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# Prison Volunteer Survey Indicates Overall Satisfaction and Potential for Expanded Roles

## *at a glance*

The Florida Department of Corrections uses volunteers to provide activities in its institutions throughout the state. Our survey of Florida prison volunteers found that their average age was 62 and many were retired. Most respondents volunteered regularly and primarily provided religious activities. They were motivated by their faith and saw several benefits from their volunteer activities. In addition, most volunteers were satisfied with their prison volunteering experience and felt appreciated by inmates. Volunteers cited negative feelings about inmates or prisons as a barrier that may prevent others from volunteering. Also, some volunteers reported lengthy wait times and inconsistent procedures when entering facilities and meeting with inmates.

While volunteers currently provide inmate activities in programmatic areas such as education and life skills, the department could increase the use of volunteers in these programs and activities, which help prepare inmates for release. Other states facilitate volunteer services for these areas in several ways, including working with retired teachers, targeting recruitment efforts through department websites, and designating a statewide office of community partnerships.

## Scope

As directed by the Legislature, OPPAGA conducted a survey of Florida prison volunteers. This report describes the findings of the volunteer survey, provides information obtained from prison chaplains, and describes how some other states coordinate volunteer services across programmatic areas.

## Background

The Florida Department of Corrections uses volunteers to provide activities in its institutions throughout the state. These activities can include providing worship services and other religious activities, including acting as volunteer chaplains, providing education and vocational training, teaching practical life skills, providing substance abuse counseling, mentoring, and other activities, such as providing clerical support. As of February 2013, the Department of Corrections reported having 16,472 current volunteers.<sup>1</sup> In Fiscal Year 2011-12, prison volunteers provided 283,665 hours of service.

The Department of Corrections has established local processes for managing volunteers. Although the department's Chaplaincy Services Administration Office is responsible for statewide coordination and development of the volunteer program, Florida's model for managing prison volunteers is primarily decentralized and varies by institution. Prison wardens are responsible for all of the volunteer activities within the prison. Typically, the warden delegates responsibility for the day-to-day activities of volunteers at the institutions, including recruitment, scheduling, and supervision, to the chaplain, or, in some cases,

<sup>1</sup> The Department of Corrections defines current volunteers as those who received a background screening within the last 12 months.

an assistant warden in conjunction with the chaplain.<sup>2</sup>

Volunteer activities can be initiated by volunteers or inmate requests. The process for becoming a prison volunteer often begins when an individual or group, such as a religious organization or civic group, contacts a prison directly to offer assistance or programming. Volunteers may only enter an institution for events and activities approved and scheduled by the chaplain and for which they are an approved participant. For example, individuals who wish to donate their time as a religious volunteer may only do so if there are inmates of that faith who wish to participate. Also, when requested by inmates, prison chaplains actively recruit volunteers of minority faiths, such as Islam, to provide instruction, materials, or spiritual advisement.

All prison volunteers must go through an application and background screening process. To become a volunteer, an individual is required to submit an application to the prison chaplain or the department's central office. The application includes the volunteer's name, date of birth, social security number, driver's license number, race, and gender. Much of this information is used to conduct an FCIC II/NCIC background check.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the volunteer application has questions about criminal history, relationships with current inmates, and employment history with the Department of Corrections. After the application is submitted and the background check is clear, the warden or chaplaincy services administrator at the central office approves the volunteer to be allowed into the

institution.<sup>4</sup> Background checks are conducted annually for all active volunteers.

The Department of Corrections provides training to some volunteers. The department provides initial and follow-up training sessions as well as on-the-job training for volunteers. Training requirements depend on the frequency of volunteering. The department requires those who volunteer six or more times in a 12-month period to go through its initial volunteer training. Trained volunteers are called "regular volunteers" while those who have not been trained are called "occasional volunteers", reflecting the fact that they visit prisons fewer than six times in a year.<sup>5</sup> In Fiscal Year 2011-2012, the department trained 3,000 volunteers.

