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A Three Year Prison Retreat

Program Proposal for the Bureau of Federal Prisons



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Introduction

The Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) has long worked to uphold the critical function of public safety in the United States. Yet, the immense financial demands, operational



pressures, and emotional toll on both staff and residents make prisons among the most difficult institutions to sustain and improve. Staff burnout, high recidivism rates, and the largest incarceration rate in the world put heavy strain on the US prison system.

To address these challenges, we propose a three year pilot retreat of the *Prison Monastery*, a model applying evidenced-based methodologies to today's prison institutions. This cutting-edge program has a proven track record, showing what is possible with minimal resources and no additional costs to the prison.

The program borrows from the ancient tradition of dedicated practice, modeled after the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition of the Dalai Lama, offering a pathway to mastery for those who want to use the challenging circumstances to experience personal growth and development. Participants pursue a pared-down lifestyle, built around spiritual practice, a monastic approach and inner stillness amidst the noise. Stripped down to the essentials, freedom and joy come not from circumstances, but from the development of inner steadiness and fortitude. In shifting from an external to an internal reward system, those incarcerated can find a new purpose, direction, and contribution.

This proposal will lay out the outline of the three year pilot retreat of the *Prison Monastery* program, which is encompassed in *six* six-month modules. Each module engages 30 participants through a guided traditional meditation retreat schedule, complete with individual study, group study and practice curriculum, and includes existing work assignments tending to the physical environment including meals, laundry, and basic maintenance roles.



The Prison Monastery has a history of successful implementations which are covered later in this proposal. In addition, the model has been featured by premier publications covering criminal justice including the academic publication, *The Criminologist*, and by well-renowned non-profit *Vera*.

This program was initially created by two women who saw the complete dehumanization waste of human resources in prison and knew there was a better way. They created this program, and five years after two pilot in-person implementations and widespread digital participation by over 200,000 incarcerated individuals, they knew it created positive, sustainable change. In utter irony, these women who had spent their whole lives helping others were themselves wrongfully incarcerated. They saw other women coping with their environment by eating, sleeping, watching TV, ingesting contraband intoxicants, and engaging in illicit sexual activity and violence. They experienced an overwhelmingly widespread attitude of defeat by those incarcerated that included a lethargy that made it difficult to move, creating an environment of conflict where no one wants to contribute. They knew from their work from the outside, only now further reinforced by what they saw inside, that with the right set of tools this could be turned around.

Utilizing existing prison infrastructure, staffing and schedule, *The Prison Monastery* introduces a series of programs and tools to both the incarcerated population and staff which shift the culture and intent of prison from one of punishment to one of penitence. The Prison Monastery draws on original ideas of what a penitentiary was meant to be, an environment where a person could contemplate the nature of their actions and conclude that they desired change. Rather than enforcing change through punishment—which



often drives harmful behaviors underground only to resurface later—the system promotes sustainable self-accountable change.

The Prison Monastery utilizes the group culture, lack of personal items and distractions, and disciplined schedule to create an environment where everyone benefits. The program enables those incarcerated to spend their time in contemplation, reflection, transformation, and ultimately contribution to society, while simultaneously reframing officer-driven custody and care to guardianship and mentorship. This method not only saves costs and resources, but creates a saner and safer environment at the prison, and improves the whole community as those incarcerated return home. As Prison Monastery consultant and UC Berkeley School of Public Health dean emeritus Stefano Bertozzi says of the program, this model helps restore prisons to their primary societal function of “creating good neighbors.”

The Problem

Established in 1930, the BOP is responsible for providing a secure, humane environment and supporting successful reentry for those in its care. Across its 120 federal facilities, dedicated staff work tirelessly to maintain order and uphold public safety. And yet, despite these best efforts, the current system faces mounting challenges. These include a \$8.3 billion annual budget, a 43% recidivism rate, and correctional officers facing stress levels so severe that suicide rates are reported to be seven times the national average.¹

¹ Frost, Natasha (2020). "Understanding the Impacts of Corrections Officer Suicide" Corrections.



