I had no idea as what to expect the first time I walked into the Louisiana State Penitentiary. As Executive Director of the state hospice association, I was told that Warden Burl Cain had initiated a hospice program within his prison and inmates were directly involved in delivery of care to terminally ill inmates within that facility. The thought of inmates trained as hospice volunteers both intrigued and frightened me. All my life, I had heard horror stories about Angola, and now as a spokesperson for hospice care in Louisiana, I shuddered to think that I might be called upon to defend the integrity of hospice because of what might happen within this correctional facility.

However, as soon as I passed through the Front Gate of the 18,000 acre facility, housing 5,108 inmates, I knew there was something different about this place. The inmates were not as I had imagined them, as often portrayed in the media and on television; they were friendly and curious about LMHPCO’s work to improve hospice services throughout the state. They were interested and excited to learn that they were part of a national movement to improve care for the dying. They had found purpose and a sense of redemption in their volunteer work with their patients and one another and I found an example of hospice - at its best! Here is an example of something I had only read of in our history: a true volunteer hospice program - practicing fundamental principles of compassion and care at the end-of-life, without any consideration of compensation or reimbursement. It reminded me of the origins of the hospice movement, established over 35 years ago…and just as the hospice movement had impacted institutional dying in this country, so too this prison hospice program had helped to transform this correctional institution from being one of the “bloodiest prisons in America” into a national model for corrections.

Since my initial introduction, the Angola Hospice was awarded the Circle of Life from the American Hospital Association for “their outstanding innovations and commitment” to improving end-of-life care and licensed by the Louisiana Department of Health. The LMHPCO Board of Directors extended membership and support to “any and all hospice programs within corrections” and that encouragement has resulted in 6 additional Louisiana Correctional facilities launching their own hospice initiatives. In September 2006, LMHPCO held a week-long hospice Volunteer training at Angola attended by 119 inmates from 5 state male correctional facilities throughout Louisiana. In March 2007, the program was repeated in the women’s facility (LCIW) at St Gabriel, LA. In April 2008, the LMHPCO Board of Directors held their quarterly Board Meeting at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman, MS in order to meet with prison administrators and plan for the initiation of hospice services within that facility in 2009.

Hospice within corrections is important because it provides those of us practicing hospice in the “free world” with a memory of our hospice origins. Before there were hospice reimbursements and corporate models of end-of-life healthcare, hospice was a bold alternative to institutional dying in this country; a volunteer movement, committed to ensuring compassion and presence at the end-of-life. The inmate hospice volunteers across this country are constant example and reminder to our “better angles” in service to one another, especially at the end of life.

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