

# National Lifers of America, Inc. Chapter 1014

Women's Huron Valley, Ypsilanti, Michigan

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SPRING 2018

**“Empowering Incarcerated Women Toward Reform & Release”**

## **GREETINGS!!!**

From the entire NLA Chapter 1014 membership....We are honored to submit to you the Spring 2018 edition of the National Lifers of America, Inc. Chapter 1014 Newsletter

**Editor:** Tracy L. Cowan

**Co-Editor:** Kelli Stapleton

## WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A LIFER

*By Faye White*

At first it seems like it means that I have no hope, that I will die here, that I no longer belong to society.

After the shock wears off, I realize that I have much to learn, much to offer and still can mean something to society even if it is just “our society”.

Being a lifer we have a voice within our system if we just take the time to define what is important in our life here. We can proceed to ignore what is wrong with our society or we can belong to groups, organizations, be unit representatives and use our voices to make the changes that we need.

After 31 years as a lifer, it means that I am an important person. I mean something to those who love me. I am not a throwaway person.

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# THE DOCTOR MAKES A PRISON CALL

*By Tracy L Cowan, Vice Chairperson, National Board of Directors, National Lifers of America*

On June 24, 2017, our chapter hosted Dr. Abdul El-Sayed, a progressive Democratic gubernatorial candidate for Michigan. At 32 years of age, Dr. El-Sayed is an accomplished author and a Rhodes Scholar. His extensive credentials and professional experience makes me wonder at what age did he complete college. Six? When I first saw him on “Off the Record” he mentioned the vulnerable in our communities and I knew that it included us. Dr. El-Sayed was appointed by Detroit Mayor Duggan at the age of 30 to become the youngest Health Commissioner in a major US city. He joked that the first day he showed up to that job, he was mistaken for the parking lot valet. Dr. El-Sayed was able to rebuild the Detroit Health Department after Detroit’s bankruptcy woes. He is known to perform his duties with a pragmatic approach and rectitude that is often missing in corporate and government settings.

Before Dr. El Sayed spoke, our Sentencing Reform and Healthcare/Medical Commutation committees gave impressive presentations. The doctor, the son of doctors, shared with us his diverse family background, which as he conveyed, makes for robust conversation at Thanksgiving gatherings. Despite his family’s plethora of differences, one thing they agreed upon was that they all had a “shared future”. In this divisive climate in which political affiliations can break up families and friendships, Dr. El-Sayed’s message was for us to be able to “see beyond our differences.” His campaign platform stems from those lively family conversations. He believes that “we will come together right now because of our shared future.”

By sharing his inspirational story and articulating his vision for the future, Dr. El-Sayed was able to project a theme that can resonate with anyone. His genuine compassion has no boundaries. He once “led a student medical mission to Peru and founded a student organization which raised money and coordinated community service for a free clinic.”...(Wikipedia). Concerned with gender disparity and inequality in general, Dr. El-Sayed expressed an interest in looking at the sentencing of domestic violence survivors accused of crimes against their abusers.

Quality education and training is a very high priority on Dr. El-Sayed’s agenda. He was vehement about citizens having access to resources and he was adamant about investing in the delivery of services to underserved communities. He also supports investments in school infrastructure and the creation of accredited 1-2 year trade programs. An interesting fact that he pointed out was that around 77% of juveniles in the criminal justice system needed glasses. Recognizing and acting upon that correlation between juvenile delinquency and a basic necessity, he led efforts to get free glasses to children attending Detroit Public Schools.

On criminal justice issues, Dr. El-Sayed said that he would like to see “penal system reform through community policing, restorative justice and elimination of for-profit jails.” He also mentioned abolishing mandatory sentencing schemes and a repeal of the “three strikes law” that fuel mass incarceration and prison overcrowding. He believes in increasing re-entry resources for ex-felons, and stressed the need for creating opportunities while offenders are incarcerated.

In the upcoming months, our chapter will be taking on the task of writing our own stories to raise awareness and advocate our cause. Dr. El-Sayed's campaign strategy can be a useful advocacy plan for us to follow as well. He told us that his strategy is to "talk to everyone and go everywhere" and wake up everyday saying to himself, "how do I make this world a better place today?"

