



## CCWF Welcomes Day of Healing



Illustration by Holly Davidson

**By Diana Lovejoy**

On Jan. 14 and 28, new arrivals to Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF) gathered in the gym for a Healing Trauma course led by resident facilitators. Two separate “Days of Healing” brought over 200 residents from CCWF’s reception center together with seasoned residents in an unprecedented effort to jump-start their rehabilitation and instill hope.

As 9 a.m. neared, eight circles of chairs gradually filled, and the gym buzzed with anticipation and the steady hum of fans. Group facilitators from program provider Velda Dobson-Davis’ team prepared to lead each healing circle through an intensive introduction to trauma and how to address it productively. Research by the Compassion Prison Project shows that prisoners comprise the most highly traumatized population in the world, and that unaddressed trauma is strongly linked to criminal behavior.

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## Out of the Pine Box Era

### CCWF Holds BPH Townhall Meeting

**By Guadalupe Barragan**

On Jan. 23, 2026, Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF) held its first Board of Parole Hearings (BPH) town hall meeting with three representatives of the board.

In attendance was BPH Chief Psychologist Dr. Jasmine Tehrani, who specializes in Comprehensive Risk Assessments (CRA). Tehrani has been in the field for 20 years and is currently responsible for the training and overseeing of other psychologists in BPH. She was joined by BPH Chief Council Jessica Blonien, who has more than 25 years of state service and who has reviewed BPH files for the past six years. Board of Parole Hearings Executive Officer Scott Wyckoff, who was an attorney before becoming Executive Officer on Jan. 2, 2025, provided much of the sessions’ information.

The purpose of the sessions, according to Wyckoff, was to answer questions, dispel myths, and provide information so that people feel well prepared for the BPH process.

All incarcerated individuals scheduled for BPH

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## A Day Just for Women

**By Nora Igova**

Our calendar acknowledges a multitude of holidays and observances. We celebrate Veterans Day, Memorial Day, St. Patrick’s Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Presidents Day, and many others including Mother’s Day, which is the only holiday that celebrates mothers but not all women are. What we don’t see observed in the United States is International Women’s Day. This day is celebrated in many other countries across the globe and provides a platform for not only addressing issues pertaining to women but acknowledging their success.

International Women’s Day (IWD) is celebrated every year on March 8. It originated from early 20th century labor movements in North America and Europe, advocating for women’s rights like fair wages, shorter hours, and suffrage. IWD evolved

into a global day to recognize women’s achievements. Its participants demanded gender equality and to highlight ongoing issues like violence and lack of opportunity. They drew attention through rallies, events, and campaigns for social, political, and economic change.

According to IWD’s website, 2026 IWD marks an incredible milestone: 115 years of advocacy.

“For more than a century,” they write, “IWD has helped drive transformative change. Each generation has built on the courage of those before it, pushing boundaries and redefining what is possible.”

IWD events also celebrate women’s successes, from local community leaders to global figures, according to the IWD website. Organizations host forums and social media campaigns to raise awareness about

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Illustration by Canva AI

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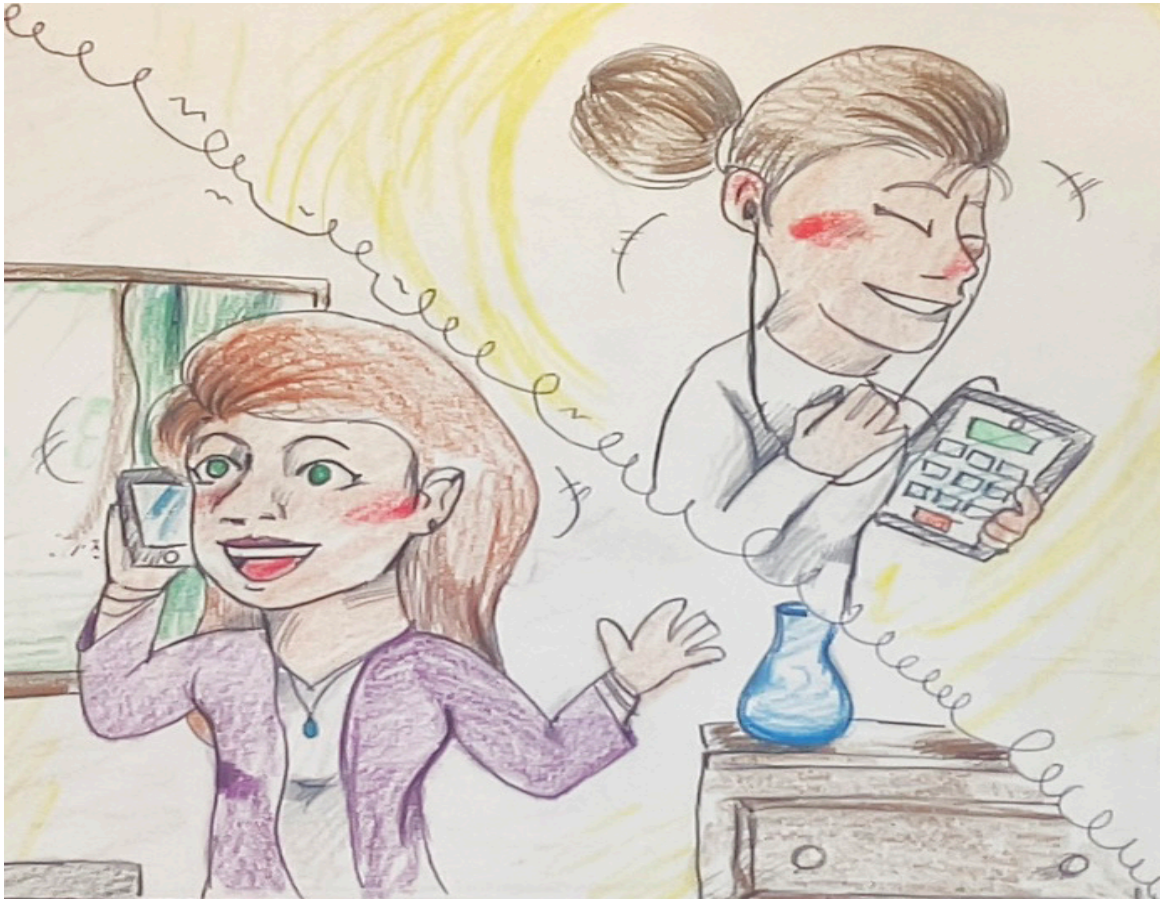
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# Staying in Touch