These outcomes are not a reflection of the values or commitment of the individuals working within the system, but rather of the structural model the system has inherited — one largely centered on external control and compliance. While this model has been effective in maintaining order, it often lacks the tools needed to foster lasting behavioral change for those it houses. As author David R. Hawkins observed, “Force always creates counterforce; its effect is to polarize rather than unify.” In practice, the emphasis on external discipline can unintentionally lead to cycles of resistance, burnout, and stagnation.²

Over time, this contributes to a high-cost, high-stress environment in which incarcerated individuals lose their sense of agency and hope, while staff experience depletion. The result is that many leave prison—either as employees or returning citizens—carrying more strain than they came in with. Without a shift toward internally motivated behavior and rehabilitation, this cycle is difficult to break.³

These structural issues are especially acute for incarcerated women, many of whom enter prison with significant histories of trauma, abuse, and untreated mental health conditions. Studies show that women are nearly twice as likely as men to experience anxiety, and 60% more likely to be diagnosed with a mental disorder.⁴ Yet, the mental health services available inside are often ill-equipped to address these needs, lacking both cultural competence and trauma-informed care.⁵

² Vera Institute of Justice. (2018). “The prison experience for corrections staff.” *Reimagining Prison Web Report*.

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE). (n.d.). “Incarceration & Reentry.”

⁴ EBP Society. (2023). *Addressing the high rates of mental health problems and substance abuse among incarcerated women*.

⁵ International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS). (2023). *Incarceration and traumatic stress: A fact sheet*.



The existing structure and staff of a prison do not need to be replaced, but can be redirected towards a system that teaches and promotes self-regulation of those incarcerated, having a ripple effect to other incarcerated residents, the staff and ultimately the community as they reintegrate into society.

The Solution: Toward Eudaimonia

This program is designed to use incarceration for its highest purpose: healing the aspect of the individual that brought them to prison. We propose a three-year pilot rehabilitation initiative—six-month modules that can be taken separately or consecutively—within a designated BOP ward, using existing resources at no additional cost. The program directly supports the Bureau’s goal of developing internal behavioral regulation.

Drawing from evidence-based mindfulness protocols and the ancient Greek concept of *eudaimonia* (human flourishing), the program offers a structured approach to cultivating emotional maturity and personal responsibility, shifting individuals toward an internal reward system. These outcomes promote a more stable institutional environment that benefits incarcerated individuals, correctional staff, families, and society.

Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) have proven effective in addressing prevalent prison conditions such as PTSD, anxiety, addiction, and aggression. A 2023 *JAMA Psychiatry* randomized clinical trial found that an eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress



Reduction (MBSR) program was as effective as antidepressants for anxiety.⁶ Other studies show MBSR significantly reduces PTSD symptoms and substance cravings, while improving outcomes like usage frequency and severity.⁷⁸ A review in *Aggression and Violent Behavior* confirmed that mindfulness reduces aggression and impulsivity, supporting safer prison environments.⁹

Eudaimonia reflects flourishing through the realization of one's potential, distinct from short-term pleasure. Purposeful, growth-oriented activities enhance motivation and long-term behavior change. Likewise, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of *Flow*—deep immersion marked by focus and enjoyment—supports intrinsic motivation¹⁰.

We believe that integrating mindfulness, eudaimonic, and flow-based principles will foster meaningful behavior change. Environments that promote autonomy and purpose increase the likelihood that individuals internalize and sustain positive behaviors.¹¹ With these interventions in place, the prison becomes easier to manage, those housed inside get true rehabilitation, being restored to their full capacity, and society benefits as a byproduct.

⁶ Hoge EA et al. (2023). "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction vs Escitalopram for the Treatment of Anxiety Disorders." *JAMA Psychiatry*.

⁷ Zhu J. et al. (2022). "The efficacy of mindfulness-based stress reduction for PTSD: A meta-analysis of four randomized controlled trials." *ResearchGate*.

⁸ Li W. et al. (2020). "Mindfulness-based relapse prevention for substance use disorders: A systematic review and meta-analysis." *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy*.

⁹ Villalba DK et al. (2019). "Mindfulness-based interventions and reductions in aggression: A review." *Aggression and Violent Behavior*.

¹⁰ Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. Harper & Row.

¹¹ Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). "Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being." *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78.



