

# NCPLS



# ACCESS

## HEPATITIS C INFECTION AND THE FACTS ABOUT TREATMENT

*By Will Hawkins, Staff Medical Paralegal*

Of all medical concerns within North Carolina's penitentiaries, one of the most worrisome is the continually increasing number of Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) infected inmates. Each month NCPLS receives correspondence from numerous HCV-infected inmates who are concerned about their health once they have been diagnosed as an HCV carrier.

An environment in which large groups of individuals are living together in tightly confined spaces poses heightened risks for the transmission of viruses, bacteria, and other pathogenic organisms. For the most part, infections by bacteria, mycoplasmas, and protozoa can be effectively controlled through the use of antibiotics and antimicrobial agents. Viruses, on the other hand, present completely different challenges. The structure and physiology of viruses are entirely different from the other mentioned microbes and are not affected by antimicrobial and antibiotic agents.

A "street" patient diagnosed with HCV infection can become overwhelmed and emotionally devastated to learn that he or she has a

potentially life-threatening disease. Even with the support of family, friends, and the ability to consult freely with clinicians about their



disease, many people outside of prison's walls find it extremely difficult to manage the stress and depression resulting from having a possibly fatal infection. The impact on an inmate can be even more pronounced. Unlike a "street" patient, the inmate lacks the immediate support of family and friends and thus must bear the hardship alone. An inmate's ability to research the disease is limited, and available materials are often times outdated. It seems to be the case that DOC makes a concerted effort to educate inmates on the mode of transmission and prophylactic

(protective) measures concerning the spread of HCV. However, inmates who have been diagnosed with HCV are too often informed of the condition without an adequate explanation or information to help the patient fully understand or cope with the problem. The lack of current and complete information regarding the inmate's HCV infection only adds further confusion, fear, and anxiety to an already stressful situation.

For example, many inmates cannot understand why they are not receiving any form of treatment once they have been diagnosed as HCV positive. It can be confusing when

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NCPLS serves a population of more than 33,500 prisoners and 14,000 pre-trial detainees, providing information and advice concerning legal rights and responsibilities, discouraging frivolous litigation, working toward administrative resolutions of legitimate problems, and providing representation in all State and federal courts to ensure humane conditions of confinement and to challenge illegal convictions and sentences.

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Articles, ideas and suggestions are welcome: [tsanders@ncpls.org](mailto:tsanders@ncpls.org)

# TROSA

## TRIANGLE RESIDENTIAL OPTIONS FOR SUBSTANCE ABUSERS

TROSA (Triangle Residential Options for Substance Abusers), is a non-profit, two-year residential drug and alcohol treatment program located in Durham, North Carolina. Since its inception in 1993, TROSA has offered services to hundreds of recovering addicts. Currently, TROSA houses approximately 300 residents, around 70 of whom are women.

In addition to supplying residents with the basics (food, clothing, and shelter), TROSA's primary functions are to provide therapy, occupational training, and an environment that supports recovery. Residents receive computer training, and if they did not graduate from high school, the opportunity to earn a high school equivalency diploma. Residents are expected to work during their time at the program and are trained in one of TROSA's businesses (such as the moving company, lawn care, or catering), or in a vocational skill (such as construction, security, or transportation). By learning a skill or trade, graduates of the program who previously did not have a career direction are better equipped to face the future with a positive attitude.

TROSA does good work. When NCPLS relocated its office earlier this year, TROSA bid for and won the moving contract. TROSA employees were friendly, hard-working, and responsive to our needs. Putting forth extra effort, TROSA met all expectations and did a great job.

TROSA is open to the public; however, there is a specific procedure to follow to be accepted into the program. Applicants are welcome to write a letter requesting help with their specific addiction. If interested, a person may write to:

TROSA

Attn: Intake Department

1820 James Street

Durham, NC 27707.