Art by Sonia Garcia

## By Diana Lovejoy

In prison, time suspends in a stream of unchanging scenery. Any indication that someone outside is thinking of you carries extraordinarily high value. This may come in tangible form, like a holiday card or a book. But it can be challenging to maintain intangibles like communication and emotional support, even when you truly care.

We care about our outside people too. I worry when I can't get ahold of my 83-year-old mom. On top of having a daughter in prison, does she have help maintaining strength and remembering things as she ages and loses her friends?

As the years pass, prisoners with long sentences may feel increasingly forgotten. Time takes a toll on supporters as well. In addition to grief, they may shoulder anger, blame, or hopelessness. Support fatigue encompasses the weariness of waiting through appeals or parole denials, financial strain, feelings of helplessness, or a desire to move on emotionally. This can lead to frustration, or even verbal attacks or silence. But your incarcerated loved one still needs you.

How do you show support when the tragedy of incarceration feels like too much and you don't even know what to say? How do you continue support when exhaustion surfaces?

First, you don't need to say much. If you don't know what to say, a short "Hey, I'm thinking of you" goes a long way inside. On any given day, this may buffer a prisoner from unbearable loneliness. Also, don't let the lack of ability to give financial support stop you from staying in contact. Naturally, prisoners feel the need for decent food from canteen and other necessities like hygiene products. But knowing that you're thinking of us is priceless.

## The Value of Listening

Supporters: Your presence and attention have enormous impact. You might struggle to understand a prisoner, but often all you need to do is listen. If you can shift your perspective and withhold judgment, you not only give the gift of energy, you may learn more about how to help. Our outside contacts play vital roles in our present and future; they orient us and help us prepare for reentry.

Prisoners: Your loved ones need to be heard too. Sometimes all you need to do is let them vent, even if it feels stressful. Remember that they face a chaotic world too, and they don't have you there. Don't expect them to relate to having every movement controlled and no internet. Try to imagine yourself in their shoes; listening without interruption is a powerful way to show you care.

You might perceive a growth gap between you and loved ones. While you work on emotional processing and insight, supporters may be enmeshed in free-world survival or may continue older thinking patterns. Conversations may feel like speaking different languages. Try adjusting your expectations and focusing on simply appreciating your loved one's time and energy.

## Tips for Talking with a Prisoner

First, avoid pulling a prisoner back into criminal activity or substance use when they've decided to move away from those. The goal is to get out and stay out.

Convey optimism. Refrain from telling a lifer or life without parole prisoner, "You're never getting out" or "It's going to be a looong time." This weakens or even destroys hope, which can prompt criminal behavior or despair.

Understand that blame or condemnation does not produce positive results, and you can't force accountability. Even if a person is in denial about what they did, blame won't lead them to responsibility.

Offenders work to understand the impact on victims and their own families/friends. When addressing pain or disappointment, base it in your feelings: "I feel hurt, I miss you, I want to understand why you did it..."

Consider working on forgiveness and acceptance of the person they are now. None of us is defined by a single action or even period in our lives; we're all human and can grow and be of service to others.

Above all, offer hope (even if you don't fully feel it!). Hope is a thread that prisoners hold onto desperately; it's about mental health and survival.

## CCWF Paper Trail EST. 2024

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## COVER STORY: OUT OF THE PINE BOX... CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

within the next 16 months were granted the opportunity to attend. Approximately 80 residents took part.

CCWF residents were grateful for the opportunity to attend. Incarcerated individual Maribel Lopez said, "this is a very important day. I will have the opportunity to ask questions straight from the source."

Retired Secretary of California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) Kathleen Allison opened the floor by introducing all members of BPH. The room was quiet. The incarcerated population was serious, alert, and focused.

Wyckoff informed the population that the BPH scheduled 270 hearings for women last year. One-hundred-twenty-nine were conducted and 56 received grants equaling to a 43% grant rate. Overall, the grant rate was 31%, meaning approximately one out of two women got a grant. Wyckoff said, "your work will be recognized."

The visiting BPH representatives told the audience that they are frequently asked by lawmakers, "what gives you joy about your job?"

The most common answer is, "granting parole." Wyckoff said commissioners believe in the power of redemption and change. They find comfort in knowing they are releasing a person

back into society that is no longer a risk.

"You must put in the hard work," he said. "You will be heard, you will be treated with dignity, and your work will show you are no longer a risk."

On the contrary, a commissioner's number one fear is releasing someone who reoffends, harms someone, and returns to prison. It is a difficult decision. However, the BPH representatives said that Board's guiding principle is to treat everyone, victims and offenders, with respect and dignity.

Wyckoff's opening remarks addressed the most common questions board asks during a hearing: Who were you then? Who are you now? And how have you changed? This is significant in acknowledging the shift that has happened in the way the BPH operates in the last two decades.

Wyckoff was candid about the reality of what he termed as the "Gray Davis Era." During the time that Gray Davis was Governor of California, almost no one serving an indeterminate sentence would leave prison through the parole process. Instead, the only way out of the CDCR's custody for these individuals, was death.

