

**Texas After Violence Project
Interview with Amite Dominick**

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INTERVIEWER: Murphy Anne Carter

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ABSTRACT: At the time of this interview, Amite Dominick was the Vice-President of the Texas Prisons Air-Conditioning Advocates, and a former board member of Texas Cure. In July of 2021, Dominick became the president of TPAA, and the organization changed its name to the Texas Prisons Community Advocates. She has been advocating for the installation of air-conditioning in all Texas prisons since 2015. Detailing her experiences at the Texas legislature, Dominick dives into the realities of criminal justice advocacy and how conditions of confinement intersect with every other aspect of carceral life. Dominick's work is one of ongoing effort, and she explains the exhaustion, the frustration, and the sacrifice of trying to change the laws creating fatal circumstances for so many, who physically cannot demand more from their state representatives. This interview was conducted by Murphy Anne Carter as part of the Sheltering Justice interview collection by Texas After Violence Project. Carter and Dominick spoke on June 1st, 2021 via Zoom.

AMITE DOMINICK: [00:00:05] Hi, my name is Amite Dominick and I am currently the Vice President of Texas Prisons Air-Conditioning Advocates (TPAA). And the way I got here actually was that my former husband was incarcerated in 2015 and that's when I found out that there's no air conditioning in the Texas prisons, which just blew my mind, you know.

[00:00:35] I'm not a Texas native. I'm not used to this humid heat and when I learned about that to me it was just excruciating and it was tormenting for people. And so I started fighting this battle back then. I'd approach some organizations, I started a petition, I started a letter-writing campaign back in 2015.

And then I actually spent some time working with Texas Cure as part of their [00:01:05] Board and life happened and so I kind of stepped out for a little while and then one day I get this message from Casey Phillips, who had just started a Facebook page, surrounding the heat issue in the Texas prisons. And at that time, there were a group of those women together who were discussing what to do. And basically, you know, after three years later it's, it's just predominantly been Casey and I and we've managed to get more

[00:01:35] Volunteers more awesome volunteers to help us in the cause and that's pretty much how I got started with this, that's the jist of it.

MURPHY ANNE CARTER: Thank you so much and I'm curious, could you describe the evolution of TPAA from when you started to now? And I know you're describing your role with Casey has been so fundamental to that, but how your advocacy efforts have changed and

[00:02:05] What, what's been on the docket for y'all as of late?

DOMINICK: Oh gosh, that evolution has been pretty fast paced. We are just three years old. So as I believe the 28th of May we became three years old. The evolution started with a lot of learning, just finding out how do we resolve this issue, right? And through looking at those steps then the organization has evolved. So for [00:02:35] example we found out very quickly that there's two major routes to get this problem solved.

There is either going to be a legal route or it's going to be a political route and working out some of those details we started to go, okay, well, then we need volunteers who are going to be what I call political team leaders, right. Who are going to develop more relationships with—or more *concrete* relationships is a better way of saying it—with their political officials. So that had to evolve.

We [00:03:05] realized that—of course, medical is something else that's very dear to Casey's heart—so what we realized we're taking on the heat that you could not do the heat and not do medical, right? Because they were so closely tied into one another. So that became something on the agenda. Of course, we wanted to help the family members, we wanted to educate the family members so then we developed our family mediator team which is we've got six people that are assigned to different regions that [00:03:35] are there to answer the questions of the family members and kind of teach them how to advocate.

So that was another wing of the whole organization, just educating family members, educating those who are inside, who are incarcerated and letting them know— Like, for example, we looked into and on the medical level, we looked into some policies and we had some meetings with UTMB and found out that the policies are there, people just don't know the policies there and then the policy isn't getting followed [00:04:05] through. And, you know, we all know that one of the big reasons for that is independent oversight. So we're not

Getting independent oversight. So how do we make *people* be the independent oversight, essentially? So that was another driving force into “we've got to educate.” So then we started doing webinars to educate people as Casey really went through a lot more with her husband on the inside than what I went through. And, but as she went through those steps, it was like, here's another level to tell people, here's another level to tell people. [00:04:35] And then I brought to the table, the stuff that I already knew from working with Texas Cure, and

The experience, we said, basically, we've got to train people. We've got to teach people that this is how you survive this process. So that became another big issue. Then we started working with other organizations and one of the other things that seemed to cross over in regards to the heat a lot is the water and we've done a lot less with that, because the heat is such a massive issue, right? [00:05:05]

So, all the work that goes into what it takes to get a bill to pass pretty much so dominated, right? So we don't have a lot of volunteers [Video cuts]

Just the back end is building this up as an organization as opposed to just a Facebook page or just a socialized platform. And we often say this and people kind of get us confused, we're not a support group. TPAA is not a support group, TPAA is an empowering group. We are educating and empowering people, you know, to be Advocates [00:06:05] themselves to get them the information that they need to help their loved ones on the inside to get.

Get the information to the folks inside so they can help themselves. So those are the big overriding principles. If the bill would have passed already, I think we'd be shifting gears, right? So we would be down shifting into really bringing the medical issues to the forefront and the heat issue to the back burner, right? But because of this issue with the special session and because [00:06:35] the bill didn't pass, we're finding ourselves in a situation where it's like, okay, so now we have to build up again.

