

Prison labor is a good thing

As president and CEO of The Fortune Society, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping the formerly incarcerated re-enter their communities, I support having prisoners do community service, including working at Asser Levy Park. Such service gives them the opportunity to be a part of a project and a team; giving them a chance to contribute to their community, which in turn leads them to re-enter the outside world with a positive outlook and a desire to start fresh.

Out of the 100,000 prisoners who go to Rikers Island every year, 83 percent return back into the community after serving a fairly short jail sentence. The group of prisoners working at Asser Levy Park is sentenced prisoners with time until release averaging 30 days or less. They are going to be released soon anyway, and such service gives them an opportunity to begin their transition back to the community.

I have been working with the formerly incarcerated for more than 30 years and I consistently see that



BY JOANNE PAGE

no one comes home as a zero; people either become contributing members of their communities or go back to a life that damages their communities. The prisoners chosen for this assignment have already reached honor status because of their behavior while incarcerated; by giving them a chance to contribute to the community before release, they are being given a head start for when they walk the streets again.

Rikers Island already has a discharge enhancement program. The program begins the process of preparing individuals for reentry prior to release, and has shown measurable progress in reducing recidivism. The

Department of Correction is proposing re-opening its Brooklyn facility, making it easier for families and attorneys to visit those who are incarcerated but are still members of the community. Both of these efforts create a bridge between life behind bars and the outside world. Prisoners need this bridge in order to re-enter their communities with a determination to successfully re-build their lives and become a positive influence to the people around them. Without such opportunities, too many formerly incarcerated persons would be lost, not knowing how to find housing, a job and other basic necessities. Without support, they would have no where to turn and most likely end up back in jail.

In the end, Markowitz' initiative gives those incarcerated a chance to contribute to the community that they will be rejoining in the very near future, to the benefit of all concerned.

JoAnne Page is president and CEO of The Fortune Society, which helps the formerly incarcerated re-enter their communities.