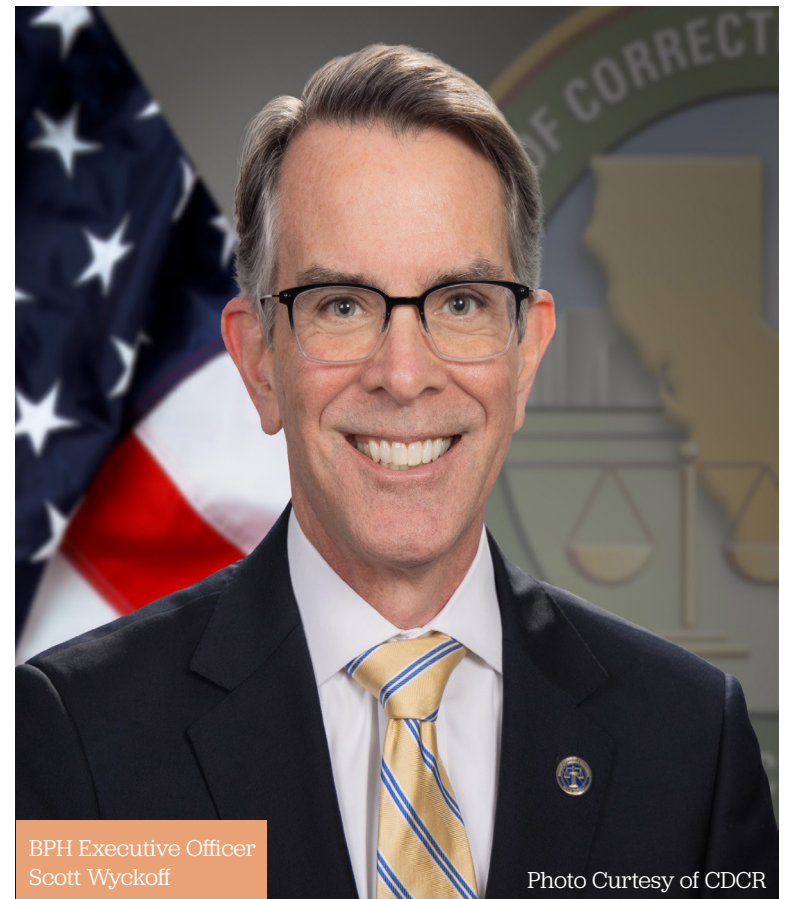
This resonated with incarcerated individual Eva Fierro.

"I've been incarcerated since 1997," Fierro said with tears in her eyes. "When Wyckoff's spoke, I was stabbed with reality... nobody talks about the 'pine box era.' When I arrived in prison, I was told by R&R [Receiving and Release] officers to write a will because the only way I'm going home is in a pine box."

Over the years there has been a shift in BPH. Prior to 2008, offenders were denied parole based on their crimes. However, the landmark California Supreme Court decision "In re Lawrence" made a huge change in the operation of hearings since BPH can no longer rely solely upon static case factors to deny parole grants. Today if you are granted parole, "you earned it."

BPH takes their responsibilities seriously since public safety is their paramount concern. Additionally, commissioners must follow the law as outlined in the Penal Code, Title 15, Division 2, and established court precedent to determine if someone is suitable for parole.

Wyckoff, added, "You must work hard for personal change and answer who you were then? Who you are now? What has changed? What was going on in your life to contributed to your risk factors? You need to be able to identify these factors, show programming, introspection,



BPH Executive Officer  
Scott Wyckoff

Photo Courtesy of CDCR

“Today if you are granted parole, you earned it... They also understand you are not the same person you were 17 to 20 years ago,” Wyckoff said.

and insight. There is no formula! Commissioners recognize and individualize assessments appropriately. They also understand you are not the same person you were 17-20 years ago.”

Wyckoff, Blonien, and Tehrani ended the presentation by answering questions

from the incarcerated population.

“I'm always impressed on how thoughtful the questions are,” Wyckoff said in closing. “Women are here because they want to succeed and provide hope when they go home.”

## COVER STORY: DAY OF HEALING.. CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Developed by Pathways to Kinship, the Healing Trauma curriculum covers discussion of trauma and our responses to it, Adverse Childhood Experiences and their lifelong impact, healthy vs. unhealthy relationship dynamics, and forgiveness as a path to healing.

Pathways to Kinship was founded by Marc Vahanian with the mission, "Empower people to get free, stay free and thrive!" The nonprofit organization offers a range of courses in insight, empathy, victim impact, relationships, financial literacy, preparation for parole board hearings and reentry, as well as outside resources and support.

When asked about his motivation, Vahanian said, "I believe in second chances. ...Family, race, neighborhood, economic status - these can be potent negative forces. I was fortunate to get help at every stage. Without the mental health and economic support, I fear I would have succumbed to darker forces. I am grateful to have something of value to offer folks on the path to freedom."

For the Day of Healing, Vahanian collaborated with Dobson-Davis to educate incoming residents and show them that they're not alone by offering a healing opportunity earlier, rather than enabling them to potentially continue negative patterns in general population.

"Ms. Dobson-Davis is a force of nature," said Vahanian. "She is one of the most passionate, hardworking servant leaders I have ever met."

