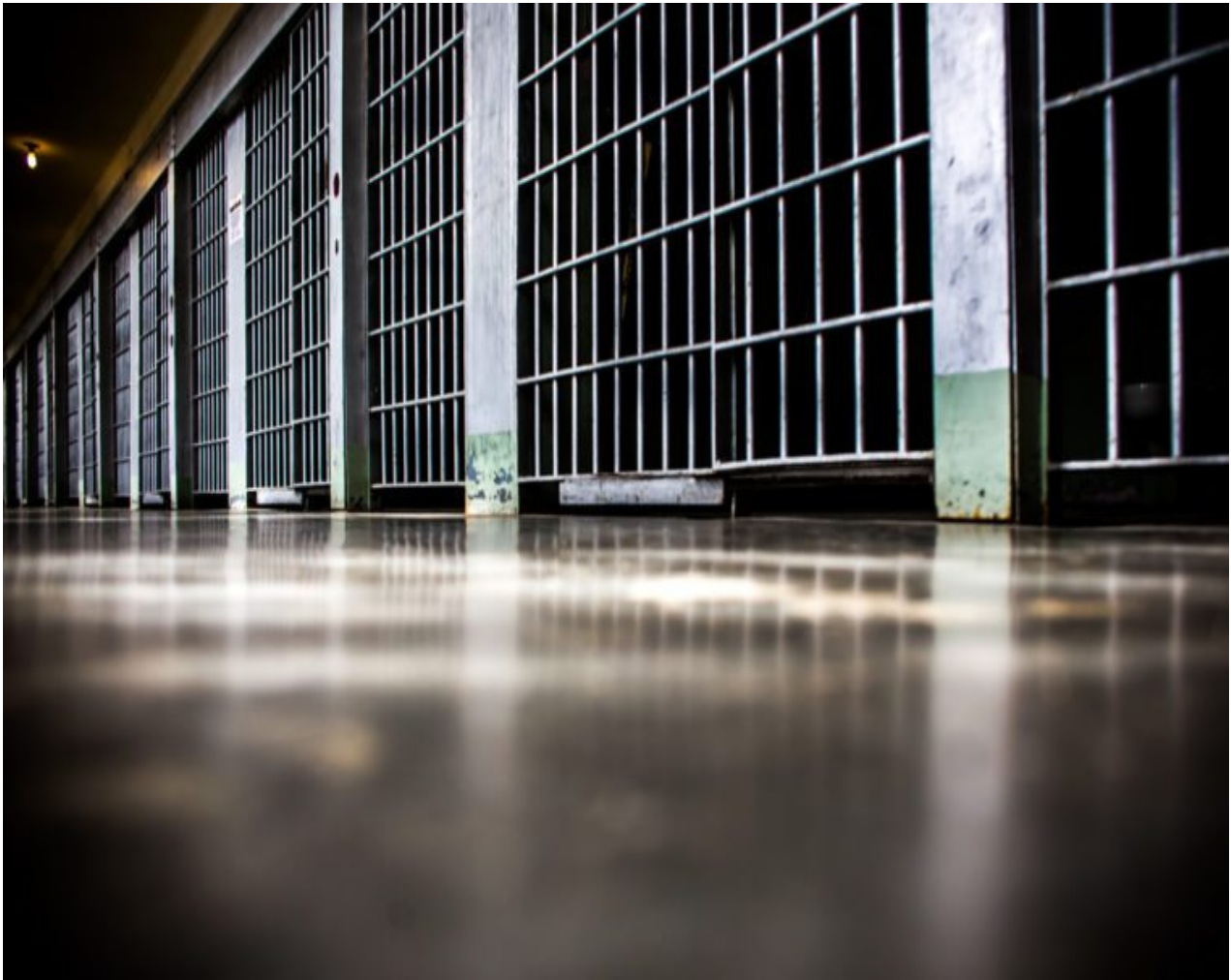


The Virgin Islands Consortium

Op-Ed | The Case For Prison Reform In The USVI, Part 1: Confronting The Ugly Truth

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In February, a video released by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of a violent July 2, 2018 attack of an inmate by a correction officer at the Alexander Farraley Criminal Justice Complex (CJC) on St. Thomas went viral on various social media platforms and rightly drew the ire of the Virgin Islands community. The video alleged that “this is not an isolated case of prisoner abuse at this jail” and concluded that “the Virgin Islands Bureau of Corrections must ensure reforms.”

For that one video alone, there are likely many more similar incidents not caught on camera that are happening behind the cinderblock walls of our correctional facilities every day. In fact, the ACLU video went on to say that at CJC, “prisoners are regularly

subjected to inadequate medical and mental health care, and violence.”

As largely quiet as it's kept locally, our corrections system is in crisis--both from the standard of care and services provided to inmates, and from the resources (or lack thereof) available to workers. When I first moved to St. Thomas almost two years ago, during a tour with government officials, I got a first-hand view of the state of our correctional facilities and was disappointed, but not dismayed, by what I saw. I knew the system could and would get better, if we are willing to do the work.

