



Reform and Rebuild ©

Guidance for Prison Staff

Supporting prisoners who are serving life sentences

Additional details about Reform and Rebuild can be accessed through our website: www.reformandrebuilt.co.uk

Alternatively, prisoners, their loved ones, and prison staff members can get in touch with us via email at prisonr4rmact@outlook.com or by writing to the following postal address: Reform & Rebuild, Lytchett House Ltd, Unit 13, Freeland Park, Wareham Road, Poole, Dorset - BH16 6FH.

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INTRODUCTION:

“Practically nothing is known about the vital subject of the lasting effects on human personality of long-term imprisonment, yet pronouncements on the subject continue to be made and very long prison sentences continue to be imposed.”

This guidance is intended to serve as a comprehensive tool for all prison staff involved in the supervision and management of individuals serving life sentences. It has been meticulously crafted, drawing upon the invaluable insights and expertise of individuals and professionals with first-hand knowledge or personal experience of life sentences. The guidance aims to shed light on the shared challenges and concerns faced by those serving life sentences, while offering strategies to enhance their support, progress, and overall management throughout their incarceration.

We understand the growing logistical concerns and pressuring challenges prison staff face when trying to support prisoners who are serving life sentences. This guide may help staff develop a better understanding of this prison population group, and how they can assist in creating a better informed and safer custodial environment for those living and working within prisons, specifically those in the Long Term and High Security Estate (LTHSE).

Throughout the duration of a life sentence, prisoners rely on the assistance of staff and the prison system to facilitate their progress. This dependence places additional daily pressures on the staff. It's important to acknowledge that not all staff members possess specialised expertise or comprehensive knowledge regarding every aspect of a life sentence. Consequently, providing support to individuals serving life sentences becomes more challenging. However, by offering guidance, staff members can gain valuable insights and enhance their ability to apply their own management techniques while developing a deeper understanding when working with these particular prisoners.

Life sentences can be incredibly difficult to cope with for several reasons:

Loss of Freedom: The loss of freedom and the inability to make choices or live a normal life can be incredibly challenging to handle. Over the years, being separated from loved ones, missing out on important events, and being confined to a small cell can have a significant psychological impact.

Loss of Relationships: Life sentences often mean being separated from family, friends, and the outside world. This loss of social connection can be emotionally devastating. In many cases, prisoners may be unable to maintain relationships with their children, spouses, or other loved ones, leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Uncertainty and Hopelessness: The absence of hope and the uncertainty about the future can lead to feelings of hopelessness, despair, and a sense of being trapped in a never-ending cycle.

Stigma and Labelling: Life sentences are typically associated with serious crimes, which can lead to societal stigma and labelling. Prisoners serving life sentences may be seen as dangerous or irredeemable, which can affect their self-perception and their interactions with others, both within and outside of the prison environment.

Loss of Opportunities: Life sentences often mean the loss of opportunities for personal and professional growth. Education, career advancement, and personal development are severely restricted within the prison system, making it challenging to maintain a sense of purpose and meaning in life.

Mental Health Challenges: The prolonged exposure to the harsh realities of prison life, coupled with the loss of freedom and uncertainty about the future, can lead to severe mental health issues. Depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal thoughts are not uncommon among those serving life sentences.

It's important to note that the impact of a life sentence can vary from person to person, depending on their individual circumstances and coping mechanisms. However, the combination of these factors makes life sentences incredibly challenging to cope with for many individuals.

The prevalence of increasingly lengthy and life sentences, including whole life orders, poses significant challenges within the prison system, raising concerns about the safety of both prisoners and staff. In many cases, these sentences surpass the actual lifespan of the individuals serving them. While this matter is highly intricate and varies depending on individual circumstances, we have strived to develop a concise guide that addresses common complexities faced by those serving life sentences. Our aim is to provide practical methods and encourage prison officials and staff to actively assist in addressing these challenges using available resources. By doing so, we can foster stronger prisoner-staff relationships, better support prisoners and their loved ones throughout their sentence, and ultimately create safer prison environments and communities.

ARRIVING AT PRISON:

“Prison is like nowhere else. Severely disorienting. Loss of control and loss of privacy, coupled with total isolation. You spend the first few weeks just adapting trying to get your head right, then after a month or so, the reality of having to make it your home for whatever duration of time dawns on you.”