Individuals typically receive training from the chaplain at the institution where they intend to volunteer. The initial volunteer training is a four-hour standardized course on the basics of working with inmates in a prison setting. This training includes topics such as the rules and regulations of the prison, the appropriate role of volunteers, useful steps to working with inmates, expected volunteer conduct, ways to communicate with inmates, and strategies to avoid things like inmate manipulation.

In addition to occasional and regular volunteer activities, some volunteers fill expanded roles, including serving as inmate mentors or as volunteer chaplains. Both of these roles require additional training and give the volunteers opportunities for additional access to inmates and freedom of movement within the prison compound to conduct activities such as visiting inmates in confinement and having keys to the chapel.

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<sup>2</sup> In June 2003, the department had 105 chaplain and senior chaplain positions statewide, and an additional 77 administrative, supervisory, and clerical positions to support the chaplaincy. In March 2013, the chaplaincy had 68 full-time chaplain positions (including 8 temporary positions), and 8 administrative or supervisory positions.

<sup>3</sup> FCIC II/NCIC is the Florida Crime Information Center II/National Crime Information Center.

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<sup>4</sup> Volunteer applicants who have been previously incarcerated and/or remain under long term supervision may be eligible to volunteer provided it has been a minimum of three years since their release or if they have completed three years of post-release supervision. Their applications must be approved by the regional warden.

<sup>5</sup> The department reports that about half of their current volunteers (8,488 volunteers) are classified as occasional volunteers and did not receive training.

## Findings

Our survey of Florida prison volunteers found that their average age was 62 and many were retired. Most respondents volunteered regularly and primarily provided religious activities. They were motivated by their faith and saw several benefits from their volunteer activities. In addition, most volunteers were satisfied with their prison volunteering experience and felt appreciated by inmates. Volunteers cited negative feelings about inmates or prisons as a barrier that may prevent others from volunteering. Also, some volunteers reported lengthy wait times and inconsistent procedures when entering facilities and meeting with inmates. While volunteers currently provide inmate activities in other programmatic areas, such as education and life skills, the department could increase the use of volunteers in these programs and activities, which help prepare inmates for release.

### *Florida’s prison volunteers provided mostly faith-based services; saw positive benefits from volunteering*

We surveyed prison volunteers to collect information about their demographic characteristics, the types of volunteer activities performed, the impetus for their involvement, their experience with training, their satisfaction levels, motivation, and benefits obtained, as well as barriers to new volunteers and areas of concern. We received 976 valid survey responses (857 online surveys and 119 paper surveys).<sup>6</sup> We

also surveyed prison chaplains, receiving responses from 40 chaplains.

Prison volunteers were older and many of them were retired. A majority of survey respondents were male (70%) and the average age of respondents was 62 years old. The ages of the respondents varied from 23 to 91 years old, with 46% of respondents age 65 and older. Thirty-seven percent reported being retired, while 35% reported working full-time. Around half of the respondents, 53%, reported having a Bachelor’s degree or higher. Almost 78% of the respondents identified their race or ethnicity as white, 13% as black, and 7% as Hispanic or Latino.

Most volunteers identified themselves as Christian and provided faith-based activities. As shown in Exhibit 1, approximately 91% of respondents identified themselves as Christian.

#### **Exhibit 1 Most Prison Volunteer Survey Respondents Identified Themselves as Christian**

Religion	Percentage
Christian	90.7%
Christian, not Roman Catholic	76.8%
Christian, Roman Catholic	13.9%
Other	5.3%
None or no specific religion	2.2%
Jewish	1.2%
Muslim	0.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: OPPAGA survey of prison volunteers.

