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Hi Friends,

It has been a busy few months on our end, and it is time to update you on our current projects. We want to keep you informed, and hope this newsletter encourages you to share your input with us. Please don't hesitate to share your thoughts on anything that interests you, or could help us with our direction.

Some of our team members



Youth Justice Senate Inquiry - Technology in Cells

Children are our future. However, for youth in detention, the lack of computers in cells isolates them from vital services and communications. The NSW government claims they cannot afford a server to provide these youth's access to technology. Yet, they can allocate **\$1 million** per juvenile detainee, **per year**. We were quoted \$260,000 for the server.

At the Youth Justice Senate Inquiry in February 2025, JA questioned the structure of the Inquiry, suggesting the committee spend a day in a cell. Further, JA called for increased access to the internet and to iExpress email accounts for kids. The “**Flip the Switch**” initiative was presented, which aims to replace the passive TV screen in cells with an interactive computer screen. This would allow kids to access arts and music, thus promoting community involvement. Computer access in adult prisons has lowered recidivism rates and assaults on prison guards by **60%**.

Following the Inquiry, we distributed Senate Inquiry reports with this concern to over 100 youth justice authorities, to each state. These included Ministers, Shadow Ministers, the Greens Spokesperson, Commissioner/Director General, and panel members.



The “Corrections Technology Conference” (“CTC”) in Bangkok, Thailand

In February 2025, we attended the CTC on behalf of the Community Justice Coalition, for the third consecutive year. This conference was run by the world leading prison authorities, the ICPA. The corporate suppliers were receptive to CJC questions on telecommunications for in-cell computers. Computers are significant, as they support the “Import Model”, which brings outside, mainstream services into prisons; however, access to video counselling and keyboards in cells is still not available in NSW. Due to restricted educational opportunities within prisons, keyboards are especially significant for improving computer literacy and education within prisons. The “Import Model” is:

1. **Effective**, to provide trusted external counselling without a conflict of interest with a security role;
2. **Efficient**, as they are often already paid for by governments;
3. **Existing** through the sentence and available after release; and
4. **Emotionally important**, enabling detainees to feel connected to the outside community.

Access to law

Accessing the law means the right of access to the courts, legal information, representation, and advice - but for incarcerated people it is not easy. You have the right to access your court proceedings, understand the laws subjected to you, a fair trial without delay, the presumption of innocence until proven guilty, and safety within prisons. If you have access to a computer and some limited access to the internet, you can access free legal information through the Australian Legal Information Institute (AustLII) database. This means that you can keep informed about your case, better understand your rights, appeal in higher courts and access legal representation. If you have trouble asserting these rights, let us know and we'll try to help.

Nairobi Declaration for Detainee Telecommunication Rights

The Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants (CURE) is an international organisation, based in Washington D.C., that holds consultative status with the Economic and Social Council inside the United Nations. CURE believes in providing incarcerated people across the world with all of the resources needed to support prisoner wellbeing. In 2023, three members of JA were present in Kenya for CURE's 9th International Conference, where the "*Nairobi Declaration for Detainee Telecommunication Rights*" was adopted.

The criminal justice system disadvantages people by leaving them without digital skills to contribute to the welfare of themselves, their families, and society at large. It also unnecessarily isolates prisoners from the outside community. The Nairobi Declaration declares that all detainees have the right to:

1. **Communicate** with others through telecommunications: email, messaging and video calls;
2. **Express** themselves publicly;
3. **Receive publicly available information**, including but not restricted to: legal, telehealth, education and counselling information;
4. **Earn payment** through services rendered in their private time, enabling them to maintain their families, contribute to society and prepare for release;
5. **Access such services on the same level of availability and financial basis** such as water, food and bedding.

We are now working with the Community Justice Coalition (CJC), to be in Abu Dhabi for the 15th Crime Congress in 2026 for it to adopt this Declaration. If you'd like to voice any ideas, suggestions or issues, please write to us.

Defending Physical Letters

Prisoners have received original letters from their loved ones since the establishment of Australia as a penal colony in 1788. However, the Crimes (Administration of Sentences) Amendment (Inmate Mail) Regulation 2020 (NSW) now prevents prisoners from receiving original letters and envelopes. There are significant human rights and legal concerns regarding the blanket destruction of prisoner mail and this needs to be challenged.

