

Rehabilitation – Can we do it better?

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Helen Glanville, Executive Director
Prison Fellowship SA

Honourable Members of Parliament, panel guests and visitors.

Do we seriously want to reduce crime and victimization? Do we - really?

Or, do we just want to lock up offenders? This approach ignores the problem and then we stick our heads in the sand and hope the prison system rehabilitates them all. Let's get serious about reducing crime. True rehabilitation reduces crime.

If we do want to reduce crime then we must develop a balanced approach to maintaining law and order. It is grossly imbalanced not to match law and order with a strong rehabilitative and restorative approach.

Prisoners come from among us and, even more importantly, most of them return to our midst. 'Prisoners are us'. So we all have a stake in their welfare and rehabilitation.

Prison is a dilemma. They were introduced in the western world by the Quakers over two hundred years ago. Like Universities and Hospitals they were introduced by Church leaders, Bishops and nuns based on humanitarian principles and values. Prisons were called Penitentiaries – places where people could repent and be penitent - reflecting on what they had done before man and Maker.

Today, prisons are more militarized where repentance is a word unknown to most. We need them as a punishment and deterrent, but today's prison can destroy people, accentuating and perpetuating criminal tendencies. In short – jail time can be counter-productive, especially if a first time offender learns more about crime from those more experienced and comes out with limited or no coping skills - 'bitter not better'.

Across Australia, prisons are financially wasteful; disproportionately affect indigenous Australians, drive massive wedges between levels of society and have a limited impact on crime rates and re-offending. Yet, South Australia has been relying on prisons to an increasing degree. More penalties are not the panacea.

Why is so much public emphasis given to punishment as the solution to crime? This single focus is 'unbalanced'. **Punishment is important to show the community will not tolerate certain behavior – but it will not reduce crime.**

The effective and decent thing to do is to increase options so offenders can make reparations for their crimes and be fully rehabilitated. This will reduce crime, rebuild lives and reduce the costs on our criminal justice system.

The average length of a sentence in SA is over 6 years. A lot can be done in helping someone to change in this time frame, if there's the political will for this to happen.

We need to learn from research about therapeutic prisons; we need to learn from Victoria which has the lowest rate of crime against people and Australia's lowest rate of incarceration. This is agreed upon by victim agencies and criminologists alike.

In their article, 'Assessing the social climate of Australian prisons', Dayet al (Casey, Vess and Huisy) September 2011 state 'The social climate of a prison exerts a profound influence on rehabilitative outcomes.....It's commonly accepted that prisons do not usually provide environments that are conducive to successful rehabilitation.'

Quakers were also pioneers of the concept of therapeutic institutions in 1796 with a model of co-operative rather than prescriptive treatment. This has extended into more recent models especially in the UK. This needs to be supported by staff who are sympathetic to the rehabilitative model. There has been a lot of research carried out into the methodology of therapeutic units which could be introduced into South Australia.

Wexler in 1997 said that for a therapeutic program to work in correctional settings, only motivated participants and competent staff should be selected.

Punishment on its own does not act as a deterrent nor does it change behavior – other ingredients are needed. We need to provide early intervention to address social, family and economic problems and ensure restoration of wrongs done.

Crime and criminal behaviour is a moral issue. Family dynamics such as parenting values or the lack of; bullying, childhood violence, bad behavior in sporting heroes, music idols and community leaders are examples. From where do our young people learn values? Poor parents? Their peers? Busy teachers? Church leaders? (if they have one) Politicians? Is the 'golden rule' taught in schools anymore? Do they have a moral compass?

Journalist Chris Kenny of the Advertiser said in August 2008, *'Experts blame the lack of action for a balanced approach to prisons and rehabilitation on the political cowardice of the major parties.'* For the long-term safety of the community, a bipartisan approach would be helpful.

It's time South Australia got back to its national reputation for being creative, producing unique solutions to problems and innovative for implementing change – especially against the tide.