If you have family or a friend on the outside that wishes to look up additional information on the Doctor, [abdulformichigan.com](http://abdulformichigan.com) can be a useful resource.

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## INTERVIEW WITH NLA PRESIDENT, FELICIA DYER\*

### ***How long have you been involved with the NLA?***

I have been a member of the NLA since 2005 that is about 13 years. Every year I have gotten more and more involved from just being a spectator to heading several committees to being on the welcoming committee, and now presiding over Chapter 1014 of NLA.

### ***What made you run for President of the NLA?***

My peers made the decision for me. I've been nominated several times. I was reluctant because I doubted my ability to run such a big and prestigious organization. This time, I was more confident in myself and I accepted the nomination. Others must have been confident in my abilities also because I was elected.

### ***What are your major goals this year?***

Bridging the gap between the offender and the victim is my major goal. I believe that the victims are the most important component in the rehabilitative process. While we are being rehabilitated, we need to find ways to help our victims heal also. I also want to get my peers involved and excited about the NLA.

### ***What are some examples of ways that NLA has positively impacted the community?***

Building a community and bringing a group of women together to accomplish goals without negative incidents, is one of our biggest accomplishments. It has also created opportunities for our women serving life sentences, who are among the most rehabilitated women in this prison. We were also major supporters of abolishing life for juveniles, enacting a sentencing commission and removing the authority of successive judges in the commutation process.

### ***How is the NLA organized?***

NLA is made up of the following committees: (i) medical commutation and prisoner healthcare, (ii) sentencing reform, (iii) restorative justice, (iv) parolable life, (v) juvenile empowerment reform, (vi) felony murder/aiding and abetting, (vii) domestic violence, (viii) community service committee/faith based encouragement, (ix) special projects committee, (x) newsletter committee, and (xi) our Chapter 1014-established committee on successful parole.

### ***How large is the NLA at the WHV?***

Currently, there are approximately 175 women who attend our general membership meetings. This is

not a mandatory program. The members are women who just want to be part of the organization. At this time our membership is at its full capacity and there are 150 women on the waiting list.

\*Since this interview, Ms. Dyer was elected to a second term as President.

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## WHO UNDERSTANDS ME?

*By Kelly Arthurs*

Have you ever wondered if anybody knows what you're going through? The solution-minded administrators at Women's Huron Valley (WHV) "get it" that prisoners have peers and we can help each other through trying times. Peer support is not a new philosophy. Outside these prison gates, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services utilized Certified Peer Support Specialists to assist their peers in recovering from the devastating effects of mental illness.

In this era of mass incarceration, people are realizing that a large percentage of the prison community is mentally ill. WHV has incorporated Certified Peer Support Specialists (CPSS) within our community so that women with depression, biopolar disorder, grief and adjustment issues can talk to someone who understands. Peers are trained to share their recovery story to instill hope in others.

Twenty-seven incarcerated women were certified by the state as Peer Support Specialists. WHV is the pilot prison using peers to help their fellow prisoners. The CPSS's went through extensive training from trainers who traveled from Georgia. The Peers learned about recovery dialogues, motivational interviewing, wellness action plans and problem-solving techniques.

Michigan was one of only four states to receive a grant to use peers in our prison system. I believe the logic behind using certified peers in an incarcerated setting is social reform and monetary savings. CPSSs assist the mental health clinical staff. The CPSS program also provides employment opportunities for the certified ladies upon release. CPSSs will assist in reentry areas for people coming out of prison.

Using certified peers at WHV is a win-win solution! We can help our community recover and remove the stigma of mental illness by keeping the dialogue open. I thank our administration, our clinical staff, CPSS trainers and all the participants for obtaining the grant that brought this program to fruition. Ultimately, using certified peer support specialists with the lived experience of incarceration will help lower recidivism and rebuild our communities.

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# HOSPICE AND PALLIATIVE CARE PROGRAM

*By Sybill Padgett, National Board Member, National Lifers of America*

The Michigan Department of Corrections has launched a Hospice Program. Training courses were provided at WHV to provide care and companionship to their fellow prisoners who have been diagnosed with life-limiting illnesses and are elderly. Level 1 and 2 prisoners will be given duties that consist of:

- Socialization—support and companionship.
- Patient assistance—practical assistance in the form of ADL (Activities of Daily Living) care to - CHOICES patients.
- Vigil keeping—remain with a fellow prisoner while they are in the process of actively dying. The vigil keeping will be done in shifts with the goal being to have no person die alone.