The improper photocopying of letters and destruction of the original is an unprecedented deprivation of a prisoner's basic entitlement to receive the original letters and envelopes addressed to them. Furthermore, there is the irreplaceable emotional support that comes from the scent of perfume, a smudge of lipstick, children's drawings, or the tactile reminder of a loved one's connection. Families also report mail delays of up to a month due to processing time, with serious concerns about the mental health impacts on their incarcerated loved ones.

This legal challenge is currently being investigated by a Barrister, the Ombudsman, and the Inspector of Custodial Services. Alternative solutions exist, including advanced scanners specifically developed to detect drugs in mail, making the photocopying and destruction of physical letters entirely unnecessary.

Commonwealth Parole Board ("CPB")

The Commonwealth Government has decided to create a Parole Board. The parole applications of federal offenders can often be unfairly rejected, as the prisoners have limited opportunities to register for therapeutic programs which are needed for parole considerations. State prisoners have an **80%** chance of being released on parole, compared to only **50%** for Federal prisoners. Whether the State parole boards should hold authority over Commonwealth prisoners rather than a new CPB is highly questionable. Although this process is still in the early stages JA will be staying close to it.

Education Opportunities for Prisoners

Education is a powerful tool for growth, skill-building and shaping your future. It is a basic human right, and it is essential to push for increased access. Education opportunities for prisoners face barriers, including the failure of the current level of technology in cells. For decades, hardcopy lecture notes were mailed from TAFE and universities to provide access to courses. However, this service went strictly online during COVID and now permanently, creating barriers for prisoners accessing the resources. After our survey last year of prisoners' experience nationally, we made the following three recommendations to all prison authorities;



1. **Enable open-access to diverse courses** run by educational institutions for people in prison, supported by in-cell access to computers, external keyboards, educational software and websites.
2. **Allow prisoners to purchase books** from Australia's major booksellers, such as Dymocks. This may be facilitated by the Australasian Correctional Education Association to support immediate access to education before technology is universally available.
3. **Employ trained "Education Officers"** to inform, assist, and support prisoners in accessing and completing education.

NSW "Drug Summit"

We support the Report's recommendations to expand harm reduction strategies within correctional facilities, decriminalise the possession of small quantities of illicit substances and extend Medicare access to individuals in custody.

However, a fundamental flaw in the report is its failure to acknowledge the true scale of drug use in correctional settings across Australia. First-hand reports from prisoners indicate that up to **80%** of prisoners engage in illicit substance use in prison, which is telling of the demand for drugs in these environments. To decrease the overwhelming demand for drugs, it requires a proper understanding of the intersecting factors that drive drug use including the sense of helplessness and hopelessness where you cannot improve your future no matter how keen you are.

To address the overwhelming demand for drugs in correctional settings and its associated harms, we suggested improving rehabilitation, education, and recreation resources in correctional facilities, and for NSW Needle and Syringe Programs in correctional settings, and leveraging already available technologies in correctional settings to provide external mental health support. Additionally, introducing earning early release to prisoners as an incentive to make an effort, do courses, and change their life for the better, rather than short term "timeout" through drugs.

Health in Detention

In the context of detention, social health is defined as having a variety of meaningful, safe and secure relationships to support human connections, both in and out of prisons. It is linked to, and as important as, physical health. We have been involved in pursuing with authorities, physical, mental and sexual health, safety, access to tablets, and health records.

Telecommunication services should be provided for prisoners via computers in cells with the intention to relieve boredom, hopelessness and helplessness. The removal from family and the loss of connection to outside community and support networks is not a necessary consequence of imprisonment. JA has been putting to the peak public health bodies that telecommunications in cells would prevent unnecessary isolation and help prisoners maintain

their social health. Telecommunications in cells would benefit prisoners, enhancing accessibility to counselling, reducing the risks of depression and further provides the opportunity for personal development.