Newly admitted and remand prisoners, particularly those experiencing incarceration for the first time, are highly vulnerable. The period of remand or entry into prison is marked by intense pressure and tension, stemming from various factors such as disruption to health, work, relationships, and housing. Research and statistics consistently demonstrate that self-harm and suicide rates are highest among the remand prison population. These distressing incidents are often associated with the difficulties of adjusting to an isolated, hostile, and restrictive prison environment. For prisoners who bear heavy emotional burdens of fear, guilt, injustice, shame, remorse, confusion, depression, resentment, uncertainty, and hopelessness, acclimating to prison life becomes even more challenging. This heightened struggle extends not only to prisoners but also to their loved ones and significant others.

Irrespective of staff opinions or personal views regarding the prisoner or their alleged offence/s, the system bears the responsibility of safeguarding all prisoners and ensuring staff members are aware of aggravating factors that could trigger negative interactions between prisoners and staff or among prisoners themselves. While local prisons may present their own distinct challenges, newly admitted prisoners may also arrive with additional pre-existing problems such as addictions, pregnancy, gang conflicts, learning difficulties, bereavement, or mental and physical health issues.

For those entering the system and potentially facing a life sentence, close monitoring of their well-being is imperative, accompanied by the provision of necessary information and available support. Prisoners have expressed that upon arrival, many staff members assume they have prior experience with the prison system and, as a result, fail to conduct basic checks.

Prison staff should undertake a comprehensive initial assessment of each prisoner to gather essential information. This assessment should cover personal details, medical history, mental health evaluation, risk factors, and any special needs or accommodations required.

The safety of the prisoner and other prisoners should be taken into consideration, necessitating an evaluation of any known conflicts, gang affiliations, or threats from other individuals. In cases where special arrangements or protective custody measures are deemed necessary, staff should explore the option of transferring these individuals to different facilities to prevent detrimental consequences. At the very least, efforts should be made to separate these prisoners and closely monitor their interactions.

After a detailed induction, prisoners should be given priority for a thorough health assessment. This assessment should encompass a comprehensive screening to identify immediate medical needs, communicable diseases, mental health issues, or substance abuse problems. Such early identification allows for timely intervention, treatment, and prevention of potential risks to the individual and others.

Immediate steps should be taken to establish prisoners' contacts with the outside world, including their legal links if available. This helps reduce prisoner frustration, maintain order and discipline, and support the preservation of family ties. Staff members must make every effort to avoid passing judgment on prisoners and instead provide objective assistance in their adjustment to prison life, ensuring they feel as comfortable as reasonably possible to minimise emotional outbursts or violent incidents that could disrupt staff duties and the routines of fellow prisoners.

Approaching each prisoner with professionalism, fairness, and respect is paramount for prison staff. Meeting the basic needs of prisoners is crucial, encompassing the provision of appropriate clothing, bedding, personal hygiene items, and access to necessities such as food, water, and toiletries. It is essential to inform prisoners of their legal rights, safeguarding measures, and the process for completing applications or filing complaints.

ADJUSTING TO THE PRISON ENVIRONMENT:

“Adjusting to living inside is difficult, you're not in control of anything, and that's difficult getting used to. People in prison offer advice of questionable value. They suggest that the best way to serve time is to forget about the world outside and to focus on the culture of confinement. The problem with such guidance is that the more an individual focuses on adjusting to the prison experience, the less prepared that individual will be to function upon release.”

Creating a daily routine can provide structure and a sense of control in the prison environment. For those who are facing a life sentence, it is always in the best interest that these prisoners are given a single cell occupancy at the earliest opportunity, not just for the benefit of their mental health and safety but staff and fellow prisoners alike. Special attention and thorough support during the initial days of custody, including the establishment of clear guidelines, should be regarded as a top priority. This encompasses addressing various aspects such as financial matters, clothing allowances, facilitation of medication, and the provision of information booklets upon arrival and prior to trial or sentencing. For those who may have learning difficulties, these individuals will need to prepare for the changed routine and practical issues such as knowing telephone numbers and addresses of contacts, understanding how sentences work, the prison rules, post and rule 39, finances, and how to stay safe. People with intellectual disability often have difficulty understanding prison rules, making them especially vulnerable to exploitation in prison. Loved ones of incarcerated people with developmental disorders often feel powerless to help them cope behind bars so every effort should be made to ensure safety standards.

