

BELIZE

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I. Historical Background

In 1993 the Belize Central Prison was relocated outside of Belize City on the Boom/Hattieville Road. During that period the facility was managed by the Government of Belize, however, budgetary constraints and lack of proper planning resulted in this new facility to be poorly designed and managed. The facility was basically a warehouse for offenders, and was operated below the minimum standards. There were no structured programs for inmates to learn and occupy their time. Their activities were minimal, and as a result, they succumbed to idleness and violence amid this desolate confinement.

In 2002, Kolbe Foundation, a private, non-profit organization was approved by the Government to manage the Prison and with the goal of reforming the prison system in Belize. Kolbe's mission is to provide a secure, humane facility geared towards meaningful rehabilitation and successful reintegration. Kolbe's approach to managing the captive audience is to offer rehabilitation and education programs that help change criminal mentality and behavior of the individual. Kolbe Foundation believes that the absence of rehabilitation and community reintegration programs increases the opportunities for inmates to improve criminal skills.

In 2010, Dr. Herbert Gayle, PhD and Nelma Mortis, MEd, prepared a release entitled "Male Social Participation and Urban Violence in Urban Belize" in that release they wrote about the prison under Kolbe's Management: *"After seven years of effort, there have been positive changes within the entire system – inmates and staff, attitudes and physical environment. Success has been achieved largely because of coloration and cooperation from various organizations, government and most importantly, its staff. Kolbe employs over 200 security officers and a little over 80 civilians and as team (and the direction of the Board of Directors) instills the values of rehabilitation through a variety of education and rehabilitation programmes."*

The question then arises, what had made the Belize Central Prison manage by the Kolbe Foundation unique from other prisons? There is only one prison facility in the entire country, which houses all of society's misfits. These include convicted prisoners, prisoners remanded or awaiting trial, females, juveniles, and special care prisoners. It's the management's vision of prisoners being treated as human beings with the potential to become good and productive citizens if given the opportunity to change. Former Chief Justice of Belize, Dr. Abdulai Conteh in his opening remarks to the Supreme Court in 2006 reminds us that, *"It should always be remembered that a convicted prisoner does not shed his humanity or personal dignity once he crosses over the threshold of the Prison. He or she still remains a human person . . . imprisonment after conviction should only result in the loss of personal liberty for the duration of the sentence as punishment for the crime for which conviction was obtained. It should not and must not shed the human dignity of the convicted for that way leads assuredly to the repeated offender syndrome."* This affirms Kolbe's believe and commitment to the management of prison and the direction it has taken.

II. Staff Development

Attaining the level of success that Dr. Herbert Gayle mentioned in his report was not an easy task. It came as a result of training and getting the staff to embrace the Kolbe vision. Staff

training was done in all aspects of prison management and it remains ongoing. Tremendous assistance was provided by the United States Government with regards to educating the trainers. These trainers, after qualifying themselves, assisted in training other staff members. The objective is to professionalize the prison and equip our staff with the necessary knowledge to operate within the confines of the domestic prison rules and in line with international conventions. Currently a large percent of our staff has received some level of training.

In addition to the training of our staff a new unit known as the Quick Response Unit has been set up. This unit is a group of elite Officers selected from among the best within the ranks. They are specifically trained in all aspects of prison management and include the use of non-lethal weapons. The level of professionalism achieved by our staff has changed their perspective. The prisoners now see the officers as one of authority and not as villains. This perception is important to Kolbe as it is indicative of the respect garnered by Prison Officers, who are in control of the Prison.

III. Rehabilitation in Prison

The changing of the inmate's criminal mentality or behavior begins with the process of rehabilitation. The opportunity or privilege to work, whether in the kitchen, medic centre, industrial zone, chopping gang, or cleaning the bathroom, must be earned. The initial step is to go through the rehabilitation programs. The analogy could be drawn of a sculptor who receives a piece of rough wood and has to work on it to develop something that society would love and buy. The same can be said of a prisoner. When he enters the facility he is society's reject. Using the time he/she has in the facility, the Foundation will design a course through the classification and assessment system to refine and shape him/her before reentry. At the same time, he/she will be equipped with the necessary skills to survive in society without reoffending.

The Inner Change for Freedom Belize Programme (IFFB) was set up in February 2003; it is a faith based eighteen month program, where inmates are removed from the general population, allowing them to concentrate on the changes they need to make in their lives without the distraction and ridicule from other inmates.

In April of 2006, an Addiction Rehabilitation Centre (ARC) was set up with its curriculum focusing on Intake Orientation, Criminal and Addictive thinking, Drug and Alcohol Education, Socialization, Relapse Prevention, Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Release and Reintegration, and HIV & AIDS Education. Upon completion of the program the inmate is returned into the general population where they are to apply the knowledge gained as they work and interact and with others.

Some inmates who successfully complete the IFFB or ARC program are selected, trained and given the privilege to work within the facility. They serve roles in the electrical department, tailor shop, medical unit, woodwork shop, agriculture department, etc. In addition, their role helps the Foundation as the meager management budget cannot afford the hiring of additional staff to do those jobs. Hence, the captive audience provides a suitable work force to care for the facility.

The Cindy Gregg Prison School was established in 2007 with the aims of giving prisoners an opportunity to improve their academic and vocational education. The curriculum used is similar to that of the Government schools. This makes it easier for a prisoner to enter the mainstream of the education system upon reentry into society. Beside the academic and vocational program, the school also teaches subjects that are geared towards providing inmates with on the job ethics and preparation for job interviews. Keeping in mind that once the inmate leaves the facility all they have is their labor to sell, they must be able to sell that to the employer.

In addition, the practice that has been adopted and has proven successful to us is the way in which the special care and sick inmates are cared for in the facility. Currently on staff is a doctor and three nurses who are assisted by thirty inmates, trained as Medical First Responders and Emergency Medical Technicians. These inmates work at the Prison Clinic and are dispersed throughout the units in the Prison. These inmates are trained to assist with the health care of the mentally challenged, paralyzed, HIV/AIDS and other inmate patients. They are assisted by inmate peer and spiritual counselors.

IV. Challenges

One of the main challenges Kolbe Foundation is experiencing is getting the Belizean society to accept its role in the process of prison management. Many have taken the hard line stance that Kolbe should be tough on these prisoners and rehabilitation should not be the priority. They advocate that Kolbe should be more involved in warehousing of inmates instead of trying to reform them. The general society needs to recognize the change in these individuals and give them an opportunity to prove themselves. Without the opportunity to work and earn a living, the entire process of rehabilitation may mean nothing when the ex-convict is face with the harsh reality of life, especially if he/she has a family to feed.

The recidivism rate for the Belize Central Prison, which stands at 15%, can be reduced further if the opportunity exist for the ex-convict to apply what they have learned during their incarceration. In a 2010 recidivism study on juveniles in the prison, it was recommended that a strong youth development program be developed by agencies responsible for youths to provide care for juveniles after release from prison. There has also been continuous dialogue with other agencies to recognize these ex-convicts and give them a chance to prove themselves in society.

Finally, as Kolbe works toward its mission of successful reintegration, the setting up of a halfway house has been a topic of interest among the concerned groups. It is believed that this half way house will assist tremendously ex-convicts in coping with the challenges of being out of prison and of being labeled with the stigma of being in prison. However, because of budgetary constraints, this idea has been put on hold.

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