The Prison Monastery was developed with experts across public health, criminal justice, corrections, and the arts, including Dr. Stefano M. Bertozzi (Dean Emeritus UC Berkeley School of Public Health), Ira Silverberg (former NEA Literature Director), John D. Liu (UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration), and Dr. Topeka K. Sam (Ladies of Hope Ministries). Correctional professionals also shaped the program, including Gary York (retired prison inspector), Keith Hellwig (35-year corrections veteran), and Kate Feigin (licensed psychotherapist with 20+ years in corrections).

The model was created by ordained Tibetan Buddhist clergy Nicole Daedone and Rachel Cherwitz, who have implemented the program in both state and county facilities. *The Prison Monastery: A Proposal for a More Human & Economical Approach to Prisons* (Soulmaker Press, 2024) outlines its philosophy and successful applications in Mendocino County Jail and a women's Level IV state prison in California. Daedone's workbook, *The Art of Soulmaking for the Incarcerated*, has reached over 100,000 individuals in more than 1,300 prisons, and has been shown to reduce anger, depression, and substance reliance while increasing gratitude and optimism.

Daedone and Cherwitz, ordained in Vajrayana Buddhism, have taken lifelong vows and serve as spiritual leaders and contemplative practitioners.

Proposed Program: A Three-Year Pilot Retreat Model

The retreat model is a path of mastery that provides a focused, immersive environment for inner transformation — drawing from spiritual traditions that emphasize silence,



solitude, and the intentional withdrawal from daily distractions. In prison, where external distractions are already reduced, retreats offer a rare and fertile space for self-discovery and growth. As Sogyal Rinpoche said, “To end distraction is to end samsara [cycle of suffering].”

In ancient traditions, practitioners would place themselves in austere conditions—minimal food, disrupted sleep, exposure to the elements—the hardships being not deterrents but integral to the practice. The purpose was to source clarity, strength, and warmth from within. Similarly, the prison context can initiate a direct confrontation with the mind. Participants face their emotional and mental patterns without escape or pretense, often experiencing profound shifts in a condensed timeframe. The communal aspect of retreats further amplifies transformation, making growth not only personal but shared and contagious.

By providing a structured space for silence, introspection, and collective practice, these retreat elements become powerful catalysts for change—helping incarcerated individuals break through long-standing patterns and reconnect with a deeper sense of purpose, clarity, and inner resilience. In doing so, they lay the groundwork for meaningful transformation across the entire prison environment.

Program Elements

To accommodate the high turnover and transfer rates of prison populations, the three-year retreat is comprised of six 6-month modules that can be taken consecutively or separately focusing on different aspects of mindfulness, personal responsibility and self development, all with the aim of developing more self aware and ethical human beings.



This program will be taught by volunteers who have been trained by Unconditional Freedom in the Prison Monastery Model.

Foundations

The foundation of the program is a daily retreat schedule that includes structured days and practices, all of which existing prison infrastructure already supports. These include:

- Sitting meditation
- Yoga and other exercise
- Noble silence
- Breathwork
- Dream yoga (intentional dreaming)
- Writing
- Art
- Set curriculum of book study
- Guided study by retreat leaders and guest facilitators
- Work assignments / Seva (a Sanskrit word translating to selfless service and contribution to the space, in this case would cover the basic assignments like cooking, cleaning and laundry)

Each of these will be taught from the ground up for a beginner, starting with the basics like proper posture for meditation.

Group practice, learning and discussion



Participants will begin with the *Art of Soulmaking* and *Art of Addiction* workbooks, already taught to nearly 200,000 incarcerated individuals across the country, as foundational study for their program. These books include spiritual principles including how to work with emotional pain, cultivating self-awareness, and engaging in meaningful service. They also delve into topics such as forgiveness and working with the addiction impulse, important for the prison population where approximately 85% of individuals either have an active substance use disorder or were incarcerated for a crime involving drugs or drug use.¹² The lessons are especially powerful when studied in a group setting, leading to rich discussion and an understanding of shared experiences.