Ensuring everyone receives appropriate induction and information in a format they can understand and attempting to provide prisoners with opportunities for receiving education, training or physical activity should be at the heart of their integration upon entering prison. Upon admission, numerous newly incarcerated prisoners often face significant strain and upheaval as they contend with the potential loss of their health, relationships, employment, housing, and overall life aspirations. Individuals facing life imprisonment should be provided with practical tasks and resources that align with their preferences and capabilities. If prisoners' express interest in engaging in such activities or demonstrate the ability to do so, they should be offered appropriate opportunities. In cases where prisoners lack outside support or connections, staff members should utilise the resources of family engagement staff within the prison to explore possibilities of reconnecting relationships and providing assistance in maintaining those connections. Prison environments can exacerbate existing mental health conditions or contribute to the development of new ones. Seeking mental health support through counselling, therapy, or support groups can provide individuals with tools to navigate their emotions and cope with the challenges of prison life.

It is of utmost importance to provide a clear explanation of the available peer support within the prison, particularly for individuals who are unfamiliar with the prison environment or who appear vulnerable. External agencies, such as substance misuse or family practitioners, mentors, and listeners, should be highlighted as sources of support. It is crucial to recognise that certain prisoners may face additional challenges due to illiteracy or language barriers, which can exacerbate their sense of isolation and frustration. Assisting these prisoners in acquiring literacy skills and providing the necessary support for learning how to read and write becomes essential in helping them navigate their prison journey. Promoting and actively pursuing referrals to organisations or mentors who can offer assistance should be encouraged for prisoners who express a desire to engage in any form of support.

For most people, prison life can be stressful and emotionally challenging. Developing healthy coping strategies, such as journaling, family contact, meditation, or engaging in hobbies or creative outlets, can help individuals manage their emotions and maintain a positive mindset. It's important to note that adjustment to prison can vary significantly from person to person, depending on individual circumstances, support systems, and personal resilience. The availability and quality of prison programmes and support services also play a pivotal role in facilitating adjustment.

TRIAL PROCEEDINGS:

“Being on trial is physically and mentally exhausting. The idea of being judged is scary but the anxiety produced from not knowing your fate is emotionally draining.”

Standing trial can be highly stressful and emotionally challenging. The uncertainty, fear, and potential consequences of the trial can significantly affect the mental well-being of the accused. It is important to consider their emotional state and provide support, such as access to counselling or mental health services, as needed. It is important to ensure that individuals are held in humane conditions, with access to necessary facilities, medical care, and legal resources.

During the trial phase, it is imperative to uphold the principle of "innocent until proven guilty" for prisoners. This period can be highly tumultuous and emotionally charged for individuals. In cases where a conviction may result in a life sentence, trials can extend over several weeks or even months. Throughout this duration, prisoners often experience fluctuating emotions that can significantly impact their behaviour and, in turn, affect their loved ones and significant others. The trial process itself is intense and draining for all parties involved, including victims, prisoners, and staff. It requires extensive efforts to facilitate a fair and thorough trial. For most prisoners, this process takes a mental and physical toll, and it is important to recognise that they may exhibit heightened sensitivity during this time. This sensitivity can manifest through ambivalent feelings such as depression or a propensity towards violence, either directed towards themselves or others. To ensure the well-being of everyone involved, staff should be aware of when a prisoner is scheduled for trial, enabling them to understand any behavioural changes that may occur prior to or during this period. This awareness is particularly crucial if disciplinary actions or write-ups are to be documented in the system.

Additionally, prisoners should be adequately prepared and supported for their trial. They may require access to photocopying and computer facilities to adequately prepare their defence, and reasonable efforts should be made to accommodate these requests, taking into consideration the alleviation of tension during this specific time. Furthermore, it is vital to ensure the safe and timely transportation of prisoners from the prison to the court, ensuring their well-being and readiness for the trial process. If prisoners require medication, appropriate arrangements should be established to ensure its delivery. Considering the early starts, long days, and late returns to the prison, potential conflicts with the established regime may arise. Therefore, best efforts should be made to grant prisoners on trial access to facilities that allow them to maintain health, hygiene standards, as well as maintain contact with family and relationships.

