



Online Services in Prison Cells Proposal 290115

Justice Action is seeking a relationship with a suitable organisation to provide people in prisons with access to online services in prison cells. We have teamed up with the New South Wales Prisoners' Aid Association and the victim support group Enough Is Enough, and we are seeing a major national organisation to join us in this exciting project.

The digital revolution has built a society where technological platforms are integrated into everyday life, and services are provided and consumed online. Justice Action is currently in discussion with both state and territory government representatives and international service providers to establish a pilot program for online services in a number of Australian prisons. It is imperative that this becomes a reality in prison cells.

There have already been piecemeal developments in providing online services in prison cells. Most notably, the Australian Capital Territory has been providing internet access in its prisons since 2007. Prisons in Queensland provide access to university courses online, and prisoners in the Northern Territory have access to computers in cells. The issue of security has been dealt with in all these jurisdictions. While all states and territories in Australia have accepted the inevitable movement towards online service availability in prisons, each state is employing a different approach.

Funded independently by Breakout Media Communications, Justice Action has represented and worked closely with people in prisons and forensic hospitals for decades. During this time, Justice Action has established *Just Us*,¹ the only newspaper that is distributed to prisons and forensic hospitals nationally, and iExpress,² a recently launched site that provides people in prisons the opportunity to have an online presence. Reflecting its long history of service in facilitating the voices of people in prisons, Justice Action has a natural role in this project to provide community representation, and enable prisoners to directly provide feedback and to communicate with prisons regarding service requirements. We have already negotiated with all state and territory governments with a view to provide online counselling services.

We are looking for a vibrant national organisation to work with us to ensure this project moves forward. A potential partner should be committed to the goal of developing and expanding this exciting opportunity to all prisons and forensic hospitals in Australia. It will also possess the skills, networks and resources necessary to assist with implementing a program structure built upon current technology that responds to prisoners' needs.

¹ See Justice Action, *Just Us: Released Issues* <<http://www.justiceaction.org.au/cms/index.php/publications-mainmenu-35/justus-mainmenu-36/released-issues>>.

² See iExpress, *Welcome to iExpress* <<http://iexpress.org.au>>.

Reduction of recidivism rates is the focus and primary goal of all government policies relating to prisons, but this goal has not yet been achieved. A successful collaborative relationship could therefore be a game changer in ensuring that people in prisons have access to the online services essential for reducing recidivism rates.

Governments have accepted that cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is an effective way of reducing recidivism rates, and online CBT has captured much interest. Justice Action has developed the 'Online Counselling in Prison Cells' paper to outline the compelling arguments in favour of providing online CBT and other services in prison cells.³ The paper has attracted attention in many jurisdictions, not only in Australia but also in New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. Online CBT offers the following benefits:

- The 18 hours that prisoners spend in isolation each day are put to productive use;
- Stability and continuity of the service provider are ensured throughout the sentence and after release;
- Greater trust in the counsellors;
- Greater empowerment by encouraging self-management;
- Greater cost-effectiveness; and
- Research indicates that online counselling leads to more long-term changes in the behaviour of participants than face-to-face counselling.

Other services that we wish to offer include:

- Counselling services;
- Educational services;
- Legal and administrative services;
- Employment services;
- Health services; and
- Communication services.

These online services will improve technological literacy, which is vital to participation in modern society. These services allow the prison population to develop the skills required to integrate into society and become employable individuals after release. They also ensure that prisoners remain productive and stimulated inside prison. To be successful, the provision of online services in cells should be responsive to prisoners' feedback and the work of other prison organisations.

Ultimately, a prison system that provides these skills and training is essential to achieve the goal of reducing recidivism. The implementation of this proposal is urgent and necessary.

³ Justice Action, 'Online Counselling in Prison Cells' (Research Paper, Justice Action, 1 July 2014) <<http://www.justiceaction.org.au/cms/images/stories/CmpgnPDFs/onlinecounseling310714.pdf>>.

Services

Online Counselling

CBT can directly target criminal behaviour and criminogenic attitudes in order to minimise the risk of recidivism. CBT is widely accepted as an effective means of reducing crime and creating safer communities.

As outlined in our ‘Online Counselling in Prison Cells’ paper, recent studies have suggested that online CBT programs are more effective than conventional face-to-face programs.⁴ Most notably, three months following the completion of treatment courses, face-to-face CBT patients’ improvements had stopped, while online participants had sustained and stable improvements. The self-guided nature of this online counselling service stimulates a maintained and long-lasting sense of self-awareness, self-efficiency and self-worth, and substantially increases the likelihood of successfully reducing recidivism.