Text Study

Over the course of the three years, participants will continue in rigorous study from a variety of texts including but not limited to:

- *Wake Up To Your Life* by Ken McCleod
- *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living* by Pema Chodron
- *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* by Chögyam Trungpa
- *Dreaming Yourself Awake: Lucid Dreaming and Tibetan Dream Yoga for Insight and Transformation* by Alan Wallace
- *The Eros Sutras* by Nicole Daedone

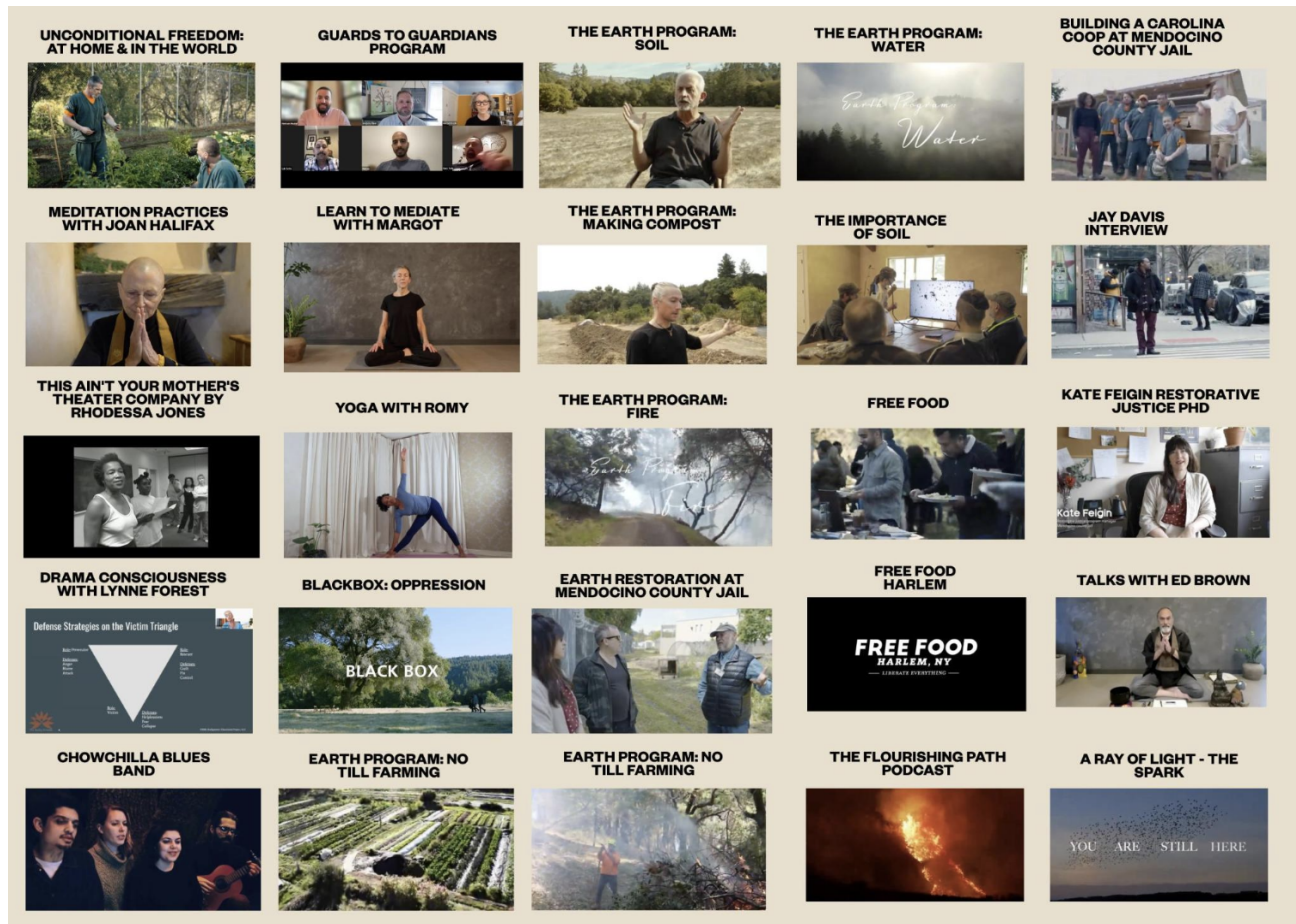
¹² Criminal Justice DrugFacts. (n.d.). National Institute on Drug Abuse. Retrieved August 30, 2025, from <https://nida.nih.gov/publications/drugfacts/criminal-justice>



- Remembering, A Daily Reader with quotes from incarcerated participants around the country

Video Offerings

The program will be supplemented by a “digital monastery” freely provided to prison tablet libraries or through DVDs for communal TVs. The digital monastery has over 40 hours of content, including a wide range of offerings from yoga postures to meditation sessions to videos exploring theater arts by renowned director and activist Rhodessa Jones to Drama Triangle Consciousness workshops by Lynne Forrest. Sessions from the retreat can be recorded and replayed on the tablet to enable access to hundreds of thousands of people.