While both prisoners and staff, alongside the court, must make collective efforts to ensure a smooth trial process, understanding the tension, exhaustion, and nervousness surrounding this period acts as a safety net to ensure every possible measure is taken to acknowledge the impact on everyone involved. Sensitive material discussed during trials, intense scrutiny, and negative reactions can potentially trigger unwanted behaviour within the prison environment. By fully comprehending and acknowledging these dynamics, a deeper insight into the daily management of prisoners during this period can be achieved, leading to better support and understanding of their needs throughout the process.

The trial process and potential outcomes can have significant social consequences for the accused. Negative publicity, damage to reputation, strained relationships, and financial implications can all impact their life beyond the immediate legal proceedings.

CONVICTION:

"You feel like your life is over and it kinda is. All your plans for the future and life goals disappear."

The weight of a conviction, especially if accompanied by a life sentence, can trigger feelings of depression, hopelessness, and despair. The individual may experience a loss of motivation, self-esteem, and a sense of purpose, leading to a deep emotional downturn. Being convicted of a serious crime can lead to societal stigma and social isolation. The individual may face judgment, discrimination, and rejection from friends, family, and fellow peers.

Irrespective of the nature of the crime committed and the perspectives of prisoners and staff towards it, once an individual is convicted and sentenced to serve a life sentence, it becomes the responsibility of the state and staff to ensure their care and safety. Following a conviction, most prisoners tend to experience feelings of despair, being overwhelmed, shocked, and uncertain about their future. The period leading up to sentencing can be excruciating for prisoners, their loved ones, and the victims involved, as they await the length of the imposed sentence, understanding that it may span several decades for some. This interim period, which can last weeks or even months, has been identified through extensive research and evidence as a time of acute vulnerability for prisoners. It is essential for staff to be mindful of this vulnerability and monitor prisoners accordingly. Awaiting sentencing is an extremely vulnerable and daunting time for the convicted individual. In cases that garner significant public attention or evoke personal judgments, it is crucial to remember the impact on the loved ones of those imprisoned, including partners, parents, grandparents, children, friends, former colleagues, and others. It is important to recognise that a conviction brings forth a range of emotions for the individual and influences how they navigate this stage of their sentence. Approaching this period with empathy can facilitate the development of supportive prisoner-staff relationships and promote understanding between both parties regarding the best ways to address the prisoners' needs during this time and moving forward. However, it is essential to remain cognisant that emotions are subject to change, and staff should be vigilant in identifying any shifts in behavioural patterns that may indicate self-harm or harm to others, even if prisoners do not overtly display problematic behaviour. Even when prisoners may not outwardly exhibit signs of distress, it is crucial to acknowledge that many, despite projecting a tough exterior, may be grappling with profound inner turmoil that continues throughout a significant portion of their sentence.

A conviction can significantly impact an individual's self-identity and self-worth. They may struggle with feelings of guilt or injustice, shame, and a negative perception of themselves. The loss of personal and professional reputation can further erode their sense of self, leading to profound psychological distress. Some individuals may turn to substance abuse to cope with the emotional pain and stress caused by a conviction. Substance abuse can exacerbate mental health problems, creating a harmful cycle that further deteriorates overall well-being.

A life sentence can severely disrupt family dynamics, including separation from children, strained relationships with spouses or partners, and financial hardships. These disruptions can cause emotional turmoil, guilt, and a sense of failure, affecting mental well-being. In severe cases, the cumulative impact of a conviction, coupled with the associated mental health challenges, can lead to thoughts of suicide or self-harm. The individual may feel overwhelmed, trapped, and without hope, necessitating immediate professional intervention and support.

While pre-sentence reports are not within the purview of the prison service, it is advisable for prison staff to engage in discussions with prisoners regarding the possibility of coordinating with their legal teams to draft such reports. These reports play a crucial role in the sentencing process, offering a comprehensive overview of an individual's background, which can aid staff in effectively managing the person during their incarceration.

SENTENCING:

"I knew I was getting life and I thought a lot about how I even got here. Thoughts flowed about my life and the issues in it that got me to the point where I could possibly spend the rest of my life in prison, cut off from friends, family, loved ones, everything that made life meaningful."

In recent decades, there has been a significant shift in the duration of sentences, and it is likely that this trend will continue in the future. Individuals are now being sentenced to life imprisonment at younger ages, and there is also an increase in older prisoners serving extremely lengthy sentences. As a result, a substantial portion of the prison population is growing older behind bars, posing numerous mental and physical challenges for these individuals.

