

# Tennessee Voices: For-profit prisons fail society

Brooks Mathews 11:06 p.m. CDT May 21, 2014



(Photo: Submitted)

This is a hard op-ed to write. It is hard to open my family up for the criticism that will surely follow. However, our prison system is broken. It is important to take a stand and talk about the issues surrounding the for-profit correctional industry in general, and the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) specifically.

My son, Harding, is serving a sentence for a nonviolent offense in a CCA prison. I believe he should be in prison, taking responsibility for his actions, and my family and I stand behind him and love him. But in the years I have been visiting Harding in prison, I have seen the failures of the for-profit prison system firsthand.

For one thing, the profit motive virtually requires corners be cut to make money. Having appropriate programming, well-trained and adequate staff, and trained medical and mental health professionals on-site costs money. This cuts into the profit margin for for-profit prison corporations like CCA. As a result, staff members are often poorly trained, leading to outcomes like medical protocols not being followed. There was a period when Harding felt ill for weeks on end. It turned out that he was being given someone else's heart medicine instead of his own prescription, endangering not one but two inmates' health. I can't tell you how

many wrong medications he's been given. When I hear reports from other facilities, like CCA employees from Idaho suing CCA for, among other things, inadequate training, it just reinforces for me that CCA is increasing its profit margin by hiring inexperienced staff or by failing to train them.

Another way I see CCA cut corners is in maintenance. At Harding's prison, there was standing water on the day-room floor for weeks. Black mold was growing everywhere and many people were getting sick. Harding's facility is not unique — in one CCA prison in Ohio, the state found that CCA had violated dozens of state standards, including inmates being forced to defecate in bags because they lacked access to running water.

But the biggest shame is that a company as well-funded as CCA, making billions of dollars, has the opportunity to do something good. They have the opportunity to have a whole different outcome for inmates — to provide the right teachers, counselors, guards — but instead they are cutting corners in a way that makes it harder and harder for inmates to function outside of prison, increasing the likelihood that they will reoffend.

Prisons must work to end recidivism, rehabilitate prisoners and build programming for inmates to successfully transition to the outside world, if for no other reason than to save taxpayer money. Though CCA says it offers re-entry programs, I have yet to see evidence of them offering programs that work and that are accessible to all inmates. In reality, prison corporations have little incentive to rehabilitate prisoners. Crime is actually good for private prisons because the more prisoners there are, the more money they make. Even CCA itself identifies "reductions in crime rates" as a "risk factor" for business.

Our criminal justice system has failed inmates and us by making it impossible to come out of prison and rejoin society as a capable and contributing member. Each time a prisoner is released, he has fewer and fewer skills to succeed. He has no car, no housing, no medications and no job. Consequently he fails and, more often than not, returns to prison fairly quickly. This revolving door can be fixed, but not as long as the prison model is for-profit.

The profit motive encourages creation of a constant revenue stream. Building in failure rather than helping felons become contributing citizens keeps more and more prison beds filled. More prisoners means more profits. More cells filled means happy investors. If we want a system that works to help people rejoin society and pay taxes, we must stop the revolving door by saying no to for-profit prisons.

Brooks Mathews, a native Nashvillian, is the mother of five.

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