And what I tell, you know, some of our volunteers who have been with us awhile, is that each year we want to build. Each year we want to get better. We want to re-structure, we want to tighten things up. You know, we started off with about seven, women or so and they fell off very, very quickly, right? And that was the foundation of the organization. And so, we've [00:07:05] now spent a lot of time building that foundation behind the scenes, building relationships with other organizations, whatever it takes to get the situation resolved with this heat. And that's pretty much what's leading us in terms of strategy. You know, every time we learn something new or for example, the first session we went in, we hadn't even been around that long. We had no idea what we're doing with the legislative session, but we went in there, we were [00:07:35] the first organization in the history as far as we know who had a bill surrounding this

topic.

And we got a lot of backlash from the politicians, particularly on the money. Like they actually asked those how do we think that this is going to get paid for? And I don't know why they do that because they're the legislators, not us. So then that birthed the cost savings report. You know, where we went through and we said hey not only are you *losing* money by torturing people, [00:08:05] you could be gaining money, you know, if you put the AC in and do what's right,

And so, we gave them that whole cost savings report and then a lot of people are still unaware. They don't believe us. So then we worked with Dr. Purdum [of Texas A&M College Station] and she analyzed our surveys from the folks in the inside and we brought that to the politicians. Then the other response from people was people in Texas, just don't know. So what do we do with that? How do we educate? I mean there's some people that are just, [00:08:35] "they're in prison, sucks to be them, deal with it," you know.

And then there's people that are like, "well, wait, *huh?*" You know, so that birthed out the mock cell events, where we bring a heated mock cell around the state of Texas and we have people come in and actually experience—*this is what, you know, life is like for them. This is what a cell looks like. This is what it feels like to not only be in the heat but not have the ventilation* [00:09:05] *you need, while you're in that heated situation.*

So we have that and then we have a poster exhibit that goes with that that's just designed to say, "These are some of the facts about the situation that you may not know about." So and then also, we have formerly incarcerated individuals who attend those events and family members, who attend those events and they speak to the other individuals who aren't aware of this situation, you know, or if we can get a politician [00:09:35] out there, you know, they're their intention is to let them know.

"Hey, this is what's really going on." So to just, you know, put it in people's faces and give them the experience. So that's how that got birthed out. So with every challenge we meet it and we go okay, what do we do to make this happen? You know, how do we increase the awareness? How do we increase the education of family members? How do we increase the education of legislators [00:10:05] in order to get some type of—I mean, because our thing is the end goal.

I mean, we hear a lot of things and Casey and I talked about this the other day, you know, a lot of people say, "you should be happy about the progress you made." And yeah, we gave a nod to that. But for us, you know, and I guess I should speak mostly for me right now. But it's the end game, you know, it is the end of this, it is actually getting them AC and some humane conditions in the prisons.

And also I want to say this—so[00:10:35] just the issue of the heat is not *just* the issue of the heat, the way we look at it. For example, in my mind I think about—and I've mentioned this a couple of times—when you shine a light on something, all the roaches scatter, right? So you can see them because you shine the light. And I think that this is an issue that would shine the light on a lot of other issues that are happening within the Texas prisons.

I think if we actually get HVAC folks [00:11:05] inside these Texas prisons and they see what's really going on, they're going to be like, "Oh whoa. What else is going on? Where are my tax dollars going? Why are we doing this?" and get other professionals involved. Like one of the reasons why I want to do this interview is because I want awareness to happen. And I think once they could really tackle that, if they could admit to that, if they can deal with that, then I think that a lot of these other issues are going to [00:11:35] be brought to the forefront because it's going to be "oh, whoa. They told us the truth. This is only what's going on in these prisons and we're only listening to the agency, you know, instead of the secret shoppers." I want them to realize that, I want them to get that and start going in.

And one of the things that I think was hopeful that I did hear that happened this session is Chairman Murr actually mentioned spending some time in a prison and I'm like, "yes!" You know, how is it these legislators don't do that? [00:12:05] They don't spend time in a prison. They don't want to get into our mock cell and experience that

So even though we're growing, and we're trying to meet each one of their concerns, it seems like there's another one that raises up, you know, after that, I guess that was kind of a roundabout way to answer that question.

CARTER: That was a wonderful way to answer that question. I feel like I got a very panoramic understanding of so much [00:12:35] of how you, yourself, and your role and TPAA has evolved and met each challenge as you say and build year by year, or you know, month by month. I do have some questions that I want to make sure that I ask and if you see me looking down it's because I'm taking notes.

So there are so many wonderful gems that you just shared and I can't wait to tease more of them out. But one thing that I do want to make sure that I asked [00:13:05] about just for my own understanding, which is you were alluding to how you're working with professionals at UTMB and talking about how like the policies there, the policy to have AC is there. And so I was wondering if you could explain that or provide more details for that, what you mean when you say that or what the policy that's there is.

DOMINICK: Okay, so we'll use the HIPPA forms, for example. The HIPAA forms used to be only good for six months. Well, through our [00:13:35] conversations with UTMB, the policy was already in place, but the policy had a lot of loopholes, a lot of problems with it, so through those conversations, we were able to get the date extended for two years. We were actually going for indefinitely, but two years is what we basically got with that and I'm trying to think

Of a specific example of a medical policy—Let's give an example of each unit has a [00:14:07] what's I can't remember exactly what you call them— but basically there is a medical person that's responsible for that unit that is supposed to communicate with family members about issues, about medical problems. Or a better example, maybe—Oh here's a great example.

