

Turning Back the Hands of Time Chain Gangs

"It sure beats being in a cell all day. I'd rather be busy than locked up."

Inmate

"Chain gangs help inmates learn to be productive and better disciplined."

*Sheriff Joe Arpaio
Maricopa County, Arizona*

Sheriff Arpaio has a different view of chain gangs than most corrections officials.

As the first Sheriff to reintroduce them, Arpaio does not consider chain gangs punishment, but rather a form of rehabilitations. They offer sentenced inmates, who have had trouble in the jail system, a way to work themselves out of long-term lockdown and back into the jail's general population.

Arpaio says the program is meant to help inmates contribute to the community and do something productive.

In the process, they seem to find real pride in the public works they perform and the charitable causes they serve. Arpaio's chain

gangs are composed of inmates who volunteer themselves a kind of boot camp discipline. He requires them to police their living quarters like marine recruits.

If they stay out of trouble and complete the program successfully, Arpaio provides a graduation ceremony, a certificate of completion and a chance to rejoin routine jail activities such as educational programs, group recreation and trusty work assignments.

Rather than being the source of public humiliation that critics claim, chain gangs are a hit with the inmates.

As one inmate put it, "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."

In Maricopa County, the chain gangs are dressed in the old-fashion black and white striped uniforms, and each wears a cap for protection against the desert sun.

Chained together, they labor eight hours a day, six days a week, under the watchful eyes of detention officers.

Most often they work in the desert heat on such jobs as cutting fire breaks

and removing trash. They also bury indigents in the county cemetery. The Office always has more requests for the chain gang than it can fill.

This Sheriff's chain gang is a win-win program. Even a reporter who posed as a chain gang inmate said the work is bearable, not in-humane. Inmates, he said, learn discipline and the community at large gets beautification projects done well and inexpensively.