Sample video curriculum already available to over 1200 prisons across the country

Logistics

Location: one housing unit in low-security or Federal Prison Camps (FCPs)

Cohort size: 30 individuals

Participant application and screening process: check for participant background including incidence of trauma, medications, violent history (incarcerated residents convicted of violent crimes will not necessarily be excluded)

Sample Daily Schedule (Sunday off days)



5 - 6 am Morning meditation

6 - 7 am Writing

7 - 9 am Breakfast and work duty

9 - 11:30 am Instruction and group practice session

11:30 - 12:30 am Individual practice / mentor sessions

12:30 - 2 pm Lunch and work duty

2 - 4 pm Afternoon meditation

4 - 5 pm group yoga

5 - 6 pm free time

6 - 8 pm dinner and work duty

Measuring Impact

This initiative is designed as a low-cost pilot program to be independently evaluated by a third-party academic institution to conduct rigorous, longitudinal evaluation. The evaluation design will combine both quantitative and qualitative metrics, drawing from carceral, psychological, and sociological research methodologies.

Quantitative Metrics

We will track the following through secure data access agreements with the facility and anonymized surveys:



- Behavioral Shifts: Reduction in behavioral infractions, lockdown incidents, and solitary confinement assignments over time.
- Psychometric Indicators: Pre-, mid-, and post-program self-report assessments using validated scales such as:
 - *Beck Depression Inventory (BDI)* – for depression
 - *Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)*
 - *Aggression Questionnaire (AQ)*
 - *Eudaimonic Well-Being Scale* – tracking purpose, autonomy, and personal growth
- Program Engagement Rates: Attendance, completion rates, and voluntary participation in group sessions and retreats.

Post-Release Outcomes

- Recidivism Rates: Comparison of rearrest, reconviction, and reincarceration rates within 1, 3, and 5 years post-release, benchmarked against matched cohorts.
- Community Reintegration: Employment status, housing stability, and participation in civic or spiritual communities tracked via follow-up interviews and community partnerships.
- Family Reunification: Tracking reestablished contact and relationships with family members post-release

Staff and Institutional Feedback

- Correctional Staff Surveys: Before and after staff perceptions of institutional culture, resident behavior, and burnout levels.



- Prison Climate Indicators: Overall facility incident trends, incarcerated-staff interactions, and unit morale through observational logs and warden interviews.

Qualitative Data

- In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with participants, staff, and family members to capture transformative narratives.
- Video Journals & Artwork: Participants' creative work (e.g., journals, artwork, recorded reflections) will be collected (with consent) as evolving records of internal transformation.

Data Visualization and Reporting

An annual report will be developed for internal use by the BOP and stakeholders, showing real-time aggregated data across emotional, behavioral, and logistical domains.

History and experience with the Prison Monastery Model

Nicole Daedone and Rachel Cherwitz are the respective visionary and implementor of the Prison Monastery Model, developed in 2020.¹³ The model encompasses a holistic set of programs focused on self-inquiry and personal growth for both the correction officers and incarcerated.¹⁴¹⁵

¹³ Bryant, E. (2022). "Planting Gardens Behind Bars." *Vera Institute of Justice*.

¹⁴ Ratnathicam, M., Feigin, K. (2023) "The Prison Monastery: A Rehumanizing Model for Carceral Institutions" *The Criminologist*, 48(1), 6-9.

¹⁵ York, G. (2022). "From Guards to Guardians: Program Focuses on the Mental Well-Being of Correctional Facility Personnel." *Corrections1*.



The Art of Soulmaking, the foundational text of the program, teaches yoga, meditation and contemplative writing for discovery of one's unique brilliance and purpose. *Art of Addiction*, the second workbook, is a new way to look at addiction, harnessing the addiction impulse for genius and flow. *Women over Dinner* is a way for women in prison to connect over a symbolic meal and foster deeper connection and nourishment from shared power. *From Guards to Guardians* was written for the Correction Officers and teaches them to uncover resilience and purpose in their work. Together, these programs transform prisons into their highest forms – places where those incarcerated can be rehabilitated and return to society as contributing individuals.