Our proposal to facilitate CBT in prisons involves new communication technology and a close relationship with the victim support organisation, Enough Is Enough.

Potential service providers that are discussed in our ‘Online Counselling in Prison Cells’ paper include:⁵

Enough Is Enough	http://enoughisenough.org.au/1
Mood Gym	https://moodgym.anu.edu.au/
Turning Point (Vic)	http://www.counsellingonline.org.au/about-us/
Counselling Sydney (NSW)	http://www.counsellingsydney.com.au/online-counselling

There are also a number of non-government organisations (NGOs) that have the potential to offer services such as online counselling. These include:

Salvation Army	http://www.salvationarmy.org.au/
Red Cross	http://www.redcross.org.au/
St Vincent de Paul	http://www.vinnies.org.au/
Mission Australia	https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/

⁴ Birgit Wagner, Andrea B Horne and Andreas Maercker, ‘Internet-Based versus Face-to-Face Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention for Depression: A Randomized Controlled Non-Inferiority Trial’ (2013) 152–4 *Journal of Affective Disorders* 115; Nikolai Titov et al, ‘Internet Treatment for Depression: A Randomized Controlled Trial Comparing Clinician vs Technician Assistance’ (2010) 5(6) *Public Library of Science One* 1; Fjóla Dögg Helgadóttir et al, ‘Online CBT II: A Phase I Trial of a Standalone, Online CBT Treatment Program for Social Anxiety in Stuttering’ (2009) 26 *Behaviour Change* 254.

⁵ See Justice Action, above n 3.

Educational Services

Access to education while in prison is essential in preventing recidivism. Specifically, in a US-based study,⁶ inmates who participated in correctional education programs were 43 per cent less likely to commit a further offence than those who did not. Such a decline in recidivism would significantly boost community safety. However, education has traditionally been a difficult service to provide behind bars.

The Southern Queensland Correctional Centre has begun to explore the possibilities of offering online education services to their inmates. They have developed a pilot program in partnership with Southern Cross University through which a limited number of participants are studying online courses provided by the University. In addition to the content of the courses themselves, these programs develop key digital literacy skills that allow prisoners to more effectively engage with the community and potential employers upon release.⁷

These online services need to be trialled and provided in prisons across Australia as they are vital to social integration upon release, and are a productive way of dealing with long periods of isolation in cells.

Potential service providers include universities or other vocational training institutions that offer courses online, such as:

Open Universities Australia	http://www.open.edu.au/
Open Colleges	http://www.opencolleges.edu.au/
HBA Learning Centres	http://www.hbalearningcentres.com.au/
OTEN (TAFE New South Wales)	http://oten.tafensw.edu.au/
APM College of Business and Communication	http://www.apm.edu.au/

Legal and Administrative Services

In addition to dealing with the criminal justice system, prisoners must often grapple with complex civil disputes, particularly in the area of family law and debt recovery.⁸ The negative effects of unresolved legal problems are twofold. First, they can undermine rehabilitation while in prison. Second, they inhibit successful reintegration into society after release. Accurate legal information is also often required for prisoners to effectively make use of complaints procedures.

⁶ Lois M Davis et al, 'Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults' (RAND Corporation, 2013)

<http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR200/RR266/RAND_RR266.pdf>.

⁷ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 'Queensland Prisoners Take-Up Online Study', *AM*, 30 July 2014 <<http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2014/s4056867.htm>>.

⁸ Anne Grunseit, Suzie Forell and Emily McCarron, 'Taking Justice into Custody: The Legal Needs of Prisoners' (Access to Justice and Legal Needs Series No 5, Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales, July 2008) 29.

Limited legal information is currently made available in prison libraries, from welfare staff and other inmates, and in certain circumstances, the prisoner's solicitor. Access to online legal and administrative information would be a more efficient means of providing prisoners with current, useful and understandable legal material.