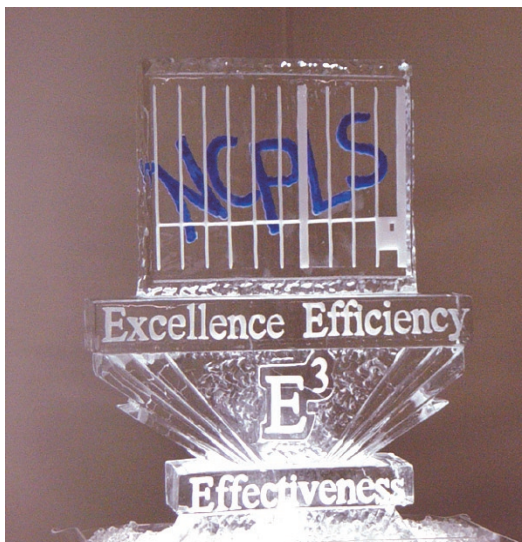
The motto of TROSA, "each one, teach one," only hints at the support countless residents have given and received from each other over the years. But no one has the power to turn someone else around to another way of living. That power lies within each of us. If you truly are ready to change your life, TROSA can give you the tools you need to help you succeed.



## 25 YEARS OF SERVICE — NCPLS ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION A SUCCESS

On March 26th, NCPLS celebrated 25 years of service to North Carolina prisoners. The event was combined with an open house at our new office on Wake Forest Road in Raleigh and was attended by NCPLS staff, members of the Board of Directors, and many other notable dignitaries. Illustrious guests included State Representative (and new NCPLS Board Member) Alice L. Borden, Michelle S. Cofied (Director, Public Service Activities, NC Bar Association), LaVee Hamer and Deborah McSwain (DOC Office of the General Counsel), LaFonda Jones (NC-FAMM), Evelyn J. Studer (Research Triangle Institute International), Bill Hart (Office of the Attorney General and member of the NC Sentencing & Policy Advisory Commission), Jane Manning-Moore (NC Academy of Trial Lawyers), George Hausen (Executive Director, Legal Aid of North Carolina), and Raleigh attorneys Travis Payne and Robert J. Willis.

Visitors were given a tour of the NCPLS facility that included an explanation of the structure of our organization, a description of the way we deliver services to our clients, and a demonstration of the technology that allows us to handle the work efficiently.



Guests enjoyed music provided by “Olah’s String Quartet,” and wonderful food catered by *Lady Fingers*, a Raleigh business.

The evening’s festivities culminated in the presentation of a plaque honoring Board Member Barry Nakell. Mr. Nakell represented plaintiffs in the original case that recognized the right of prisoners to assistance in accessing the courts. *Bounds v. Smith*, 430 U.S. 817 (1977). Mr. Nakell, who played a central role in the creation of NCPLS, has continuously served on the Board of Directors since the program was established in 1978.



*Senior Attorney Richard E. Giroux receiving his plaque for 25 years of services with NCPLS*

Senior Attorney Richard E. Giroux was presented a plaque in honor of his 25 years of service to North Carolina inmates. Also honored were Finance Officer Rick Lennon and Executive Director Michael S. Hamden. In remarks bringing the celebration to a close, Mr. Hamden expressed gratitude for the opportunity to serve inmates, appreciation for the strong support NCPLS has received from the community, and a renewed commitment to the program’s mission – to provide legal advice and assistance of the highest quality to North Carolina prisoners.

## HEPATITIS C (CONTINUED)

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such a patient sees a fellow inmate with HIV (AIDS virus) receive a steady antiviral regimen for his condition, while the Hepatitis C patient does not. It can be especially disconcerting that one inmate infected with HCV may be given treatment, while others may not.

This article is intended to provide information about the effectiveness of treatment for HCV infection, and statistics that help explain why treatment is provided in some cases, but not in others.

AZT and other antiviral “cocktails” (several medications given together) have proved to be very effective for HIV/AIDS patients. In HIV-infected pregnant mothers, for example, the use of antiviral drug regimens can actually prevent the transmission of HIV to unborn children. Today, a diagnosis of HIV is not a “death sentence” as it was in the early to mid-1980’s. People infected with HIV can now live fairly normal, long lives by taking their antiviral medications. The cost of those medications has been significantly reduced as a result of advocacy efforts, pressures brought by the U.S. government, and concessions made by U.S. pharmaceutical companies. Consequently, HIV/AIDS medications are cheaper and available to patients who would not have been able to afford the drugs 10-15 years ago.

