The Facts

America's prison population is growing at an unprecedented rate. The 2008 Pew Charitable Trust Study shows one in every 99.1 persons in this country are behind bars in jails or prisons. This rate of incarceration is higher than that of any other country in the world. According to the Pew study the U.S. prison population rose by more than 25,000 inmates in 2007 alone.

There are approximately 2.5 million inmates in the American Penal System. The growth is an outcome of much more restrictive sentencing models. Prison growth is not driven by an increase in crime but by a tightening of sentences. In many states, "Good Time" is a reward for good behavior while serving time has been abolished. For any Departments of Corrections and the Federal Prison system parole is not an option, the length of the sentence is the time that is served. Some states have enacted the three strikes approach to sentencing meaning after three convictions the sentence is for life. This too has increased the number of inmates who will grow old in the nation’s prisons.

There is a dramatic increase in the number of people who are imprisoned after the age of 50. Often offenders have lived hard lives and will be a minimum of ten years older physically than they are chronologically.

Impact of Age and Health Status on the Prison Health System

State Departments of Corrections are given a flat per diem for each inmate. There are no increases or adjustments in the rate due to age or health status. Prisons are mandated to provide “community standard” health care. Thus, correctional facilities are financially strained by the cost of care for aging and dying inmates.

End of Life Care in Corrections

Approximately 3,300 inmates die of natural causes each year. As the number of aging and ill incarcerated men and women increases, correctional facilities are seeking both a method and a model to care for these inmate patients in a humane and caring manner. NHPCO has been involved in the development and support of hospice programs in prisons across the country since the GRACE Project was initiated in 1999. Following the GRACE Project, NHPCO worked with the Volunteers of America to collect the stories of dying inmates and their caregivers and to assess the needs of prison hospice programs across the country. It is natural and appropriate that State and Community Hospice programs across the country have been willing to work collaborative with their local prisons to help them with training and structure for hospice care. The challenge always is the introduction of a nurturing and caring model of health care in an environment with a primary mandate of security.

Status of Hospice Programs in the United States

There are approximately 75 hospice programs in prisons in the country. There are six programs in the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Of the existing programs, about one half use inmates as hospice
volunteer. There are multiple advantages to using well screened and well trained inmates in the care of aging and dying offenders. For many inmates, it has been a way to “pay back” for the crimes that led to their incarceration. Other volunteers have said that the opportunity to help others has given them a purpose, a meaning to the prison life. They learn new skills and are in the service to their fellow inmates.

NHPCO

As experts in the area of End of Life Care, NHPCO is committed to serving as a resource and support to its member organizations who are willing to collaborate with their local prisons. NHPCO offers educational events, is represented at correctional conferences across the country, hosts an Industry Round Table of executives of correctional organizations, has created a Quality Guidelines document for Correctional Hospice and is involved in the creation of a much needed curriculum for health professionals in corrections who care for aging and dying prisoners. In the current economic time, correctional facilities face multiple crises as they seek to care for the exploding population of aging and dying inmates. NHPCO seeks to reach out to those who care for this underserved population to educate, to support and to make a gentle death a reality within the secure imperative of the prison environment.