Thank you to Hospice of Michigan and MDOC staff for providing the necessary training for the Prisoners Palliative Care Aide (PPCA).

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## HOW LONG IS LONG ENOUGH?

*By Linda Stermer*

In the first year of prison, the most profound but certainly not the most devastating changes begin. You've been torn from your family, children, friends and community. You realize that you've been taken from all you know and that it is your fault.

You become completely dependent on the people who care about you. More than ever before, you rely on them for all of your financial and emotional needs. You have to navigate your life in the new world that you have been placed into. You must set up a new "household" and acquire the things you need in order to get by. Everything you do is on "prison" time, not your own.

The friends you still have are largely sympathetic and try to help you keep some connection to your life in the world. Others are embarrassed and begin to turn away from you.

Your second year, you've started to develop relationships, creating or becoming part of a circle of people you can count on.

Your visitors begin to come less and less frequently. You look for comfort, lash out, or try to find a way to fill the time productively. Only to learn that you cannot get into a group because you have too much time on your sentence or are placed on a waiting list that will take, most times, a year or more. By the time you have served five years, you have become a financial burden on your family. If you have children, you have missed many of the monumental firsts in their lives. Whether it was learning to walk, riding a bike, the first day of school, first date or graduation. Or your parents are becoming elderly and are having major health problems and you cannot be there to help them.

Few if any of your old friends are there for you now. Life simply got busy and is passing you by. You've weathered the losses of all your appeals and are coming to terms with the reality of your sentence. Visits are rare and vending machine food is now a delicacy.

The job you have does not pay enough to afford your necessities, let alone any extras. You've begun to develop a "family" among the inmates: a prison mom, sisters, brothers and uncles. It's likely that you've had something important stolen or been betrayed by someone you thought was your friend in prison.

Pictures of your family are rare and as much as you look forward to your calls to family, they no longer answer as quickly as they once did. If you were married or had a significant other, they've likely moved on by now.

Once you have done ten years, if you had young children, they no longer look forward as much to seeing you. They are busy with sports, friends, school and other activities. If your parents were already elderly, you're blessed if they can still visit. Visitors are more often outreach or religious visitors just so you can have a visit with someone from the outside world, or get food from the visiting room and get out of your cell.

You are more reliant now on your prison relationships because outside relationships are nearly nonexistent. If you came in young, you are now grown up. You've lived through regret, loss and are still waiting for rehabilitative programming. The courts sentenced you to a long time in order to make you learn a lesson, but you have likely learned that prison is not interested in your becoming rehabilitated. Your rehabilitation will only happen through your own efforts, your own incentive.

Once you have been here for twenty or more years, it is unlikely that you still have anyone on the outside that helps provide for you or even visits. Not only have you suffered loss from your family in the world, but the family that you have created in prison also begins to dwindle. Some have gone home, others are elderly and can no longer visit you in the yard. Some have expired and others are getting close to it. You will never attend a funeral and have a little time or outlet for grief. If you are fortunate enough to be released, you will leave the only "family" you have known for years, only to have no family left on the outside to go to.

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## STOLEN

*By Kelli Stapleton*

Has there been a case in the news lately that involved a really young person? Maybe a drug case, a DUI or some misguided relationship that ended in a horrible crime? The big worry about sending a young person to prison is how the environment will shape their future behavior. Will a prison sentence teach them to be better criminals? We are all products of our environment. So if sending a young person to prison will teach them to become better criminals, then that would be true for any of us, young or old. The prison environment is difficult. There are people here with poor impulse control and with anger management issues, with antisocial behaviors and criminal addictive thinking, just to name a

scant few behavioral problems. Will being in this environment shape me? Will I walk out of prison, a worse criminal?

Today, I am admitting to you that after being in prison for three years, I am very good at stealing. Now it's not my fault (spoken like a true criminal). It's a fact that most people steal when they don't have anything. If you think that I am wrong, take a suitcase full of things, and walk through a place where people have nothing and see what happens. You would steal food if you were hungry enough.

