



February 2010

# INSIDE-OUT

NEWS  
FROM  
THE  
DC JAIL



**VISITORS' SERVICES CENTER** 1422 Massachusetts Avenue SE ♦ Washington, DC 20003

Tel: 202-544-2131 ♦ Fax: 202 543-1572 ♦ Web: [www.vscdcjails.net](http://www.vscdcjails.net)

*An organization offering immediate and practical assistance to inmates in the DC Jail*

**Our Mission:** *Toward our overall goal of reducing recidivism, VSC's mission is to help inmates maintain their family ties and to help them, as well, create and strengthen ties to the community through a combination of direct services and referrals so that they are better prepared for release back into a community we all share - to live, to work and to raise their children.*

Each month, the VSC staff and our volunteers handle hundreds of requests for assistance. The majority of these requests come from inmates. Requests also come from family members, attorneys and the staff of the Department of Corrections. The requests we have handled in the past several months include:

- ♦ One family member wanted to know if inmates can be e-mailed (they cannot)
- ♦ Inmate was released from jail with a scheduled appointment for foot surgery - but he didn't know where to go. We contacted Jail and traced all steps until we located surgery clinic for scheduled appointment.
- ♦ Ex-offender visited our office and said he was unable to submit applications for jobs because he couldn't read them - we provided reading glasses and off he went to various local businesses to seek employment.
- ♦ We received daily calls from family members during the 10 day period before Christmas when the Jail was on lockdown and the jail, as a result was closed to all visitors, including VSC. "Is the lockdown over?" x 150.
- ♦ Employers who hired ex offenders in the last few months included National Airport, Fed Ex, UPS, Safeway, the National Harbor and the United Planning Organization.
- ♦ AARP contacted us to see if we could find out if the individual they were looking for was possibly in the Jail. He was - his mom had died and left funds for him through AARP. We connected the inmate with AARP through with our 3 way line.
- ♦ Inmate asked us to retrieve his property at the police station where he was arrested: money, car keys, papers, jewelry. We could not: property was being held as evidence.
- ♦ Son called. His 81 year old dad went to court yesterday and he didn't come home last night. Was he in Jail? Yes.
- ♦ Inmate wants to know if he can sign up for the Army while locked up.
- ♦ Attorney called - wants to know how to get his assistant into the Jail to provide interpretive services when attorney visits.

## What's in the VSC Look-Out

The VSC Look-Out is our newsletter which is distributed to 2000 inmates in the DC Jail. The February edition includes information on how to get a non-driver ID at no cost through the Department of Motor Vehicles, the days and times of clothing distribution for men and women through So Others Might Eat, a description of the job and housing services available through Jobs Have Priority which is located in the lobby of the shelter at 2<sup>nd</sup> and D and open daily, and a challenge from the VSC staff to double any contribution to the Red Cross for Haitian relief made by inmates through their accounts at the DC Jail.

## Commentary on the Snow

Terri Freeman, President of the Community foundation for the National Capital Region, turns her attention to members of our community for whom these extreme weather conditions presented added challenges.

*"Like me, you may be the kind of person who rushes out to the grocery store at the first mention of snow, stockpiling the basics: milk, toilet paper, hot chocolate. But for everyone one of us in line at the grocery store, there is a mom trudging through the snow to a food bank. For each of us who moves into a hotel because we've lost our electricity, there's a family that can't pay for its utilities. For children who rely on subsidized breakfast and lunch at school, the word "snow day" takes on a new meaning: hunger. When the snow forces local governments and non profit agencies to close, it's even harder to know where to turn for help. This winter's weather has added insult to injury for many in our region who are already living on the edge. It has created its own set of challenges for local safety net organization that provide food, shelter, clothing to the neediest in our region."*

At VSC, while we don't provide long term solutions to life's most basic needs like food and shelter, we are a gateway to the many organizations which can provide those services and we make referrals daily to SOME, Bread for the City, Strive DC, Jubilee Jobs, First Helping Street Outreach, various shelters and food programs throughout the City. VSC is a first stop for many when they are released from the Jail. A VSC staff member was reminded of that when arriving at VSC on Tuesday between snow storms. There was a note on the door: "I just got out....I need help. Will you be here tomorrow?"

Well...we were not "here tomorrow" and, in fact, we were closed all week, as were many non profits with whom we work. The snow highlights the plight of our most marginalized members of the community - as certainly the note left on our door did for us. The response does not lie in one day - but relies on the work we, you and others do all year long to help our neighbors in need.

## What's ahead for VSC in the coming months

We will be providing tax preparation services for inmates at the Jail and we will hold a tax preparation clinic at VSC for family members. We have received a generous contribution so that we can purchase a washer/dryer to install in our basement for the use of homeless ex-offenders. We are forming the VSC Children's Committee, to include the children of staff and VSC board members in an effort to strengthen our services and broaden our outreach to the children of inmates. And, we are publishing a weekly newsletter called "Out There..." which will provide regular updates on job fairs, training and treatment programs, housing possibilities etc.

**VSC Board of Directors:** Rainey Brandt, President, John Clark, Vice President, Bryan Young, Treasurer, Mary C. Kennedy, Secretary, Roy A. Austin Jr, Leona Bennett, Betsy Biben, John Graham, George Holland, Claire Johnson Fay, Kathy Patterson and Jeremy Wiley. Kyros Freeman, *of counsel*.

**VSC Staff:** Ann C. Keep, Bill Chandler, Betty Gatewood MSW, Sarah Coleman, Cynthia Johnson, William Napper, and Mary Elizabeth Pate.



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