

Chinese Prison Delegation Visit

JA was asked to present to the top 24 bureaucrats from the Bureau of Prison Administration of the People's Republic of China on the 10th of August 2017. Earlier they attended Long Bay and Silverwater prisons, as well as a briefing from Corrective Services NSW.

We were asked to present prisoners' views on resettlement and how our experiences could help them. We invited the Women's Justice Network to join us. Two flyers including Chinese translations were distributed to the officials.

JA presented the benefits of social support and access to communication via computers in cells, amidst a spirited series of questions from the Chinese officials. We highlighted our independence funded by Breakout Media Communications.

The Women's Justice Network presented its experience of mentoring and particular problems for women prisoners.

Huang Lanzheng, the Director-General of the Bureau of Prison Administration said he respected our work. He particularly appreciated our influence on criminal justice policy reform. He said that in China there are programs similar to restorative justice, but said "we still have something to learn from you ... three things we can still learn from you are the protection of prisoners after release, reduce isolation, and restorative justice".

Huang Lanzheng said he felt comfortable talking directly with us, and appreciated the benefit of our experience. They all clapped and we shook hands agreeing to work together in the future on the issues of mentoring, use of technology to lessen isolation and the formation of NGO support.

A video record was created and a YouTube presentation will be published in the next few days.

Detailed Minutes

Trades Hall, Sydney Australia.

Thursday 10 August 2017 2:30pm – 3:30pm

I. Justice Action (JA) Introduction

- Greetings and explanation of documents distributed to delegation
- Acknowledgement of Gadigal people
- NSW prison system is a failure (high recidivism and low out-of-cell time)
- NSW government planned a decrease of 5% in recidivism but turned out to be an 8% increase
- Justice Action has a unique role of connecting prisoners to the outside world
- Prisoners should be able to learn new skills in prison, and stay out of prison when they are released

II. Catherine – Women's Justice Network (WJN) Introduction

- There are currently about 1,100 women in NSW prisons and the figure is rising
- 76% sexually abused or involved in domestic violence relationships
- 80% involved with drugs or alcohol, this is not addressed by prison system
- Access to program – only 1 program in 1 prison for 50 women (programs only available for those sentenced to 12 months or more)

- Out of 400 women who participated in the prisoner and mentor program, only 7% of these returned to prison, reiterating that the program works.

III. Q & A Session

China: After inmates are released, do you provide employment services?

JA: JA cannot help all the ex-prisoners in employment, but we mentor, and we have limited job opportunities for them to work in the printing business at Breakout Media Communications, the social enterprise that funds JA.

China: Are you providing services to only NSW or to all of Australia?

JA: We provide national support and services with the support of Breakout, and our newspaper, Just Us, is delivered nationally.

China: Upon receiving your services, how many percent of prisoners reoffend?

JA: In the example of WJN mentoring services, the result of recidivism is at 7% compared to the general recidivism at 49.8%.

China: What is included in your mentoring program?

WJN: The mentoring program focuses on issues like mental health, addiction, education, family, or employment matters. The mentor would volunteer to provide the ex-prisoners with the assistance in finding these services. The mentor must be someone trustworthy.

China: Do you not only mentor, but also influence policy?

JA: Yes. We attempt to keep families linked to inmates, often using technology to make communication easier. Computers in cells has been shown to lower the extent of isolation, and thus the recidivism rate.

China: How are mentors selected?

WJN: To make sure that mentors and mentees are compatible, we do extensive background checks and reference checks; and mentors are carefully matched to mentees considering values, travel time between them, etc. The program would last for one year and the pair usually becomes friends.

China: How many prisons are there in Australia? Do you think prisons are useful in restorative justice?

JA: It is better for them to maintain family connection, and we believe that it is better for them to rehabilitate in the community, with electronic monitoring if necessary.

China: Where do you get funding?

JA: JA is funded by Breakout Media Communications, about \$1M per year, while WJN receives government funding.

JA: We would like to offer goodwill, to work with you, and to implement mentors also in China. We have international connections with the US, Canada and UK, and we are happy to help you also with restorative justice.

China: We show respect to JA and WJN efforts, in China we encourage similar programs.

China: Prisoner classification?

JA: it is important not only for security but for the entitlement of prisoners to feel safe with their cell mates, and compatible for positive friendships. In Australia, prisoners are mostly put into the maximum security available, which is damaging for rehabilitation.