Ironically, on the other side of the equation, quoting Michael Dawson former CEO, Victim Support Services in 2003, *'The vast majority of victims of crime don't seek revenge or clamour for harsher penalties – their overwhelming concern is the criminal stops their behavior and that no one else gets hurt.'* We have all been victims of crime at one level or another. He goes on to say, 'Most want the behavior to stop and for the system not to make matters worse.'

Earlier this year Ralph Bonig President Law Society wrote an article 'Prevention is the best way to tackle crime' – headline Jan 11. He said *'Crime prevention needs to be paramount and appropriately resourced.'*

Do we really want to reduce crime? Let's get tough about reducing crime. To do so we need to invest in prevention before and after prison.

Mentoring of prisoners pre and post release is a cost effective way forward.

South Australia prides itself on being a State with a high level of volunteerism with wonderful volunteers. Volunteers are valued for funding applications at \$22.06 per hour in local government circles, but they are not always appreciated especially in areas not fully understood like prisons.

This year Prison Fellowship had the privilege of giving a 'parole party' for a man who'd spent over half his life in institutions. At last he realized he could make a better life for himself but he needed support. He is now married, has a child and a management training position with a career path he can see. He is drug free, crime free and paying taxes. He is part of the Prison Fellowship 'family' and has hopes to make a contribution in the future when he completes his criminology studies.

All the criminologists in the world state, 'for someone to remain crime free they need to be surrounded by people who believe they can.' Prison Fellowship New Zealand has a phrase in its 'reintegration' project which states, '*A prisoner can be released, but it needs a community to bring them true freedom.*'

They need the following on release to be successfully reintegrated back into the community.

1. Accommodation of a good standard to take pride in.
2. Meaningful activity either employment or study.
3. A circle of supporting friends and/or regular contact with a personal mentor.
4. A Community of faith saying 'you can make it.'

Every experienced General Manager or prison officer will say that over the past 20 years the profile of the average prisoner has changed considerably. There is no 'honour amongst thieves' anymore. It's 'dog eat dog' situation – 'it's a jungle in there'. This is largely due to the increase and effects of long term drug use from decade to decade.

In addition, males need to grow up as most don't mature for social responsibility, till about 30 years, but of late it is more like 35.

There is only one solution for change from criminal behavior and that applies to all of us. We need to be;

1. Shown how to live – parents, family and teachers are the main influencers
2. Make right and wise choices in life.
3. A change of heart.

In our world of higher and higher education we have devalued the significance and power of a positive change of heart.

Changing a person's heart for good – is like seeing the Titanic make the important soul saving U-turn it so desperately needs to take.

The power of **friendship mentoring** especially for men who've had a poor father role model is a significant influence in someone who is beginning to want to change their ways. The community expects change and as a society we have an enormous challenge to change the predisposition of violence and anti-social behavior many children carry forward into adulthood. Early intervention prevents potential adult offenders from developing later in life.

Prison Fellowship does a crime prevention program through 'Camps for Kids' and 'The Way' Mentoring because the *'children of prisoners are six times more likely to go to prison than their peers'*.

In their homes they are taught the opposite of the basic values we take for granted. They are taught to lie, to steal, to cheat and cover up. It is endemic of the drug culture.

How can we do rehabilitation better?

I give you four suggestions for The Way Forward

1. **Political Will.** The political will to work on rehabilitation initiatives on a bipartisan basis would be a historic landmark creating a more conducive environment for effective rehabilitation.
2. **Therapeutic Unit.** Political willingness to try a **'pilot' scheme** of separating those who want to change (prisoners who volunteer) to reside in a dedicated therapeutic rehabilitation unit with a Restorative Justice culture and with agreed codes and core values to live by.
3. **Mentoring prisoners.** Government support and use of volunteers and their agencies who are willing to recruit and train mentors for a prisoner post-release. NGO's, committed to the cause, are a good investment of government dollars as they give a good return – they want to see lives changed.
4. **Children of prisoners.** Government support for **early crime intervention programs** for the **children of prisoners** such as Camps for Kids, Teen Camps and Mentoring to prevent generational reoffending.