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Sheriff Joe Arpaio

The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

America's Toughest Sheriff

Muriel Newman talks to America's toughest sheriff. Sheriff Joe Arpaio is known as "America's toughest Sheriff". He is head of the country's fourth largest Sheriff's Office in Maricopa County, Arizona. With a background in the army, the police, and federal law enforcement, Joe Arpaio was elected Sheriff in 1992.

Within four years he had earned an unprecedented 85% public approval rating. Now in his fourth term of office, his philosophy is one of service: "As Sheriff I serve the public. The public is my boss".

Sheriff Arpaio firmly believes that offenders should be held accountable for their crimes. Jail should act as a punishment as well as a deterrent to crime. While upholding the need for the humane and fair treatment of inmates, the Sheriff is opposed to coddling prisoners and sees no reason why they should not find jail uncomfortable: "No one, while they are in jail, should ever live better here than they do on the outside".

Discipline, hard work, and an absence of frills are the hallmarks of Maricopa County jails. Smoking is prohibited, girly magazines and such are forbidden, and coffee is banned.

Radios are not allowed and television is restricted to authorised programs only shown over an in-house cable system. These programmes include news, weather, arts and Disney Channels, as well as a local government access channel. Each inmate is expected to learn about the government and how it works, with special videos on the subject being shown weekly.

Inmates are subjected to random drug testing, their hair is cut short to prevent the hiding of contraband, and while food services meet general nutritional standards, the meals provided are the cheapest of any large jail in the country. Some cost as little as 14 cents per meal.

The Sheriff holds a rock solid conviction that courts, not head counts, should determine when an inmate is released from jail. He never wants a Police Officer to

hesitate in arresting someone because he thinks that there is no room for them in the jail.

When the Sheriff first took office, the overcrowding in the jail system and a lack of funding for building new jails, led him to consider housing offenders in tents. He rationalised that if American troops in Desert Storm could live in tents, then surely they should be good enough for sentenced inmates.

Maricopa County now has around 2,000 convicted inmates serving their sentences in tent cities. These are constructed using surplus military property. Each tent has proper foundations, electricity, and plumbing. Staff numbers in the tent city are minimal - approximately 250 inmates to each officer.

Being an equal opportunity incarcerator, three years after the first 1,000-bed capacity tent jail was opened, Sheriff Arpaio established a tent city for women.

The Sheriff's tent cities operate at a mere fraction of the cost of building a new jail, but more importantly, they ensure that no criminal in Maricopa County, who should be sentenced to jail, walks free because the jails are full.

Another of the Sheriff's initiatives that sparked heated debate was the re-introduction of chain gangs. In Maricopa County jails, chain gangs are not considered to be punishment, but rather a form of rehabilitation. The opportunity to take part in a chain gang is offered to sentenced inmates who have had trouble with the jail system. It provides a way for them to work their way out of long-term lockdown and back into the jail's general population.

Inmates, who volunteer for this special form of boot camp discipline, are required to police their living quarters like Marine recruits. When they go out to work, they dress in old-fashioned black and white uniforms, and are chained together for eight hours a day, six days a week, under the watchful eye of detention offices. They perform

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jobs that contribute to the community such as cleaning up rubbish, cutting firebreaks, and beautifying the roadsides.

Rather than being regarded as a source of public humiliation, chain gangs are a hit with the inmates: "It's better than being in the cell. I'd rather be busy than locked up in a small cell for 23 hours a day". Working in a chain gang (a women's chain gang also operates) teaches the inmates discipline and good work habits, with the community at large gaining the benefit of projects carried out well and inexpensively.

If the inmates stay out of trouble and successfully complete their 30-day chain gang programme, Sheriff Arpaio celebrates their success with a graduation ceremony: they receive a certificate of completion and the chance to rejoin routine jail activities such as educational programs (including the highly effective drug rehabilitation programme), group recreation, and work assignments.

The Sheriff is a man of action. When he heard that inmates were stealing prison-issue underwear, he immediately ordered that it all be dyed pink. He reasoned that pink underwear would be much less appealing, stealing it would be harder, and detecting it easier. Thefts dropped through the floor, but public interest was so great that a range of pink boxer shorts, emblazoned with the Sheriff's emblem, was produced

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Concerned about young people becoming involved in crime Sheriff Arpaio erected a tent city for kids. Situated adjacent to the real tent city, up to 220 school age children can stay overnight to find out what life in jail is really like. They receive instruction about drugs and the life of crime that results from being a user, as well as the dangers of alcohol use and cigarette smoking. Any child who misbehaves is put on a chain gang and made to do the cleaning. The kids leave the program with the message impressed upon them that crime and jail is the worst possible future for them.

The community is enthusiastic about supporting the Sheriff. His volunteer posse programme has grown to 3,200 members and is the largest in the country. These men and women help the police by patrolling the streets, fighting prostitution, rounding up deadbeat parents, and helping in search and rescue. The posse's contribution is invaluable and essentially free to taxpayers.

Under the leadership of Sheriff Joe Arpaio, the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office has not only established the proud reputation of being one of the premiere law enforcement agencies in the USA, but his accomplishments are increasingly being recognised around the world.

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Regards



Muriel Newman
(founder & director of NZCPD)