What I've learned is that when I am ready to steal, I must be careful of who is around me. There are other inmates who would really hate what I do. I must also be mindful of which officers are around. I have already been busy at my task this morning. I found myself alone in the small yard. I looked left and then I looked right, gathered up my courage and I did it... I sang along to my radio. My crime? What did I steal? I stole three minutes of joy. And I totally got away with it!

I did it again yesterday in our big yard. I was meeting some friends. I was so excited that I jumped up and clicked my heels. Haha! The officer did not yell at me for frolicking. I got away with that too. That moment of joy was stolen fair and square. And do you know the best part? That moment can never be stolen back from me. It's mine forever.

So I'm getting pretty good at stealing. I think this is a useful skill in prison. I think this new skill may also serve me well once I am free. I must insist, before I close, that you keep my secret. There are those who would like to bring an end to my thieving ways. I don't want to stop. I want to get better at it. Remember that you would steal food if you were hungry enough. Prison has left me just that hungry.

P.S. A partial list of moments I've stolen

1. Waking up after a very restful nap
2. Being lost in a good book
3. Hearing the sound of the "crack" when the softball hits the bat and everyone cheers
4. Getting the corner piece of pizza
5. A poorly executed cartwheel
6. Getting final Jeopardy correct in a room full of people
7. Bag of chips with a cold diet coke \*squee\*
8. Watching an ant carrying an impressively large piece of food
9. Writing on a blank piece of paper
10. Watching a movie from beginning to end

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## CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

*Tracy L. Cowan, Vice Chairperson, National Board of Directors, National Lifers of America*

"Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose a response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."-Viktor Frankl, Holocaust survivor

In October of 2017, that National Lifers of America, Inc. Chapter 1014 at Women's Huron Valley viewed a short documentary produced by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). That documentary

was called “*Changing the Narrative: The Case for Commutations*”. This documentary was a collection of interview responses of ex-felons who shared the realities of re-entering society after lengthy periods of incarceration. These resilient citizens shared their struggles, vulnerabilities and how they overcame the traumatic impact of their pre-incarceration and in-prison experiences. The first reaction from a member of the audience after viewing this emotionally packed film was “powerful”. We were not only viscerally impacted, but unexpectedly, we felt a renewed sense of empowerment and inspiration. There were tears nonetheless.

The fundamental commonality of the participants in the documentary was to become self-sufficient and expand their education and vocational skills. They humbly performed jobs that were often well below their skill levels and intellectual capacity. Just as important, they all had a sense of “strong empathy for each other” as noted by one of the audience members. Their dedication was manifested in their continued advocacy especially as voices for people whose journeys have been similar.

Toni Bunton, a former NLA Chapter 1014 President commented on the plight of women who often find it hard to heal from past trauma and abuse because they don’t feel safe and protected in prison. Unlike Toni, women are the silent, underrepresented minority as inmates and tend to remain quiet upon release from incarceration.

AFSC’s Good Neighbor Project Coordinator, Demetrius Titus’ poignant comments in a recent correspondence is moving. He said: “Tracy, there are individuals out here that have not lost sight of those they left behind in prison. There are people that have heart for those that are still navigating through the conditions of their confinement as they deal with the bureaucracy of prison culture. This is why I come into the office every day to put forth some effort to make life better for those incarcerated and when I leave, I carry the frustration of being witness to the travesties of prison life that I can personally relate to due to my own experience. I can’t tell you how at times I find myself so frustrated at the mere fact that although minorities are the most impacted by mass incarceration, we are in fact the least active.

The first time I had the opportunity to go back into the prison I spent 14 of my 18 years of incarceration, I was overwhelmed with so many different emotions. After being just hours in the very place that I encountered those most difficult aspects of my life, I left with such sadness. I think because the actual HOPE I see in their faces, because many of the guys there personally witness my story of coming in with a life sentence to now being free and coming back to prison to help in anyway possible. Once home, this led me to sit on the edge of my bed and weep. Why? Because there is so much I want to do to change laws, to create new policies, to reconnect incarcerated citizens to the world, to get deserving people home. But [I] often [don’t] feel empowered to do so. Having the desire without the means is literally truly difficult.” We applaud Toni and Demetrius’ efforts and relentless pursuit of justice but we desperately need more people like them.