With the success of newer HIV medications, why hasn’t the HCV patient reaped similar benefits and

outcomes? The answer is simple; the HIV medications are more effective and less costly.

The Hepatitis C Virus has at least six different genotypes. In the past, transmission most commonly occurred through blood transfusions. Recently, transmission trends have shifted. Over 50% of new cases are being attributed to patient histories of intravenous drug use. Intranasal cocaine (snorting) and body piercing produce a significant number of new HCV cases each year, but sexual transmission and mother-to-infant transmission rates remain low. However, having multiple sex partners remains a significant risk for contracting the virus. Transmission during bloody altercations (fights) has also been reported in several patients, but the way transmission occurs is unknown.

In the U.S., it is believed that there are approximately 2.7 million HCV carriers. But 1.3 million previously infected patients have actually cleared the virus from their bodies.

The incubation period of HCV (the time it takes for the virus to cause a response from the body) is usually 6-7 weeks. The initial infection is very mild and may produce no obvious symptoms until it progresses to a chronic stage. HCV may contribute to other detrimental conditions in the patient such as pulmonary fibrosis, lymphoma, and it can complicate Type-2 diabetes mellitus.

Diagnosis of HCV is based on the body’s production of antibodies to HCV. These antibodies are not protective against the virus, but they can be crucial indicators of the presence of the virus in a given patient. There have been occasional cases of individuals that had anti-HCV antibodies in the circulatory system but did not have the virus. In these cases, elevated antibody counts were attributed to a past infection of HCV.

HCV infection can be classified as acute (the initial mild infection) or chronic (the ongoing and established infection). At least 80% of all patients with acute Hepatitis C eventually progress to the chronic stage. This is troubling since antiviral treatment is most successful when administered during the acute stage.

In patients older than 20 years, 20% of Hepatitis C patients experience cirrhosis (hardening) of the liver. Increased risk is found in patients who drink more than 50 grams of alcohol per day. There is also an increased risk for progression to cirrhosis in patients that acquire the virus after the age of 40.

The drugs Interferon alpha and Ribivirin are used in combination over a 24-week period to provide antiviral therapy for HCV. These drugs act to bring ALT levels (a liver enzyme) back to normal and

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# HEPATITIS C (CONTINUED)

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to decrease inflammation of the liver in up to 50% of the patients that receive the regimen. An individual who does not have cirrhosis of the liver has a greater chance for a successful outcome. But patients with compensated cirrhosis (a hardening liver that continues to function fairly well) should not be excluded from receiving antiviral treatment.

After the 24-week regimen has been completed, only 30-50% of the treated patients that responded to the medication will actually maintain improvement. Simply put, *at best*, only half of the treated patients actually respond positively to the antiviral medications. Of that half, 50-70% suffer a relapse and develop HCV complications. Black HCV patients tend to have a lower response rate to treatment than white patients due to the prevalence of genotype 1 HCV found in black populations.

A 24-week treatment regimen of Interferon alpha and Ribivirin costs about \$8000 and has several side

effects, ranging from flu-like symptoms to psychiatric disease

not be prescribed in every case. Indeed, a comparatively small

number of those who have HCV can expect to benefit from antiviral treatment. However, the Interferon alpha and Ribivirin combination is the best treatment the can be offered, at present, and it does offer some hope to a limited number of patients.

Prevention is still the best way to fight the health consequences of HCV infection. Study the guidelines for preventing the spread of blood-borne pathogens and avoid behaviors that increase the risk of infection, especially if you are a carrier.

Questions about HCV infection and treatment may be directed to health care professionals at your facility, and you can write to the National Institutes of Health, Building 1, 1 Center Drive, Bethesda, MD 20892 (NIH Consensus Statement: 116. Management of Hepatitis C – Final Statement 9/12/2002) (reflecting an assessment of medical knowledge available at the time the statement was written).



and depression. In patients with *decompensated* cirrhosis (a hardening liver with impaired function), Interferon cannot be used. In patients over 65 years old, Ribivirin should be avoided due to effects on the blood that may lead to angina or stroke.