Dobson-Davis opened the day by asking, "How many of you are moms?" She has worked in the California prison system for 47 years, during which she retired temporarily and then decided to come back. A grandmother of 27, she remind-

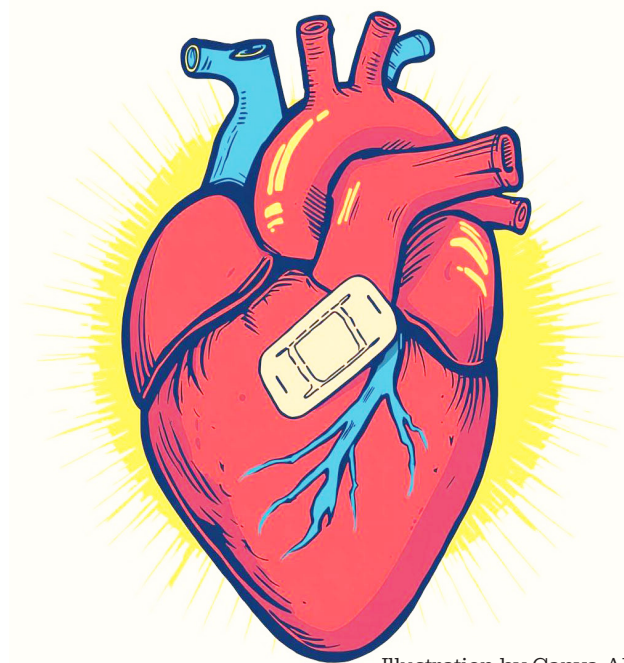


Illustration by Canva AI

ed the mothers of the impact of their children wondering, "Why is my mom in prison? Why did she choose that over me?" This day was an invitation to develop the insight required to disrupt intergenerational trauma.

Participants switched facilitators by topic, experiencing varied instruction styles. For example, one group paused for a 30-second dance break after the discussion became very emotional. Another facilitator refocused her group with short breathing and meditation exercises, while others used intellectual illustration or shared personal experiences.

Dobson-Davis hired two of the facilitators from the former Condemned Row housing when they

were reluctant to join general population, thereby catalyzing their healing.

"If it weren't for her, we wouldn't have had these opportunities. We had no exposure and no hope. The third day out, she sticks us in the middle of an event and puts us to work," said facilitator Manling Williams, previously housed on Condemned Row. "Now my motivation is paying it forward...giving (residents) inspiration that they'll take and learn from."

A particularly poignant moment occurred in one group when a young woman who now chooses the name Nevaeh shared some of her past abuse and her pain around her children. After her arrest she had immediately felt the impact of her children being without her. She was sharing her own pain for the first time, and was visibly shaking but showing courage. Her new awareness of trauma's physiological impact showed in her ability to connect her emotional pain to bodily sensations.

"I feel my kids, I feel them here," she said tearfully, patting her chest. "I need to get back to them."

Without this preemptive chance to embark on a healing path, residents can feel hopeless and perpetuate criminal patterns inside. When asked what inspired her about the Day of Healing, facilitator Valerie Nessler commented, "Everyone is so open and eager and vulnerable, hearts so genuine...we can instill in them that hope that we never got."

Participant Jordan Dockery expressed relief in hearing that "it was OK to cry, to open up and share...not hold it in and keep a tough face." Another new arrival, Gina Bean, summarized her takeaway: "We aren't defined by our trauma, and we can push forward and change."

## FEATURES

# Maintaining Ethnicity While Incarcerated

## Who am I?

By Mimi Le

Ethnicity is defined as your background, where you come from, your language, your customs, and your belief systems.

Growing up, I spoke predominantly Vietnamese at home. Today, I have conversations on the telephone with family members who no longer speak Vietnamese as fluently as we once did as children.

This is a common occurrence for members of my family at home, as well as for members of other ethnicities here. When a native language is not used as frequently, it becomes lost. Traditions and customs transform and are eventually forgotten when not practiced regularly.

But there are those of us in this melting pot of incarceration who still maintain their ethnicity, despite adapting to prison culture, which is predominantly English-speaking with American traditions and practices.

During my years working in Canteen and processing items to be scanned, my Texan Mexican American boss would be at the computer waiting for the count so he could input it into the system. I so often slipped into Vietnamese while counting that he eventually understood which word correlated to which number.

I don't always catch myself when I say something in Vietnamese; sometimes, I am not even aware that I do it. But if you live around me or work with me, you will notice it and pick up on what I am saying.



Art by Crystal St. Mary

That is how I maintain my ethnicity while incarcerated. I speak my language to my English-speaking peers.

When I call home, I speak Vietnamese to my family. I share Vietnamese food that I cook and teach my friends how to season food with our infamous fish sauce from Southeast Asia. I educate my associates about my traditions and culture.

Members of other ethnicities here at Central California Women's Facility maintain their ethnicity in similar ways, and we also share similarities in the challenges we face in the ways we attempt to maintain our cultural ways.

Incarcerated individual Crystal St. Mary identifies her ethnicity as Creole. One of the ways in which she maintains her ethnicity is through

sharing aspects of her culture with her peers.

"An important piece of my culture is we do not practice voodoo, contrary to popular belief. And even though our ethnicity is Creole, our race is proudly part of the African migration," said St. Mary.

When asked what challenges she encounters maintaining her ethnicity while incarcerated, St. Mary reflects, "It gets me down sometimes; the fact that I don't have anyone who knows and understands my culture. I miss dancing. I feel like I can't truly be Creole here."

Incarcerated individual Cynthia Dubose (née Drakopoulos) identifies her ethnicity as Greek. She stays in contact with family members residing in Greece through phone

calls and videos.

"I want people to know Easter is our most important holiday. The Olympic Games were started in Olympia, Greece, to honor Zeus, the King of our Gods. The Greeks established democracy, philosophy, and drama originated in Greece," said Dubose.

Not having others to speak Greek with is causing her to forget her language, and the lack of available ingredients makes it hard to cook authentic Greek meals, she says.

The common thread in all our stories is the risk we face in losing our ethnicity as we continue to be far away from our communities of origin and are forced to assimilate into the culture of prison where the English language is dominant and American traditions are celebrated.

COVER STORY: WOMEN'S DAY.  
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A German Women's Day poster from 1914 celebrating women and encouraging the right to vote for women. Image credit: Karl Maria Stadler (1888 - nach 1943), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

current challenges, from gender-based violence to lack of educational opportunities.

