

**New Life Creating Community – A Vision**  
**Executive Summary**  
**December 23, 2020**

---

**Abstract**

New Life Creating Community presents a vision for a different approach to both incarceration and post-incarceration involving people with serious mental illness who are involved with our justice system. New Life envisions a two-phase process which allows for mentally ill patients (inmates) to transition upon discharge to a family-style residential community that will serve as a place of healing and provide a powerful alternative to the lure of meth which draws 8 out of 10 released inmates back to the streets and addiction.

New Life also presents an opportunity for general inmates (not struggling with a mental illness) serving extended sentences to be trained as Mental Health Assistants and placed into roles of responsibility that provides an opportunity for redemption and purpose.

**Authors**

The authors of this vision are Adrian Berumen and Craigen Armstrong. Mr. Berumen and Mr. Armstrong have spent the last three years living embedded 24/7 in the Forensic Inpatient Step-down unit (FIP Step-down) at the Los Angeles County Twin Towers Correctional Facility (TTCF).

Through the Education Based Incarceration Program at Men's Central Jail, they undertook training to become Mental Health Assistants in the FIP Stepdown Unit in 2017. They wrote a book about their role as Mental Health Assistants which was self-published in the summer of 2020. It is called [The Solution: Mental Health Assistants](#).

They also were featured in a [podcast](#) this fall produced by [Heart Forward](#) Conversations from the Heart in which they describe how they acclimated themselves to the role of Mental Health Assistant, how they developed the curriculum they use in the pods to which they are assigned and what led them to write their book.

Both Berumen and Armstrong make a compelling case to take advantage of inmates serving extended prison terms to be trained and deployed in this role as a win-win for everyone. Berumen is 25 and has been incarcerated since he was 18 and is awaiting trial. Armstrong, 39, spent 18 years in state prison before his case was overturned. He is awaiting a new trial.

**Elements of the vision**

Berumen and Armstrong present a vision that addresses the both the physical environment and the care culture for mentally ill patients who are incarcerated (Phase One ) and upon release (Phase Two).

**Phase One** elements include:

- Quality care, treatment and support during the judicial process.

New Life Creating Community  
Vision Statement – Executive Summary

- A description of the desirable environmental elements that will contribute to the well-being and stabilization of inmates in their care including access to sunlight, nature, grass, activities, learning and enrichment.
- A proposal on how security would be addressed which offers an alternative from the more punitive presence of uniformed law enforcement officers
- Enhancing the Mental Health Assistant program – both for the benefit of the inmates/patients who are cared for in this program, but also for the purposeful engagement of the general population inmates looking to serve and grow as human beings.

The **Phase Two** vision seeks to interrupt the cycle of discharge from jail and falling back into the lure of meth and the streets when there is no support or competing life alternative. Elements include:

- Creating an environment of care and support where life is to be enjoyed. This environment competes with life on the streets where meth is a strong attraction. Detailed illustrations of the community layout and living arrangements are provided.
- Fostering a lifelong community of support; once family always family. This is not a “program” that expires and discharges. Those who are discharged are connected forever to people who care for them. They also have meaningful roles and opportunities to contribute back to the community.
- The community envisioned also competes with institutional-type residential “programs” to which some are discharged after TTCF which lack the amenities to make life enjoyable.
- The design of Phase Two New life is created based upon the questions: *“what would make my life pleasant? What would encourage me to remain healthy? How can I create the same feeling that drugs cause?”*

An important element is the opportunity afforded to general population inmates, serving extended prison terms, to be trained as Mental Health Assistants and deployed into a role that otherwise would not be filled by clinical staff or law enforcement personnel. Their presence as peers, and as individuals seeking redemption and motivated to give back, can be leveraged in ways that the system could never provide through paid staff. In their words:

**New Life Creating Community is not a program but a people who specialize in care for the mentally disabled while accessing the talent of the violent offender who has been discarded by mass incarceration but is willing to learn and serve.**