Chemical Restraint

Forced medication is seen as an easy method of “social control” over vulnerables and “troublesome people”. In youth detention centres, **90% of children** are referred to by authorities as “mentally ill”. This can categorise people in detention as “mentally ill” and justifies medicating them into submission. Forced medication is often termed “treatment” rather than “coercion”. However, the process involves forcibly medicating people, which can cause long-term side effects and restricts their freedom of movement. After months of consultation and research, JA engaged experts on the issue of “forced medication” as “chemical restraint” and wrote a paper proposing its mandatory data collection. In our paper, we emphasised the need for accurate and accessible data, with forced “treatment” as part of the data collection to judge the culture of that authority. This would allow for the process to be used more safely and ethically, and prevent its misuse.



Forced Control in Disability and Aged care

The Disability Royal Commission’s Final Report in 2021 found that people in aged care were forced to take medication, which resulted in people with disabilities experiencing serious consequences that negatively impacted them. These consequences include reduced cognitive function, headaches and nausea. This revealed concerns about the current biomedical model of health, medicating rather than the psychosocial model of engaging people.

JA attended a roundtable discussion with the Department of Communities and Justice on a proposed legislative framework, which regulates the use of restrictive practices on people with disabilities, and aims to reduce or eliminate these practices. During the discussion, concerns were raised about consent, especially for those who are considered to “lack capacity”. We raised that restrictive practices should only be used when alternative strategies to lessen serious harms had been tried and were unsuccessful.

We raised a focus on person-centred approaches, and peer mentors. We aim to support a shift towards a rights-based, person-centered mental health approach, and endorse the end of coercion, forced medication, with the promotion of peer support, as well as better telecommunications within correctional centres.

World Health Organisation (WHO) - Mental Health Policy

The WHO’s newest mental health policy, “*Guidance on Mental Health Policy and Strategic Action Plans*”, promotes rights-based, community-focused care, reduced coercion, and inclusion of people with lived experience to uphold human rights regarding medication. Coercive practices, restraint, and forced medication was acknowledged by WHO as abuse. The policy advocates for a non-secretive, transparent and detailed procedure regarding the prescription of medication. Accordingly, the use of coercion and the misuse of medication, especially under the form of the biomedical model, should not be used as treatment as it undermines the human rights and dignity of people with disabilities.



Productivity Commission’s ‘Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement’ (MHSPA) Review

The Productivity Commission reviewed an agreement across the Commonwealth, state and territory governments within Australia, focussing on where money is allocated and spent. Justice Action proposed three main recommendations suggesting that the money should be allocated to:

1. **The incorporation of lived experience in addressing mental health policies and practice:** codesign and peer mentoring
2. **Telehealth and telecommunications access:** improved delivery of services
3. **Honesty with data collection:** chemical restraint data to include all involuntary medication

JA Focus Case

As part of a broader campaign to improve telecommunications within cells for counselling and prisoner support, we have been working with a focus-person within the prison system. Although we don’t normally do cases, this person’s treatment highlights many issues which could affect all prisoners. We have found that this woman has been subjected to isolation and bullying by both guards and other prisoners, which has resulted in her solitary confinement. Through video calls, letters, external counselling, and some financial assistance we have been pushing for her right to education and access to art materials at tuition. In her long sentence, we have been working to improve her social health through access to outside connections and peer mentoring. When she wins, everybody wins.

iExpress - (website link: iexpress.org.au)

iExpress is one of our ongoing initiatives running since 2014. It’s the world’s first prisoner webpage where you can present your profile as you want to be seen. The email service has stopped as it was too difficult to run over the COVID period and now some messaging services are available. It is a stable place to exist and present yourselves. iExpress is being updated to provide quicker and more accessible ways for you to connect such as personal blog forums. Through the iExpress website, you can file complaints and share your prison experience confidentially through the ‘Report Your Prison’ function. This can be accessed by your family. We encourage you to use it, help shine light on issues that need attention, and push for change.



Australian Prisoners Union

The APU has existed since 1999 to help represent prisoners’ human rights on both the national and international level. It will be linked directly to serving prisoners in the new future. It is involved in advocating for prisoner interests including improved prison conditions. It aligns with the UN Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT) regulations for consistent monitoring of detention facilities, and the inclusion of computers, education and development opportunities. We will keep you updated on its developments.

Your story matters and JA is here to help advocate for your rights. Sharing your experiences is important to us in making impactful policy changes. Stay in contact, share this with your mates, and give us feedback because your voices are needed to give us direction!

A big hug from us all,

Brett Collins and the Justice Action Team.