A better example would be what happens when your loved one goes to the hospital. Okay. Can you get information? Can you talk to them when they're in the hospital? Well, UTMB says [00:14:37] that the

hospitals are supposed to be able to share that information with the family members. Sometimes the hospitals will say, no, they can't because TDCJ said that they can't. Well, TDCJ says that "we never said that. They can share that information."

So here you've got policy and it's not being practiced properly. And so we're trying to go back to UTMB and go back to TDCJ and say hey look, the [00:15:07] hospitals are saying one thing. You guys are saying another thing, let's get this cleared up and then once you do that then we can then take that policy and we can tell the family members that not only is the policy on the book but so-and-so from UTMB and so-and-so from TDCJ has sent out a memo to this effect so that when the hospital's don't understand, or there's a breakdown in communication somewhere that that can be enforced. [00:15:37] And so that's a, that's an example with the hospital.

But we see the same thing with the prison. So for example, when we change the HIPPA form, a lot of people were coming back to us. And they were saying at the unit level, there was no such thing. There was no such policy. You know, there was no new HIPAA form, that's what they were. And so we were able to go back to our contact and say "this unit says this. This unit said that" so that they can go back and fix the problem, you know, and make sure that that unit [00:16:07] understands, "No, this is policy." Because there are so many policies and realistically, nobody can remember them all honestly, but what we're trying to do is tell the family members and then have them enforce it with the units. So, you know, creating some checks and balances there.

CARTER: Thank you. I appreciate that clarification because—and I think that that's also a wonderful way to kind of look again at all of the policies and understand, you know, like you mentioned [00:16:37] independent oversight of how it does and doesn't work, right? So and this is something that you've touched on now with both your answer and even describing so much of TPAA's evolution and I have been, you know, so many folks have been thinking about health care and health care or lack thereof in carceral spaces and prisons and jails and detention centers over the past year because of the pandemic, [00:17:07] and I know that while you were talking, you were alluding to the relationship between heat and medical, right? Like it's not just about the heat.

And so I was wondering if you would kind of give or describe more about the relationship between heat and medical, but also, any details or any description you can offer for how that's evolved during the pandemic and how the pandemic has shifted, expanded, or [00:17:37] even revealed more of that interrelated relationship over the past year as well. And I realize it's a really big question. So feel free to tackle that as a part one and part two or however it makes sense in your mind.

DOMINICK: Okay, so let's start with the relationship between heat and medical. First of all, a lot of the people inside take psychotropic medications or various medications that are heat sensitive. [00:18:07] And so what happens with those medications is they don't allow the body to sweat properly. So the incarcerated individual has a choice: either I don't take these medications and I suffer from the condition that I have or I take these medications and maybe what happens is my body isn't

allowed to sweat so I go into heat stroke more easily. Which means now I'm more vulnerable to things like cardiac arrest and a heart attack or stroke and I die. [00:18:37]

Okay, so that's one of the biggest levels where the heat impacts the individuals. I mean it makes their bodies just more susceptible to any illness in general. So that's just the general kind of thing. You're weakening your body through that heat so it makes you and there are studies that prove that out, that show that.

And then you've got the medication issue and then you've just got the mental issue. So there's this crossover between the mental and the medical in terms of the physical. So [00:19:07] for example, you have people who have veterans who are going in there that already have PTSD and then you put them in a small cell with this heat, and it aggravates that anxiety, it aggravates that PTSD. Okay, now we've got the blood pressure rising and this person might already have high blood pressure. Now, we're shifting and once again,

To heat stroke then cardiac arrest again and then death. So that's another example of it. Those are strong examples but I'll give you another example [00:19:37] for my ex-husband that I've told all the politicians over and over again, he has allergies, severe allergies, right? And what the heat, what would happen in the summer and the spring is that allergies would fire up and I would wait till later on in the day to go visit him so that he gets AC for a little while.

So he comes out into the visitation room. His face is swollen. I can barely see his eyes, right? Because his allergies are so bad. He can't breathe [00:20:07] and then he's dealing with this heat and I literally would watch his face transform in front of me. You know, at some point I'd be like, oh, I can see your eyes, you know, they're not so swollen anymore. I've heard stories like that from officers as well, whether allergies are impacted because all the dust and vermin and everything that comes into the prisons along with that heat and that humidity, just aggravates those pre-existing conditions and makes it even worse. [00:20:37]

So that's another example. So when I talked to the legislators I mentioned that putting air conditioning those prisons could be seen as preventive medicine. Another thing that's kind of interesting, if you put AC in the prisons then that means you have to close off areas to a certain extent and one of the things that the prison's all are notorious for is bugs.

Bugs and Vermin to getting in there. You know, we hear the stories about people's toes that have been getting bit off by rats and the mosquitoes that carry all types [00:21:07] of diseases and what have you they're coming in. And if we have that, that more enclosed environment with the air-conditioning, then you're not going to have—it'll cut down on that problem as well. And we know that what happens with some of these animals and vermin and stuff, they transmit these diseases from one person to another, which may be part of the reason why, you know, Hep C is so high in the prison. So that's, you know, that's another contributing factor, [00:21:37] I think, to that. So those are some of the ways that I hope that address the first part of your question, but refresh my memory on the second part of your question.

