

Prisoners' Guerrilla Handbook to Correspondence Programs in the U.S. and Canada, 3rd Edition, by Jon Marc Taylor and Susan Schwartzkopf

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Reviewed by Paul Wright

In 1994 the Democratic Congress and President Clinton eliminated Pell grants for prisoners. Within the next few years, most states followed suit and either totally eliminated or gutted their prison education programs. Prison and jail education programs beyond GED and Adult Basic Education (ABE) became, and remain, a rarity. Of course, prisoner illiteracy rates remain sky high; all that changed is that prisoners seeking a higher education can no longer seek one within the prison system. The other alternative is correspondence courses. While there are books on the market discussing correspondence courses, they are all aimed at non prisoners, virtually all of which require some degree of internet access or residency.

Prisoners' Guerrilla Handbook to Correspondence Programs in the U.S. and Canada, 3rd Edition (PGHCP) is written by Missouri prisoner Jon Marc Taylor who has successfully completed a B.S. degree, an M.A. degree and a Doctorate by mail while imprisoned. This book was initially published in the late 1990s. The second edition was published by Biddle Publishing in 2002. The publisher retired in 2007 and Prison Legal News took over the publishing of the book as the first title in its new book line.

With the expert assistance of Editor Susan Schwartzkopf, the third edition of *PGHCP* has been totally revamped and updated. Many colleges no longer offer correspondence courses, having gone totally to online distance learning courses. This book offers a complete description of more than 160 programs that are ideal for prisoners seeking to earn high school diplomas, associate, baccalaureate and graduate degrees and vocational and paralegal certificates. In addition to giving contact information for each school, Taylor includes tuition rates, text book costs, courses offered, transfer credits, time limits for completing course, whether the school is accredited, and if so by whom, and much, much more. What makes the book unique is Taylor's first hand personal experience as an imprisoned distance learning student who has a basis for comparison and knows how to judge

a college correspondence course from the perspective of an imprisoned student who doesn't have e mail access and who cannot readily call his instructor.

Book editor Susan Schwartzkopf brings a masters degree in education and 12 years of experience teaching immigrants English language skills to the project. The book's introduction by Vivian Nixon, the executive director of the College and Community Fellowship which advocates for the inclusion of released prisoners in higher education, further bolsters the masterful expertise and experience brought together in this book.

Taylor also explains factors to be considered in selecting an educational program and how to make meaningful

comparisons between the courses offered for the tuition charged. No money to pay for school? Taylor covers that too. Diploma mills? The book addresses how to recognize and avoid them. Any prisoner seeking to begin or continue their education behind bars will find this to be an invaluable road map. This is not just the only book on the market to address the needs of prisoners seeking a higher education while locked up; it does a fantastic job accomplishing its goal. It saves the prospective student countless dollars and time researching the best course for their needs. Cost is \$49.95, free shipping. Contact: Prison Legal News, 2400 NW 80th St. # 148, Seattle, WA 98117. 206-246-1022. www.prisonlegalnews.org. ■

In the Shadow of San Quentin: An Interview with Prison Law Office Director Donald Specter

by Todd Matthews

If any one of the dozen attorneys working at the Prison Law Office ever needs to be reminded of the importance of their work, they only need to step outside their office door. The non-profit law firm is located just outside the gates of California's San Quentin Prison, in the shadows of razor wire, guard towers, and the prison's 5,200 prisoners.

For 30 years, the Prison Law Office has provided free legal services to California state prisoners, with an emphasis on conditions of confinement and medical care. In 2000, the firm filed a class-action lawsuit on behalf of prisoners with chronic diseases who suffered medical neglect. The case was settled two years later, resulting in medical care improvements throughout California. The firm has also worked for prison reform aimed to benefit prisoners with disabilities and address overcrowding.

For the past 25 years, attorney Donald Specter has been at the forefront of this work as the firm's director. *PLN* recently caught up with Specter to ask him about his work on prison reform.

PRISON LEGAL NEWS: You have focused your law career on prisoners' rights for nearly 30 years. As I understand it, you joined the Prison Law Office in 1979 as a volunteer, and were appointed director in 1984. What was your original interest in or motivation for pursuing prisoners' rights issues as an attorney?

DONALD SPECTER: I originally thought about criminal defense as a career, but after a stint as a law student at a public defender's office realized I wasn't cut out for that line of work. However, to get to the public defender's office I had to travel past San Quentin every day. After law school, I saw a volunteer opportunity to provide legal assistance to San Quentin prisoners. I jumped at the chance.

PLN: What was the Prison Law Office like in terms of staffing and number of cases handled when you joined in the early-1980s versus today? How has the law office responded to the ever-growing number of inmates in California prisons over the past two decades?

SPECTER: When I started working at the Prison Law Office, it was staffed by one other attorney, who co-founded the

organization. When he left in 1984 there were four lawyers, and now there are 12, including myself, plus several legal assistants, a policy advocate and intermittent law students. Our office has also been affected by the overcrowding crisis in California's prisons. Even with a larger staff, we receive more requests for assistance than we can possibly handle. Some days we receive more than 100 handwritten letters from prisoners throughout the state.

PLN: When you look back at the law firm's work, which two or three cases, decisions, or areas of reform would you consider to be 'landmark' and heavily involved the work of the Prison Law Office?

SPECTER: Some of the more important cases have been *Madrid v. Gomez*, a highly publicized case challenging conditions in the supermax SHU and excessive force; *Pennsylvania v. Yesky*, a case in the Supreme Court holding that the American with Disabilities Act applies to prisons throughout the country; *Farrell v. Tilton*, which resulted in a consent decree over virtually all of the state's juvenile facilities and led to a dramatic depopulation; *Plata v. Schwarzenegger* and *Coleman v. Schwarzenegger*, which respectively involved challenges to the medical and

mental health care systems in California's prisons, both of which are still in the remedial phase, with the Court appointing a Receiver in *Plata*; finally, we just ended a trial in *Plata* and *Coleman* in which we have argued that the Court should release 52,000 prisoners due to overcrowding. [Editor's Note: After this interview was conducted the court ruled in favor of the prisoners. That ruling is reported in this issue of PLN.]

PLN: When someone incarcerated in a California prison seeks out the Prison Law Office for assistance, how do they learn about the firm?

SPECTER: There are notices of our cases all over the prisons with our address so it's not hard for prisoners to know where to write for help.

PLN: What are the most common reasons for a prisoner to contact your office?

SPECTER: The most common reason prisoners write to us is for health care related issues. That's why we have spent so much of our resources in that area.

PLN: How many of those contacts turn into cases your firm will take on?

SPECTER: We try to use impact litigation as much as possible so we don't handle very many individual cases. We

provide direct assistance in only a very small percentage of cases.

PLN: Describe the areas of prison and jail reform that need the most work and are currently being pursued by the Prison Law Office?

SPECTER: At the moment, the most pressing issue is overcrowding. It is making it impossible for the state to provide the basic services to prisoners, and to comply with court orders in many different areas.

PLN: What keeps you motivated to continue in the field of prisoners' rights?

SPECTER: I've wondered about that myself. The opportunity to end human misery and suffering for people who have no power is a big part of it, as is the desire to stop the state from abusing its authority. The other aspect of this field is that it's always changing and there are always new and interesting issues that arise. 🐶

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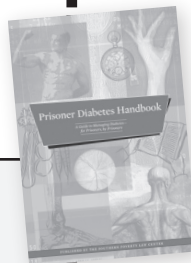
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