

DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION

COMMISSIONER'S CORNER

CT REENTRY VOICES

SHARING OUR SUCCESS & HOPE



CT REENTRY VOICES interviewed Department of Correction Commissioner Scott Semple on his visit to the prison system in Germany.

CT REENTRY VOICES: You must have prepped for your visit, but were your first impressions of the prison system different from what you knew before going over? What stood out?

Commissioner Semple: Yes, I did a lot of research prior to my visit to include published documents from the VERA Institute and a YouTube video presented by folks who made a similar trip about one year prior to my visit. My overall impressions were consistent with what many call the European Model. What stood out most for me was the overall environment. There was definitely a different vibe in the prisons that we visited. It was quiet, organized and there appeared to be a certain level of dignity between the staff and inmate population.

CT REENTRY VOICES: Share your perception of the “culture” of the prison system there. What are the differences between your responsibilities as Commissioner and your counterpart in Germany?

Commissioner Semple: There is a culture of mutual respect and commitment to wellness. The best example I can describe was related to a simple question that was posed. The contingent asked about the rate of incidents at a facility that was the equivalent of a level four, maximum security environment here in the United States. For calendar year 2014 there were zero incidents at this particular facility. That means the staff and inmates were exposed to virtually no trauma. Although the Connecticut system boasts pretty low incident rates, zero is an attractive number. We met two administrators who oversee regions within the German system, which is operated by our equivalent of a federal government system. Their Wardens are referred to as Governors. In comparison, the roles and responsibilities of these positions appeared consistent with the systems in the United States.

CT REENTRY VOICES: You have mentioned that there are only 4,000 inmates in the prison system in the city you visited. Does that smaller number by itself make the jobs of corrections staff easier/more effective?

Commissioner Semple: The city that you are describing is Berlin. As previously described, this city is one of several dedicated regions within Germany. The census in Berlin was consistent with the census in the State of Connecticut (approximately 3.3 million). As you indicated, Berlin incarcerates about 4,000 inmates. The incarcerated census in Connecticut is four times greater (approximately 16,000). I do not think that a reduced population will make the job of a correctional professional easier. Fostering law abiding behavior is an immense and complicated endeavor. As much as the Department of Correction, along with our partners, can introduce evidence based practices that we know have positive outcomes. It will ultimately always require self-accountability and commitment from the offender. Both systems experience failure, but that does not mean that we give up trying or operate in a manner that does not foster hope. A reduced population should allow us to be more effective provided the appropriate resources are allocated accordingly.

CT REENTRY VOICES: What kind (s) of training do corrections staff undergo that is different from someone in corrections in CT?

Commissioner Semple: This is an interesting question. In Germany you are required to have an I.Q. of 100 or above. It is apparent that the training is very demanding and requires two years of commitment. I do not recall the specific completion rate, but I do know that most do not make it through their academy. We watched a video of one of the candidates undergoing an interview type test. He was subjected to a scenario and was then required to go before a review board. It was intense and you could sense the anxiety that this employee candidate was up against. He passed, but made several mistakes that he had to appropriately respond to; otherwise it was a “call it a career moment.”

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CT REENTRY VOICES: Assuming that the needs of German inmates are not vastly different from U.S. inmates upon release, how successful is the German system in reducing recidivism and preparing inmates for their reintegration back into their communities.

Commissioner Semple: Germany does not rely on recidivism rates like we do here in the United States. This question was posed during our visit and they did not have any data to present. However, it is clear that rates are no doubt much lower than ours. Incarceration in Germany is used as a last resort. Sentences for equivalent crimes are significantly less. Very seldom are there any gun related crimes. Most inmates returning to the community have employment and higher education opportunities that occur in the community during their incarceration. Yes, at some of their facilities they can work and go to work and/or school in the community. These are referred to as "open facilities". Interesting enough, our recently opened Reintegration Unit at Cybulski is moving in the same direction. In addition, the rate of pay is more aligned to what I perceived as a sustainable income. Medical and higher education services are provided by the government to all citizens.

CT REENTRY VOICES: How do the communities play a role in reentry in Germany?

Commissioner Semple: The stigma of incarceration did not seem as apparent in Germany. My general sense is the community is much more interested in formerly incarcerated people moving on with their lives. I did not broach this topic with any of the citizenry, but this is what was shared with us and I have no reason to believe otherwise. There were enough variables to consider that support this notion.

CT REENTRY VOICES: What is the one thing that you witnessed on your trip that you would like to incorporate into the CT prison system (if there were no financial/legislative barriers)?

Commissioner Semple: We are exploring the potential to put more emphasis on what I consider to be our most vulnerable population as it relates to recidivism. This population represents offenders within the age range of 18 to 25. We visited a facility that was designed specifically for this population. The milieu for this environment put heavy emphasis on brain development. People within this age range have a tendency to be more physically impulsive and it is believed that this exists because the brain is not fully developed and is limited in reasoning. "Good" in Connecticut means we begin to introduce programming and curriculum to this population. "Great" means that as our population declines, we will dedicate infrastructure (housing units and/or a facility) to mimic certain aspects of the environment I observed. I am told that this endeavor would be a first in the United States. With implementation we can view recidivism on two fronts. One is the existing vast majority of the overall population (over 90%) that will re-enter society due to sentence eligibility and is represented in our current recidivism rates. The other is this age group, which we know represents a much higher rate of return to incarceration. Positive outcomes will naturally impact the recidivism rates in Connecticut. Most importantly, by targeting the more vulnerable in a more comprehensive manner we present the possibility of having a generational impact.

Commissioner Semple: In closing, I would like to acknowledge Governor Malloy who took the time out of his busy schedule to traverse through the German Prison system with me. To his credit, he is very knowledgeable about criminal justice matters and is aware and supports my rant on what I think we can do in Connecticut. Also, I would also like to thank the VERA Institute and John Jay College who sponsored this event and allowed for various representatives around the country to experience a European system. The television show 60 Minutes will feature this trip in an upcoming segment in the near future.