CARTER:

Absolutely. And that was a wonderful way to—I really

appreciate your specificity and those concrete examples because I think that I'm, and I'm sure you can talk more about strategy for talking with politicians, but sometimes the more specific and example based you can get, you can really illustrate [00:22:07] the meaning and the importance behind so much of what you're describing. So I can tell you're very practiced at sharing those examples and I'm grateful for them.

The second piece that I wanted to ask you about and it may be more of a wider-zoom perspective of it, but because of the past year of the pandemic and the way that so many folks have been isolated, the lack of healthcare and being able to treat folks who have coronavirus and prisons. I was just [00:22:37] curious how that has informed or reinforced your perspective of this relationship between the conditions of confinement and medical or Healthcare systems or lack thereof in jails and prisons since so many people are ill.

DOMINICK: One of the big things I think that came out with the pandemic was a lot of people inside were getting [00:23:07] refused medical treatment for their pre-existing or new medical issues because of covid. So basically, it was if you didn't have covid, we'll push you on down the road a little bit. We're not going to see you right now. Well, there were people were very real medical issues that needed their stuff taken care of and they didn't get it taken care of. And there were people who were at high risk medical situations that were [00:23:37] being exposed to covid, that shouldn't have been exposed to covid because of the way the prison structure is set up.

I guess the best example would be Casey and her husband. There were, you know, at some point he did get covid. He already was in a critical situation, he should have never been exposed to that. But yet he had people in cells across from him that had covid that exposed him [00:24:07] to it, you know? And then in the middle of the heat, now you have like what happens when it gets to a certain level of heat that TDCJ has their heat directed protocol that goes into effect. Well, one of the perks of that are things like being able to take a shower whenever you want and—which we know never really truly happens—and going to respite areas. Well, because of covid, now you're in the heat and you can't go to respite, right, because of [00:24:37] the covid issue. Now you're in the middle of the pandemic and you already have respiratory problems, right. Now, you're in the heat so your respiratory problems are aggravated and you're wearing a mask all the time. And if you don't wear a mask, then you're catching a case which is going to cause a problem with your parole down the road a little bit.

We saw a lot of—I think it did flush out the lack of communication that goes on on a unit level [00:25:07] between TDCJ, admin, and what's happening on the units. Because during those family meetings, it seemed to me like the administration was kind of like, *oh well this shouldn't be happening, well what we have this in place we have and it's still wasn't happening.*

And we had the opportunity to to tell them about this, and to say *Really, a lot of the stuff has been happening for a very, very long time. But now we have the opportunity to tell you because it's highlighted through covid.* [00:25:37] Another big thing, important thing for us for covid is that iWave purification system and that is a system that.—And if you go to the capital they're in just about every office that you see, some kind of purification system because of covid, right? But TDCJ has started to use it in some of

their units.

Well, in order for it to be utilized, it has to be tied into the air-conditioning ducts, right, the air-conditioning system. And so now we've got a new level [00:26:07] of preventive medicine that is coupled with the heat. So that's one of the biggest things that to me actually came out of the whole covid situation.

And then, you know, the other thing to me, truly, that was just so sad about the situation is just the lack of care from our legislatures that they just didn't—particularly our governor, you know, who didn't, like in so many other states, release people that should have and could have been [00:26:37] released. We had people that were approved for parole, just waiting for a class! And they *died* because TDCJ as an entity and our legislators decided that we're just going to keep you there in the middle of the pandemic. And if you die, will it just kind of happened, you know? So that was a, I mean that was just huge, that [00:27:07] came out there, Texas had the largest—for both officers and incarcerated individuals—we have the largest amount of deaths.

And I mean to say that we have more than the federal system, it's just *wow!* that just shouldn't be happening. So it was that, it's that same indifference, it's that same, I want to say almost self-righteousness that I think dramatically—[00:27:37] and it was like, surely, you know, that was disappointing. It was like, *surely, they'll see now, surely they'll get it now with covid and people actually literally dying because of this*. And that was a huge thing that came out of that but I do think that it may have been a wake-up call for some of the medical folks over at TDCJ. So I do think there might be some more that they look into at this point. At least, I'm hopeful for that.

CARTER: [00:28:09] And this is something that I know we talked about and alluding to this indifference or, you know, we have a “give a damn problem” and to reference something else that you shared. Can you kind of, you know, start from the beginning of this legislative session or walk through the story of this bill.

Even before this legislative session of trying—the bill that TPAA [00:28:39] has been trying to get passed in order, like what it says and kind of how its journeyed and you know, then met with so many challenges and what all has happened.

DOMINICK: So the journey started with not this session—the prior session, having the previous bill, and this session, we responded to the concerns from last session. The first concern will be that the politicians always want you to compromise. First of all—

[00:29:09] And Casey and I weren't happy about that at all. But one of their feedback issues was maybe we need to break this down into smaller parts, so that we can deal with this huge fiscal tag because last session TDCJ came back with a 1.2 billion dollar fiscal tag, right? They base that—it's just completely ludicrous, how they came to that conclusion, but they based it off of beds of all things.

So my simple explanation for this is that, okay. Let's say you've got two homes. Both of them are a thousand square feet, right? They both are identical. So they both got four bedrooms in them, right? But one house has bunk beds in all the rooms and the other house only has single beds in there. And basically what TDCJ said is this is going to cost this much based [00:30:09] on the amount of beds that we need to have pulled. So that's like taking these two houses and the one with the bunk beds is going to raise your mean, right? It's going to raise your average, right? So that's essentially what they did.