<sup>6</sup> Respondents to the prison volunteer survey represented volunteers from all institutions, with the highest number (51) identifying Lowell Correctional Institution as the primary institution where they volunteer. We used a non-probability sampling technique (convenience sampling) to maximize survey participation. Prison volunteers with valid email addresses in the Department of Corrections’ volunteer database received an email with a link to an online survey. Also, we asked several prison volunteer service and faith-based organizations to provide a link to the online survey to their members. We also provided prison chaplains with posters and flyers with the online survey web address to post and distribute to volunteers. Chaplains also received a packet of 25 paper surveys with postage paid return envelopes to distribute to volunteers.

As shown in Exhibit 2, respondents reported that worship services and religious education were the most common volunteer activities. Educational and vocational activities were less frequent among respondents.

**Exhibit 2  
Most Prison Volunteer Survey Respondents  
Reported Providing Faith-Based Activities<sup>1</sup>**

Volunteer Services	Percentage
Worship services	55.6%
Religious education	55.1%
Other spiritual or meditative activity	30.8%
Mentoring or advising	23.5%
Other <sup>2</sup>	15.7%
Practical life skills	14.4%
Substance abuse counseling	7.0%
Adult basic education	4.3%
Vocational training	2.0%
Sports or recreational activities	1.1%

<sup>1</sup> Percentages add up to more than 100% due to multiple response categories.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of other services include re-entry activities, dog training, and Gavel Club.

Source: OPPAGA survey of prison volunteers.

Survey respondents reported that the most common source of learning about prison volunteer opportunities were from a church, synagogue, mosque, or other faith-based ministry or organization (48%). Another common source of learning about prison volunteering was from a friend or family member who volunteered (32%).

Most respondents volunteered regularly. Around 35% of respondents reported volunteering at least once a week in 2012, and 73% of respondents reported volunteering more than six times within the last year. Respondents reported an average length of time as a prison volunteer of six years, with some having volunteered for 30 years. Many respondents (38%) indicated that they volunteered at more than one prison. Respondents reported spending an average of 3.4 hours at the prison on a typical visit. About one-third of the respondents expected to volunteer more

frequently in 2013, whereas less than 10% of respondents reported they expected to volunteer less frequently or not at all.

Most volunteers received Department of Corrections' training and found it useful. Most respondents (82%) indicated that they received the Department of Corrections' initial four-hour prison volunteer training.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, 44% of respondents indicated that they received follow-up volunteer training from the Department of Corrections.

Most prison chaplains (97%) indicated that they conducted at least one volunteer training session in 2012, with a median number of three volunteer trainings offered during the year. In addition, 73% of chaplains provided follow-up training sessions for volunteers during that year.

Approximately 89% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the training was adequate to prepare them for prison volunteering, citing information about security rules and regulations and appropriate inmate interactions as useful aspects of the training.

Most volunteers were satisfied with their prison volunteering experience and felt appreciated by inmates. Respondents reported high rates of satisfaction, with 95% indicating that they were very satisfied or satisfied with their experience as a prison volunteer.

Almost all respondents (99%) indicated that inmates sometimes or often expressed appreciation for their efforts. While most respondents (80%) indicated that prison staff sometimes or often expressed appreciation for their efforts, 20% indicated that prison staff had rarely or never expressed appreciation for their efforts. Approximately 88% of chaplains indicated that they have a formal volunteer recognition program, such as an annual volunteer appreciation banquet or appreciation awards or certificates.

<sup>7</sup> The department requires those who volunteer six or more times in a 12-month period to go through its initial volunteer training.

Most volunteers were motivated by religion and saw the primary benefits of volunteering as serving God and having a sense of purpose. When asked to identify their primary motivation for volunteering in Florida prisons, 65% of respondents selected “to meet the religious or spiritual needs of inmates.” As shown in Exhibit 3, respondents’ three most frequently identified benefits of volunteering in prisons were serving God, feeling a sense of purpose, and helping inmates find faith.

