



American Correctional Officer Intelligence Network

Serving America's Corrections Professionals

Privatization Wars

Prison privatization has become a large component of the corrections dynamic in this country. As of June 2007, 7.4% of all inmates were held in private prisons across the nation (118,239 inmates). The federal government now houses over 11% of their inmates in private facilities. Only 18 states do not place any of their inmates with the privateers. As of July 2008, the state of New Mexico held 46.5% of all their inmates in private penitentiaries, the highest percentage in the nation. This is neither a Democrat nor Republican issue. The largest increase in the utilization of private prisons has come within the federal system under Republican President George Bush. However, the initial move in this direction came under President Bill Clinton, and the state of New Mexico's Governor is Democrat Bill Richardson. There are no party lines on this issue.

We, who work in corrections understand why privatization is such a bad idea in our field. The politicians, media and the public do not. As a profession we have failed to educate the nation concerning the dangers to public safety and to the future of our society that the private prison industry presents.

Why has the private prison industry been so successful at landing contracts and securing inmates for their for-profit beds? There are two main reasons for their success; money and non-disclosure. They have the money to play in the political world that the United States has become. Their campaign and political contributions are well documented. One corporation alone, Corrections Corporation of America spent over 6 million dollars on lobbying in just one year! As working corrections professionals we most certainly cannot compete with that.

The privateers other advantage is their ability to hide behind the corporate veil and claim proprietary interests. As of this date private prison corporations do not have to comport with open records laws or Freedom of Information Act requests. That may change in the near future as legislation originally authored by members of ACOIN is now pending before Congress. HR 1889 "The Private Prison Information Act" would mandate that any corporation housing federal inmates must disclose their operations to the same extent as federally run prisons are required. The industry is vehemently fighting to defeat this legislation. They claim to be cheaper, more efficient than, and at least as safe as publicly run facilities. Yet, when asked to support their claims, they spend millions to suppress the very information that would verify them. They are not cheaper, more efficient or safer, not by a long shot.

ACOIN has dozens of documents, reports and research that disprove many if not all of the privateer's assertions. Those are all available to you. From media accounts, to statistics, to resolutions from organizations, churches and the like, we have the tools to fight this very real threat to public safety. However, there is only one way to truly fight back and stop this menace; education. It's all about enlightening the decision makers and the communities these corporations seek to marginalize.

The following is a game plan to do just that. The privateers may have the money and the corporate veil to fool the nation, but we have the manpower, grassroots and information to stop them. This is hand-to-hand combat that must be fought door-to-door, elected official by elected official, church by church and at Town Hall meetings across the country. They can be defeated, if we are willing to work for it.

Research

ACOIN is one of the leaders in researching this industry. We have corporate compendiums, statistics and media accounts of incidents that have and continue to occur behind the walls of private prisons. We also have resolutions from churches condemning this industry, as well as first hand accounts of their operations. You will need to enlist the support of the community in defeating this menace to our safety.

In addition we take them to task on issues such as cost savings, economic development, safety, equipment, training, staffing etc. ACOIN has “white papers” on many of these topics. Remember the key to winning this fight is knowledge. If you properly educate the public private prisons make no sense. But first you must educate yourselves and second you must be willing to go out there and share what you learn.

Jobs

Rule number one; remember who your audience is, this is not about jobs! The economy is a mess and many people are in fear that their jobs will not be there when they go to work. The general public we serve are not concerned over whether or not you have a job.

The privateers often use the argument that our only concern is about union protectionism and union job security. Do not waste your time, finances or resources on this issue. Prison Privatization is about public safety, first, last and foremost. If you make public safety the issue everyone will listen. If you make this an issue about job security the only ones who will listen will be your co-workers. **Remember who your audience is.** Do not fall into this trap.

Whenever the privateers raise this issue, point out that the overwhelming majority of public prisons are understaffed. Corrections is a growth industry. Jobs in our line of work are plentiful and will be well into the foreseeable future. Take this argument away from them at the onset. This is an issue about public safety. Who takes an oath to protect public safety and who takes one to secure the corporate bottom line? Would we privatize the police, our firefighters or the military? Then why would we put corporate profit before safety when it comes to dealing with the worst members society has to offer? Some governmental functions are ripe for privatization; the safety of our communities is not one of them.

There is one issue to discuss relative to jobs when it comes to private prisons; the privateers turnover rates. Private prisons have a 53% turn over rate compared to the public prisons rate of 16%. A 53% turnover rate in a private prison indicates that in less than 2 years the entire security staff turns over. Hence the saying, “the only pros in a private prison are the cons.” The privateers will promote bringing good jobs to a community. If that were the case then why do they lose over half of their staff in less than two years, which is what a 53% turnover rate indicates? Demand to see their wage and benefit package. In many instances an assistant manager at a fast food chain will make more and have better benefits than a private prison ‘guard’ (remember they are not sworn Correctional Officers, they are private security guards, that is an important distinction.) If the money is the same would you rather work with murderers and rapists or with the general public flipping burgers?

