

Advice for Supporting Families

From A Mother of A Prisoner

A mother of a prisoner approached us and gave us this advice, for professional staff wanting to support prisoners' families. We share her ideas here.

Families come into contact with prisons when they are often already traumatised and fragile. They are subsequently met with a system that is unkind and alien to them. The need for better treatment is clear and would not require much thought or effort. Be kind to us, many of us have had a long and difficult road before we arrive at your door.

Information - a leaflet or card should be given out by social work, police or the courts. As many of us will have had contact with them, there will have been opportunities to hand out information, even if it's not put to use at the time at least people will have it. There would not be much cost or time involved, but it would be of great benefit.

Communication from the prison to families - There should be cheaper phone calls and video links. The phone calls are so short there is not enough time to share very much. Family contact officers dedicated to that role (not part time when other duties allow). Families really have no idea what is going on, only what we're told by the prisoner during snatched conversations.

Don't take it for granted that families are aware that rules may differ in each prison and then again between remand and sentenced prisoners (visiting and canteen). There is a major effect on communication if they don't get money in time and therefore are unable to phone home. Why is everyone punished (lock down) if there's a fight? No phone calls! Prisoners pretend they are not in fear, but they are. Because problems are hidden from families, we have no real idea what happens inside the prison and then we have to deal with the consequences when they are released.

There needs to be more support if we're going to address the root cause of the problems that led to a prison sentence. If prisoners agree to help on the outside, families should be made aware so they can encourage them to attend and help them to get to appointments. How can we be of use if we have no idea of what has been suggested, agreed, or put in place? We're working alone in the dark, with big gaps in our understanding of what's changed for them during their time in prison.

Release – All families differ and the dynamics are always changing, more so when you add prison and its effects on family life to the mix. Not all families will be able to live together on release, that situation may have broken down long before a sentence is handed down. That doesn't mean families can't be held together with the right support. Some families will have

gone through periods of all living together after release and times when that is too difficult. Not all offenders are able to return to their own communities. Families may hope for reconciliation but not all are expecting a success story. Families aren't hope for that at times and would be happy with better health care for prisoners (inside and outside), somewhere safe for them to live on release and a reasonable quality of life. For themselves - an easier time of it!

A long term view of the prison experience for everyone affected is essential for change. An awareness that a family's needs change throughout and that prisoners and families are all different: a one size fits all approach to initiatives and support services is not going to work.

Don't underestimate the fear, anxiety, confusion and despair that families and prisoners' experience.

Acknowledge that it's a poor system. Families have little or no information about the prison system to start with. There is an assisted visits scheme that in reality helps very few and the pre-release programme in the main is shockingly inadequate.

Be realistic – We need something we can manage with the right help: not everyone can be rehabilitated, not everyone is able to access or accept help at certain times, not all families will come back from it, not in the same shape anyhow. There are exceptions, but what about the rest of us?

How can we make it less traumatic for everyone affected?

Information for Families at the Outset.

Information should be visible at police stations, courts and social work departments. Solicitors could be approached and asked if they would be willing to let families know there is help for them.

Follow up – someone checking that families are being given the correct information and also visiting court periodically to hand out leaflets or cards.

Families themselves could be involved in order to reassure other families that it is confidential and worthwhile. Families helping out in their own areas could pass on local knowledge of the system in the initial stages; where the prisoner is likely to be sent; how they will be taken there and when (mode of travel etc); will they be allowed to see them or give clothes/money before they go; when will they have contact again and how; what does the sentence mean; explanation of sentencing system (concurrent, how long they will actually serve).

Information needs to reach the agencies and services that come into contact with families affected by imprisonment. Very few, if any, in the Western Isles know what support there is for families. All of the agencies/services I spoke to, including Who Cares Scotland, Action for

Children, Food Bank, Schools, Advocacy Western Isles, Social Work and our M.S.P had no idea what was available or where to direct families. It hadn't occurred to some that there was a need.

Communication with Prisoner & Family Contact Officer.

Changes have to be made to the excessive cost of calls and the arrangements for getting money to the prisoners for these vital calls to their family and friends. S.P.S also need to understand that a lot of families don't have a prison near to them and can't physically hand money in.

Families need the information about the system being different when it comes to remand / convicted and also in each individual prison.

We have to push for video links and make sure from the outset that it's clear they are for families and not put through as agency visits. Social work departments would be a good place to start, they can and should offer it. An affordable, safe and stress free alternative to visits. M.S.P's and local councillors would need to do some work on this.

Involvement with Release Plans (support for families as well as offenders on the outside)

Consistent and good communication throughout will make release day so much easier for everyone.

If an organisation is planning to support someone on the outside then they should make contact with families pre-release if at all possible. If support workers are going to be unavailable due to sickness or holidays with no cover for a period of time, families should be told beforehand.

Two weeks can be a long time for a vulnerable person and their family.

Documents and forms should be taken care of before release – benefits, housing, social work, doctor, dentist, bank, birth certificate and I.D - all this needs to be in place in order to save it becoming a problem and an obstacle on the outside.

Families should be offered or at least given contact details for possible support for them in dealing with the changes to their lives and with the anxiety and emotional turmoil of adapting to release.