



***Our View:* Rehabilitating prisoners without sacrificing their, or our, dignity**

Saturday-Sunday, 4/13-4/14

“The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.”
— Fyodor Dostoevsky, “The House of the Dead”

The gloomy 19th-century Russian author of novels including “Crime and Punishment” knew whereof he spoke, having been a guest of the czar in Siberia for some years for the offense of reading banned books.

And by his measure, America is a not particularly civilized nation. While the United States represents about 4.4 percent of the world’s population, it houses around 22 percent of the world’s prisoners.

Through its history, America has tried various ways of dealing with crime — from punishment to rehabilitation. The fact a federal study last year found that 83 percent of prisoners who complete their sentences will wind up back in prison after nine years shows that whatever we are doing isn’t working particularly well.

When it comes to local offenders, most arrestees’ first contact with the correctional system comes at the county level, where prisoners awaiting trial — those not granted bail — are held and where those convicted of less serious offenses will serve out their sentences.

For offenders in Bristol County, that means being in the custody of six-term Sheriff Thomas Hodgson at one of the county’s two houses of corrections — a chronically overcrowded facility in Dartmouth or the dank, 19th-century relic on Ash Street in New Bedford.

We have criticized the high sheriff before in this space for sometimes seeming more interested in self-promotion than in rehabilitation.

A Republican and an ardent fan of President Trump's brand of law-and-order bluster, Hodgson has offered to send local prisoners to the Mexico boarder to help build the president's wall, an offer that's been derided as cruel at best and illegal at worst.

More alarmingly, Bristol County facilities have seen a disturbingly high number of suicides among the inmate population — a number the sheriff blames on outside social issues beyond his control — and Hodgson has faced criticism from prisoner rights advocates and inmate families for some of the harsher measures under his regime.

Some of Hodgson's "tough love" schemes — such as charging inmates rent for their cells, a way, the sheriff says of teaching convicts about responsibility — have been slapped down by the courts.

Now his practice — widespread in the correctional system nationwide — of charging inmates high rates for phone calls has come under scrutiny. The sheriff says the money helps support a chronically underfunded system. Opponents say the burden falls mostly on prisoners' families.

One thing is not in dispute. Nearly all the inmates of the county's jails will, sooner or later, be released back into their communities.

That's why re-entry programs, such as the one offered by the St. Vincent de Paul Society, a Catholic group dedicated to serving the poor, are so important.

In today's front-page story by staff writer George W. Rhodes, the sheriff and one representative inmate talk about life inside and out of jail. One thing they agree on is that inmates have to be made ready to rejoin civil society. We as a society have to decide how we will welcome them and remain civilized ourselves.