

## North Country Public Radio

### In Final Days, Inmates Care for Inmates

Nov 08, 2013 — Yesterday as part our Prison Time Media Project we heard the story of an inmate at Coxsackie prison, who fought to get home after he was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

It's a growing issue for America's huge prison system, as more inmates than ever are aging and dying behind bars.

Here in New York, hundreds of sick and dying inmates navigate the compassionate release system every year, but very few actually make it out of prison.

And for those inmates who die behind bars, prison officials offer them hospice care. As Natasha Haverty reports, those men and women are supported and comforted in their final days by fellow inmates.

"It's shocking man, because you don't think that people are over here in the prison system on their deathbed."

Woodbury says the inmate told him he had the right personality to be a hospice aide. Woodbury is 23, from Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, and is here for drug and weapons possession. He says where he came from going to prison seemed normal but at first the idea of sitting with people on their deathbeds sounded crazy "But, now," he says, "I appreciate every day that I get. I appreciate it to the fullest. Because I see these guys, some of these guys dying in their thirties, forties. And I really would not want it to be me."

This is Coxsackie's medical unit. The walls are cinderblock; there's a strong smell of ammonia.

When inmates get sick at Coxsackie, this is where they're sent. When they find out they're dying, prison officials offer them the option of hospice care.

"The most part is you try to comfort him," Woodbury says. "You might rub his back, hold his hand, read to him. Just things like that. "

Woodbury, and every man who applies to become a hospice aide, has to go through a rigorous interview process, and then train for six weeks with a prison chaplain and nurses on the ward. They learn about the medical realities of death. And inmate aides like Patrick Ayrey learn their place in the dying process:

"First and foremost we gotta show compassion, we're just there to be their friend. We write letters for them if they need that, if they want us to cook for em we cook for him, if they want to play cards we play cards, if they just want to sit there we shut our mouths and sit there. I've held a man's hand for 7 hours while cried in pain. That's what he needed and that's what I did for him."

Ayrey doesn't look like a hand holder. He says he's been in and out of prison most of his life—this time on a burglary conviction.

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As he talks about his work as a hospice aide he furrows his red eyebrows sits low in his chair. He says it's not always easy to square who he is in the prison's general population with who he is here in the sick room.

"I don't know, in the yard you gotta put up a mask, you gotta put up a persona, you're a tough guy you don't want nobody messing with you," Ayrey says. "It's just different. In there you're not the one that's vulnerable, they are."

Ayrey comes from Rome, New York. He first went to prison when he was 17. Like Woodbury, he says sitting with men through their last days, helping them die in peace, has changed the way he thinks about his own life.

"I've never done anything like this in my life; I've never put anything ahead of me before. It's always been me first, and everything will fall into place. And that type of attitude is what let me to do fifteen years in prison and I don't want to do it anymore. I want to spend as much time as I can with my family and I knew if I didn't start doing something positive I'd spend the rest of my life in here. And I don't want to do that."

The truth is, hospice isn't the first choice for a lot of dying inmates. A lot of these men just want to go home and spend their last days with their family.

The U.S. criminal justice population is aging at a significantly more rapid rate than the overall U.S. population. Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau. But for the vast majority of inmates—even those with weeks or months to live, the prison's strict rules for compassionate release make that impossible.

And some dying inmates have lost contact with their wives or parents; just getting a visit can mean a long struggle with the prison administration.

Aldo Diaz, another inmate hospice aide, says his crew becomes the next best thing to family. "You just want to be there for them," Diaz says. "They are expecting you to be there."

Diaz is 34, originally from Puerto Rico. He's a compact guy, and looks young for his age.

"In 2009 my father passed away. So I was not able to be there for my father when he was in the hospital and he needed my help. So I was like, this is something I have to do because I'm gonna give back; what I didn't do for my father, I could do for somebody else that's here. "

A lot of the men working here in hospice tell the same story, of not being able to be there for a dying father or mother, and then having to keep their grief to themselves.

Coxsackie is a harsh place; it's one of New York's maximum-security prisons. Here, compassion and warmth aren't high on the list of necessary survival skills.

Like the other hospice aides, Diaz says his work here turns a lot of the unspoken social rules of prison on their head.

“You know, I feel like the hand touch is so much important. You don’t get that. You’re in prison nobody likes to be touched. If I’m standing in the line, somebody touch me I’ll be like, you know what I’m saying, dude why did you just touch me, you know? But here in a hospice environment these guys trust you. Like I remember this one guy he was a real thugged out really bad dude. He was so sick he couldn’t tie his shoes. So, I used to like, put lotions in his legs. Put lotions in his feet. Combing his hair.”

Moments like that are exactly what these guys say they’re here for. Moments of human contact, companionship, making them feel as comfortable as possible. Victor Turturro is serving time for a second-degree murder charge.

“There’s a lot of appreciation with a prisoner sits with another prisoner, you know,” Turturro says. “You try to encourage them to try and put on a pair of tight socks for their circulation and stuff like that. And when they see that you actually care, it makes ‘em feel good.”

Some of the fellow hospice aides at Coxsackie are here for lower level crimes, with sentences that will have them back on the street while they’re still in their thirties or forties. But Turturro is here on a murder charge. He’s one of the men facing the very real possibility that he could live out the rest of his life right here.

“I hope if I’m ever in that situation somebody’s there for me. And that I’m not alone. I came in with twenty to life, and there’s that possibility that I won’t go home, but you know if not? I’m hoping this program’s around for me.”