

# Growing Old Behind Bars

by  
Karima Amin

Many on the outside have certain stereotypical pictures in their heads when they think of prisoners. Some don't ever think of mothers in prison. Some never consider blind or deaf people in prison. Many never consider those who are growing old behind bars. As I cruise toward age 65 with Medicare and other health-related info filling my mailbox daily, I think of my contemporaries who are aging in a place that was never designed to be a senior living facility. Further, we rarely think of those terminally ill prisoners who may require hospice care. What happens to them?

While some state prison systems are liberal about granting compassionate release, most are not. Some prisons have outside organizations that come into the facility to provide hospice care while others carefully select and train prisoners to take care of those confined who are terminally ill. According to Human Right Watch, "...aging men and women are the most rapidly growing group in US prisons." In a recent 104-page report, "Old Behind bars: The Aging Prison Population in the US," the following information is stated:

- Nearly 10% of state prisoners are serving a life sentence. 11.2% have sentences longer than 20 years.
- The number of state and federal prisoners, age 65 or older, grew at 94 times the rate of the overall prison population between 2007 and 2010.
- Long sentences today mean that many current prisoners will not leave prison until they become extremely old, if at all.
- Many older prisoners remain incarcerated even though they are too old and infirm to threaten public safety if released.

While some states are moving forward to change the rules about mandatory minimum sentences and parole, the need for special medical care and hospice care for the elderly in prison is rapidly growing.

The next meeting of Prisoners Are People Too will screen the award-winning documentary film, "Serving Life," which takes a look at prisoners caring for prisoners in the hospice unit of Angola State Prison (aka "The Farm") in Louisiana, where the average sentence is more than 90 years. At Angola, the sentences are so long, 85% will never again live to see the outside world. Prisoners who volunteer in the hospice unit have said that this program provides the kind of bonding and empathy that leads to a clearer understanding of how fragile life is. It's an opportunity that can be transformative. While hospice care is just one aspect of growing old in prison, prisons must also be prepared to provide for the medical needs of the elderly who frequently require special safety precautions, emotional feedback, special nutrition, or whatever may be needed to deal with diabetes, hepatitis C, or cancer ...and the list goes on.

PRP2 programs are sponsored by The Circle of Supporters for Reformed Offenders and Friends of BaBa Eng. For further information, contact Karima Amin: 716-834-8438; [karima@prisonersarepeopletoo.org](mailto:karima@prisonersarepeopletoo.org).