**Exhibit 3  
Respondents Identified Multiple Benefits from Their Volunteer Experience**

Benefits from Volunteer Experience	Percentage <sup>1</sup>
Felt I served God	86.9%
Felt a sense of purpose	85.6%
Helped inmates find faith	78.5%
Helped others in need	72.9%
Received appreciation from inmates or staff	66.9%
Gave back to my community	59.7%
Supported my church’s mission	46.9%
Felt a part of a group	37.9%
Learned new skills	18.9%
Received recognition or rewards for my volunteering	18.5%
Made amends for past wrong-doing	7.8%
Developed important career skills	5.9%
Got my foot in the door in a place where I would like to work	4.9%

<sup>1</sup> Percentages add up to more than 100% due to multiple response categories.

Source: OPPAGA survey of prison volunteers.

Volunteers cited negative feelings about inmates or prisons as a barrier that prevents others from volunteering. As shown in Exhibit 4, respondents most frequently identified negative feelings about inmates or prison as a barrier preventing others from volunteering. A lack of awareness of opportunities was the next most frequent response. Approximately 23% of volunteer respondents identified travel distance as a barrier to potential volunteers, despite the fact that 77% said that it took them more than 30 minutes to travel to the prison. Almost 40% of

respondents indicated that it took them more than one hour to travel to the prison where they volunteered.

**Exhibit 4  
Current Volunteers Thought Negative Feelings About Inmates and Prisons Are a Barrier to Potential Volunteers**

Barriers to Potential Volunteers	Percentage <sup>1</sup>
Negative feelings about inmates or prisons	54.1%
Lack of awareness of opportunities	51.3%
Lack of time	40.4%
Travel distance	22.8%
Other	15.2%

<sup>1</sup> Percentages add up to more than 100% due to multiple response categories.

Source: OPPAGA survey of prison volunteers.

Many chaplains indicated that they believed concern for personal safety and security was a barrier that prevents people from volunteering in prison. However, volunteer respondents did not view lack of safety as a primary concern. Ninety-eight percent of respondents reported that they never or rarely felt unsafe while volunteering in Florida prisons.

Some volunteers reported lengthy wait times and inconsistent procedures when entering facilities and meeting with inmates. Some volunteers reported delays in being admitted into the prison or in program schedules. Some volunteers reported waiting 30 minutes to an hour or more to be admitted to a facility. Some delays or cancellations were the result of prison lockdowns that are necessary for institution security. Approximately 27% of the volunteer survey respondents indicated that they were unable to enter a facility in the past year due to a lockdown or other security issue.

Although many delays were required for institutional security, others may result from inconsistencies in the prison admittance process and in communication within the institution. Some volunteers reported that processes vary between facilities and can vary within a facility depending on the staff on

duty. For example, some security staff may perform a hand scan prior to admitting a volunteer; other staff may ask for an identification card. Different processes can vary the amount of time required for entry. Volunteers also indicated that inconsistencies in, or lack of, communication about program schedules may result in inmates not being available for the volunteer activity.

In addition, some volunteers indicated that security staff could be dismissive or disrespectful toward volunteers. For example, volunteers reported feeling that security staff seemed resentful of the volunteers' presence in the facility. Also, some survey respondents felt that volunteers were not readily accepted by staff and characterized staff as rude. Chaplains indicated these experiences may be a reason that some stop volunteering.

Although most volunteers provided religious activities, chaplains reported a need for additional volunteers for some faiths. Most volunteers provided religious and faith-based activities, and none of the chaplains indicated that there was a great need for additional volunteers for worship services. However, 77% of chaplains indicated that having additional volunteers from certain faiths would help to meet the religious needs of inmates. For example, chaplains indicated a need for volunteers to serve Muslim inmates (46%) and Jewish inmates (31%).

Volunteers provided inmate activities in other programmatic areas, but needs still exist. Volunteers and chaplains reported that some volunteers are providing services in the areas of substance abuse counseling, re-entry counseling, teaching and literacy, and vocational instruction. Some of these activities may have a faith-based component, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. Some religious organizations also teach their own curriculums for life skills programs (e.g., anger management, parenting skills, financial management, and employability skills) from a faith-based perspective as part of their mission, and some

provide family support, education, and re-entry services.

