

CURE: A Case Study of Advocacy and Program Development

by Russ Immarigeon*

Much in the news these days are media reports of states lowering their prison populations, reducing their juvenile detention populations, and increasing their participation in Second Chance reentry efforts, reinvestment schemes, and social-bond ventures. Criminal justice systems across the country have in fact become social laboratories for various “reform” measures.

The term “reform” is overly general, having different meanings, for better or worse, in different contexts. Reform can be progressive or regressive, depending on the reform, those assessing the reform, and those recommending it. The proof, as the old saying goes, is in the pudding. What works, how, and why?

A long-neglected aspect of criminal justice reform concerns the history of such measures. How did they come about? Who initiated them? Are there differences between what was advocated and what was implemented? How did these differences emerge? There are many such questions along these lines.

Texas CURE

Forty-two years ago, in 1972, a recently married couple, Charlie and Pauline Sullivan, founded a Texas-based organization with the antiquarian-sounding name Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants. Known more widely through its acronym, CURE, the organization began as a program that provided prison-bound bus rides for visiting family members of incarcerated men and women. From its start in San Antonio, this service quickly spread to Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth, El Paso, and Houston, as there was a great need for these basic services. Soon, the organization began engaging in advocacy efforts to improve (“reform”) the state’s prison system, and its treatment of prisoners and their families in particular. Beyond the Sullivans, members of this organization, besides interested citizens, were those who had been served—prisoners, ex-prisoners, and family members of current or former prisoners.

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Like many organizations, CURE emerged on a step-by-step basis, rather than as the result of an entirely pre-planned approach. As it happened, in bringing family members to prison, the Sullivans, a former priest and a former nun, were also building a constituency for reform.

CURE’s first target was the Texas “building tender” system. According to a new booklet, *Justice Advocates: CURE and Prison Reform* (March 2014, 39 pages), written by Charles Hounmenou for the Jane Addams College of Social Work in Chicago, this now-defunct system established “inmates as guards” who could punish and even kill troublesome or whistle-blowing prisoners.

In 1973, the Sullivans learned of the building-tender program while on one of

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According to *Justice Advocates*, Texas CURE worked this way:

Pauline and Charlie would spend most of their time roaming the halls of the Capitol. They would accost legislators, testify before committees and panels, or prod the press to get their policy points across. They were often pleading for more humane treatment for detainees, more work release and community-based corrections programs, and fewer new expensive prisons.

Despite being non-confrontational, or, as one supporter suggested, “attack[ing] a fleet of tanks with a toothpick,” the

We realized that if we were ever going to have any success in prison reform in Texas, we would have to “adjust our marketing strategy.”

their prison visit bus trips. They immediately issued a statewide press release announcing that CURE was “a prison reform organization.” This announcement soon attracted a San Antonio legislator’s support, and the group was off and running, a journey that would last over a dozen years, at which point the Sullivans moved to Washington, D.C., making CURE a national prison reform organization.

In Texas, as described in *Justice Advocates*, the Sullivans adopted “a non-confrontational approach when dealing with the prison management system. This implied moving from a confrontation approach to cooperative strategies, and no longer being involved in demonstrations because anything that might occur during protests sponsored by the group could irretrievably damage its brand and reputation.”

As Charlie Sullivan has said, “We realized that if we were ever going to have

Sullivans nonetheless encountered resistance, if not hostility, from corrections officials. In one notable episode, the Texas Department of Corrections’ director walked out of a statewide CURE conference without reading his prepared speech because earlier in the day some CURE members had been critical of his practices and policies. Interestingly, however, the director soon apologized for his “overreaction.”

Subsequently, Texas CURE accumulated a number of important successes:

- Chairing a citizen’s advisory committee of a legislative task force on prison reform;
- Helping to establish a Texas Commission on Jail Standards and a Texas Adult Probation Commission;
- Publishing an exposé of the state’s parole process, including governor-based

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obstacles to parole release and the “cumbersome process” that parolees experienced in being released;

- Helping to facilitate landmark prison reform and prisoners’ rights mitigation;
- Working with state budget officials to stress community corrections over prison construction during periods of declining fiscal resources; and
- Engaging with state legislators in the early 1980s, during what Charlie Sullivan calls “[t]he most productive legislative session in criminal justice reform in Texas history.”

Among the products of these successes were a scathing rebuke of Texas correctional practices, the Texas Parole Board’s adoption of CURE’s parole report as its official information guide, the solicitation

From their new office not far from the Capitol building, they began walking the halls of Congress, using their Texas contacts to meet legislators from other states, and using their good-natured personalities and well-focused organizing skills to meet other legislators, advocates, and others with similar interests in improving the criminal justice meted out, especially within state and federal prison systems. State by state, they started building state-based CURE chapters. Texas worked for Texas, and Maine could work for Maine. And so their work has continued for nearly 25 years.

