

## Crime and Punishment

### Sheriff Michael Ashe Challenges His Inmates To "Answer The Bell "

Hampden County Sheriff Michael Ashe, who began his fifth term in office last month, has always managed his prisons with a style he calls 'firm but fair.' The goal is to punish, yes, but also to challenge inmates to set higher standards for themselves. The results have been impressive. Today, the county lock-up in Ludlow is considered one of the best run jails in the country.

Hampden County Sheriff Michael Ashe remembers well an irrepressibly hot August day in 1991 at the old Hampden County jail on York Street . About 500 of the 800 or so prisoners at the 19th century Bastille, as Ashe calls it, (designed for a capacity of about 250) were crammed into the prison yard trying to keep cool - and they weren't about to go back inside.

Ashe, sheriff since 1975, approached the situation as he has all others since he took the job. Rather than reacting with force and an eye to punish, he responded with logic, treating the prisoners with respect, as human beings with issues...not criminals with no rights and no hope. And after an extended period of negotiation, the prisoners retired to their cells.

The episode exemplifies Ashe's approach to corrections and punctuates the dramatic change in management style that has evolved naturally - but also through Ashe's own determination - since the new county jail was opened in Ludlow in 1992.

Before, with the overcrowding at York Street and the pressure to build a new facility, there was what Ashe calls "crisis management," a purely reactionary style of conducting business.

Today, Ludlow's Stony Brook facility is one of the nation's newest and most heralded prisons, and Ashe's proactive management style has earned it the lock-up honors as one of the best run jails - or "cans," as Ashe calls them - in the country.

Inspectors who have visited the facility in recent years have worn out their thesauruses trying to find new ways to say "good" or "innovative" and the National Commission of Correctional Health Care, rating 450 accredited jails across the country, named the Hampden County Correctional Center "facility of the year."

Asked how the jail racked up such scores, Ashe replied jokingly, "because I know cans." Elaborating, he said that for a quarter century he and his staff have fought the good fight and the accolades are merely recognition of those efforts.

Ashe began his fifth six-year term in office last month. Now 59, the popular Ashe says he stays at the job for a number of reasons, but mostly because he loves the work and "because I'd like to think I've delivered."

Few could argue.

In a candid interview, Ashe reflects on his quarter century of public service, and the state of corrections as the millennium approaches.

#### Hard Cell

At a time when corrections leaders are being called upon to make sure that those staying in their jails are being properly punished for their crimes, Ashe says this can be done without overlooking his primary goal - to challenge inmates to develop the skills necessary to re-enter society.

By getting them to answer his bell, Ashe believes he can reform inmates so that they might answer society's as well.

A former social worker, Ashe told Business West that corrections leaders have to look at the reasons why someone eventually winds up being incarcerated, not merely the fact that they are.

For the future, he said society's biggest challenge is to focus on those problems before someone winds up behind bars not after.

As for corrections management, Ashe knocks it down to two words: common sense. Recalling the incident in the yard at York Street in 1991, he said there was little else to fall back on.

"It's not as if you could open a book and turn to a certain page and see a chapter on what to do when prisoners won't come in from the yard - You just handle the situation and use common sense," he said. "I went right down in the yard and met them, and it was the human factor and a sense of fairness that allowed us to resolve the situation."

But probably the most defining moment in Ashe's career came in 1990 when the sheriff, clear out of patience over his struggles to build a new jail and totally frustrated that he had to release convicted felons to the streets because there was no room at York Street, seized a National Guard armory in Springfield to temporarily house prisoners.

The bold move put him in the national spotlight and provided the jolt necessary to propel the state into choosing a site and building the new lock-up. But those who know Ashe say the episode didn't define the man. It was an out-of-character move by an administrator known for his ability to work within the system, not around it.

"No, that wasn't really me, I suppose," he said. "But I had just reached a point where something needed to be done. I prefer a style where I'm being proactive and not reacting to circumstances, but that wasn't always possible back then."

In many respects, Ashe has had two careers, one at York Street, where his job was made exponentially more complicated by the task of running that anachronistic facility and maneuvering through the political and logistical minefields in pursuit of a replacement, and the second at Stony Brook.

But through both chapters, his attitude toward corrections has never changed. Instead of putting someone in a dark hole where they can reflect on their indiscretions, he has always looked to shed light on the problems that have ultimately led to incarceration.

