

Outreach program targets Muslim inmates

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GARDEN GROVE – Yasmeen Harris can tell quite the cautionary tale.

Raised Muslim, Harris strayed from her faith as a young woman. Soon, she found herself serving nearly 18 years in prison.

She renewed her commitment to Islam during that time. But she'd again question her decision as she watched hundreds of Christian and Jewish volunteers – and just one Muslim – minister to inmates at the California Institution for Women in Corona.

“I asked, ‘Am I in the right faith?’” Harris said, shaking her head beneath her bright blue scarf. “I considered converting to Judaism.”

It was a wakeup call to the 100 or so Muslims who gathered at the Islamic Society of Orange County in Garden Grove on Saturday.

The meeting marked a first for the new prison outreach program of Islamic Shura Council of Southern California, an umbrella group of some 60 mosques and Muslim organizations.

The Shura Council has been advocating for Muslim prisoners for years. That includes fighting to get *halal* meals – food permissible under Islamic law – for Los Angeles and Orange County jail inmates, the way kosher meals are available for Jewish inmates.

It was just a year ago, though, that the Shura Council created a formal program to serve Muslims incarcerated in Orange, L.A., Ventura, San Diego, Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

“There’s never been a concerted, structured effort to develop volunteers to go in and serve,” said program director Imam Abu Ishaq Abdul Hafiz, who worked 23 years as a chaplain with the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Roughly 1,100 religious volunteers minister to some 7,200 inmates in county jails, said Dominic Mejico with the Orange County Sheriff’s Department. He said just one of those volunteers is Muslim, calling it an “underserved population.”

Abdul Hafiz believes that’s because many Muslims are immigrants who may not know prison visits are an option and tradition established by other religions.

The group’s first meeting focused on recruiting volunteers to counsel inmates, stem any hint of radicalization, distribute literature on Islam and advocate for prisoners’ rights.

County, state and federal officials are embracing – sometimes even requesting – the help as they look to comply with laws dictating they must accommodate inmates’ religious beliefs, so long as those concessions don’t compromise security or cause a hefty financial burden.

Inmates in California prisons are allowed to have religious texts and approved artifacts such as head coverings, for example, said Bill Sessa, spokesman for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. They can receive meals in keeping with their faith. Plus Sessa said regular services and faith-based counseling sessions are offered.

“We are obviously a secular institution, but we encourage any behavior that helps an inmate to gain insight into themselves,” Sessa said. “Before you can change criminal behavior, you have to change criminal thinking.”

Policies protecting the religious rights of inmates are becoming commonplace, Abdul Hafiz said. However, implementation issues still pop up, he said, and new guards have to be educated – and occasionally “nudged” – to follow those policies.

For Muslims in Orange County jails, he said there was confusion this year about the start of Ramadan, for example.

During that holy month, Muslims fast between dawn and sunset. The start of Ramadan fluctuates from year to year, though, based on the cycle of the moon.

Where jail or prison officials might previously have tried cold-calling the closest mosque for input, Abdul Hafiz said they were able to contact the outreach program and clarify the issue, resolving grievances before they could escalate to litigation.

One such case rose to national attention in 2007, when Souhair Khatib sued Orange County after she was forced to remove her *hijab*, or head covering, in the presence of men during court appearances for charges of welfare fraud.

The Sheriff’s Department rewrote its policy after that incident, Cmdr. Steve Kea said. Now, hijabs are removed in discreet rooms with no men present. The scarves are then searched to ensure they’re safe, or Muslim women are issued preapproved hijabs to wear – with a supply provided by the Shura Council.

As the outreach program evolves, Abdul Hafiz said he hopes to collaborate with other faith- and community-based organizations to focus on reentry, setting up job and housing opportunities. That’s the most critical step to prevent released inmates from reoffending, Sessa said.

“When they get out, who is there to greet them? It’s not the Muslims,” said Imam Jihad Saafir, who serves as chaplain at the women’s facility in Corona. “It’s the dope man. It’s the pimp. It’s their old circle of friends.”

Without an established support system from the Muslim community, when Harris was released, she turned to transitional housing that requires her to attend Christian services. She said she’s sticking by her faith this time, though, determined to make that process easier for Muslims still behind bars.

“This isn’t about me,” she said. “It’s about the women I left behind.”

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