Potential service providers that specialise in providing accessible online legal information include:

Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS): ALS lawyers could communicate with prisoners online.	http://www.alsnswact.org.au
Australasian Legal Information Institute (Austlii): This organisation provides free, accessible reports of current cases. This would be of use to prisoners with basic legal research skills to investigate cases relevant to their own disputes.	http://www.austlii.edu.au/
Community Legal Centres: Many community legal centres have online databases of legal information, and can additionally provide legal advice to prisoners unable to afford a private solicitor. Major community legal centres include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inner City Legal Centre: - Macquarie Legal Centre: - Marrickville Legal Centre: - Redfern Legal Centre: - Kingsford Legal Centre: 	http://www.iclc.org.au/index.htm http://www.macquarielegal.org.au/ http://mlc.org.au/ http://rlc.org.au/ http://www.klc.unsw.edu.au/
Private solicitors could also provide legal advice and representation for a fee. These solicitors could provide a source of advertising revenue to support the project.	

Additionally, the following governmental bodies could provide important legal information for prisoners:

National Child Youth Law Commission	http://www.ncylc.org.au/
Legal Aid	http://www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/
Human Rights Commission	https://www.humanrights.gov.au/
Ombudsman NSW	https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/
Correctional Services of NSW	http://www.correctiveservices.nsw.gov.au
Law Access	http://www.lawaccess.nsw.gov.au/
Find Legal Answers	http://www.legalanswers.sl.nsw.gov.au

Employment Services

In the modern world, the internet is crucial to accessing the job market. Not only is access to the internet in cells the best way of connecting prisoners with employment agencies, being familiar with internet services is essential for participation in the workforce after release. Technological illiteracy is often a hindrance to job-seeking attempts.

Potential service providers that specialise in finding employment opportunities for ex-prisoners include:

Break Thru People Solutions: Provides advice and guidance with employment opportunities, career goals and workplace skills to disadvantaged groups including ex-prisoners.	www.breakthru.org.au/index.php
Auswide Projects: Connects job seekers with employment, vocational training and apprenticeship providers. Auswide also offers short courses such as Responsible Service of Alcohol (RSA) and Responsible Conduct of Gambling (RCG), which are necessary for specific types of employment.	www.auswideprojects.org.au/

Health Services

Access to the internet is also vital for prisoners to retrieve basic health information. This is particularly important in the area of mental health.

The internet allows prisoners to anonymously access support for personal health problems, which could include participation in Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous programs. Without access to anonymous and confidential support programs for mental health and substance abuse problems, prisoners may be deterred from obtaining professional medical help.

Potential service providers that could assist with providing health information and confidential support include:

<p>Alcoholics Anonymous (AA):</p> <p>Provides confidential support for people with alcohol dependency issues. AA facilitates online meetings, which would allow prisoners to access the traditional peer support therapy offered by the organisation.</p>	<p>http://www.aa.org.au</p>
<p>Narcotics Anonymous (NA):</p> <p>Provides confidential support for people with substance dependency problems. NA similarly offers online meetings that could be accessed by prisoners.</p>	<p>http://na.org.au/index.php/en/</p>
<p>Beyondblue:</p> <p>Provides assistance to people suffering from depression and anxiety. Beyondblue facilitates online forum discussions through which prisoners could access important support for mental health issues.</p>	<p>http://www.beyondblue.org.au/</p>

Communication Services

Communication with the outside world is critical for rehabilitation. Currently, prisoners are largely dependent on letters as a means of communication. This is becoming increasingly outdated as the world moves towards online communication. Online communication services in prison cells are therefore necessary to enable prisoners to build digital literacy skills that will be needed upon their release.

Online communication services could be developed in the form of social networking sites, such as:

<p>iExpress:</p> <p>A recently developed social networking site, which allows prisoners to create a personal profile and receive emails from their friends and family. At present, Justice Action is required to print out emails and mail them in letter form to prisoners. Providing internet access to prisoners would significantly streamline this cumbersome yet important process.</p>	<p>http://www.iexpress.org.au/</p>
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Conclusion

The rapid spread and mainstreaming of technology in modern society have rendered computer skills increasingly essential. The proliferation of online service providers has made the provision of services in prisons over the internet inevitable.

Access to online services in cells provides an excellent opportunity for effective prisoner rehabilitation and reintegration into society. In the light of this and other compelling arguments in favour of online services provision, it would be socially healthy to establish a nationally integrated, NGO-driven online services program that links to people in prisons and forensic hospitals.

Justice Action is seeking to establish a relationship with a major national organisation that shares a common purpose in the implementation of online services in cells. We look forward to cooperating with such an organisation to define the precise form and organisational structure of the relationship, to conduct further research, and to build links with governments. Together with an organisation like yours, we can ensure this project moves forward.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brett Collins', with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Brett Collins and the Justice Action team