The increasing prevalence of individuals serving life sentences poses significant operational challenges for prison staff, who bear the responsibility of caring for these individuals. To address the potential problems arising from systemic deficiencies, a comprehensive and coordinated approach involving external agencies and partners, such as healthcare and social care, is essential. This ensures that the needs of prisoners are acknowledged and effectively addressed.

The experience of serving a life sentence varies from person to person, constituting a unique and ongoing journey for each individual. However, the overarching reality remains that these individuals have spent, or will spend, a significant portion of their lives in prison, being subject to recall for the remainder of their lives.

As staff structures undergo continuous changes, it becomes challenging for personnel to identify which prisoners are serving life sentences and allocate the necessary time to develop relationships with them. This is further compounded by staffing issues and frequent personnel turnover. Without consciously noting and building rapport with these prisoners, their life sentence status can often be overlooked, obscuring the reasons behind their incarceration and the duration of their sentence.

It is crucial for all staff members to be mindful of the type of sentence a person is serving, as it serves as a safeguarding measure and an important reference point for everyone working in the prison. Understanding the nature of the sentence is pivotal in determining the support required by life-sentenced prisoners and facilitating their progression throughout their sentence. Various aspects, such as maintaining outside contact, accessing education, employment opportunities, utilising library resources, engaging in purposeful activities, and participating in physical exercise, are vital for the well-being and survival of any prisoner.

These factors should be actively promoted and prioritised for individuals serving life sentences at all stages of their incarceration. Staff members must diligently complete and update accurate records for each individual on the case management systems, including key contacts and significant events, both positive and negative.

Prisoners should be given the opportunity to contribute to and design their own sentence plans, fostering a collaborative approach between the prisoners and staff. This allows for the allocation of resources to support the person in staying on track throughout their sentence. Establishing a progressive and realistic sentence plan serves as an anchor for prisoners, providing them with a tangible goal to work towards.

Overall, a life sentence typically means the loss of future opportunities, including education, employment, and personal development. The individual may face limited prospects for personal growth, skill development, and the ability to contribute to society in a meaningful way. The loss of hope for a different future can impact motivation and self-esteem and can strain relationships with family members, particularly children, who may grow up without the presence of their imprisoned parent. Individuals serving life sentences may become institutionalised over time, adapting to the prison environment as their new reality. This can lead to a loss of self-sufficiency and create a dependency on the prison system for basic needs, routines, and decision-making.

The stress, trauma, and prolonged exposure to the prison environment associated with a life sentence can take a toll on both mental and physical health. The lack of autonomy, restricted movement, potential exposure to violence, and limited access to healthcare resources within the prison system can contribute to deteriorating health conditions and reduced life expectancy. Adapting to the demands of life imprisonment can lead individuals to adopt diverse coping mechanisms and survival strategies, which may be perceived as positive or negative depending on one's perspective. Among these approaches are finding solace in religion, channelling creativity through various outlets, seizing educational prospects, and forming support networks within the prison community. Although these coping mechanisms are crucial for resilience, they might also inadvertently reinforce institutionalisation and dependency. On the other hand, some prisoners might resort to negative outlets as a means of coping with the challenges they face.

It is crucial to recognise the significant impact of a life sentence.

COPING:

“Serving life is like dying with your eyes open. The Lifers I knew were resolved to the situation but survived despite the hopelessness. In fact, some found hope in small things, particularly visits, if they were lucky enough to get them, but serving a life sentence in prison feels like a long and arduous journey towards a freedom that is not guaranteed to be there once you arrive.”

The emotional turmoil one may experience through a life sentence is difficult for anyone to comprehend but specifically for those serving such long sentences. Emotions are dynamic and subject to change throughout the years and during various periods of incarceration. Factors such as losing contact with individuals, experiencing the loss of a loved one, significant milestones like birthdays or anniversaries, special occasions, and even the personal sense of self undergoing transformation can all contribute to these emotional fluctuations. Prisoners have shared their experiences, expressing that unless they exhibit visible signs of self-harm, visible distress, or engage in disruptive behaviour, support may not be readily offered.