And through initiatives like an alcohol recovery program, a pre-release center, prison industry efforts, and a high school equivalency degree program, he says he can do the prisoner and society a favor by preparing inmates for life back on the streets.

"If you look back on corrections, maybe 25-30 years, not just in Hampden County but nationally, these facilities take on the attitude of society." he said. "A lot of times we end up with these one-line slogans like 'lock'em up and throw away the key,' and you end up with a warehousing concept, a fortress in the woods."

Today, he said, attitudes have changed. Corrections facilities look at the profile of the average prisoner - most have a fifth or sixth-grade education; 90% have a substance abuse problem of one sort or another; 93-94% lack any vocational education; and at least that many lack the discipline for the workplace - and have decided to go after the causes, not the effect.

"From the beginning, I always wanted to bring a correctional philosophy to Hampden County," he said.

Sheriff David Manning, who served Hampden County through much of the '40s, '50s, and '60s, had a different attitude, he explained. "His philosophy was punishment, and punishment to him meant being isolated and standing in your cell...there was very little productive activity."

"People were expected then to reflect as they sat in their cell," he continued. "They were supposed to look at their negative experience and learn from it as they sat in their 6'-by-8' cell."

Ashe's predecessor, John Curley, started the movement away from that mindset, getting prisoners out of their cells. He built a cafeteria so prisoners could eat together, outside the cell block, and instituted many of the reform efforts that Ashe would refine.

"Looking at corrections in the 1950s and '60s, there was a great deal of warehousing," he said. "There was a feeling that you couldn't do anything with them...once a criminal always a criminal, once an alcoholic always an alcoholic...that was the attitude. My philosophy was to bring a new attitude, to be firm but fair and bring a sense of strength, reinforcement, and decency."

"I was going to challenge inmates, to place greater demands on them, to set higher levels of expectations and set higher standards, and get them to answer the bell and be more productive."

Programs involving inmates at both Stony Brook and the Western Massachusetts Correctional Alcohol Center include community service restitution (where inmates clean parks, roadsides, and cemeteries); a prison industry program, where inmates make their own uniforms among other products; a day-reporting program that has become a national model; a high school equivalency program; and weekend spiritual retreats.

The collective efforts impart responsibility, and build workforce-readiness. At the same time, they convey a sense of respect for inmates and their problems and offer another measure of accountability for the correctional system.

"These places can be fraught with suspiciousness, mistrust, divisiveness, manipulation, control, power - they can be very oppressive places," Ashe said of jails. "But we've opened it up."

### **Complete Sentence**

All this betterment must still be conducted in the atmosphere of punishment, said Ashe, acknowledging that this is the reason, not reform, that people are sent to prison in the first place.

"But now, you've got to define punishment," he said. "And in my opinion, punishment means taking away their freedom and making them answer to the Sheriff's Department's bell, not their own. And I won't buy into letting them languish and play into their history of irresponsibility that has resulted in them being in jail."

"My job is to get them to be a lot more accountable - their behavior, their actions, everything," he continued. "I feel that what we do is bring constructive tension, which I think is the basis of change. It comes down to creating an environment that challenges the inmates."

On the flip side of the fair-but-firm equation, Ashe said discipline is dispatched quickly and decidedly when there are violations of the rules, particularly those governing gang activity.

"We have zero tolerance on gangs, we lock these people up for 23 or 24 hours a day until their attitude and their demeanor changes," he said. "There's that firmness. On the other hand, if the person has a mental health issue, or a substance abuse issue, or an alcohol issue, there's compassion, there's the fairness."

Ashe bristles at the suggestion that today's correctional facilities have become too soft on prisoners, providing better accommodation than they might find in their neighborhoods in Holyoke and Springfield.

While inmates may have a bed and a warm cell and three meals a day, the bottom line is the lack of freedom - as in freedom of movement and freedom of choice. The jail has a firm no-smoking policy, for example.

"We care enough on behalf of society to confront them and try to hold them accountable for their actions. Every day we fight, but I don't think you have to do it with a Billy club," says Ashe.

### **Like a Rock...**

Instead, he falls back on common sense, using a staff that supervises inmates instead of watching over them.