So our response was to go back, get information requests and to kind of tease that out as much as we could because they don't like to provide us with a lot of information and say, hey, look, we're crunching these numbers and that's not what our numbers are coming out with, you know, even though we couldn't [00:30:39] get into the facilities and get an HVAC person in there and that kind of stuff. It still is like *no, you're doing what you've done before and what you've done before is you've made these very large estimates and then we find out later that they're not true*. I mean, they estimated 20 million for the Pack Unit and when it came down to it was about 3.-something million to get that done. So they have a history of [00:31:09] overestimating these things, right? So we work with Representative Canales office again and Senator Menendez's office again and we put our heads together and we said, *okay well let's break this down into three separate sessions*. Let's ask for a hundred million per session and break this down over the next three sessions. Now, would that amount be enough to put AC and all 70 units? No, uh-huh. No.

[00:31:39] And we realize that. And so what we did is we coupled this with the concept of—what we've got seven units that are over a hundred years old, let's take them offline because they're Bottomless Pits, they're going to continue to need maintenance. You have to bring everything into this century's level in terms of media and just everything—phones, all that kind of stuff—would have to be that so let's take them off the table and let's show you how much money you can save [00:32:09] if we take them off the table.

Well, now let's look at better conditions for your officers, because here's another one of your huge problems. Officer turn over—you're down over 5,000 officers. So maybe if we gave them a better work environment and maybe got closer to OSHA standards, or CDC standards, and by the way, OSHA has no jurisdiction in the Texas prisons, which I think is just mind-blowing. So this we're solving this [00:32:39] problem for you too. Put AC in the units, get rid of some of these, you'd better have enough officers and you're going to have a healthier environment.

Okay, well, what else are some of your issues? TDCJ comes back with stuff about medical every year they asked for more in the budget for that. Let's help you with that. If you take these offline then we're going to decrease those expenses. We're going to use this as preventive medicine. We're going to decrease that as well. So that was another question they had.

And then just some [00:33:09] in general stuff like just aggression and suicides and stuff. We kind of threw that into the mix and said, okay, basically our approach this session was: let me answer every single one of your questions that you gave me last year. And so also we looked at the terms of parole, you know, if we were to parole out a lot, especially with nonviolent offenders and those who are already parole approved, well guess what? We then save a whole lot [00:33:39] of money and maybe we can take

another prison offline since we have the most amount of Prisons within the United States, right? Our numbers at some points get really scarily close to the federal system. That shouldn't be happening. The whole nation is pushing towards de-incarceration. Let's lead the nation in that and then we don't have to put, we don't have to do the full 70 units anymore.

Because now, we've acted wisely and prudently and we've got rid of some of these other situations. [00:34:10] We just tried to show that panoramic point of view how all this works. So our approach this session, once we got that done, to drafting, we worked on what I'm telling you is some of the things that are in the reports—Our approach this session was—we had the political team so I was trying to develop and encouraging more people in terms of awareness so they would help me fight.

Because last session was like The Little Red Hen. I had one or two people [00:34:40] who were going down to the Capitol with me and what a lot of the politicians had to say is there like there's just not enough we don't hear from our constituents, you know. Okay, so let's address that. Let's work within our community and start educating saying, hey, look, folks we need, we need you to be involved, we need those numbers to be demonstrated so we can get that passed. So that was another big part of the approach. This year, we started with the Senate as opposed to the house.

So far as my Lobby [00:35:10] went or hardcore Lobby because it just the Senate was just more stubborn. But you know, we work closely with their staffers. So there were meetings that don't get seen on the page you know, along with the political team there was another you know we had like four heat meals so those staffers or other staffers that were even remotely interested, I was having separate meetings with them and asking them *How would how do we come together, how do we [00:35:40] pull our resources?* That type of situation.

I would have liked to have had a lot more done, you know, a lot more relationships formed this session but, you know, we can only do so much, right? So, we'll take that up another level. But the other major approach was reaching out to other organizations, reaching out to former officers current officers and getting them on board and saying, hey,

Look, this is what's going [00:36:10] on. We want you to get involved, we want you to help us to fight for that because it touches. Like, if you're, if you're an advocacy anywhere, it touches you, right? So we reached out to our allies, other advocacy groups, things like groups, like FAM, Latino Justice. Just, you guys, you know, just so that was another part of the strategy. And then, of course, the big emphasis on the mock cell events to just bring awareness,

[00:36:40] That was another big part of the strategy. We did a lot of Twitter storms. They did a lot of Twitter storms. We did a lot of phones zaps this year, just really encouraging people to get involved. And pressuring these legislators. My main goal this year was I don't want to ever come back to the capital and people tell me, *oh I didn't know there was any ACs in prisons!*, you know, so that was my main goal.

[00:37:10] *You are now all accountable, you know, you now all know what's really going on.* So the question is what do you do with it, now that you know? And then there was a last-minute push by representative Canales. I don't know what the heck he did but he did it! And he made that bill bipartisan and got it through the house with flying colors. You know. So that was that was really important and I

Like I said, I can't emphasize [00:37:40] working with the staffers enough that, you know, there are some staffers that come in and just give you that kind “ehh” thing and then there's others. Like Representative Canales and his chief of staff, who really worked with us and who I could take my questions to. And, and strategize with. And yeah. So that was this legislation. That was the gist of it and I was happy to see so many more people get involved. I think, once we made it past the house,

I think the good [00:38:10] people hoped and so they really got involved, but like you said earlier we were talking and the reality is, you have to start that process way earlier than that. And so my only sadness is I wish that more people would have got involved in hitting it really hard earlier on when we were going *hey we need you. Hey we need you. Hey we need you*, you know.