Given the limited effectiveness of existing medications in treating HCV, and in light of the cost and the serious side-effects these medications can produce, it seems clear that HCV antiviral treatment should

## PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS

Through the electoral process, citizens choose their political representatives and shape governmental policy on a broad range of issues. Voting is perhaps the single most important responsibility of citizenship.

This November, voters will elect the next United States President and choose representatives at every level of government, including Congress, state legislatures, and local government. Elected officials will pass laws and set policies that will affect virtually every aspect of our lives, including the enactment of new criminal laws, the refinement of correctional policy, and a host of other matters.

The opinion of every citizen matters. As you may recall, the last presidential contest was ultimately decided on a margin of a few hundred votes.

Obviously, it is important to educate yourself about the candidates and the issues. You can affect the outcome of elections by sharing your views with family members, friends, policy-makers and elected officials, by contributing (even modest sums) to political campaigns, and, if you are eligible, by voting.

### **Barriers to Participation**

Eligibility to vote is a matter of state law, and most states deny the right to people who are serving time for felony convictions. (Maine and Vermont are the only exceptions.) Indeed, many states disenfranchise people who have

been convicted of a felony, even after they have served their time and have been released from prison. Twelve states impose a life-long prohibition on convicted felons. Such policies have a devastating impact on democracy and representative government.

Presently, the United States has the highest rate of incarceration in the world. America has a prison population of more than two million people. But laws that bar convicted felons from voting also affect an estimated 2.5 million people who have served their time. In total, about 4.5 million people, or 2% of the electorate, are prohibited from voting by law.

Because the prison population is disproportionately comprised of African Americans, the impact is greatest on the minority community. It is estimated that 13% of African American males have felony convictions and are ineligible to vote.

Laws that disenfranchise so many of our citizens deprive our nation of the views and experience of a significant segment of our population, skewing election results and undermining the development of sound public policies on a wide range of issues, including most especially criminal justice policies.

### **Reasons for Hope?**

A 1998 report by the Sentencing Project and Human Rights Watch brought these issues to national attention. A broad coalition of advocates and organizations came

together to educate lawmakers and the public about the impact of disenfranchisement policies and to urge reform. As a result, some progress has been achieved. For example, a Harris poll conducted in July 2002 showed that 80% of Americans believe that voting rights should be restored to felons who have completed their sentences.

This initiative has also met with some success in legislatures across the nation. Connecticut repealed a voting ban that prohibited felons on probation from voting. Delaware repealed a lifetime voting ban for some felons, but imposed a five-year waiting period. Maryland repealed a lifetime ban for most repeat offenders after a three-year waiting period. In Nevada, a ban on voting for first-time nonviolent felons was repealed. New Mexico repealed a lifetime ban on people convicted of felonies. Texas eliminated a two-year waiting period before felons can vote. Virginia made it easier for nonviolent, first-time felons to get their voting rights restored, and Wyoming repealed a ban for first-time nonviolent felons, but imposed a five-year waiting period. In addition to these developments, favorable legislation is pending in a number of other state legislatures.

Last year, the Sentencing Project estimated that about a half a million people had their right to vote restored.

But not all of the news is good. For instance, Kansas expanded a

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## PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS (CONTINUED)

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prohibition on felons' voting rights (ostensibly to clarify uncertainty under state law). And two states, Massachusetts and Utah, eliminated the right of felons to vote while in prison.

### Get Involved

Participation in national elections among eligible voters hovers around 50%. Recent elections have been decided on very narrow margins. Under these circumstances, it surpasses understanding that a nation so deeply committed to democracy would permit the summary exclusion of a significant percentage of the electorate from

participation in the electoral process. It makes even less sense to prohibit the participation of people who have been marginalized by society, or those we hope will develop a deeper understanding of the duties of citizenship. You can help to bring about much needed reform, your views are important, and policy-makers need to hear from you.