The way IWD is observed varies. In some countries, it's a national holiday similar to Mother's Day, while others give women flowers (like mimosas or carnations), which are a symbol of strength and resilience, as a gesture of appreciation. The colors symbolizing IWD are purple, green, and white, which represent women's suffrage and adopted by IWD.

According to the IWD website, the use of the colors originated from Women's Social and Political Union in the UK, founded in 1903. Purple signifies justice and dignity and being loyal to the cause; green symbolizes hope; white is a symbol of sisterhood and solidarity, respecting and representing the progress made by those who have fought for women's suffrage.

By honoring and celebrating women leaders, activists, artists, and everyday women around us, we might speed up the progress toward equality in all areas of life.

IWD is the perfect platform to encourage girls and women across the globe to pursue opportunities, as well as recognizing that when women thrive, societies prosper. It gives women the space to share stories, connect, and advocate for issues like reproductive rights, freedom from

abuse, and equal representation. According to the World Economic Forum (WEF), none of us will see gender parity in our lifetime, and neither will many of our children. WEF shows that at the current rate of progress it will still take well over a century, roughly five generations from now, to reach full gender parity.

IWD is more than just a day of our lives, it is a movement that belongs to all groups everywhere with a powerful history of collective action.

One of the IWD 2026 campaigns is Give to Gain, which encourages a mind of generosity and collaboration in all areas of life. Give to Gain emphasizes the power of reciprocity and support.

When people, organizations, and communities give generously, opportunities and support for women increase. As the IWD website says: "Giving is not a subtraction. It's international multiplication when women thrive, we all rise."

Whether through donations, knowledge, resources, infrastructure, visibility, advocacy, education, training, mentoring or time, contributing to women's advancement helps create a more supportive and interconnected world.

Together, we can normalize women's leadership and success, while staying committed to positive action.

# The State of Dental Care in CDCR

## Why we need policies that save our teeth

By Jessica Hann

Author's note: We decided to exclude the first names of some of the sources for medical privacy.

Within the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and across the country, we lack access to proper dental care. In the free world, it usually comes down to a lack of insurance or good enough insurance.

But in Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), and throughout CDCR, whether or not you can receive a dental procedure comes down to one question: Is your problem cosmetic or medically necessary?

The Health Care Department of Operations Manual section 3.3.2.9(a) Endodontics states that incarcerated individuals can only have certain dental work, like root canals, on the front six top or bottom teeth. All other teeth will be pulled.

In fact, most dental care the residents need to save their teeth from being pulled or to avoid dentures is considered cosmetic or medically unnecessary under the Health Care Department of Operations Manual section 3.3.5.14(c)(8)(b)(3), and 3.3.5.14(c)(8)(b)(4).

This is not to say the residents get bad or shoddy dental care, but that our institutional dentists have to work within these guidelines. So we need to take care of our teeth. Otherwise, we'll lose them.

This policy has been in effect since April 2006 and hasn't been revised for almost four years. It's high time for a change.

One such resident, Cathy Sarinana, said she came to prison with all her teeth, and so far, she has had five pulled, not counting her wisdom teeth.

"I'm angry because if policy wasn't so outdated, I would have all my teeth," Sarinana said, adding that it has become difficult for her to chew certain foods.

Resident Williams, who asked to only use her last name due to the shame she feels, said she had all her teeth when she came to prison, but has since lost about half. She attributes this to the inability to have root canals done on her bicuspid and molars.

"When I got here, I had four crowns," she said. "And when I started having issues with them, instead of repairing the crown, they pulled each tooth!"



Illustration by Canva AI

“When I got here, I had four crowns,” Williams said. “And when I started having issues with them, instead of repairing the crown, they pulled each tooth!”

Williams said she not only has difficulty chewing her food, but she also suffers from some depression over the situation.

Another resident, Carla Torres, said, “I’m terrified every time I have to go. I worry they’re going to want to pull one! The policy needs to include more; it’s very outdated.”

She added that she wished she could get all her teeth fixed and not just the front five or six.

Some residents would go as far as to pay for more extensive dental care.

Resident York, who also asked that her first name be withheld, said, “When it comes to my dental care, I would rather have to pay a copay for a root canal than have my tooth pulled!”

But others believe the state should take responsibility for dental care that reflects the care they would receive in the free world.

Resident Crockett, first name withheld, whose opinion resonates with the majority of the women I interviewed, said, “I’m a ward of

the state, why should I have to pay anything? I take care of my teeth, so God forbid I have an issue that requires a root canal. As of now, I’d lose that tooth. The policy needs to be changed to include root canals of our back teeth.”

According to the American Association of Endodontists (AAE), “When possible, you should always consider treatments to save your teeth,” and that, often, pulling teeth will “negatively impact your quality of life.” The AAE also recommended, “when given a choice between tooth extraction and root canal treatment, always opt for root canal.”

As some residents have found to be true, the AAE says that “spaces left by extracted teeth can cause other teeth to shift, affecting your ability to properly chew and impacting your smile.”

It is clear that something needs to change. We would benefit from a policy change, so that more is included in our dental care, and possibly also the return of a revised copay system.

The copay system was taken away

a few years ago, likely because it was prohibitively expensive: a \$5 flat rate for each medical and dental visit. Today, all care is free. But many people I spoke to would be willing to pay a small fee for enhanced care and a wider range of dental services.

However, not all residents would be able to afford a copay system based on the 8 to 48 cents we are paid per hour. It would take a hefty pay increase for all residents to have access. Indigent residents would need for all care to be provided free of charge.

Changing policy would be the best option at this time. CDCR and our policymakers need to make these necessary changes to improve our oral health and overall mental wellbeing.

Throughout the institution, I have found an overwhelming belief that policy is outdated and needs to be changed to include better dental care. So reach out to your local legislative leaders and call for necessary policy change. Policy change starts with all of us and not just with those in society.