In response to questions about the need for additional volunteers, chaplains indicated the greatest need was for additional volunteers to provide vocational training, one-on-one mentoring, and adult basic education services. Other identified needs included practical life skills such as parenting, anger management, and job-seeking skills.

Surveyed volunteers also mentioned the need for activities for inmates in these programmatic areas. Some volunteers expressed an interest in providing these activities but lacked awareness of opportunities to do so. In addition, some indicated that they had offered to provide these services, but had not received a response to these offers from prison staff.

Additionally, many of the surveyed volunteers reported having a professional degree or background that would be helpful in providing these activities. For example, 32% reported having a background in teaching, 17% in social work or counseling, and 30% in business. In addition, 14% of the surveyed volunteers reported that they have vocational skills.

***The Department of Corrections could increase the use of volunteers in other programs and activities that prepare inmates for release***

Currently, the Department of Corrections provides academic and vocational education, substance abuse treatment, and re-entry transition programs, but enrollment capacity for many programs is limited. While volunteers currently help provide these services, a relatively small number of volunteers are involved in these activities, and chaplains and volunteers indicated that more could be done.

The Department of Corrections does not currently have a plan or organizational structure that would facilitate using increased numbers of volunteers. Under the department's current organizational structure,

prison chaplains have primary responsibility for recruiting, training, scheduling, and supervising volunteers, as well as reviewing volunteer materials. Most chaplains (69%) reported that half or more of their time is spent conducting these activities.

The department chaplains have a primary mission of addressing the religious and spiritual needs of inmates. Therefore, it is reasonable that their primary focus is working with the volunteers that provide religious and spiritual activities. Chaplains indicated that the responsibility for scheduling and coordinating volunteers for other programmatic activities is shared with staff from other departments at some prisons, such as the warden's or assistant warden's offices or the education or classification departments.

Although our survey showed that volunteers are providing activities in other programmatic areas, the department's organizational structure may not facilitate the recruitment and coordination of volunteers for such activities. The department directs potential volunteers to contact the "targeted institution or department" to volunteer, but, as previously stated a few volunteers and stakeholders told us that they had contacted the department to volunteer in these areas but did not receive a response.

Chaplains reported that prison volunteer recruitment most often happens through current volunteers via word of mouth or through outreach to local religious communities. As a result, recruited volunteers often also come from faith-based organizations to provide activities similar to current volunteers.

Other states have taken various steps to coordinate volunteer services to include other programmatic areas. States use a variety of approaches to recruit and facilitate the use of volunteers in other areas.

- The North Carolina Department of Corrections prison volunteer website describes the qualifications of volunteers in order to meet inmate needs and the department's goals. It describes specific volunteer activities, such as tutoring and conducting classes, mentoring, assisting inmates with budgeting and employment preparation, and assisting inmates with finding housing and employment prior to release, as well as participating in religious activities.
- The Massachusetts Department of Corrections advertises specific education-related volunteer needs on a website for retired teachers.
- On its volunteer application, the Virginia Department of Corrections asks prospective volunteers to indicate interest in such areas as business or administration; drug and alcohol counseling; life skills training; religious activities; educational programs; arts and crafts; or public relations activities, such as public speaking.
- The Texas Department of Criminal Justice has established a volunteer coordinating committee, made up of members representing the various divisions of the department that use volunteers. The committee reviews volunteer programs, as reported by the departments and divisions, and identifies new or continuing areas in which volunteers are needed and may serve.
- The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation has a state level office of community partnerships that creates opportunities to increase volunteer participation and monitor the effective delivery of services to inmates. The office develops policy and provides administrative oversight of volunteers. The department also has volunteer coordinators at each prison in addition to chaplains to help manage volunteer activities.

# *The Florida Legislature*

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