Organizing

- 1) All of your members and concerned citizens need to get involved. They need to understand the perils of private prisons and be willing to share information, be willing to go door-to-door, to organize meetings and protests and to attend gatherings when the privateers come to town.
- 2) The community where the prison is proposed needs to be educated:
 - a) Attend town meetings and ask questions
 - b) Hand out flyers at local stores or meeting places.
 - c) Meet with the editorial board of your local newspaper, radio and televisions stations
 - d) Ask the private company for a debate – for nine years they have refused every opportunity to debate us in a public forum. Their refusal to do so speaks volumes. In the event you are able to secure a debate contact us and we will attend.
 - e) Go door-to-door especially in the area where the prison is to be built.
 - f) Ask to meet with the school board and the PTA, not many parents want a prison near their school's or children.
 - g) Offer to provide research on the company they are considering or on the industry overall. Many towns and small media outlets do not have the man power or money to research these corporations, we have already done that for you. You just need to get it into their hands.
 - h) Remember that most elected officials want to be re-elected. It is important that they understand the level of opposition and why you are opposed. Never give them the opportunity to say, "I didn't know that."
 - i) Hold your own town meeting. Do this as soon as you can. Hand out flyers in the community alerting them to when and where the meeting is and give them contact information. Contact your local clergy, school board and PTA and make sure they attend.
 - j) Meet with the local police chief and policeman's union. In many instances private prisons will cause a major drain on police resources wrecking havoc on the Chiefs budget. The number of instances that occur at a private prison far outweigh those at public facilities. More important is the fact that private guards are not sworn Peace Officers and must rely on the local police to respond to riots, murders, assaults and escapes. Who will pay for this? It is well documented that in almost every instance the public winds up paying these hidden costs.
 - k) Ask everyone you meet for their email address. Tell them you want to keep them informed on how the process is proceeding. You can then send out Email Updates on what the industry is all about. The internet is one of the most powerful tools we have. It allows you to send out a topical email once a week or as needed. When you meet someone only once at a Town Hall meeting or the like, the amount of information you provide can be so overwhelming that they lose interest. If you send out topical emails addressing a singular issue on a regular basis you have a great advantage. Remember, once they are informed the issue is a no brainer. Run a classified ad; "Want to know what's really going on with the private prison? Contact us at this email address." Do not underestimate the power of the internet. Not only is it quick and efficient, its FREE.

Questions

ACOIN has a twenty question paper that we publish that will assist you here. However, here are just a few of the pointed questions you will want to ask the elected officials who will be making this decision:

- a) Ask if any contract entered into will include complete disclosure of the private prisons operations to the same extent as a public prison must. If they site proprietary interests here is our response: “We’ve heard the claim about protecting corporate proprietary interests. This is a despicable and dangerous argument in our profession. In public corrections when one of us finds a solution to a problem or comes up with a new idea we share it knowing it may save a life. That’s what public corrections is about, sharing information to better secure our prisons and keep our communities safe. Are these private prison corporations arguing proprietary interests over human life?” That usually ends the discussion pretty quickly.
- b) Ask what type of inmates they will house, where will they come from and who will decide their classification level.
- c) Ask if their staff are certified Peace Officers and what legal authority do they have.
- d) Ask for their turnover rates, training hours, assault rates, escapes and lawsuits filed against them.
- e) Private prisons have an inmate-on-inmate assault rate that is 66% higher than public prisons and a 49% higher inmate-on-staff assault rate. As the private prisons are not part of law enforcement who will pay to investigate, prosecute and defend these inmates when these assaults take place? Who will pay the costs for the appeals and future incarceration of those inmates? These are some of the hidden costs the public never sees or hears about and are never included in the privateers per diem rates.
- f) Ask what’s their protocol when assaults, escapes or violent incidents occur? Who gets notified and when? Private prison operators are concerned about PR above all else. They have historically tried to hide many serious instances from public view. Unlike the public sector which immediately sounds the alert when something goes wrong so that the public is aware and can prepare accordingly, the private prisons want no one to know. We have documented many cases that prove exactly that.
- g) Ask who will staff the prison and what level of experience will they have. The privateers love to tell a community about the great jobs they will provide. They will often say that 90% of the jobs will be filled by locals. Sounds great to the politician and uninformed citizen. What it tells us is that 90% of the employees won’t have any idea what they are doing! This isn’t Burger King, experience is one of three major components that keep a prison safe. People get killed behind the walls. The public needs to know that the last person they want protecting their community is someone whose most important function at their last job was to remember to ask “You want fries with that?” The public at large doesn’t understand that, it’s our job to educate them.

This is a brief overview of how to attack this issue at the local level, and the local level is where you will win or lose this battle. Remember its all about education. The facts are on our side, the ideology behind corrections is on our side. If as a profession we had not been silent for so long there would be no private prisons, it just doesn’t make sense, unless you own stock in one of these dungeons for dollars companies. If you take it to the streets you will win. Good luck, we are here for you.