## COMMENTARY

# A Constitutional Right to Rehabilitation

## How did Alaska become a more progressive state than California?

By C. Gosztyla

For the past 20 years, California has been involved in the national trend of criminal justice reform. A key moment happened back in 2005, when the California State Legislature added the “R” to CDCR – becoming the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Before this reform, people would literally spend the rest of their lives in prison – reports Kevin Sawyer in the San Quentin News.

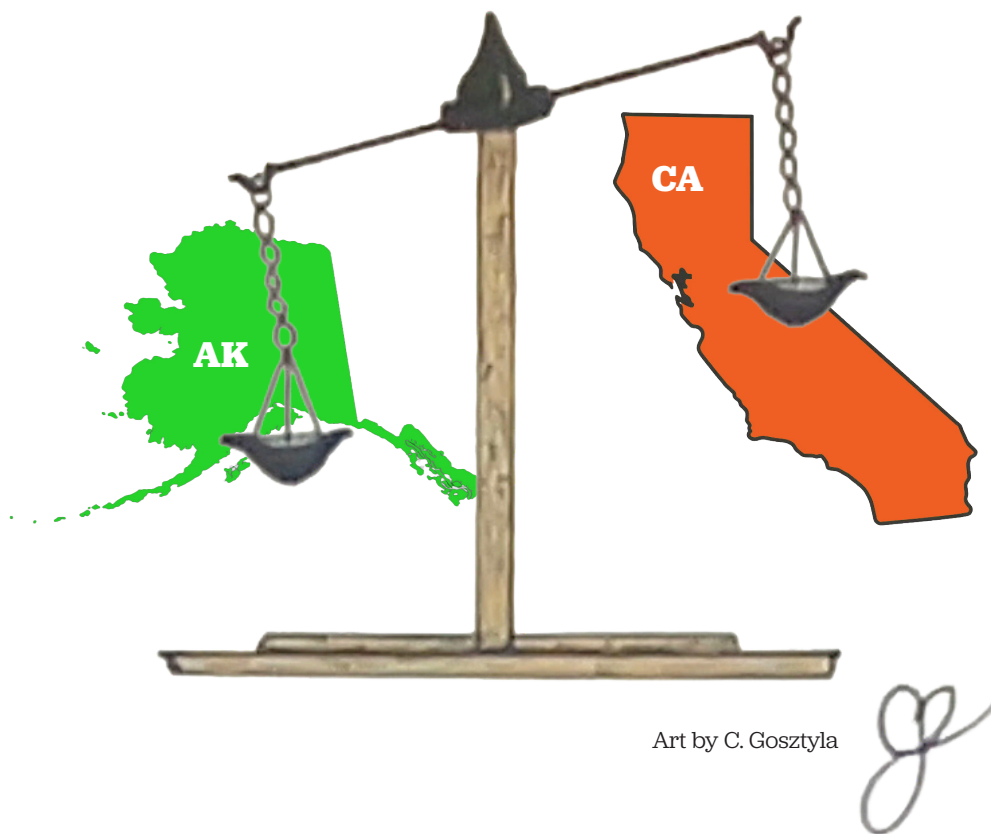
Nearly 15 years after adding the “R,” the California legislature finally made a significant reform that aligns with the concept of rehabilitation by declaring that they, “[Recognize] that long sentences do not deter the crimes they are intended to deter.”

This led them to amend Penal Code (PC) 1170 in 2019 to clarify that when sentencing someone to prison, “The deprivation of liberty satisfies the punishment purpose of sentencing. The purpose of incarceration is rehabilitation and successful community reintegration achieved through education, treatment, and active participation in rehabilitative and restorative justice programs.”

Further penal reform in 2026 enacted PC 5000.5 to state, “the purpose of incarceration is rehabilitation accomplished only if the period of imprisonment is used to maximize personal growth for all residents and facilitate their reintegration into society upon release, enabling them to lead-law abiding and self-sufficient lives, reducing recidivism.”

One state California could learn from is Alaska, the only state to provide a constitutional right for rehabilitation to its incarcerated population. Alaska is the only state to abolish both the Death Penalty and Life Without Parole (LWOP). California, however, actively issues both of these extreme sentences.

How did Alaska become a more progressive state than California and the rest of our nation?



Art by C. Gosztyla

In 1957, Alaska abolished the Death Penalty for all crimes. Just over a decade later, Alaska added section 12 Criminal Administration to Article I of its Constitution. This provision specifies that the administration of criminal justice “shall be based upon the need for protecting the public, community condemnation of the offender, the rights of victims of crimes, restitution from the offender, and the principle of reformation.”

It is the last three words, “principle of reformation,” that put Alaska in the lead of progressive justice, since they provided a foundation for the landmark Alaskan Supreme Court decision, *Abraham v. State*.

In the 1970s, Mickey Abraham, a person incarcerated in Alaska because of a crime committed while

intoxicated, filed an appeal. Among his grounds for relief was the lack of treatment for his alcoholism while detained.

The case made its way up to the Supreme Court of Alaska, where the Court determined that “Abraham has a constitutional right to rehabilitative treatment – particularly with respect to his consumption of alcohol.”

In 1978, the Alaska Supreme Court concluded in *Abraham v. State* that prisoners in Alaska have a constitutional right to rehabilitation. They further clarified that if the offender is rehabilitated, it also advances the public interest – creating a safer society overall.

In 2008, the Supreme Court’s decision on the matter led Alaska to abolish LWOP for all crimes and

entitled all offenders to an opportunity for parole.

The same can’t be said for California.

Nearly two decades later, Californians continue to fight excessive sentencing through the “DROP LWOP” campaign. There is a difference between the purpose of prison being for rehabilitation, and the constitutional right to rehabilitation.