[00:38:40] So yeah, we have a couple plans in place, we had an, A, B, and C, and that's one of the reasons why it took me so long before I called the bill dead because I've—Senator Menendez was trying to tack on the bill language on as an amendment to another bill and that just didn't happen, you know. So we had a couple of plans that we said, okay, if this doesn't work, let's try this and that, and it was just this session was just so crazy. It was hard to even implement the Back-up plan. [00:39:10]

CARTER: Yeah, thank you for walking me through. One thing that I'm thinking about so much about while you're talking while you're sharing all this, because it is, you know, all this happened and there's so much action and there's so much movement and every step of the process that you're describing. And then to remember that behind every action, there's so much effort and time [00:39:40] and all of this *invisible* and oftentimes internal movement that's going on and even to reflect back, some of the words, I know at different points in this conversation you kind of talked about like there has been indifference. There has been that feeling of almost self-righteousness. There is this almost like up to the whims of politics constancy that you've had to deal with. And I would love to learn more [00:40:10] about kind of that invisible side of the

Work that you yourself. and you know, with other people at TPAA, how you've navigated you know, because behind every single step that you're describing, you know, every conversation with the staffer, every plan, A and B, and C, that you've worked on, I know that there's even so much more that we couldn't even in like, you know, hours and hours of conversation fully dive into.

But I would love to hear, you know, what it's been like [00:40:40] for you personally to navigate through all of this action and this work, that's so important. And yeah, that's that's my, that's my big open ended question. So please, feel free to answer it however feels best for you right now.

DOMINICK: I'm glad you asked that question because that's been really

challenging. Especially when you're dealing with the family members, they kind of see us as well, you're an organization you're supposed to do, right? And they don't realize that we're not a typical organization, [00:41:10] you know, we're not... and not only that,

Again we're only three years old. So, for the past three years I haven't got paid for this, Casey hasn't got paid for this, you know, for the past three years, it's meant sacrificing a lot of my life honestly because—

And I try to set some healthy boundaries. I try to, you know, I was like, what's this morning—I was thankful that at least I wasn't getting up at six [00:41:40] o'clock in the morning, to take a shower, to get dressed to then drive to work. Right? At least I didn't have to do that, but once I get started, it's back to back to back and then it's into the evening and then it's maybe into the weekends.

It's getting to the point where I would love to turn my phone off for a day because I can't think of a day that I haven't done something TPAA-related. [00:42:10] I can pull back a little bit, you know, like right now I tried to pull back over the weekend so and you know what happens with that, right? So then you've got the list that of all the stuff you didn't do, so I managed to do that a little bit, but it still has been—I live really close to the beach, you know, I can't go to the beach because I'm usually tethered to my computer or tethered to my phone. When it comes to doing these events, [00:42:41] we have a van and a storage shed. I'm the one who loads up that van, you know, and there's like ten panels, ten heavy wood panels plus all the other equipment that goes with that. So unless I mean, I've gotten help from people like Michael Cevallos like once or twice, which was great, which was awesome because he was out of my way.

But I'm the one who has to do that so it can be really stressful. The committee's that I mentioned, you know, that were trying to go up and running, those folks like in a typical job, you have an interview [00:43:11] right, then you have to onboard the people then you start your meetings and then hopefully you have a secretary that takes notes and does that now? No, that's all me. And then you know and then it's juggling that and then going to Austin because I don't live in Austin, I live at least three hours away from Austin.

So now I've got to have Zoom meetings and phone calls and emails with staffers or political officials, so that I can get that job done, but [00:43:41] I still have to go to the Capitol and represent all the people who aren't going, you know. So, there's that component of it's not just fighting the battle of the heat, it's building an organization and building all the components of that.

So we've got a family mediator team, somebody has to supervise and manage that we need to start, you know, doing things like grants, somebody has to do that and that's a process in and of itself, right? There's the media team, [00:44:11] somebody has to manage that there's, you know, there's a, what's the other team we have—with the parents club that I'd like to spend more time with that one would be our support group, the parents love. There's, there's doing that and then there's all these ideas that people throw at you that—

That creates this pressure. Right? So you're throwing this idea at me and then, I'm going, logistically,

how do I get this done? You know, with very limited Manpower and almost nothing in terms of funds. [00:44:41] How do we, how do we manage to get that? How do I get this donated? And I'm the person who's doing all that. We need to write op-eds. We need to up our media influence, we need to write tweets, guess who? We need to meet with our research committee, guess who?

Ooh, you know, meeting with the other political staffers and set a separate meeting. Guess who, once again, meeting with other organizations and trying to build those relationships and being part of those coalition's and learning that. Guess [00:45:11] Who? And then, if I don't know how to tweet. And I don't know how to use Instagram and I don't know how to use Slack, guess what? I get to learn, you know, so it's learning all those things as well and then learning the political process and then also

We haven't talked about the legal side of it either, but you know, there's been some learning with that learning TDCJ's policies, that's part of it. So like I said, it's really been—[00:45:41] It's just been a sacrifice. I don't know how else to put it. And it's, it's hard sometimes to not look at people and get upset with them because they're not fighting the way you're fighting. And I try and balance that out.