Each person's journey is unique, and it may not always be apparent if someone is struggling. Regardless, it is essential to consistently suggest, offer, and actively pursue resources and support for individuals in order to ensure their well-being. A range of powerful emotions, including guilt, injustice, resentment, depression, hopelessness, anger, denial, frustration, despair, sadness, boredom, and sexual deprivation, can contribute to extreme actions such as drug abuse, self-harm, violence, or even suicide. For prisoners who have no established relationships, the pains of imprisonment can inflict even greater damage, leaving them more vulnerable to harm, both from within themselves and from other prisoners or staff. Similarly, the absence of meaningful connections can make these individuals more susceptible to vulnerability, further emphasising the importance of safeguarding measures for their well-being. Even for those who have some form of support, maintaining connections with the outside world throughout their life sentence will be immensely challenging. It is crucial to explore every available avenue to assist prisoners in managing their emotions and nurturing their relationships with the outside world.

It is essential to acknowledge that prisoners find themselves in their current situation due to a myriad of factors. Many of these individuals may have experienced significant trauma in their lives long before entering the prison system. Additionally, it is important to recognise that a considerable number of prisoners lack a robust support network or may no longer have the means to establish one. The prison environment is inherently challenging for both prisoners and staff alike. Under such extreme pressures and complex dynamics, some individuals may resort to bullying as a means of self-protection or survival. Understanding these underlying circumstances and the complex interplay within the prison setting is crucial for fostering a safer and more supportive environment for all individuals involved.

It is evident that external support plays a vital role in helping prisoners navigate life inside the prison walls and subsequently aids the staff in their duties. Consequently, prioritising mental health should be a primary focus for every prison establishment. It is crucial to provide prisoners with the necessary resources to cope with their emotions, even if these emotions are not readily apparent to staff. Actively seeking out support groups and agencies that can address specific areas of concern is essential. In this regard, we have compiled an updated list of available agencies that may be able to provide assistance which can be found on our website under “resources” alternatively you can write to or email us to request a copy. Moreover, if you believe that a prisoner can benefit from our services, you are also encouraged to make a referral. Together, we can contribute to the well-being of those serving life sentences.

FAMILIES AND LOVED ONES:

“From my perspective, the family gets incarcerated, too, when someone is missing from the family, it always has a psychological or emotional effect on the entire family.”

Families of prisoners serving life sentences often experience emotional distress. They may feel grief, sadness, and a sense of loss upon learning about the life sentence. The emotional toll can be long-lasting, as they grapple with the reality of their loved one spending the rest of their life in prison. Supporting someone through a life sentence is an incredibly challenging and emotionally draining process for their loved ones. These individuals often experience a range of difficult emotions, including shame, guilt, sadness, grief, despair, hopelessness, and pressure. They are the hidden victims who must navigate this intense journey, and those without any support can face detrimental consequences that extend to their peers and communities.

Life-sentenced prisoners may have children and family members who struggle to understand or come to terms with the situation, and they may be compelled to conceal this aspect of their lives, placing a heavy burden on themselves and their loved ones. Children with a parent serving a life sentence may experience unique emotional challenges. They may grapple with feelings of abandonment, confusion, and a sense of loss. It is in the best interest of the community to recognise the hardships and stigmas that families face when someone they love is sentenced to life imprisonment, and every effort should be made to provide support. Loved ones rely on the system and prison staff to care for their incarcerated loved ones to the best of their abilities. When this is achieved, it can create a more stable environment for staff, prisoners, and their families, enabling them to better cope with daily life both inside and outside of prison.

Those on the outside can experience secondary effects of imprisonment, which can lead to mental and physical health issues. Staff should understand that prisoners also carry their own guilt concerning the strain their imprisonment places on their loved ones and the reliance placed upon them. It is crucial for the prison system to include families or significant others in the prisoners' objectives or to notify them of any behavioural changes. Importantly, feedback from the family should be sought to determine how best to assist the prisoner. Various reports have highlighted the need for prison staff to contact prisoners' loved ones and work collaboratively to foster inclusive understanding and shared goals.

Additionally, it is important to maintain contact with families when prisoners are moved to segregation. When a prisoner is placed in segregation, it often signifies a more restrictive and isolating environment. By contacting the prisoner's family, the prison system can provide reassurance and information about the situation, alleviating concerns and keeping the family informed about the well-being of their loved one. By maintaining contact and open lines of communication, the prison system can obtain feedback from families about the prisoner's experience in segregation, any changes in behaviour or mental health concerns, and any additional support that may be needed. This demonstrates a commitment to transparency and inclusiveness, recognising that families play a significant role in the prisoner's life and how they manage their sentence.