The wording in California’s PC 1170 is contrary to Death Penalty and LWOP sentences because those sentences do not afford the individual an opportunity to prove their rehabilitation before the Board of Parole Hearings. Currently, the only recourse left for LWOP and Death Penalty cases to prove they are rehabilitated is a commutation by the governor. Only 106 death penalty sentences, all between 1893 and 1967, have been commuted in California, according to University of the Pacific, McGeorge School of Law. And fewer than 200 LWOP sentences have been commuted over the last 30 years, CalMatters reported.

Using legislators’ words against themselves poses a moral question: If incarceration serves the “punishment” function of sentencing, and the purpose of prison is “rehabilitation and successful community reintegration” back into society, then how can Californians morally continue to allow the Death Penalty and LWOP? If Californians want to stake a claim at being a progressive state, then constituents need to utilize the power of their voices and inform their district legislators – let’s catch up to Alaska in this era of criminal justice reforms!

How is it that the California Legislature can claim that the purpose of incarceration is rehabilitation for all residents and facilitate their reintegration into society – and yet continue to detain people with Death Penalty and LWOP, much less continue to pass out these contradictory sentences?

## A Timeline of Rehabilitation in the US

Late 1700s	1870	1940-1970s	1974	1980s	2010s
Influenced by social reformers in England, medical doctor Benjamin Rush transformed Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia into a place for reform.	The United States held the National Prison Congress, which set reforming the individual as a priority for prison.	Rehabilitation came to the forefront of prisons in the United States. The term correctional institution became common during this time.	Robert Martinson wrote “What Works? Questions and Answers About Prison Reform,” which contributed to the collapse of rehabilitative programs in the United States.	Tough on crime policies sweep the United States, including Truth in Sentencing laws, Three Strikes/habitual offender laws, and laws targeting drug offences. Prison populations skyrocket.	Attitudes towards rehabilitation and prison overcrowding begin to change. California passes various sentencing and parole laws.

# Parting Gifts

By Mallissa James

Donna Andrews was released from Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) on Dec. 4, 2025. She had been incarcerated since 2006. She spent her last 13 years in Facility B's unit 506. Her roommates described Andrews, now in her 70s, as mild, meek, and still a bit feisty. She has a down-to-earth quality about her that is welcoming and non-judgmental. She often sat on her walker scooting herself around the dayroom so she could mingle with her community. Andrews was a facilitator of many groups. She was a positive confidante, friend, and a motherly figure to many. While awaiting her release, she gave away many gifts, including around 150 purchased candy bars specific to the taste of the recipient.

**Q.** Can you tell me about the parting gifts you left?

**A.** I asked each person what their favorite candy bar was and made a list. Then I ordered them from Walkenhorst's [a vendor for CCWF quarterly packages]. When they came, I lined them up, put names on them, and separated them by room number...I made check marks and checked the list all the time to keep track.

**Q.** What were the most popular candy bars?

**A.** Reese's Peanut Butter Cups and Hershey's bars.

**Q.** What made you want to do this?

**A.** It made me feel like I had a purpose...I have been here and watched so many people leave and leave nothing behind. I know what it is like for a person to leave, and there be no memory here left of them. That's why I did it - so that every one of you would know about the bond I have with you.

**Q.** How do you feel about being a part of a new community?

**A.** It's going to be great; a new purpose, new people to help, new people to know. I really like helping people.

**Q.** How long have you been incarcerated?

**A.** It has been 20 years, 6 months, and 4 days, but who's counting?

**Q.** What was it like when you arrived with your sentence?

**A.** I came here when I was 51. I came with 32 years...I did whatever because I knew I was going to die here anyway. It took a while for a fire to light under me. I wanted to become a changed person. I wanted to change.

**Q.** How do you feel about leaving after all this time?

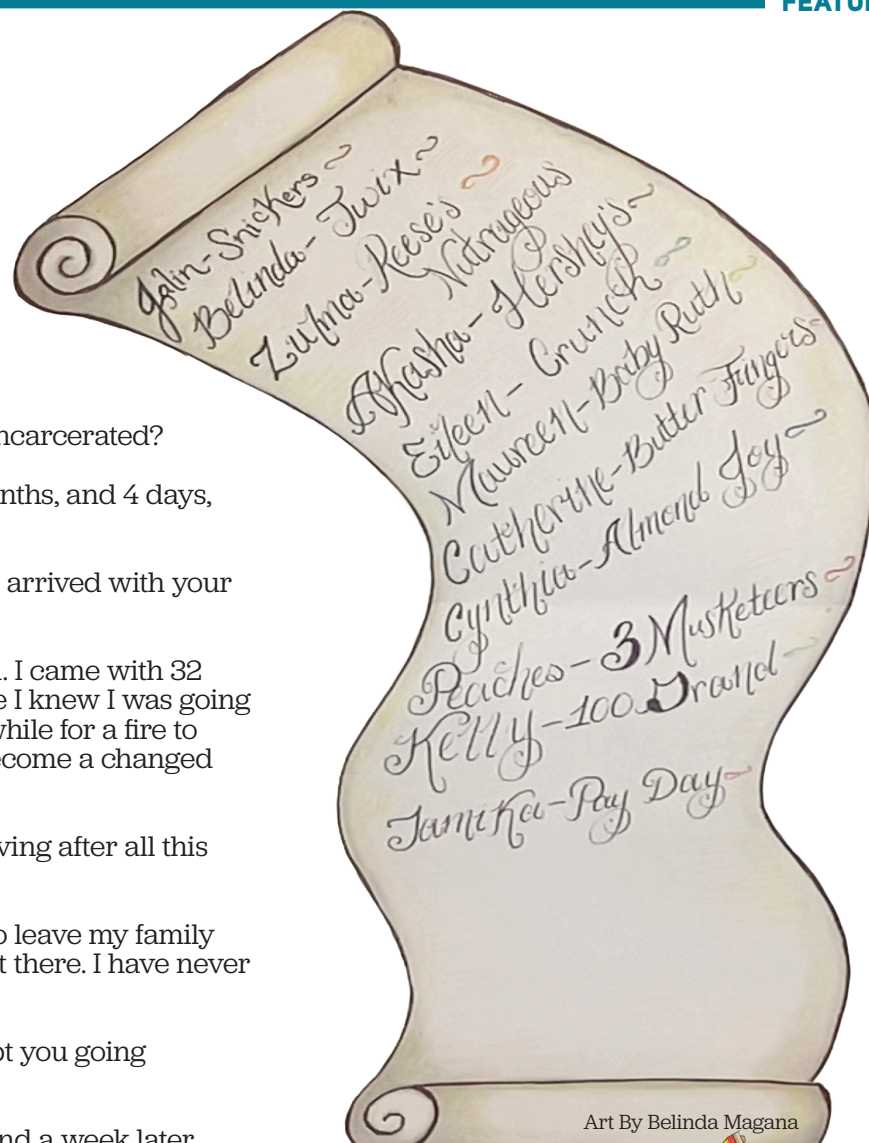
**A.** I am scared. I don't want to leave my family because I have little family out there. I have never been on my own.

