

The 3 Rs: Reading and Writing Reduces Recidivism

by Abigail Rabinowitz

The Hinda Institute is currently implementing a pilot educational program in correctional institutions, and we are looking for assistance in delivering the sessions and tutoring our clients as well as general support.

Understanding the Problem—Education, Incarceration, Recidivism and Employment

It is no secret that there is a nexus between incarceration and the ability to read and write. Forty-eight percent of the incarcerated population is estimated to have low reading skills (Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile, Autumn 2013). While there are no formal statistics, contrary to popular myths, incarcerated Jews like the general population also have low literacy skills; more than half of our clients do not have a high school diploma or higher education.

Furthermore, for formerly incarcerated individuals, the disadvantage of not having a high school diploma is compounded by the multiple barriers to successful reentry and the additional stigma they face when they reenter their communities and the workforce. On average, formerly incarcerated individuals earn 11 percent less than those with no criminal record doing the same job. They are also 15 to 30 percent less likely to find a job in the first place. Most importantly, literacy reduces recidivism rates. Simply put, education means jobs and the self-esteem to move on with life. It's vital that our clients are provided opportunities to develop their literacy level in prison and envision a better future; an engagement in reading and writing is crucial to this process.

Reducing Recidivism

Education opportunities in correctional institutions may be the key to reducing crime and initiating meaningful justice reform. Education is the most cost-effective way to reduce crime and leads to long-term benefits across the entire U.S. population. Prison education is far more effective at reducing recidivism than boot camps or vocational training, according to the National Institute of Justice. In 2001, the Correctional Education Association's "Three State Recidivism Study" quantified this reduction, demonstrating that correctional education lowered long-term recidivism by 29 percent. In 2016, the RAND Corporation produced a report that showed that individuals who participate in any type of educational program while in prison are 43 percent less likely to return to prison. Individuals who do not complete high school are rearrested at the highest rate (60.4 percent), while those who have a college degree are rearrested at a rate of 19.1 percent.

Correctional Institutions Need Our Help

Correctional institutions are having difficulties implementing educational programs. We need to help fill this gap.

- Only 26% of state prison inmates said they had completed the GED while serving time in a correctional facility.
- In 2016, the Vera Institute of Justice reported that only 35 percent of state prisons provide college-level courses, and these programs only serve 6 percent of incarcerated individuals nationwide. Receiving a quality education continues to be out of reach for much of the prison population due to a lack of funding for, and access to, the materials needed for the success of these programs.

Budget cuts have also resulted in decreased access to books. In 2000, the Illinois Department of Corrections spent \$750,000 on books -- but in 2017, the Department spent only \$276 on books (according to NPR, Apr. 16, 2018), leaving multiple non-profits to fill the void. Books and learning are tremendously valued commodities in a prison environment where reading material is expensive and hard to access and the Internet is restricted. Simultaneously, books are a critical factor in rehabilitation.

Hinda Institute Pilot Educational Program

The objective of our program is to improve reading and writing skills of our clients within adult education courses that have value, meaning and the opportunity for self-reflection.

As part of the pilot, we are collaborating with the University of Illinois to develop a course called "From Victim, to Survivor to Offender: Where is Justice?" as well as developing a Jewish-text-based tutoring/mentoring package called "Joy in the Depths." Both courses will include exercises developed by experts in special education to encourage literacy skills and motivate individuals who may have difficulty with reading and writing. All courses will also involve extensive opportunities for reflection and discussion. For the pilot, we will be delivering these courses to one Federal correctional institution, two Illinois state correctional institutions, and Cook County Jail, either on a monthly, weekly, or biweekly basis depending on the institution. Workbooks are being developed so that our clients can work on their own after the sessions (a blended learning approach). The courses will be highly interactive and the ensuing discussions are designed to be provocative. Our lending library is also expanding, which is resulting in books being distributed in participating correctional institutions to encourage supplementary reading in this new innovative program.

How You Can Help

We are looking for lawyers to co-facilitate our criminology classroom sessions in conjunction with students or anybody to mentor/tutor students at least once a month starting in January 2020. Participants will need to have prison volunteer training by the fall, and background checks are required. This work may be counted toward your legal volunteer hours. If you don't have time to volunteer, please consider donating towards books, workbooks, or textbooks in honor of the High Holidays. Please contact Abby Scheiman at the Hinda Institute for more information. This program is sponsored by the Walder Institute in honor of Daniel Azari.

Abigail Rabinowitz is a volunteer coordinator for the Hinda Institute.