Indeed, along with the many other changes that have taken place in corrections, Ashe cited a revised job description for correctional officers up and down the system. There exists what he calls a new accountability - for everything from the prisoners' safety and progress toward a return to society, to responsible spending of the taxpayers' money.

"The whole aspect of the guard has changed as we've moved from the old warehouse facilities to the new podular setup with direct supervision," he said. "Like I always tell the staff...guards I can find at Pinkerton, what I'm looking for are correctional officers."

Describing the staff as the cornerstone to any successful correctional philosophy, Ashe said that with some help from the governor - he agreed to take 300 state inmates in exchange for higher wage scales for his staff - he has turned many corrections jobs into careers.

There are 750 such careers to be had at Stony Brook, said Ashe, acknowledges the tremendous power - not to mention political patronage - that accompanies that kind of hiring. The key is to use that power effectively.

"Once we were given the financial resources, we set about changing the environment here, making it an attractive place to work," he said, adding that along with the physical and practical amenities, there were new job descriptions.

"Before, on the lower end of the spectrum, the line staff were never really involved in decision making...that was always left to the sergeants, lieutenants and captains," he explained. "We reversed that and set up this direct supervision system, making the supervisor the iron."

"I want these people to have an image, that they're a manager of people...we need good communicators, people with good interpersonal skills, and problem-solving abilities," he continued. "Beyond that, they're a role model, they lead by example."

Only a few years ago, Hampden County ranked ninth among the 14 counties in compensation for correctional officers, even though it was one of the largest counties. Now, it's third. Salaries for correctional officers now average \$32,000 - with benefits, the number approached \$40,000 - making the positions far more attractive. "This is a career now...these people are professionals," he said.

Quality help is important, because the prison population continues to rise. Factors ranging from mandatory sentencing to the spread of gangs have swelled the numbers at Stony Brook to nearly 1,900 inmates.

And many of those are doing longer sentences for more serious crimes than the inmates of a generation ago.

"Springfield today is like a mini-L.A., a mini-New York, a mini-Chicago... we have gangs and violence... it's not like these prisoners are guys from Hatfield off the farm who had a bad spell for a few weeks."

### **Bar None**

Incarceration, while popular with politicians and most conservatives, is also quite expensive. It costs \$26,000 a year to house an inmate at Stony Brook, more than it takes to send one to all but the most exclusive colleges in the region. That statistic has prompted lawmakers on Beacon Hill and administrators like Ashe to look at prevention and failing that, less costly alternatives to punish those less-serious offenders.

Ashe cited one model pre-release program for non-violent substance abusers that carries a pricetag only one-fourth that of traditional incarceration.

Operated in conjunction with the Probation Department, the so-called Community Correctional Center is operated out of the old jail on York Street. Currently, 300-400 inmates are taking part in the model, but Ashe predicts that number could soon grow to more than 1,000.

"Until now, there's been just jail and probation...here's an intermediate sanction," Ashe explained. "The guy goes to jail for the day, he doesn't have to spend 16-24 hours there, it's no longer an overnigher. He gets anger management treatment, mediation, community restitution, substance abuse treatment, it's all there."

Ashe calls such programs the wave of the future because they provide the essential ingredients corrections officers have been looking for - accountability, on the part of both the inmate and the system - and a lower sticker price.

Efforts such as the pre-release program have helped Stony Brook rank third among the state's 13 county prisons in overall cost per inmate.

In addition to pre-release efforts, Ashe said the county is also focusing on post-incarceration programs to curb recidivism.

Noting that 68% of the inmates come off the streets of Springfield and another 17% from Holyoke, Ashe said the county is putting together teams to go into those neighborhoods to help prisoners re-enter society.

Using so-called "sector beat teams," the Sheriff's Department will make sure that inmates will have some help, in the form of "after-incarceration support services," when they return home.

"These people will be leaving with a plan," Ashe stressed. "Years ago, when people left prison they were given a sawbuck and a suit from the Goodwill. Now they're leaving with a work plan, a housing plan, an education plan, and a substance abuse plan."

### **A Matter of Time**

Summarizing his approach to corrections, Ashe said his role isn't to judge inmates - that's been done already - but to serve them and society as a whole in ways that benefit both.

"As I said before, it all comes down to common sense," he said. "For the inmates - and for us as well - if you don't put anything in, you won't get anything out. We've put everything we've had into the fight and the results speak for themselves."

