



MCSVA

Muslim Chaplain Services of VA

2317 WESTWOOD AVENUE, SUITE 115
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA 23230
804-355-0813 FAX 804-255-1717

JUNE 2010,
VOL. 1 ISSUE 1

MCSVA Moves into New Offices

After several years of meeting at the homes of Board members or at the Hijrah House, MCSVA's Board decided that it was time that we move into commercial office space to accommodate our growing program demands.

Also, our successful outreach program into the community has made it necessary for us to meet with people interested in our progress and programs. We felt that we

needed office space with ample conference room facilities.

On February 1, 2010, we executed a lease for office space located at 2317 Westwood Avenue, Suite 115, Richmond, VA 23230. We have also installed new telephone service, with our main telephone number: 804-355-0801 and our Fax number 804-355-1717.

One of our major programs is receiving and

answering mail from DOC inmates throughout the state. We also supply many inmates with free Muslim literature including: "The Noble Qur'an", "Forty Hadith", "The Sealed Nectar", "Islam in Focus", "Elementary Teachings of Islam", "The Holy Quran", and "Islamic Horizons".

Continued on p. 2

MCSVA's Latest Fundraising Event

On December 17, 2009, MCSVA held its latest fundraising event at the Islamic Center of Virginia to support our Hijrah House and Prison Dawah. Iman Siraj Wahhaj was our keynote speaker.

We raised over \$31,000 for this event although only approximately \$12,000 was received in cash donations. The remaining balance of the donations consisted of pledges made by well-meaning Brothers and Sisters. For these pledges, MCSVA

expresses our heartfelt appreciation for the generosity shown in caring enough to want to assist us financially in our work.

We are asking those who made pledges honor them.

If you need additional time, please call us at 804-355-0801 and if no one is in leave a message with your name, telephone number and a brief message indicating how you intend to meet your pledge.

Our sincere thanks to those who have either paid their pledges in full or who are in the process of doing so.



MCSVA President Carroll Abdul-Malik leading Salat with female Muslim inmates at Central Virginia Corrections Unit.

New Office Space Cont'd

We receive these publications as donations and we send them to interested inmates who request Islamic reading materials without cost to them. We also make an effort to pay the postage sending them these reading materials which can be quite expensive. Although we have only been in our offices for a little more than a month, we thoroughly enjoy the convenience and efficiency that the offices

bring to our operations. We look forward, Insha'Allah, to the other advantages that we are certain that these provide us.

MCSVA Trains the Department Of Corrections

During the past year or so, Muslim Chaplain Services of Virginia (MCSVA) through the request and cooperation of the Virginia Department Of Corrections (DOC) undertook to provide staff training to high-level officials in the Department, including wardens and other operations staff, to give them orientation and vital information with regard to the tenets and practices of

Islam. During the several training sessions led by MCSVA, in excess of 900 DOC personnel received this training. From the comments and feedback from those who attended these sessions, which were done at many of the DOC's facilities throughout the State of Virginia, our sessions were given high ratings, ranging from enthusiastic to outstanding.

MCSVA's approach to the training sessions was to provide those who attended the sessions with a practical, commonsense understanding of Islam which was designed to assist them in their interactions with Muslim inmates. At present, there are no Muslim chaplains working in DOC facilities. In most and chaplain services last count, Muslim inmates comprise over 20% of the total

The Hijrah House

The Hijrah House is located at 1009 White Head Road, Richmond, VA 23225. It is a Fe-SabeelAllah Charity managed by Muslim volunteers only (We have no paid staff). It is a place where recently released Muslim prison inmates,

who have no family or financial means, can have an interim stay before their reentry into the society's mainstream. The residents are provided room & board; learn basic skills such as responsibility, discipline, sharing, home budgeting,

and activities of daily living. Hijrah House staff links them to resources for job training and resume service. They are provided an atmosphere where residents can practice their faith as well as learn appropriate life-coping skills. After finding a job,

Training, Cont'd

population. Given the considerable presence of Muslim inmates, the training and information that MCSVA gave at these training sessions proved to be invaluable to those who attended.