Hollywood’s version of prison, like HBO’s “Oz” and Netflix’s “Orange is the New Black” has given mainstream a narrative involving the inequities and retributive treatment towards prisoners. In an interview with Esquire magazine (Nov 2017), actors from the “Oz” series commented on their take-away on their experiences working on prison-themed shows. Quoting from this article titled “The Great Oz” by Adrienne Westenfeld, Actor Tergesen remarked that, “The show gave you a chance to look at people that you initially didn’t think you had anything in common with. But once you understand their story, you start to see the similarities and that’s what’s great about it and I think what needs to be happening more now.” Another actor from the show, Fontana, said, “If you have a clear enough vision

about what you want to say and the world you want to depict, there is an audience willing to experience it with you.”

The promotion of Changing the Narrative will be a priority for the National Lifers Association. Commutation and all prisoner releases will be viewed more favorably when more people view this type of material that delivers a message that resonates in our communities and with particular voters. It is imperative that prisoners strongly encourage people in their social circles and professional networks to view AFSCs documentary at [www.prisoneradvocacy.org](http://www.prisoneradvocacy.org). Changing the Narrative will change minds, attitudes and hearts but we, as inmates and ex-felons must initiate and guide the narrative the world needs to know.

## GIVING BACK

You may be interested to know that we are active in giving back to the community. The NLA would like to pay special tribute to the Prisoner Benefit Fund (PBF) and other WHV efforts to promote health and relieve suffering outside the prison walls. Developing empathy towards others' needs and generously helping to meet them is part of the rehabilitative journey at Women's Huron Valley. We proudly acknowledge below, the numerous charitable donations from the PBF in the past year.

Forgiven Ministry \$15,000 for One Day With God Event

Torch Run Special Olympics-\$2,500

Human Trafficking-\$2,500

YWCA-\$2,500

Coats for Tots-\$5,000

COTS Homeless Shelter-\$2,500

American Red Cross-MI Region-\$5,000

Operation Smile-National-\$5,000

Safehouse Domestic Violence Shelter-\$2,500

Gleaner's Food Bank-\$5,000 (twice so actually \$10,000; one was for summer lunch programs)

Guiding Harbor-\$5,000

Make A Wish Foundation-\$20,000

Huron Valley Boys & Girls Clubs-\$5,000

Teen/Infant Parent Services-Detroit-\$10,000

Boy Scouts of America-Outreach-\$3,000

Girl Scouts-Outreach-\$600

Members of our community also sponsor walks each year to raise awareness on important issues. For Domestic Violence Awareness Month, PBF matched \$3,500 to prisoner voluntary contributions. A group of prisoners participated in the Passionate Cure For The Pink walk during Breast Cancer Awareness Month, which raised \$2375 for the Susan G. Komen Foundation. The community also participates in “pick up and go” where they receive supplies to crochet or knit various items to be donated (lap blankets, chemo caps, scarves, mittens, hats, baby clothing, quilts, blankets, dolls, etc.) to

various shelters, hospitals and nursing homes, coordinated by a CPC-Special Activities. The Horticulture Program donated 11,492 pounds of food to Food Gatherers in 2017 to feed the local homeless.

## WHAT DO YOU ALL DO AT NLA?

*Tracy L. Cowan, Vice Chairperson, National Board of Directors, National Lifers of America*

“What do you all do at the NLA?” is a question that I am often asked followed by “Who’s coming to NLA today?” What people fail to realize is that nobody would ever come if we weren’t actively inviting our guests to come in for our soirées. The commitment and efforts of our members, lifers and non-lifers, is what keeps our chapter going.

The National Lifers of America incorporated in 1980, stemmed from the “Legislative Committee of the Prisoners Progress Association.” This organization was “predominantly lifers engaged in a struggle to create an atmosphere that was more favorable to the treatment of lifers cases through legal means”. Willis X Harris, the founder of Michigan Lifers Association, had actually spearheaded the concept (CURE Lifelong newsletter, March 2017-“National Lifers of America, Inc.” by the National Board Chair, Reginald Williams).