Incarcerated individuals who study the workbooks have the opportunity to be paired with a penpal on the outside, and correspond about the material and what they're learning. In addition to heartfelt letters and reflections about the work, many incarcerated individuals also sent drawings, sketches, poems and other forms of art. Unconditional Freedom created a digital platform, *Free the Artist*, where this work can be shared with the world. Finally, *Dharmapalaw* was added as a component of the program, giving wrongfully incarcerated individuals a way to work with Jailhouse Lawyers to understand their case and the legal system.

These programs are accessible at over 1,500 Facilities, across 48 states, and available to over 1 million incarcerated people through the digital tablet Edovo.

At present, there are nearly 200,000 incarcerated people interacting with Unconditional Freedom content on the Edovo platform.



Incarcerated residents across the country have also formed their own peer-led Soulmaker and Art of Addiction study groups, where they go through the material together, using a facilitator script. There have been at least 20 reported completed study groups of this kind, 6 active groups, and 40 additional requests to lead groups.

Notably, 7.2% of Death Row is engaged in the Art of Soulmaking.

Guards to Guardians, which was started in 2023, has been introduced to 1,500 officers and 30 veteran correction officers have enlisted as Mentor Officers for the program, conducting talks and offering mentorship to fellow officers. Three trainings (three hours each) were held at Metropolitan Detention Center, Brooklyn in 2024 with 13 officers going through the Guards to Guardians curriculum. Corrections Officers even joined the Holman Correctional Facility, Death Row Art of Soulmaking group.

Results

At program completion, self-report data of 116 incarcerated participants in the Art of Soulmaking program showed a reduction in¹⁶:

- Anger - 17% reduction
- Depression - 25% reduction
- Stress - 25% reduction
- Drugs/Alcohol Cravings - 24% reduction

39 incarcerated participants of the Art of Soulmaking course responded to the Eudaimonia Assessment before and after completing the course. This showed marked

¹⁶ See footnote 14



improvement in Acceptance, Purpose, and Autonomy, even scoring higher than the general population in Autonomy post-course.

A qualitative study, based on two months of collaborative fieldwork and qualitative interviews with 22 participants, showed that the Art of Addiction helps people embrace their full humanity and the parts of themselves they've felt ashamed of, get back in touch with the flow of life, and find a deeper sense of meaning and fulfillment. Research shows that when incarcerated people cultivate a stronger sense of meaning and purpose, they are more likely to experience positive behavioral change and reduced risk of reoffending.¹⁷¹⁸

Testimonials

Administrators and CO Testimonials:

“So many of the (incarcerated residents) tell me these programs make me feel like I’m not in prison anymore.” —Former Warden Michael Pallares, CCWF

“Captain once told me, ‘Society may often forget about the gatekeeper known only as a corrections [or] detention officer, but what would society do without him or her at the gate?’” —Jerome R. Hall, former CO and former Marine

¹⁷ Duncan, J., Stansfield, R., Hall, S., & O’Connor, T. (2018). *Women’s Engagement with Humanist, Spiritual and Religious Meaning-Making in Prison: A Longitudinal Study of Its Impact on Recidivism*. *Religions*, 9(6), 171.

¹⁸ Maruna, S. (2001). *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.



“In looking back on my life as a correctional officer, I realize that one of the keys to personal peace and success is introspection. I truly feel that this program offers an opportunity for deep self-examination. I appreciate that at the end of each chapter there are questions, many that I haven’t thought of, that caused me to re-examine my thinking, beliefs, and values. The first question in the series that caught my attention was when I was asked, “What did you want to be when you grew up?” and then also the question “What about life did you find most engaging and interesting?” It made me sit back and think about whether I had actually done what I wanted to do with my life.” –Keith Hellwig, Correctional Officer

Program Participants Testimonials

“The Art of Soulmaking has transformed me and my life here behind bars — I used to be very aggressive and outwardly negative. I showed no compassion to anyone. I have changed so much that the Officers in the Jail here have started to read about the Art of Soulmaking. I can communicate with compassion and I can see all situations clearly.” — Rich G, Jefferson County Jail, NY

“I truly believe and embrace the statement ‘You can live free inside of prison.’ I’m living proof. I’m freer in here than I was on the outside, out there.” — Jennifer B, Prison Monastery Participant.