I've been blessed to be able to do it. Like I keep my finances—I'm very prudent and frugal with my money. So I keep my bills down to a minimum and don't go out and don't have a social [00:46:11] life. And I can't tell you the last time I went to the movies or anything, just so that I can do this.

You know, that's the part that people don't see and it's the part that I don't usually have a lot of time to tell people about either. They just kind of typically want to know what they want to know at that moment and that's fine. I get that, you [00:46:41] know, I have to balance that out. So I had my days, I have my days where it just gets really upsetting and I just want to shake people and say,

“Look if y'all would do half of what I'm doing, we might be able to get something done” and then on the other times I have to realize people have real lives. You know, they have real situations that come up and I just, at this point in my life right now, I'm just blessed to not have some of those situations [00:47:12] that would, you know, not allow me to do the work. But there's a lot that goes on behind the scenes, there's a lot that people take for granted and, and it's really interesting when we do get volunteers who stay, or the first time we get a volunteer who goes to a Beat the Heat event, they all go, *Oh my God, I had no idea*, you know, or when I do, start bringing [00:47:42] them into our Drive, our Google drive, right? And I start plugging people into parts of the Google Drive and I go, okay, this is the part you're plugged in, now look at my screen, this is the rest of it, see all those folders, that's the rest of it, you know.

And so they kind of go through that process and then when they themselves like our political team leaders, I've asked them to create a team, a small team to work with them and [00:48:12] they can't. It's really hard for them to do that, right? And they get frustrated and they go, oh my gosh, I can't believe this. I can't believe people aren't helping, I can't believe I can't get more people involved and I'm like, yeah yeah, that's the challenge, you know?

Yeah, I think that that's—like I could start, I could tell you for, you know, spend hours telling you

about all the stuff that happens in the backdrop, you know, but I [00:48:42] think that's the gist of it.

CARTER: And I really appreciate the mindfulness with which you answer that question. And, you know, recognizing when you say they're things that we just take for granted and knowing that, that's something, you know, that you are dealing with when you're talking with politicians about, like, or folks, who didn't realize that there was an air conditioning in these spaces. And I'm, you know, and I'm [00:49:12] sitting here talking to you in an air conditioned room you know, and I think, I just, I'm thinking a lot about the mindfulness peace and the recognition that the, you know, behind this one, you know, Google drive or behind this one bill that I'm trying to show you, there's so much that you can't see.

And how much of that is part of the work that maybe we don't get to discuss. So I really [00:49:42] appreciate your response and your thoughtfulness of your responses as well. Also I think that there's this other piece that I'm realizing as we're talking too, how much of this is about a real human experience of these are people who are, who maybe physically can't sweat. Or it's just so hot and they're sweating and they're sick. That's a corporal. [00:50:12]

Like that's a *body* experience, and yet you're still translating that into the language of a politician with a cost-benefit analysis and writing all these reports and translating it into money, as like, the language of being able to get this bill passed. And I also just want to acknowledge that as well, because that requires thoughtfulness in mindfulness and time and effort and work.

So those are just two things that I'm thinking about, and I want to kind of circle back for a question, [00:50:42] or I guess even just, I'd love to learn more about when you say, "I just want awareness to happen," that was your goal of this session where you, you know, you want to be able to say like "everyone here knows. You can't say that you don't know that there's not air conditioning." So I'm curious about how you kind of arrived at that goal and how you have sought to accomplish that and what you're seeing as a result [00:51:12] during this session to make sure that awareness is happening.

DOMINICK: I arrived at the goal, well actually, you know, when I first started this journey back in 2015 and I was shocked about it so that was the first level. And then when I started talking to other organizations because I was new in this world, right? And I was like well how come nothing is being done about it? You know how [00:51:42] come it doesn't seem like there's a lot being done and then I found out there were some things being done but it wasn't this hard push. And then just talking to people in general, friends, family, they're like, oh, I had no idea. I had no idea, you hear that over and over again and then the first time I went to the capital going to all those offices and they're like oh I don't know, we didn't know that. And I'm going what? You know, you guys are responsible for these folks that [00:52:12] are in these prisons, these prisons are their maintenance.

Everything about them is the responsibility of the state. There's a lawsuit going on about this and you're telling me you don't know. And I tell them over and over again if you do a Google search or YouTube search on Texas prisons, the heat will come up more than any other topic from a longitudinal perspective. Okay? So covid has kind of dwarfed that a little bit and then you've got, of course, the

[00:52:42] food, which another one is a big one you find out in the media.

The other thing that I quickly realized in Texas, when it comes to the Texas prisons, there is this cap on the media on what people are allowed to know about these prisons, I noticed it when Obama was President and he was talking about prison reform and he went to all these prisons but he didn't go to Texas, prison. And I was like, huh? How does that happen? You know, why wouldn't you go to a Texas prison? [00:53:12] So you must not know, do you not know? You guys don't understand?

And so, I thought that surely, if they knew the humanity of it all, surely if they knew that we are treating human beings worse than we are treating animals then they would want to change something, but it just had to be that they just didn't know, they just didn't get it, you know. Is that a dysfunctional relationship or what? Right?