Getting the chapters in sync after the MDOC banned prisoner-to-prisoner correspondence has been difficult. By working with MDOC administrators and our organization’s volunteers, we are committed to getting all the statewide chapters working on the NLA’s national agenda:

- Capping life sentences at 25 years especially for parolable lifers
- Adjust lifers review for parole consideration from every 5 years after serving 10 years to every 2 years
- Support Battered Women’s Clemency Project and educate/facilitate domestic violence awareness and legal issues
- Change Michigan’s four strikes law
- Support reinstating Accountability Credits (formerly known as “good time”)

Each chapter has several standing committees. Our chapter at WHV includes the following standing committees:

- Sentencing Reform
- Domestic Violence/Battered Women’s Clemency
- Medical Commutation and Prisoner Health Care
- Lifer Legislative and Legal
- Aiding and Abetting/Felony Murder

We also have ad hoc committees as needed such as Prisoner Programming. The NLA provides prisoners a platform to advocate and educate from the inside to our outside communities.

Chapter 1014 is the only women's chapter and is also one of the most consistent and hardest working chapter in the state. On June 1, 2006, the first woman, Michelle Bazetta, was appointed to the national board of directors. Now there are two women, Sybil Padgett and myself, who are lifetime appointees. I was recently appointed the first National Board of Directors Vice Chair. Reginald Williams has held the Chair position for many years and has persevered through all our challenges.

Our organization is only allowed to operate with outside volunteers and a sponsor organization. Currently, our chapter's volunteers are Mary Lynn Stevens, Dr. Ruma Banerjee and Farideh Almani. Dr. Lora Lempert volunteered for many years. She brought in many guests including students from the University of Michigan-Dearborn for roundtables with our members in which we discussed an array of prisoner-related topics. These roundtables were the model for the Inside-Out Program. The interns commonly asked if we have cable and we told them that the Prisoner Benefit Fund pays for it, not the taxpayers. We also let them know that we used our funds to contribute to various charitable organizations. Most of the students left with a more favorable impression and realistic perspective of prisoners and the culture of a women's prison. Dr. Lempert also spearheaded free college classes that we are offered here. These classes are now well into their 15<sup>th</sup> year.

We have several women who have been involved with the NLA for decades now. At Scott Correctional Facility, some of our juvenile lifers, including Jennifer Pruitt, Amy Black and Toni Bunton, gave a moving presentation to legislators in which they got in garbage bags to demonstrate juvenile offenders should not be treated as "throwaways". Slowly but surely, views have changed and laws passed that reflect the message that our juvenile lifers successfully sent. Our chapter also presented to legislators and advocated with Families Against Mandatory Minimums to get major amendments to draconian drug laws. Mandatory minimums were abolished, early paroles were granted and new sentencing guidelines for drug convictions in Michigan were enacted.

During one of our soirées with former Michigan House Representative Alma Wheeler-Smith, we told her about our excessively high phone rates and how it affects our families and our rehabilitation. After that meeting, Rep Wheeler-Smith drafted and sponsored a legislative bill that drastically reduced our phone rates. Although she was only able to negotiate the contract for one year, it extended for several glorious years. NLA members not only support and propose legislative bills but some members have actually drafted bills themselves. Legislators have used some of these bills as models for their own versions. In response to our expressing our needs as women, Rep Wheeler-Smith was also instrumental in getting a reserved section on the prison commissary for female products.

In 2009, the entire population from Scott Correctional Facility was moved to WHV and the NLA chapter was immediately reinstated here. Our current President is Felicia Dyer. Our chapter officers and board directors are fortunate to be able to meet with a WHV CPC on a monthly basis. Initially, CPC Mack was assigned to our chapter and through meetings with myself and her, Chance for Life was brought to WHV using contacts from former inmate Anita Posey and members who I contacted from our brother chapters. Currently, CPC Campbell assists us tremendously with our operational activities, volunteer communications and soirées. Patricia Trevino, who established the first women's NLA chapter, is now back in action and is our current 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President. She is committed, along with our chapter officers, to reenergize and motivate lifers to become members of the NLA.

So the next time you are wondering what we are doing at the NLA, maybe reframe that inquiry to "What can I do for NLA?" With more participation, we can continue to advocate for betterment in the treatment of lifers and for the prisoners' overall reform and release.