MCSVA views the training sessions as a stopgap measure until Muslim chaplains are employed in the various facilities of the DOC. We have and continue to advocate for this to happen. We have developed a positive working relationship with the Director of the DOC and his senior staff. It is our mission to see that adequate funds are appropriated so that Muslim chaplains will be

hired to work in DOC facilities so that Muslim inmates throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia can benefit as do other Christian inmates.

Over the last several months, the DOC has requested MCSVA to troubleshoot areas of concern involving Muslim inmates throughout the system. We have obliged and accommodated these requests and will continue to do so into the foreseeable future.

HIJRAH HOUSE, Cont'd

the resident pays for his food and rent and also participates in a mandatory savings plan. After saving enough money, he rents his own place and becomes a tax-paying member of the society.

Fledgling Group Ministers to Muslims Behind Bars

Reprint Richmond Times-Dispatch by Frank Green

A seven-year-old prison chaplain group recently was awarded a one-of-its-kind, \$25,000 state subcontract to minister to a rapidly growing faith behind bars: Islam. But the all-volunteer Muslim Chaplain Services wants more state funding so it can hire imams to serve as prison staff chaplains, as do Protestant clergy. "We just want a level playing field," said Carroll Abdul-Malik, the group's president. The Chaplain Service of the Churches of Virginia, a Protestant group established in 1920, has the full, \$780,000 contract with the Virginia Department of Corrections to administer religious programs in prisons for inmates of all faiths.

Relations between the two chaplain groups are cordial, and they agree on the need for Islamic experts in prisons. So, too, do some secular experts with concerns beyond the spiritual. Mark Hamm, a terrorism expert with Indiana State University, conducted a study on Muslims in prison for the National Institute of Justice and said that "Islam, by all accounts, is the fastest-growing religion among prisoners in the Western world, including the United States."

And a key finding of a 2006 national study co-authored by the University of Virginia's Critical Incident Analysis Group, a think tank on national threats, was that "the inadequate number of Muslim religious service providers increases the risk of radicalization." Hamm said it is estimated that up to 40,000 of the 2.4 million prisoners in the U.S. convert to Islam each year. Muslim Chaplain Services believes there are 1,700 to 2,500 Muslims in Virginia's 32,000-inmate system. Prison authorities do not dispute that estimate. After the Sept. 11 attacks, some in Congress and elsewhere grew

Muslims Behind Bars Cont'd

concerned about the potential for the spread of jihadism along with Islam in the nation's prisons.

But Hamm found that "overall, Islam has a beneficial effect on inmates. Most of these inmates come to prison with little or no . . . spiritual grounding whatsoever." Islam offers order to their lives and a sense of identity and belonging, he said.

The "radicalization" that occurs often is the result of "prison or jailhouse Islam," twisted versions of the faith spread by those who are not necessarily well-informed about the tenets of Islam and some of whom have gang-related or other nonreligious agendas, Hamm said.

Asghar Goraya, executive director of Muslim Chaplain Services, says Islam is a religion of moderation and tolerance, not extremism. A goal of his group is educating believers who may have been given incorrect information by other well-meaning but misinformed inmates.

In addition, Sa'ad El-Amin, a former Richmond lawyer on the Muslim chaplain group's board of directors, believes more needs to be done to foster communication between staff and Muslim inmates.

"We see an accident, a train wreck ahead, if this thing is not resolved," El-Amin said.

El-Amin and Abdul-Malik, are former inmates themselves. El-Amin surrendered his City Council seat in July 2003, pleading guilty to a federal tax-fraud conspiracy charge. He served 32 months and was released in August 2006.

Abdul-Malik was released in 1978 after serving seven years for robbery. "first kin to an atheist," he said. Then he converted while behind bars. "It changed my life and I've been out for 31 years and I've been a volunteer in prison for 29 years."

In 2006, Gene Johnson, director of the Virginia Department of Corrections, invited the Muslim group to brief officials in prisons across the state about rituals, prayers, holy days, dietary regulations and other pertinent aspects of the Islamic faith.

"The sessions have been well-received with lots of positive feedback," said Larry Traylor, a department spokesman.

Goraya said the group has worked to clear up misconceptions and head off problems. For example, he said, "a

question came up during the training: 'Is it prohibited for a Muslim male to obey the orders of a female?'"

