




Prisoners Aid (ACT)

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Submission
to the

Standing Committee on Justice and Community Safety
ACT Legislative Assembly
Inquiry into the Auditor-General's Report No. 2 of 2015:
*The Rehabilitation of Male Detainees at the
Alexander Maconochie Centre*

Prisoners Aid (ACT) is a charitable organisation run by volunteers that has been operating in the ACT since 1963. We have one full-time and one part-time staff member together over 30 volunteers. Our income is currently around \$165,000 a year, almost entirely in the form of grants from the Community Services Directorate and the Justice and Community Services Directorate.

Prisoners Aid (ACT) performs four principal functions:

- 1. assisting prisoners on their release.** Prisoners Aid was created in 1963 to help ACT-sentenced prisoners released from NSW jails with accommodation, employment, financial assistance, social contacts and so on – at the time when ex-prisoners are most vulnerable and most likely to re-offend. This remains a key activity of Prisoners Aid, especially once Canberra opened its own jail in 2009. This allowed us to get to know some prisoners before their release and to identify some of their needs, including such things as driving licences and birth certificates. We also meet prisoners at the time of release if they do not have family or friends to assist and we contribute to AMC's Throughcare program.
- 2. supporting prisoners while they are in jail.** Prisoners Aid provides support for prisoners during their sentence. For example,

Prisoners Aid staff or volunteers visit prisoners who have no other visitors or who need particular support. Staff members also regularly visit areas inside AMC where prisoners can approach them with issues.

3. helping the families of those in jail. While the causes of crime are complex and much debated, all research indicates the importance of prisoners maintaining family connections in reducing the likelihood of a return to crime after release. Helping families has been a major activity of Prisoners Aid since 1963.

Our support focuses on making contact with families when they arrive at AMC for visits. We have a roster of trained volunteers in the waiting area who provide information of all kinds, referrals to government and non-government agencies, assistance with phone calls and transport, and sometimes simply reassurance over a chat and a coffee. Visiting prisoners has become much easier for families since the opening of AMC though we sometimes provide transport for the most needy families (including visits to prisons outside the ACT from time to time).

4. Court assistance and referral service (CARS). In 1989 Prisoners Aid set up a service in the ACT courts building to assist all those involved in the court system, particularly those charged with offences but also victims of crime, witnesses, and the families of these people. Our office is open every weekday morning when the courts are functioning – which is most days of the year. The office is also a convenient point of contact for released prisoners.

CARS also assists people ordered by the court to undertake drug rehabilitation to travel to the institution concerned whether within or outside the ACT. There is no other service that does this. CARS provides bus tickets and on occasions ensures that clients get on the bus.

In summary, Prisoners Aid operates at the grass roots level. By and large we do not take positions on major policy matters (the main exception was our long-term advocacy for a prison in the ACT) but focus on practical assistance to those in need.

Issues of concern

Rehabilitation

Prisoners Aid welcomed the 2015 Auditor-General's Report on the rehabilitation of male detainees at the Alexander Maconochie Centre. We endorse the recommendations of the report and are pleased to note that the ACT government accepted all ten recommendations.

In particular, we commend the AMC's efforts in its Throughcare program. We note that it may be desirable to extend the period of time that Throughcare support is provided for some prisoners. Efforts should also be made to promote their rehabilitation of released prisoners not covered by the Throughcare program. Community organisations are in a position to do this when Corrective Services has no direct authority to act.

- *We encourage the government to provide sufficient resources to AMC to allow implementation of the recommendations in the Auditor-General's Report and to extend support to community organisations to assist detainees who are not on the Throughcare program.*

The Role of Families in Rehabilitation

Prisoners Aid particularly welcomed the emphasis in the Auditor-General's Report on the role of families and of contacts with

community in the successful rehabilitation of prisoners (for example, paras. 2.28, 2.44, 2.127, 3.104-5, 4.139 and 5.12). We note, however, that quite understandably support for the families of prisoners does not fall within the responsibility of the Justice and Community Safety Directorate. There is no specialist government agency that is familiar with the particular problems faced by the families of prisoners. Prisoners Aid is the only community agency dealing specifically with this area – along with SHINE which focuses on the children of prisoners.

The Strengthening Families initiative is welcome as a means of co-ordinating diverse agencies in supporting families, including families of prisoners. But this applies only to a small proportion of prisoners where difficulties are intense, not to the bulk of prisoner families.

- *We recommend the government increase its support for community agencies dealing with prisoners' families.*

Visits by Families

Given the importance of family contacts, Prisoners Aid has some concerns about the changes to visiting arrangements that commence on 1 May 2016 and their potential effect on prospects for rehabilitation. While we recognise problems with the existing system, we believe that the changes could have several adverse consequences:

- for some prisoners possible visiting time will be reduced from 8 hours to 2 hours per week
- reducing visits to one hour may well make the popular BBQ visits impractical
- fewer sessions may mean that family visits will displace visits by friends and workmates

- visitors who work will have the possibility of only one hour visits on Saturday or Sunday
- visit times will again be out of synch with the bus timetable which from past experience is very slow to change.

The Minister for Corrections, Shane Rattenbury, has claimed that ‘the current system actually prevents many detainees from accessing visits because a small cohort of visitors book well in advance’ (Letters, *Canberra Times*, 21 April 2016). What this means is that the new timetable will impose a heavy burden on those families who have already shown they are keen to keep in frequent contact with their family member in AMC. The appropriate response is surely to expand visiting opportunities rather than to ration them.

- **In order that the impact of the new timetable can be assessed, we urge that detailed statistics be collected on the numbers and composition of visitors both before and after implementation and that these statistics be made public.**

Prison industry

Prisoners Aid also welcomed the Report’s emphasis on the value of meaningful work for prisoners (paras. 2.103 and 5.98) and endorses the efforts by AMC to find appropriate prison industries. While we understand the difficulties that would be involved, Prisoners Aid suggests that Corrective Services examine a successful experiment in the UK where an organisation called The Clink Charity has established quality restaurants open to the public at four prisons. The catering and table service is performed by prisoners who obtain relevant experience and qualifications in the process.

The first restaurant was opened inside a prison near London in 2009 and within three years had demonstrated a reduction in recidivism among participating prisoners. In 2012 a second restaurant was opened in Cardiff, this time outside the prison walls. In the same year another prison began growing herbs and vegetables to supply Clink restaurants. In 2013 Clink Events was established to allow the restaurants to provide catering for external events such as receptions and cocktail parties. Two more restaurants, including one at Brixton prison in South London, were opened in 2014. Further information, including menus, can be found at <http://thelinkcharity.org/the-clink-restaurants/>

Such experiments do not automatically transplant to a different country. A coffee shop with lunchtime snacks might be more appropriate in the Canberra environment. It may also be an advantage that with the opening of the Majura Parkway route to Cooma and the snowfields AMC will be favourably located as a stopping point.

- *We suggest that Corrective Services consult on such a venture with individuals and groups with interests in catering and with charitable foundations which might provide financial support.*

Staff training

The quality and experience of staff has increased greatly since AMC was opened. However, Prisoners Aid has heard reports that detainees who have mental health problems have not always been well managed by staff. This can also extend to visitors with mental health problems.

- **We urge that staff training include adequate attention to dealing with detainees and visitors suffering from mental health problems.**

(Dr) Hugh Smith
Secretary

28 April 2016

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