The impact of life imprisonment on family members is not well understood, but studies and our own research have shown that uncertainty, pressure, and feelings of hopelessness are recurring themes that resonate with both prisoners and their children and family members. Families may take on the responsibility of advocating for their loved one's rights, seeking legal representation, and pursuing appeals or sentence reduction efforts. These efforts require emotional investment, time, and financial resources, adding to the burdens already faced by families. It can be emotionally draining to provide ongoing support, maintain communication, and navigate the complexities of the criminal justice system.

For the families, taking care of their own well-being becomes crucial in order to sustain themselves through the challenges they face. Support networks, counselling services, and community organisations can play a vital role in providing assistance and resources to families coping with the effects of a loved one's life sentence.

Our organisation provides specialised support services to families of individuals serving life sentences. We understand the unique challenges and hardships they face, and we are here to offer assistance. If you know of any families who could benefit from our support, we encourage you to make a referral. Together, we can provide the necessary guidance and resources to help these families navigate their journey and cope with the impact of life imprisonment.

CONTACT AND CONNECTION:

“Out of sight, out of mind. Most people have good intentions of keeping in touch, but they lack the initiative and execution. Most people lose their family and friends over time because outside, life goes on and prisoners cannot be a part of that.”

The impact of lengthy imprisonment includes social isolation and the loss of contact with the outside world, which can have significant effects on life-sentenced prisoners. These individuals may experience grief over the loss of family members, the inability to have or raise children, and a sense of exclusion from friends and family networks. Financial strains can also hinder contact and connection, as families may struggle with expenses, travel costs for visitation, and supporting the basic needs of the incarcerated individual.

For those serving life sentences, relationships provide emotional support, love, and a sense of belonging, which can contribute to the well-being of these prisoners. Strong family ties can also have a positive impact on reintegration into society upon release. A strong support system can provide encouragement, guidance, and resources that help prisoners cope with the challenges of a lengthy sentence and prepare for life after release.

Prisoners' communication should be regarded as valuable and deserving of respect and support. Fair treatment in handling mail, including the timely delivery of letters and parcels, as well as the proper handling of emails and legal post, should be prioritised and conducted with the utmost respect. Prisoners should always be given daily opportunities to make phone calls if they do not have access to in-cell phones. Emergency credit should be provided to ensure the implementation of safeguarding measures and the preservation of family ties. For individuals who face difficulties in maintaining connections due to limited access to phones, financial constraints, or visitation restrictions, it is not uncommon for prisoners to isolate themselves from the outside world as a coping mechanism. However, this withdrawal from external support systems can further institutionalise the individual and places a greater responsibility on the system to cater to their needs.

The prison system should ensure the availability and accessibility of various communication channels, such as regular mail, phone calls, emails, and video visits. These channels should be reliable, secure, and affordable, allowing for meaningful and frequent interaction between prisoners and their loved ones. Embracing technological advancements is crucial in facilitating virtual communication, especially for families who face distance or financial constraints. Guidance and support should be provided to prisoners and their families to help them navigate and strengthen their relationships during incarceration. This can involve offering information on effective communication strategies, coping mechanisms, and available support services. Implementing specialised programmes, including family counselling, parenting classes, support groups, and educational initiatives, can promote healthy relationships and emotional well-being for both prisoners and their families.

When prisoners have access to positive relationships and support systems, they are more likely to establish pro-social connections and engage in activities that promote personal growth. This, in turn, enhances prison and community safety. By enabling and facilitating contact, prison systems can promote the well-being of incarcerated individuals, strengthen their social support networks, and contribute to their successful reintegration into society. It is an essential aspect of a humane and effective approach to incarceration that recognises the importance of maintaining connections and supporting the holistic needs of prisoners.

FINANCES:

“Financial support is important, but it is not impossible to serve time without it, it is only less comfortable. Emotional support from the outside can become unimportant. Many people serving time cut off communication with the outside to make serving time actually easier. Sometimes, cutting off that communication goes hand-and-hand with losing financial support. I can remember times where severing those ties were worth losing the financial support that was attached to it.”