Educate yourself on the candidates and the issues. In addition to news articles and broadcasts, information is available from a diverse range of political parties, including:



Democratic National Committee  
430 S. Capital Street, SE  
Washington, DC 20023

Republican National Committee  
310 First Street, SE  
Washington, DC 20003

Grassroots Party  
P.O. Box 6197  
Minneapolis, MN 55406

Green Party USA  
P.O. Box 1134  
Lawrence, MA 01642

Internet Party  
P.O. Box 67  
Germantown, MD 20875-0067

Libertarian Party  
2600 Virginia Ave., NW  
Suite 100  
Washington, DC 20037

Natural Law Party  
P.O. Box 1900  
Fairfield, IA 52556

Prohibition Party  
P.O. Box 2635  
Denver, CO 80201

Reform Party  
P.O. Box 9  
Dallas, TX 75221

Socialist Party USA  
339 Lafayette Street  
New York, NY 10001

U.S. Pacifist Party  
52223 E. 21st Avenue #2  
Denver, CO 80205

U.S. Taxpayers Party  
450 Maple Avenue  
East Vienna, VA 22180

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## PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS (CONTINUED)

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Learn more about your right to vote by contacting the board of elections in your state. Additionally, information is available from the Federal Elections Commission, 999 E Street, NW, Washington, DC 20463.

Finally, share your views and opinions with family members, friends, policy-makers and elected officials. Even if you cannot vote at present, your ideas can influence others and affect public policy. Make your voice heard.

### If you are Eligible, Vote

#### Misdemeanants

In North Carolina, being convicted of committing a misdemeanor does *not* mean that you lose your right to vote. You can even vote while serving your sentence. Follow the steps below so that you can vote in the next election.

#### Step 1 - Register to Vote

\* If you are not already registered to vote, you can register by mail. Write or call your County Board of Elections office to request a mail-in voter registration form.

\* When completing the registration form, you can use your home address (if you know where you will be living after completing your sentence) or your prison address as your permanent address. You should use the prison address for your mailing address.

\* You will receive information in the mail from the County Board of Elections telling you which precinct you will vote in and where you can go to vote.

\* Mail in the completed form to the local County Board of Elections. It must be **received 25 days before the election.**

#### Step 2 - Vote

\* If you are going to complete serving your sentence before the election, you can vote after your release at your assigned polling place or by absentee ballot. If you are going to be incarcerated on election day, you can still vote by absentee ballot.

\* You can register to vote and request an absentee ballot at the same time. If you do so, be sure that both are mailed early enough to arrive at the County Board of Elections **no later than 25 days before the election.**

\* To vote by absentee ballot, you must send a signed, written request to the County Board of Elections beginning 50 days before election day. Written requests must be received in the office **no later than the Tuesday before election day.** The request must be signed by you or your near relative. It must include your name and address as they appear on the registration records, and the

address where the ballot is to be mailed. It is helpful to include your date of birth, your near relative's address, and their relationship to you.

\* If the Board of Elections determines that you are qualified to vote, they will mail the ballot to you after they receive your written request.

\* When you receive the ballot, mark your votes and mail it back to the County Board of Elections. **In order to be counted, your ballot must be received in the County Board of Elections office by 5:00 p.m. on the day before the election.**



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## PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS (CONTINUED)

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### Former Felons

When people are convicted of a felony in North Carolina, they lose their citizenship rights, including the right to vote. However, these rights are automatically restored when a person convicted of a felony completes his sentence (including parole), is unconditionally pardoned, or completes the terms of a conditional pardon.

If you have completed your sentence for a felony conviction or have been pardoned, you are eligible to vote in North Carolina. In order to vote in North Carolina elections, follow the steps listed below:

#### Step 1 - Register to Vote

\* Former convicted felons must register to vote **even if you were registered before your conviction.**

You can register at any time after completing your sentence.  
\* You can register by writing or calling your County Board of Elections office to request a mail-in voter registration form.

\* For the address section of the registration form, use your permanent home address.

\* Mail in the completed form to the local County Board of Elections at least **25 days before the election.**

\* You will receive information in the mail from the County Board of Elections telling you which precinct you will vote in and where you go to vote.

#### Step 2 - Vote

\* You can vote at your designated polling place or by absentee ballot.

\* For directions on how to vote by absentee ballot, see Step 2 on Page 8.

