

Talks About Stigma

by Karima Amin

Since its inception, most Prisoners Are People Too monthly meetings have dealt with the stigma of a criminal conviction in some way. We have talked about the stigma that touches the family members of an incarcerated person. We have examined the stigma that follows a formerly incarcerated person who is seeking employment or housing. We have dealt with the stigma that rears its ugly head when the collateral consequences of a criminal conviction are considered. These may include disenfranchisement, dis-entitlement of education loans, loss of a professional license or drivers' license, or eviction from public housing. We have considered the stigma that defines a community when those outside of the community fail to understand the community's strengths as well as its deficits.

Stigma means different things to different people in various situations but it mostly means attaching shame or disgrace to something or someone regarded as socially unacceptable. Oftentimes, stigma is based on misconceptions, stereotypes and labeling. When someone is coming home from prison, and they have paid their debt to society, they all too often find that second chances are in short supply and that ignorance has a tendency to paint all formerly incarcerated people with the same brush. For most formerly incarcerated people, reentry is an uphill battle. The roadblocks are daunting and assimilation back into society can be extremely frustrating. Most frustrating, in my opinion, is the stigma we attach to the process of reentry with our unwillingness to see those who have served time in prison as people, deserving of an opportunity to become assets, fully productive contributors to society.

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