

# Interfaith partnership provides community connection at Bedford women's prisons



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Each month, about 30 women leave the state women's prison complex on Harris Road in Bedford Hills having done their time.

But reentry can be tough, especially when you walk out the door with \$40 in cash, your belongings in a plastic trash bag, heading for a homeless shelter or a relative's home.

The Interfaith Prison Partnership in Westchester, which links houses of worship and the town of Bedford with volunteers looking to help, has changed that dynamic. For the past year, volunteers gather bimonthly to fill 60 satchels with a passel of household items – from soap and shampoo to feminine hygiene products to a blanket and a towel.



“If women are released with the black trash bag, it sends the message that you are basically trash,” said Rev. Siobahn Sargent, pastor of Memorial United Methodist Church in White Plains, and the IPP’s executive director. “Our efforts let the women know that there’s a community of support that cares for them. It’s a community that’s praying for their best outcomes when they return home.”

On a Sunday in mid-December, volunteers from across the county gathered at Memorial United Methodist to fill bags with items that various congregations had donated. One table had boxes of flip-flops and blankets, while another had bottles of shampoo, hair conditioner and hand lotion lined up.

Among those filling a bag was Rev. Drew Courtright, assistant minister at St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church in Bedford, and his daughter, Lucy.



“I’m happy to give a little help, and hope,” Courtright said.

Prison officials at the Bedford Hills and Taconic Correctional Facilities have lauded the program, saying the donated items have improved the lives of those seeking a new life upon their release.



Other donated items include soap and face masks that have helped during the COVID pandemic.

“The partnership has created a positive working relationship and open dialogue between the facilities and the community,” said a state Department of Corrections spokeswoman.

The inmates have shown their appreciation as well in thank-you notes to the committee.

“Being at a place like this in a time like this wears us down,” wrote one woman. “You all as a group have boosted our spirits and put smiles on our faces. We thank you for your extreme kindness.”



The release bags are the latest initiative of the IPP, which was formed in 2019 at the urging of Hans Hallundbaek, who served as director of prison ministries for the Hudson River Presbytery, which oversees 81 Presbyterian congregations in the region. Hallundbaek, who had seen signs on the interstate urging companies to “adopt-a-highway,” had the idea of extending that concept to the local state prison complex.

Why not adopt a prison, he asked himself.

The town of Bedford responded, with then-Supervisor Chris Burdick setting up its Prison Relations Advisory Committee, now a 19-member panel that includes clergy for Christian

and Jewish congregations; representatives from Bard College, Columbia University, and Marymount Manhattan College; as well as Bedford town officials and a county legislator.

The committee coordinates the program, makes grant proposals for funding, and reaches out to public and private officials who can help.

U.S. Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney, D-Cold Spring, whose district includes Bedford, has heard from the partnership about the unsafe conditions for visitors who take the Metro-North commuter rail to Bedford, and then walk to the prisons down Harris Road, which lacks sidewalks.

Maloney has included a \$650,000 federal grant for sidewalk improvements on Harris Road among his community projects passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in July, but still awaits final approval in the Senate.

“I have worked directly with local advocates to improve conditions at Bedford and other criminal justice facilities in our region,” said Maloney. “After hearing their concerns regarding road safety, I submitted a community grant project to address the situation which would bring \$650,000 to the town of Bedford.”

During COVID times, the partnership responded with an effort to improve prison conditions by collecting 40,000 bars of soap for the incarcerated women. With increased hand-washing necessary during the pandemic, the harsh prison-issued soap, with high concentrations of lye, had created skin problems for some inmates.

The partnership also provided an estimated 15,000 masks during the early days of COVID when they were difficult to find in the spring of 2020. The mask outreach brought donations from across the nation, as religious communities spread the word.

“The outpouring has been beyond overwhelming and heartwarming,” said Sharon Ballen, of Somers, who chairs the Prison Relations Advisory Committee and is the IPP’s program coordinator. “I believe we have a moral obligation to stand up for people who can’t stand up for themselves.”

Ballen, a parishioner at Katonah Presbyterian Church, has organized the soap collection during the recurrent waves of COVID. Among the donations were 3,000 bars from Michel Design Works, a Florida-based company with an office in Katonah.

She set up a contact-less collection bin on the church porch, at 31 Bedford Road, where donations continue to roll in. State Department of Corrections policy requires that the soap come in individual boxes, and without alcohol additives. So the IPP suggests donations of Dove for incarcerated women, and Irish Spring for transgender prisoners at Bedford.

“People leave off their soap on the porch, and not one bar has been stolen,” she said.



At Memorial Methodist that Sunday, Mark Davies, of Tarrytown filled a black release bag as he walked from table to table. Davies, one of the state’s foremost authorities on government ethics, began his work with the partnership during his field study at the masters of divinity program he’s enrolled in at the Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan.

He’d like to enter the prison ministry once he completes the program.

Each release bag includes a note of encouragement from the volunteer who filled it. Davies kept his brief, and upbeat.

“You made it!” Davies wrote. “Good luck! You can do this!”

*Follow Tax Watch columnist David McKay Wilson on Facebook or Twitter @davidmckaywils1. He has written about Hudson Valley public affairs since 1986. [Check out his latest columns at lohud.com](http://lohud.com)*