As they settled into Washington, the Sullivans’ first impulses were to establish state chapters across the country and to meet members of Congress. In 1985, few members of Congress were interested in criminal justice reform. Meeting them was difficult. As Pauline Sullivan notes in *Justice Advocates*, “In Austin we knew

prisons, and life sentences for children and youth. Moreover, as they look to the future, these other issues loom large:

- Abolition of “supermax” control units and long-term prison lock-downs;
- Restoration of education-oriented Pell grants;
- Mentoring programs for incarcerated young people;
- Medical and mental health care reform;
- Federal assistance to states for programs that help newly released violent offenders;
- Increased staffing levels at the U.S. Department of Justice’s prison and jail litigation unit;
- Emphasis on rehabilitation at local instead of state levels;
- Restored voting rights for prisoners with felony convictions; and
- Abolition of sex offender registries and the civil commitment of convicted sex offenders.

In recent years, national CURE and its state chapters have raised concerns about the privatization of prisons and life sentences for children and youth.

of testimony for the landmark case *Ruiz v. Estelle*, state support for halfway houses and restitution centers, and state support for contact visits for prisoners and their families and five-day furloughs for prisoners. Moreover, Texas CURE’s successes marked the way for the Sullivans to move to Washington, D.C., where they hoped to have a national impact.

National CURE

In August 1985, the Sullivans moved to Washington, D.C., where they quickly set up their office. While CURE’s national emphasis focused more immediately on the needs of prisoners and their families, its approach remained largely the same as when it was addressing broader criminal justice policy matters.

In Texas, the Sullivans and other CURE members did extensive ground-work getting to know any state or local official who might be influential in helping them achieve some, if not many, of their reform objectives. CURE was truly a grassroots organization, and in Washington, D.C. they simply took their Texas approach national.

everybody in the state capitol building. It was just like a community. But [in Washington] I’d go up to Congress when we first arrived, and it seemed very lonesome. So the first two years were hard.”

Still, from 1989 to today, CURE has achieved many legislative successes, causing or contributing to such notable federal legislation as the following:

- The Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program of 1989;
- The Family Unity Demonstration Project Act of 1993;
- Creation in 1996 of an Office of Correctional Job Training and Placement within the U.S. Department of Justice;
- The Second Chance Act of 2007;
- Introduction of the Federal Prison Work Incentive Act of 2009; and
- Federal communications commission efforts in 2013 to reduce and regulate predatory prison phone rates.

In recent years, national CURE and its state chapters have raised concerns about temperature (hot-cold) control within prisons across the country, the privatization of

International CURE

Charlie and Pauline Sullivan believe that CURE and similar organizations should be “keeping an eye on every prison and jail in the world.” By 1997, CURE had worked for 12 years in Texas, then 15 more years in Washington, D.C. Sure enough, the Sullivans began casting an interested eye toward building international working partnerships, which subsequently included bi-annual conferences that have been held in Africa, Asia, Europe, South America, and the United States. African participation in these conferences has been especially high, and nation-based chapter websites exist in Ghana, Nigeria, Togo, and Zambia. International CURE has also made its presence known at the United Nations, an important and perhaps overlooked site for addressing the intersection of human rights and criminal justice, a relationship that is more apparently integrated into policy and practice discussions and practices in non-American nations.

Conclusion

Reform organizations that strive to provide both “policy and practice” advocacy and direct services face many, often

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daunting, challenges. At the start of CURE, as *Justice Advocates* notes, “Pauline and Charlie realized that the organization might not be able to survive by both providing services and doing policy advocacy because of the risks and constraints associated with each. Direct services helped find short-term solutions to prison issues. However, they maintained status quo and hardly affected any actual change of the prison system.”

Or, as the Sullivans have stated, “The prison system liked us when we only ran a bus service. When we advocated banning the ‘building tender’ system, they saw us as ‘the enemy.’”

CURE is no longer “the enemy.” As *Justice Advocates* suggests, the Sullivans and others within the CURE community have managed to succeed with a minimum of fiscal resources, but perhaps with a maximum of human resources. How do they do it? Grassroots organizing is at the core of the organization’s accomplishments.

As noted in *Justice Advocates*:

Empowerment has always been the group’s driving force. In fact, it has succeeded in providing opportunities

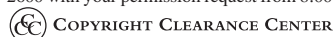
for empowerment of its members, prisoners and their loved ones, and done so many times. The organization’s board of directors has many leaders who have a proven record of accomplishments in prison reform. Regular national conventions and yearly chapter board meetings allow CURE leadership to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses and accordingly adjust to the changing socio-political context in the country. The successful policy campaigns CURE spearheaded for years show the high level of management skill within the group, and the use of strategic planning so as to achieve policy goals. CURE’s established leadership base is largely the result of regular training of leaders and members in a decade-old leadership development program.

Copies of Justice Advocates: CURE and Prison Reform can be obtained from the Jane Addams Center for Social Policy and Research, Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois at Chicago, 1040 West Harmon St., Chicago, IL 60607, (312) 996-3219, (e-mail) policycenter@uic.edu, (website) www.uic.edu/jaddams/college/research_public_service/policy_center.html. ■

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