So [00:53:43] that was my first perspective on that that if they knew, and then when the perspective shifted to if we get enough people who know and utilize their voices, then maybe we can get a shift, so we get enough of their constituents coming to them and I found that out through the politicians who were honest with me that they, you know, I've had some very candid conversations with people like, Senator Menendez and representative Sherman [00:54:13] who have said we're not hearing from our constituents on this issue. It's not important to us if we don't hear from them and during last session, one of the things that Senator Menendez had pointed out to me, he said you see all these people but from the teachers associations there's thousands of the filling the capitol right now but I'm just sitting with you.

You know, and I have to go back to that idea of, [00:54:43] I'm just one person. I can be the Little Red Hen and I can go to all these offices and I can at least say that this, this session I made my rounds. I made it to every office if for nothing else to drop off the two different reports, you know. That's a lot of people to visit with, that's a lot of conversations to have, that's a lot of Zoom calls. But if I'm the only one doing it, that's just not enough. [00:55:13] It just isn't. So with this awareness piece, it became, I need more allies.

You know, so it morphed into that situation of. I don't only need people to know. I need people to join me in the fight now to get this done and, you know, you mentioned earlier about just—

There was something I wanted to circle back to and it's leaving me now. Oh how we had to deal with reports and stuff you know that makes me so sad. [00:55:44] It makes me so sad that the humanity of this issue wasn't enough. It just wasn't, we were forced into a corner to talk to them about the money and make it appealing to them based on the money. But it wasn't enough for me to just say people are dying. People are feeling tortured and I just don't get it.

I mean for me, literally, I remember one of my first letters I wrote to a [00:56:14] politician. It was Garcia at the time and I remember just telling her how I cry when I get in a hot car. You know, when I get too hot, I think about them inside and I go, *oh my God, I couldn't, I couldn't live like that. I couldn't bear it.* You know, or I don't feel like I could bear it.

I have to write because I've been through some unbearable things [00:56:44] in life, where you think, you can't bear it and then you survive it. But just to put myself in that situation and to empathize with their situation at when it gets more than 80 degrees, you know, my AC is on in a heartbeat, you know, and after all the other documentaries and news articles and things that like that that are out there for them to still take this stubborn stance is just mind-blowing [00:57:14] to me.

You know, I believe in a very real God too and I do believe that there's accountability for our decisions in life and the Bible is very clear about how to treat the prisoners, right? And how to feel about them? And one of the things that upsets me so much is, you know, we say, we're in a Christian Nation, Texas is in the Bible [00:57:44] Belt.

But yet you don't treat these people as Christ would treat them.

Part of that awareness to them is saying, hey, look, I'm coming to you and I'm calling you on the carpet for this. These are the things that you're supposed to be doing as Christ-following and you're not doing it. So now you're accountable for that. So for me, there was that spiritual component for me, personally. Not a whole lot of other people are [00:58:14] in on that, but that's for me. There's that but having, you know, we had to learn how to speak their language.

But it just blows me away that this session there were so many bills that were passed about animals and I think animals need to be treated correctly. If you don't treat your animals correctly you don't need to have them. You know you shouldn't have them, you're not gonna be responsible. So but here our government officials are being irresponsible [00:58:44] and not only are they being irresponsible, they're sweeping this under the rug. So that's another component of my awareness, when I go to things like these hearings and I hear people like Bryan Collier say one thing, but I know that what these family members are experiencing is a completely other thing, you know.

And I wanted to expose that and say hey look let's stop sweeping this under the rug. We've got this big old lump in the rug and it's not [00:59:14] working. Let's stop focusing on making the agency look good and let's really explain the truth of what's going on to people, you know? And then the other point is amplifying the voices. I'm hearing the stories of the family members that bring me to tears. I'm hearing the stories of incarcerated individuals or the formerly incarcerated individuals, and I need to tell somebody that, I mean even with our mock cell.

And I know our formerly incarcerated [00:59:44] people probably don't realize this because I don't say anything, I'm really, really focused at these events, I don't socialize a lot. But I do watch and to watch them start to have PTSD symptoms, to watch some of them not be able to cross the threshold of a mock prison cell because they're flashing back to that place.

To see these mothers and these fathers crying and go *oh my God, I knew it was bad. I had no idea what my child was living in.* [01:00:14] That needs to be told and if I'm a person who will go around and

amplify that voice, then that's important to me, it's important to me that their stories are told. It's important to me, especially for the people who are incarcerated, you know, there's such a struggle with not feeling valuable anymore. They were thrown away, they're tossed away people and so, part of that awareness is for me to say, *no, you weren't tossed away. Somebody heard you. I heard you*, [01:00:44] you know, and I want to make sure other people hear you.

So that's—I'm not an emotional person. Yeah. But these are things I typically don't say. People typically don't get to hear and I wanted the legislators and I wanted the people of Texas to hear it too. [01:01:14] I want them to, because they have this mindset, you know, that Aunt B's going to come bring you lunch at some point. You know, and the prison's really, just not that bad. If they get three meals then they should be satisfied and I want to say, *no, that's not true. You're believing lies*.

And so I need to tell you the truth, you know? And that's, that's a huge part of the awareness piece for me, every time I do a mock cell event [01:01:44] and I get somebody who goes in and they go, *oh my God, I didn't know. Oh my God. Now I'm going to do something about it*, then that's, that's—

It's so valuable that your eyes are open. You can see maybe we can get somewhere at all.

CARTER: Thank you for sharing all that and I hear you, when you said these are the things [01:02:14] that not everybody gets to hear, but they all need to and they all show. I'm gonna hit pause really quickly. Is that okay?