“I believe this course really opened up my eyes to a lot of pain I was running from. This course really allowed me to confront some of my ways of thinking that were keeping me



locked in constant battle with myself. I was not at peace of light I know I can be. I've faced a lot of my demons throughout this course, I won't say it was easy, but I can say it was worth it. " —Diana Lovejoy, Central California Women's Facility

"I really loved this approach and the ideas and mindset I learned in this session. So many programs are a rigid 12 steps or very judgmental, this put my heart and mind at ease and gave a different perspective on how to look at things." —Art of Addiction course participant

"The biggest take away from this session is that in our recovery, we are using our experience as previously drug addicts, for the purpose of the greater good. One possible way to help the incarcerated population see the value of recovery is to share stories of how former drug addicts and formerly incarcerated have used their experience to contribute to society." —Art of Addiction course participant

Conclusion

The Prison Monastery offers the Bureau of Prisons a practical, no-cost strategy to address persistent challenges such as recidivism, staff stress, and institutional instability. Rather than requiring new infrastructure or extensive staffing changes, this model repurposes existing resources — daily schedules, group settings, and housing units — and data driven, time-tested interventions to support a more constructive and sustainable prison environment.



By emphasizing internal behavioral regulation, emotional resilience, and ethical development, the program equips incarcerated individuals with tools to manage themselves more effectively and learn from the circumstances and actions that brought them into prison. This reduces the burden on staff, improves dorm culture, and contributes to overall facility safety. The Guards to Guardians component of the program directly focuses on correctional officers, helping restore meaning and motivation to their roles while reducing stress-related burnout.

Independent research supports the use of mindfulness-based interventions to reduce anxiety, aggression, substance cravings, and PTSD — issues commonly encountered in carceral settings. With structured programming, third-party evaluation, and a replicable framework, this pilot can serve as a scalable model for rehabilitation-focused incarceration.

Ultimately, this initiative aligns with the BOP's goals of public safety, fiscal responsibility, and successful reintegration, while being mindful of the current staffing shortages, as the program is entirely volunteer run. It does so not by replacing enforcement, but by complementing it with a system that encourages accountability and growth from within — leading to better outcomes for individuals, staff, and the communities to which people return.

Instructors

Nicole Daedone



Nicole is the founder and visionary behind Unconditional Freedom, a nonprofit committed to restoring dignity to society's most overlooked populations through programs in prisons, kitchens, and communities. At the core of this mission is the Prison Monastery, a reimagining of incarceration that brings contemplative practices—like meditation, yoga, and Nicole's *Art of Soulmaking* curriculum—to prison populations. Implemented in over 12,000 facilities across 48 states, the program has reached more than 195,000 incarcerated individuals, offering a transformative space for inner growth, reflection, and spiritual awakening inside the walls of America's prisons.

As of 2025 in MDC Brooklyn, Nicole has started a Bureau of Prison-approved meditation class and a daily walking group. The first formal meditation class was held August 11 and had 20 women present. The second class, one week later, had 18 women, 4 of whom were brand new. Throughout the eight-week class, and daily meditation club sessions, there were up to 21 women in attendance, representing approximately half the women's dorm. Every meditation class had a philosophy piece accompanied by meditation practice. Classes covered topics such as grief and equanimity and meditation techniques such as Dream Yoga and Tonglen, a Tibetan Buddhist practice of using the breath to visualize inhaling pain and exhaling healing. The incarcerated women expressed great interest in the meditation, including the breathwork which helped keep them warm in the very cold conditions at the jail. Additionally, Nicole and Rachel started a daily walking club, where a consistent group of 8-12 women walked laps around the track in the rec room daily at 5:30 pm. Some of the women who joined their walking club were women who prior to this, lay in bed all day.



In Harlem, New York, Nicole was the visionary and creator of Free Food Harlem, a food justice program that provides over 500 nourishing meals weekly in a sit-down, restaurant-style experience located at the historic Emanuel AME Church. With tablecloths, fresh flowers, and warm service, the initiative goes beyond sustenance—it affirms dignity. Since its founding, it has served over 100,000 meals and diverts more than 100,000 pounds of fresh produce annually from the wastestream. It also partners with organizations like Exodus Transitional Community and Housing Works to train formerly incarcerated individuals in culinary arts, creating employment pathways and opportunities for reintegration.

