

Effective Religious Volunteer Programs

The media was at its hound dog best in sniffing out the story and bringing the shocking abuses in the Texas Youth Commission (TYC) to light. The legislature and the governor have responded by enacting reforms in the system and new TYC executive management is in place implementing the reforms.

Sadly, what was once regarded as one of the best run juvenile justice systems is now being painted as one of the worst by some critics. All because of the shameful acts of a few! True some reforms were needed and welcomed. But I wonder how much time these critics have spent up close inside these institutions working with the staff and the youth. Do they really have a clue about how difficult it is to take a youth whose life has been trashed and turn them into a model citizen? Reforming the worst 2% in the juvenile justice system is not for wimps.

The Juvenile Justice Ministries Network of Texas (JMMNT) member organizations have spent thousands of hours in virtually all TYC facilities working closely with TYC employees. The consensus is that the overwhelming majority of TYC staff are dedicated caring professionals. These individuals have invested their lives in helping troubled youth. They deserve our respect, trust, and appreciation.

Due in part to the visibility the TYC scandal has received; state and county juvenile justice systems are scrutinizing their programs and procedures, including religious volunteer programs. As the largest juvenile faith-based network in Texas we have gained a clear perspective about effective religious volunteer programs. The following criteria are based upon our membership's extensive experience serving in state and county volunteer programs:

Religious Program Standards

- 1) For a youth to achieve wholeness, rehabilitation or re-socialization programs must include the mind, the body, and the spirit. Accordingly, staff chaplains in juvenile facilities coupled with religious volunteer programs are vital in achieving this outcome.
- 2) Religious volunteer programs are an integral part of ministering to the spiritual needs of incarcerated youth. Religious volunteers and organizations are a key factor in reinforcing positive social values and in facilitating a youth's successful re-entry into the community.
- 3) Incarcerated youth must be allowed to discuss their spiritual concerns and prayers with religious volunteers in a confidential manner. The right to meet with youth on a *one to one basis* is an essential process in ministering to youth. The eye supervisor of institution staff is encouraged for the protection of all concerned.
- 4) The right to attend religious services is mandated by the Texas Family Code. Youth must be allowed to exercise their option of attending worship services. It is not a privilege to be earned. Denying youth the right to attend worship services because they have not reached a certain level in their program is counter productive to their spiritual development and undermines the rehabilitation of the youth.
- 5) Juvenile facilities must have documented scheduled times for regular religious services. Religious service times must be included in their institution master program schedule. One time special events are encouraged by the administration and are perceived as an important part of the religious component of the institutions program.
- 6) Faith-based ex-offenders that have demonstrated successfully re-entry into the community should be permitted to participate in religious volunteer programs. They bring unique insights and inspiration to youth who are struggling with similar destructive lifestyles.
- 7) Religious volunteers and organizations are encouraged to make themselves available for ministry to facility staff if requested but not during duty hours.
- 8) Volunteers and volunteer organizations conduct themselves as ambassadors for Christ while in a juvenile facility, respecting and adhering to the rules and policies of the institution, including submitting to essential security clearances.

You can find out more about the Juvenile Justice Ministry Network of Texas and how you can help these youth at www.jjmnt.org