Groups changing focus to meet needs of aging prison population

By JAMES MINTON
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ANGOLA — Men who committed violent crimes in their younger years now face the reality of growing old and dying in Louisiana State Penitentiary, and reality is changing the focus of some inmate organizations.

The origins of the prediction that Angola some day will become the nation’s largest “old folks home” are obscure, but the fact that its population is graying is evident to both administrators and inmate leaders.

“Louisiana got a head start on the other states in terms of locking up prisoners for longer sentences,” said Wilbert Rideau, whose Human Relations Club regrouped in response to the increasing number of elderly inmates housed among the younger criminals arriving from the streets.

The club traces its lineage to the early 1940s when it was called the Inmate Lending Fund. More recently, it was renamed the Pardon Finance Board and paid for legal notices for indigent prisoners seeking freedom or sentence reductions through the state Pardon Board and the governor.

“About two years ago, we changed the name to Human Relations Club, given the current temper of the times. We wanted to be known for more than paying for clemency ads,” Rideau said.

Checo Yancy, vice president, said the group found it hard to do.

“I won’t say nobody, but very few inmates are getting (favorable) Pardon Board recommendations. They’re so few and far between that we changed to be known as more of a humanitarian organization,” Yancy said.

The club recently began holding quarterly get-togethers for the 133 Angola inmates age 60 and older, gatherings similar in nature to what may be seen in free-world nursing homes.

“We treat them to the type of food they wouldn’t normally get in prison, bingo and other activities. We give them some basic necessities. Last winter we gave them knit caps, gloves and soap,” Yancy said.

“We asked them what they wanted, and some of the things they asked for are not good for them, like tobacco and coffee, but we try to give them what they want,” Rideau said.

“We want them to know that if they have a problem, we’re here to help them,” Yancy said.

“Most of them have nothing to do. They’re like many elderly people on the streets: they’re lonely. We want them to know they’re not alone,” Rideau said.

Rideau and Yancy said the older inmates are scattered around Angola’s camps, and to allow them to meet in one place, Warden Burl Cain made an exception to the rule that generally restricts gatherings to inmates within any one camp.

Cain also has allowed the group many fund-raising opportunities, including concession sales at various events.

Cathy Jett, Cain’s executive officer, said 343, or 6.6 percent, of Angola’s more than 5,000 inmates are age 55 and older, and another 6.4 percent of the population is 50-54 years old. The average age of an Angola inmate is 35.7 years, five years older than the average age of all the men, women and children under Department of Public Safety and Corrections supervision.

The oldest inmate was born in 1909; the youngest in 1980, Jett added.

On the Wednesday before Easter, about 20 key inmate leaders joined Assistant Warden Dwayne Mccatty at Point Lookout, the prison cemetery, to rake leaves, hoe weeds and paint the concrete crosses that mark inmate graves.

Stan Smith, a member of the Point Lookout Committee since its inception, said the annual work project began when an anonymous donor on the West Coast set up a trust fund to decorate the graves with flowers each Easter, but administrators and prison clubs are working together to make inmate funerals “more like a funeral.”

Angola funerals were once very simple. An inmate crew would dig a grave, haul the casket out of the hearse, lower it into the grave on ropes and wait to cover it after a chaplain said a few words and offered a prayer.

More recent funerals have been more dignified.

The Human Relations Club and Angola Special Civics Project put up about $3,500 to buy turf-like carpet to spread around the grave, chairs for the mourners, a funeral tent and a building to store the items.

A singing group will attend the funerals, which are often led by inmate preachers.

“The sad part is that it scares me. It looks like everybody has accepted that a lot of us are going to be buried here. There’s nothing in the works to let us die at home,” Smith said.

Wilfred Cain, the Point Lookout Committee chairman, said the efforts to provide dignified burials for deceased inmates is “not so much for the dead, but because we are in a community.”

“It goes to our peace and contentment; it keeps us with a feeling of unity. If we lose that, as incarcerated men, we’re no good to anybody,” Wilfred Cain said.

The Angola Special Civics Project continues its efforts toward criminal justice legislation, but its members also are involved in the burial and hospice projects, said its president, Norris Henderson.

“A lot of guys have been passing away, and, for whatever reason, they’re being buried here. If this is the reality, we need to make sure we do the best we can, given the circumstances.” Henderson said.

About a mile away from the cemetery, inmates Eugene Redwine and Richard Liggett worked on a beautiful wooden coffin at a prison carpentry shop.

The most recent burial at Angola was that of a deceased Hunt Correctional Center inmate, whose body arrived, not in a coffin, but in the coffin’s shipping crate, even though the state probably paid for a coffin, McFatter said.

That won’t happen again, even if the inmate is from another prison, McFatter and Jett vowed.

The carpentry shop will always have a coffin available for future burials, they said.

“My fall partner (cohort in a crime) fell out of a coffin that came from a funeral home. This one won’t fall apart,” the 70-year-old Redwine said as he pointed out the care that he and Liggett put into the Angola coffin.

“If you saw one that was built here in a mortuary, you might not choose it, but it wouldn’t look out of place,” McFatter said.

Jett said taxpayers hearing of elaborate coffins, the hospice program, efforts to help the older inmates and dignified funerals may ask, “But, what about the victims?”

The answer, she said, is that treating dead and dying inmates with dignity teaches compassion to the living.

“This is the dreadful nightmare of every inmate — dying and being buried in prison. Still, 15 percent of the population will leave here eventually.

“It’s that 15 percent we want to expose to compassion before they go back on the streets. Maybe we’ll prevent another victim,” she said.