Nicole’s work is always rooted in a fierce love of truth and a devotion to liberation. Whatever the setting, her mission remains the same: to transform poison into medicine and make that medicine available to anyone with the courage to seek it.

Rachel Cherwitz

Rachel is an Advanced Drug and Alcohol Counselor, Clinical Trauma Professional, and holds both a bachelor’s and master’s degree in addiction counseling. She has worked as an addiction counselor and treatment support manager, focusing on client services and counseling, psychoeducation, and relapse prevention.

With a deep commitment to working with marginalized communities—including the unhoused, incarcerated individuals, and those struggling with addiction—she advocates for the transformative power of rewilding humanity. Passionate about guiding individuals



through the complexities of trauma and addiction, she helps others recognize their inherent strength within their struggles.

Rachel runs the Art of Addiction program as part of the Unconditional Freedom nonprofit, which offers a new way of looking at addiction, recognizing it as a way of accessing our genius. The program has been taught in person, online, and is available on Edovo, a tablet program available throughout American prisons. She has spent the last five years guiding implementation of the Art of Soulmaking, Art of Addiction, and the Guards to Guardians program.

Letters of Support

Letters included below

Edovo is a nonprofit organization that delivers free, tablet-based educational and rehabilitative programming to incarcerated individuals across the United States.

Operating in over 1,000 correctional facilities and serving nearly one million learners, Edovo provides access to more than 25,000 hours of academic, vocational, and therapeutic content through its platform, Edovo Learn. The platform has been associated with improved behavior, reduced disciplinary incidents, and up to a 43% reduction in recidivism, offering a meaningful path toward rehabilitation and successful reintegration.

Courtney Waybright is the Community Resource Manager at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), where she leads rehabilitative programming and peer-support initiatives. She has coordinated large-scale events such as trauma-informed workshops, the Transgender Prisoner Day of Action, and livestreamed "Hope Events." Through her



leadership, CCWF has strengthened community-building efforts, creative engagement, and holistic rehabilitation opportunities for incarcerated individuals.

Kate Feigin, MSW, is a licensed psychotherapist with over 20 years of experience providing substance use and mental health treatment to incarcerated and justice-involved individuals. Having served as a restorative justice manager and licensed addictions counselor, she has worked extensively in correctional settings, including Mendocino County Jail. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Community Liberation and Indigenous Ecopsychology.

Debra Bailey spent 25 years cycling through incarceration and battling addiction until she encountered the Art of Soulmaking program, which played a pivotal role in her healing journey by helping her find peace, self-forgiveness, and purpose. Since her release, Debra has graduated from junior college with honors and is now pursuing a degree in social work at Cal Poly Humboldt.

Dr. Nena Messina is President and CEO at Envisioning Justice Solutions. She is a criminologist with over 25 years' experience working in criminal justice and substance use research. Dr. Messina's areas of expertise include the association between crime, psychiatric disorders, and substance use, as well as the specialized treatment needs of justice-involved women. Throughout her career, Dr. Messina has directed multiple randomized clinical trials funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the California Endowment, the Office of Violence Against Women, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), and the National Institute of Justice.



Jason Davis is a peace advocate, author, poet, gang specialist, mental health advocate and father. Jason grew up in gangs in Harlem, NY, rising to become a high-ranking shot caller. He has since converted his entire set to nonviolence while using his leadership and his set as a force of positivity in his community. In his prison work, he works with the most violent offenders, gang leaders, and Corrections staff to bridge the gap between cultures and further peace and understanding.

Ira Silverberg is an American editor and consultant to writers, artists, publishers, funders, and non-profit arts organizations. Currently at Soulmaker Press, Ira is also a member of the Columbia University School of the Arts adjunct faculty, MFA Writing Program, and the former Literature Director of the National Endowment for the Arts. He has taught the Herstory curriculum at the California Correctional Women's Facility.

Exodus Transitional Community provides supportive services to formerly incarcerated men and women, helping them reintegrate and achieve wellbeing through a holistic approach. Exodus's Alternative to Incarceration (ATI) program in NYC offers a trauma-informed and community-based option for individuals facing court-mandated support requirements.