

IndComing.org > Blog > SOLID >

(External) Redefining Recovery Behind Bars : Lessons From USCF

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Last week, a few of us from Access Foundation had the opportunity to tour the Utah State Correctional Facility, where we had the honor of visiting with the SOLID program. What we witnessed was human connection in its most powerful, redemptive form.

The program, which stands for Successful Offenders Learning Individual Development, brings together incarcerated men who are committed to rebuilding their lives from the inside out. SOLID is a full-time, peer-led environment rooted in daily accountability and mutual respect.

One of the things that makes it unique is the decision to house mixed populations. This goes against the standard approach in most prisons, where people are separated by sentence length or status. In SOLID, men who just arrived live alongside others serving decades. This creates space for mentorship and dialogue that doesn't happen when people are isolated in categories. [S.A.: The most remarkable mixture is between former or even current (reformed) gang members, with sex offenders, who usually are not together, because the one wants to scapegoat the other. What everyone has in common is a commitment to reform. Also, usually, only those

who are close to release are able to participate in reform programs, whereas in SOLID, even those with life sentences are able to participate.] The program isn't about compliance, it's about transformation. There's structure but also compassion. Everyone we spoke to, officers included, shared a genuine investment in the success of the men inside.

What struck us most was how closely SOLID's principles mirror our own. We believe recovery happens in community. In Access Foundation's homes, residents support each other, make decisions together, and live in environments built around trust.

This visit reminded us that the work of recovery doesn't start when someone walks out of prison. [Duh. "Corrections."] It starts long before. It starts the moment someone decides they want more for themselves. SOLID is giving people the tools to make that decision and follow through with it. It's creating a culture that doesn't just reduce recidivism; it restores humanity. Standing face-to-face with these men, listening to their stories, we were reminded of something simple and true: People can change. Sometimes they just need the right environment to change their story.

What's happening inside that unit has weight. Not just because of what it offers the men who live there, but because it challenges assumptions ^[stigmas] we've come to accept about prison. Most of us, consciously or not, are used to thinking about incarceration as a system built around punishment and isolation. But inside the SOLID unit, we saw people learning how to lead with empathy and how to take

responsibility for themselves and for each other.

There is something powerful about a room full of men owning their mistakes and still choosing to invest in one another. There's no hiding in SOLID: the work is constant; the accountability is daily; the expectations are high; and the stakes are real. If someone slips up, they don't get written off. They get pulled back in and reminded why they're there. And they show up again.

The officers we met with aren't there just to ~~supervise~~ supervise. They care deeply about the integrity of the program. They believe in what's being built, and they're willing to do the work alongside the residents to protect that culture. That kind of partnership between staff and incarcerated individuals is rare. It's part of what makes SOLID so effective.

We left the unit with full hearts and a deeper sense of clarity about our own work. Because whether someone is living in one of our homes or housed in a state facility, the needs are the same. Everyone wants to feel safe. Everyone wants to feel seen. Everyone needs hope that change is possible.

There's no denying the weight of the choices that brought the men in SOLID to prison. They don't deny it either. But they've chosen to respond with integrity, humility, and a commitment to growth. That takes courage. That deserves support.

Programs like SOLID don't just happen. They are built by peo-

ple who are willing to take risks on each other and stay in it for the long haul. And when that happens, when people believe in something enough to keep showing up for it, real change follows.

We're proud to have spent time with the men and officers behind this effort. Their example challenges us to keep growing, to keep listening, and to keep pushing toward a future where everyone, regardless of their past, is given a fair shot at something better.

To the men of SOLID: Thank you for the work you're doing, and for reminding us what's possible.