Many corrections officers are women, and male Muslim inmates must obey them, Goraya said.

But some Muslim inmates have the wrong idea. Often, he said, the cultural traditions of patriarchal societies that practice Islam get mixed up with the tenets of the faith.

The Muslim group, founded in 2003, has a dozen volunteers -- none of them imams.

When an inmate needs an imam, efforts are made to get one, but that can be difficult because the Islamic faith leaders are not compensated for travel to a prison, Goraya said. "They have to work for a living," he added.

Chaplain Service of the Churches of Virginia, supported by various Protestant churches, individuals and foundations, started working in prisons in 1920, at no cost to the state. In 2002, the General Assembly began appropriating money from the inmate commissary fund to help.

The arrangement is an unusual one, because Virginia may be the only prison system, or among

Muslims Behind Bars Cont'd

non-inmate funds this year, lower than in past years because of the economy.

Among other things, the money is used to staff adult prisons with 13 full-time and 19 part-time chaplains, and three part-time chaplains for juvenile correctional facilities.

"We've been working with Asghar Goraya for years," said McFarland of the Muslim group, which has the only chaplaincy subcontract. McFarland's group coordinates religious programs for inmates of all other faiths, including Catholics and Jews.

McFarland said his governing board is not concerned with money going to an Islamic group because "this relieves our chaplains of a lot of responsibilities. . . . They have assumed the responsibility of serving the Muslim population in prison."

"It's really a good thing for everybody," he said.

But the problem, as Muslim Chaplain Services sees it, is that \$25,000 -- used primarily to pay for religious literature -- is not enough to support a single staff Muslim chaplain, and the Protestant group will not hire one.

In addition to the \$25,000, the Muslim group also receives about \$12,000 to \$15,000 a year via fundraisers. But virtually all expenses come out of

the pockets of volunteers. They also operate a five-person halfway house in Richmond.

Goraya said there are many situations in which even the most well-meaning staff and Christian clergy cannot help a Muslim inmate. Full-time Muslim chaplains are needed in prisons just as Christian ones are, he said.

The group asked the Department of Corrections for \$611,560 to get Muslim staff chaplains in prisons but was turned down.

On Sept. 3, the department modified its contract with the Protestant group so that it could receive the \$25,000 subcontract. The Muslim group says it has spoken with some area legislators who told them it is unlikely the General Assembly will find more money for them.

Goraya and Abdul-Malik said they now are considering asking for some of the money -- \$4.6 million in the year that ended June 30 -- made on surcharges imposed on inmate telephone calls. That money, however, always has gone directly into the state general fund.

They are also considering a lawsuit, El-Amin said. "What you have is the [Department of Corrections] treating Islam like it's a second-class religion because we're not on equal footing

fundingwise, or staffwise, or accesswise," he said.

Muslim inmates buy goods in prison commissaries, too, El-Amin said.

Hamm, the terrorism expert, said a good chaplain of any faith can make a large difference in a prison. "It seems a shame that any state doesn't have a paid cadre of prison chaplains.

"I've been in some prisons where the chapel is hopping between 8 a.m. and whenever the yard closes -- one activity after another, Indians, Muslims, Christians," he said.

"And then I've been in other prisons where the chapel is a ghost yard. It just sits there. You wonder who's minding the store and what lessons there are here to learn on how to run a chaplaincy."

**Muslim Chaplain
Services of Virginia**

2317 Westwood Ave
Suite 115
Richmond, VA 23230

PHONE:
(804) 355-0813

FAX:
(804) 355-1717

We're on the Web!

See us at:

<http://www.muslim-chaplains.org/>

Contribution Form

Your contribution, no matter how small it may be, will go a long way to help someone get back on his/her feet and become a productive tax-paying citizen. Please contribute today.

Today's Date: _____ Amount Enclosed: _____

Full Name: _____

Address: _____

Address: City: _____ State: _____ Zip Code: _____

Phone: Home: _____ Mobile: _____ Work: _____

Please make check payable to: Muslim Chaplain Services of Virginia or MCSVA.

Please mail this form with your payment to:

MUSLIM CHAPLAIN SERVICES OF VIRGINIA, 2317 Westwood Ave. Suite 115,
Richmond, VA 23230