To put this all into context, I come from an extensive background in human resources and most recently worked as the second in command at one of the largest jail complexes in the U.S. -- New York City's Department of Correction (DOC). In my role as First Deputy Commissioner, I was directly responsible for helping transform DOC into a well-staffed, professional, more efficient and humane facility. That transformation began in 2015 and continues today.

Before we dig deeper, let's first define **prison reform**: *Reform is providing inmates an environment and culture where they have access to tools to change their lives. Additionally, reform is providing corrections professionals with the resources they need to effectively do their jobs and to succeed at it.*

Kalief Browder – Catalyst for Reform at NYC Department of Correction

On June 6, 2015, Kalief Browder died after hanging himself from an air conditioning unit outside his mother's Bronx home. He was 22 years old. At the age of 16, Kalief was accused of stealing a backpack and its contents on a NYC subway. While awaiting trial, Kalief was jailed on Rikers Island for three years, nearly two of which were spent in solitary confinement. His case gained national attention and was one of the drivers for NYC's more than \$100 million investment in jail reforms.

The numbers are staggering when it comes to incarceration. Statistics show there are currently 700,000+ people in American jails, 450,000 of whom have not been found guilty of any crime. When Kalief's story made national headlines following his tragic death, NYC knew it had to make some serious changes within its jails.

In the Virgin Islands, we shouldn't wait to have a *Kalief Browder story* on our hands before we are willing to make tangible, sometimes unconventional and even unpopular reform decisions. Below are the ugly truths we must confront in order to tackle prison reform in the USVI:

Ugly Truth #1 - Mental Health: The lack of adequate mental health care for mentally ill inmates

Many residents suffering from mental health conditions are committing crimes and ending up behind bars due, in part, to inadequate mental health services available across the Territory. In the USVI, we cannot talk about prison reform without first addressing our very big mental health problem. When inmates are jailed or imprisoned and not properly identified as having a mental health issue or given proper mental health treatment, it is a recipe for disaster.

Ugly Truth #2 – Excessive Use of Force

The July 8 ACLU video stated that the officer involved in the incident at the St. Thomas jail was not reprimanded, and is believed to be still employed at the jail, although the officer admitted to using excessive force when he punched and choked the inmate for complaining about a cockroach found in the inmate's food. Are USVI correction officers being trained in proper/legal use-of-force tactics? Does Bureau of Corrections (BOC) maintain adequate data on use-of-force at its facilities? Are appropriate reviews/investigations and disciplinary actions, up to and including termination and prosecution, in place for officers who violate procedures?

Ugly Truth #3 - Leadership Development and Culture

In order to have the best outcomes, there must be great leadership. The new USVI BOC chief can only succeed if she is equipped with the tools to do so. Whether an officer is at the supervisory level or is the person running the ship, correction leaders must be supported in order to perform their jobs. Not enough has been done to help USVI correction leaders lead effectively, which, in turn, will have a negative effect on the culture of the facilities.

Ugly Truth #4 – Employee Needs, Training and Morale

The environment of a prison or jail can be a stressful one because there is a constant threat. There is built-in tension since inmates are involuntarily incarcerated and believe correction officers get in their way of living the life they want. The stress of the prison environment has many negative effects on correction officers. Are officers being regularly provided the training they need? Failure to train correction officers properly can make the stressors of incarceration a lot worse. What is being done to boost the morale of correction officers? Do they feel safe in their work environment? What are the challenging physical conditions under which they work? Is there a system in place for officers to advance in their careers? These questions must be explored and are key components to prison reform anywhere.

Ugly Truth #5 - Inmate Programming

Inmates and detainees should be offered robust programming that reduces idle time, and keep them engaged and mentally stimulated. This is the right and humane thing to do.

Ugly Truth #6 - Policy

Despite the best efforts of the BOC, there seems to be no real oversight and monitoring of our local jail and prison. If this were the case, the USVI prison system would not be in its current state -- lacking resources on every end. It's time we do things differently and establish policy that would change the way our corrections facilities operate.

In Part II of this two-part series on prison reform in the USVI, I will share how my team and I took on the challenge of transforming NYC DOC and will also provide concrete solutions that would turn the aforementioned Ugly Truths on their head, making prison reform a reality in the U. S. Virgin Islands.

Submitted last week by: *Dina Simon, principal at Simon & Leroy LLC. She is a leading international human resources expert who has helped transform the workforce of companies worldwide. In 2014, Simon was tapped to head the Human Resources division at the NYC Department of Correction, where she was charged with redefining*

recruitment and retention. After just one year, she was appointed first deputy commissioner — the first and youngest woman to serve in that role. As the agency's second-in-command, Simon was instrumental in helping to transform the NYC Department of Correction to the organization it is today.

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