**Q.** What is something that kept you going throughout your time?

**A.** I had a hip replacement, and a week later, a nurse rolled my leg under a wheelchair and broke my femur, and then I got a bone infection and started to die. I could feel myself dying. Death was right there. I was sitting in my wheelchair, like, "Come on!" All of a sudden, I felt really warm, and I realized it was God beside me. I was like, "Okay, you are here with me while I die." Then I got in bed and ended up waking up the next morning, and my body felt completely different. I can listen to him now. I have a new love. I am having the time of my life. I see everything now. I see everyone.

**Q.** Do you have anything else you want to say?

**A.** Don't give up. Never surrender. Fight your way out of here because there will be obstacles around every corner.



Art By Belinda Magana

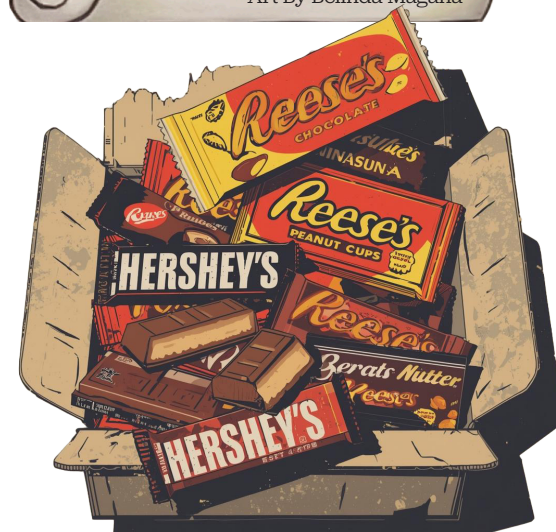


Illustration by Canva AI



Illustration by Canva AI

By Sagal Sadiq

Purpose is one of the most powerful forces a human being can possess. Think about it: purpose is what gets you out of bed in the morning. Even if it is as simple a purpose as going to your assigned program. You go because you choose to go and fulfill your purpose for the day. But you and I both know that purpose is greater than simply going to an assigned job site.

**"P"** is for purpose.

Webster's Dictionary defines purpose as "what a person plans to get or do; an aim or goal."

It is fair to say that at this very minute, all over the world, there are people in search of purpose - in search of something that gives their lives meaning, a reason not to just crawl out of bed in the morning but to awaken and seize the day

## Felon's Alphabet

with excitement and determination.

And yet, despite that yearning for purpose, it appears that for most, that purpose remains an elusive, intangible target. If that is how people on the outside feel, then what do you suppose those of us who are incarcerated must feel?

For many of us, prison becomes that moment, the unexpected crossroads where finding purpose becomes essential for survival. Purpose must be excavated from beneath years of survival, distraction, and pain.

How do you find purpose behind bars when your entire spirit is clamoring for freedom? Does freedom then become the purpose?

Imagine how difficult it must be to wake up in a cramped cell with seven relative strangers and realize that this is what your life will now consist of for the next 25 years. Wow! How can we expect this individual to have a purpose other than freedom? Is that even fair? But we, the incarcerated, know more than anyone that prison is not survivable without purpose.

Inside a prison system designed to restrict autonomy and strip you of your identity, the search for purpose can be a final act of defiance. Purpose is not handed out in prison. It has to be carved out - through reflection, accountability, remorse, and the willingness to actively work on living amends. Purpose will aid you in growing up by going in and resisting the inclination to collapse when life gets tough. Because life is tough in prison. And good old-fashioned grit will only get you so far. My friend, you also need a purpose. Remember, your purpose is the

thing that motivates you; what are you passionate about? Is it as simple as going home to your loved ones? Is it seeing an aging family member before they pass? Because both are laudable purposes. Are you determined to leave prison a person transformed from the inside? That was me. It may surprise many of you reading this that up until 2021, I struggled with suicidal ideations-daily. My purpose was to heal psychologically and through my lived experience, help others heal.

So many incarcerated individuals have found purpose in this wretched place. And by that, I mean they have found that which permits them to awaken in the morning and seize the day. If you are looking, you will see them in the rain, in 110 degree weather; waiting at the gate and then waiting at work change, their meager state lunches in hand, ready to labor for pennies. If you keep looking, later on that evening, you will see the same people waiting to attend self-help groups or to facilitate groups for their peers. These folks have found purpose-rehabilitating themselves and aiding peers with their rehabilitation. And it is gratifying and humbling to behold. One can't help but be moved by the sight of these clearly rehabilitated men and women doing their life sentences in the pursuit of purpose and in the service of others.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs suggests that all human beings aim for the tip of that pyramid, where evolution lies. To be evolved is to have grown and progressed. Ideally, from a pre-carceral state of criminality and suffering into a state of rehabilitation. Purpose is the catalyst that can transmute a criminal into an evolved prosocial being.