### Additional Information

For additional information on voter registration, absentee ballots, or to get the address of your County Board of Elections, write to:

State Board of Elections  
P.O. Box 27255  
Raleigh, NC 27611-7255  
(919) 733-7173  
[www.sboe.state.nc.us](http://www.sboe.state.nc.us)

You may contact NCPLS for advice and legal assistance regarding your right to vote, as well as any other matters that arise in connection with the conditions in which you are incarcerated.

## ANALYZE DETAILS

*By Michael G. Santos*

(Reg. No. 16377-004 - FCI Florence, Colorado)

**Editor's Note:** The following articles, "Analyze Details," and "Never Lose Focus," follow a series of articles by federal inmate Michael G. Santos. They are republished in *ACCESS* by permission of the author. Mr. Santos was convicted of drug distribution and sentenced to serve 45 years in federal prison. He is scheduled for release in 2013. While in prison he has earned Bachelors and Masters Degrees. He has also written three books available for review and purchase on his web site: [www.MichaelSantos.net](http://www.MichaelSantos.net).

Although he does not have direct access to the internet, Mr. Santos can be reached by email at: [info@michaelsantos.net](mailto:info@michaelsantos.net). He can also be reached by writing to him at the following address: Michael G. Santos (Reg. No. 16377-004), Federal Correctional Institution – Florence, Teller 6-212, P.O. Box 5000, Florence, CO 81266-5000.

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Although I am in my 17th year of prison, I have never felt the need

to carry a weapon. Other prisoners do not understand how I have made it through so many years living in maximum-, medium-, and low-security prisons without a single altercation of violence.

The answer is quite simple. I made a conscious choice to succeed. Doing so does not require a knife or a steel pipe to defend myself. It requires me to analyze details and

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## ANALYZE DETAILS (CONTINUED)

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to consider the ramifications that follow every step I take. Rather than serving time, by analyzing details, I have learned to make time serve me.

Carnalito chose a different path. Like me, Carnalito was arrested and sentenced when he was 23. He received nine years for convictions related to the distribution of cocaine. I had over a decade of imprisonment behind me when I met Carnalito, and as I do with many young prisoners, I began working to guide him in acquiring skills that would help him succeed upon release.

I tutored him in preparation for the high school equivalency exam. Initially, Carnalito was eager to pass the test. He expressed hopes of enrolling in a college program that would lead to a degree before his release. Somewhere along the way, however, Carnalito became discouraged with the work. Rather than persisting through the studies and exercises that we had been working on, Carnalito insisted that he needed a break. He dropped out. He began dawdling his days in depthless games of dominos and cards, looking for excitement through gambling and immersing himself in the prison social scene.

As frequently happens with such choices, Carnalito found himself in a scuffle before long. The results of that fight led to feelings of emasculation in Carnalito. He procured a weapon made from razor blades, then slashed his nemesis repeat-

edly across the face, neck, and shoulders. Determined to exact his revenge, Carnalito sliced the man's flesh as if he were dicing tomatoes. And as a consequence, Carnalito was prosecuted.

Following his conviction for that assault, my young student received three additional years of confinement. They were tacked onto the end of what had begun as a nine-year sentence. Now, instead of being released in his early 30s, Carnalito will remain in prison for at least a few additional years. With the choices he is making, there may be more to come.

Like Carnalito, many prisoners fail to appreciate the consequences that follow their decisions. By eliminating possibilities for parole, and minimizing opportunities to advance release dates through good time or any other means, legislators have zapped any hope that once existed inside these caged communities of felons. Rather than focusing on steps that would help his eventual return to society, Carnalito allowed the pressures of living in prison to suck him in. Whereas he should be preparing himself for the future, he lost focus. Carnalito no longer sees how the choices he makes expose him to disaster and even more time in confinement. Or worse.

As a long-term prisoner, I am not immune from the pressures and volatility that erupts behind these walls. My commitment to succeed, however, helps me make choices

that enable me to evade explosive situations that can lead to steel shanks in the neck, or the blow of a heavy pipe slammed to the skull.

I play no table games, participate in no team sports, and avoid television and group activities. The many years I have served have given me opportunities to analyze the details of prison living, to understand the possibilities that accompany every decision.

Although prisoners cannot count on correctional administrators to implement policies that will assist our preparations for release, we must expect them to implement swift and certain punishments to any violation of prison rules. These barbed-wire bureaucracies come with high-voltage tensions, and in order to avoid their torment, which can come with the quickness of an electrical shock, prisoners are wise to persist toward their goals.

Carnalito knew the course that could have led to his success. By deviating from it, he regressed to patterns of behavior that inevitably lead to failure.

The books I have written describe how others have adjusted to confinement. Those who succeed have mastered the art of analyzing details. In the following article, I describe how such prisoners keep focus.

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## ANALYZE DETAILS (CONTINUED)

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### NEVER LOSE FOCUS

An old prison maxim holds that while serving time, men should forget about the world outside the fences. Those who subscribe to such a code of living refuse to allow free-world problems – no matter how personal – to influence their adjustment. Such prisoners consider their predicament so dire that they force themselves to live completely within the fences, ignoring the collateral complications of their convictions. It is a loser's approach to serving time.

Those who choose success understand that they cannot narcotize themselves with music videos, soap operas, and frivolous talk shows. They understand that every minute counts, and have no room in their busy schedules for table games, prison rackets, or hibernation. Instead, prisoners who succeed recognize the direct relationship that exists between the choices they make during confinement and their probability to prosper upon release. For them, prison represents a viper pit from which they struggle to emerge. Their bodies may be confined, but the minds of successful prisoners are constantly engaged with strategies they can pursue to prepare for the challenges ahead. They are in focus.

When an ostrich is being pursued, it buries its head in the sand and believes itself unseen. Prisoners should not mimic the ostrich. They should not avoid the complications that accompany confinement by ignoring them. Decisions in their

past may have contributed to the temporary loss of liberty, but every prisoner ought to realize that the decisions we make today determine the future we face tomorrow. Prisoners, like all citizens, ignore this reality at their peril. A better approach is to anticipate the obstacles that are sure to follow imprisonment, and to take proactive steps in response to them.

I am in my 17th year of this sentence. During each of the 6,000 days that I have been confined, thoughts about the obstacles I expect to encounter upon release have tormented me. Comfort wouldn't come by burying my head in the sand. I knew that ignoring the obstacles would only hurt me further. Instead, I needed to realize and accept that many people in society would not welcome me with open arms. I expect that many will feel threatened by my long prison record, that I always will be judged for the bad decisions I made at 23. My criminal record is a stigma that I expect to carry with me for the rest of my life. And I know I cannot hide from it.

I expect that I'll be nearly 50 when I finish this term. No credit history and no work experience, many of the accoutrements most 50-year-olds take for granted, will be missing from my life. After more than 26 consecutive years of imprisonment, landlords may be reluctant to have me as a tenant. Employers may not want to hire me. Citizens may not want me in their neighborhood. These are some of the obstacles that I expect to complicate my

life upon release. Acknowledging them from the beginning has helped me keep my focus.

The anxiety that comes with my expectations for release inspired me to educate myself. If I am better educated, I might succeed in persuading others to give me a chance despite my long history of confinement. I also work to open a network of support and to open relationships with law-abiding citizens who might provide the references I will need upon my release. And through the years of my confinement, I constantly look to create opportunities that allow me to contribute to society. Focusing on these goals, I hope, will help me navigate around the challenges that I expect to follow confinement.

Some think that I go overboard with my monomaniacal focus on the future. But I have seen too many people finish one prison term and return for second and third terms in these caged communities. After years of lounging through confinement, they were not prepared for the obstacles and challenges that came upon release. I became convinced that those who fail to prepare, prepare themselves to fail. Those who choose success, conversely, never lose focus of the goals they struggle to reach.

No man should resign himself to the monotonous banalities of prison life. The television and games and rackets are distractions that serve no purpose other than the wasting of time. It is better to focus. It is better to choose success.



**THE NEWSLETTER OF NORTH CAROLINA  
PRISONER LEGAL SERVICES, INC.**

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