For prisoners serving long or life sentences, financial support becomes a significant concern. Many of them lack outside sources of income, and their families may struggle to provide the necessary financial assistance, especially over an extended period. Even if prisoners have some outside support, their loved ones are often limited in how much they can afford, particularly when they have other financial obligations and expenses related to the imprisonment. While all prisoners require some form of income, it is particularly crucial for life-sentenced prisoners. Having access to work and the ability to manage their own money to some extent can have a positive impact on their mental well-being and help them maintain a sense of autonomy within the prison environment. To prevent issues such as bullying, violence, and debt, it is essential to prioritise life-sentenced prisoners for employment opportunities, offering them as many hours of work as the establishment can reasonably provide and the prisoner is willing to undertake.

Prisoners should receive appropriate payment for their work or participation in educational programmes. Even if the establishment is unable to accommodate them with employment, they should still receive compensation if they are willing to work. Many prisoners may have been the primary breadwinners for their families before incarceration, and feeling like a financial burden to their loved ones can cause frustration and strain on their relationships. Similarly, for those prisoners without external support, identifying and providing them with work or educational opportunities is of utmost importance. In-cell packs can be made available to offer guidance on money management, and certain organisations may be able to assist prisoners financially by providing grants for necessary essentials. Some prisons also accept clothing donations to help prisoners who cannot afford to purchase their own clothing. Supporting prisoners in this way sets a positive example within the establishments and can promote a sense of dignity and self-sufficiency. It is important to raise awareness about the financial support options available to the loved ones of prisoners who may be struggling with the costs associated with imprisonment. Our organisation may be able to provide assistance in this regard.

Over the years, costs can accumulate for phone credit, canteen purchases, clothing allowances, technical appliances, travel for visitors, and other visit-related expenditures. Every effort should be made to ensure that individuals are not burdened financially, as this can alleviate some of the stress in an already challenging situation. Additionally, it should be recognised that many prisoners may enter prison with existing debts, as creditors can still pursue collection efforts while individuals are incarcerated. The inability to earn the same income as before incarceration can create financial hardship for their children and families, making it difficult to make ends meet.

Supporting prisoners in managing and alleviating their financial burdens can contribute to their overall well-being and the stability of their families.

HEALTH AND SAFETY:

“Then, at some point, sometimes a year or two later, it hits you like a bomb: you’re going to be here for a long, long, time. That realisation is so powerful some people freak out.”

This segment addresses the dual aspects of physical and mental health of life-sentenced prisoners, as well as the safety of the prison establishment. It is crucial to recognise that prisoners may enter the system with existing physical or mental health issues, and additional challenges can arise, or pre-existing conditions can worsen during their incarceration. Conducting comprehensive physical health and psychological assessments from the outset can potentially identify and address these issues proactively. As the population of life-sentenced prisoners continues to grow, many of them are aging, and their life expectancy within the prison system is significantly lower than that of the general population. Research indicates that our prisons are lagging in providing the necessary resources and equipping staff with the knowledge and skills required to address health complications, especially as it falls outside the traditional remit of prison officers. Ensuring that life-sentenced prisoners receive their prescribed medical treatments and supporting their physical limitations is critical for the overall safety of both prisoners and staff.

This approach can reduce tension in an already hostile environment and help prevent accidents or conflicts. Proper staffing and responsive management of safer custody phone lines are essential in managing the well-being of all prisoners. Families may report concerns about suicide or notice changes in the behaviour of their incarcerated loved ones. It is crucial to manage and monitor the safer custody phone lines effectively, providing follow-ups and updates to the individuals who initiate the calls. Consideration should be given to implementing updates and communication through social platforms as a time-saving measure for staff and external individuals. Additionally, ensuring proper monitoring and allocation of medication in a timely manner is vital to prisoner and staff safety. Neglecting medication schedules or inadequate supervision may lead to prisoners trading medications, resulting in potentially dangerous situations.

Promoting a sense of dignity in meeting prisoners' medical needs and providing opportunities for physical activity, within the limitations of their time, is beneficial for their overall physical and mental health. Establishing effective communication links between loved ones, healthcare providers, and social care is pivotal in ensuring prisoners' needs are understood and met. In cases involving mental health concerns, it is crucial to adhere to official policies to prevent negative outcomes. However, it is also important to emphasise the seriousness of well-being for both staff and prisoners, providing opportunities for enhancing well-being, sharing ideas, and facilitating discussions in which prisoners can participate. For prisoners with disabilities, their cells should be appropriately adapted to support their specific needs. It is essential to recognise that many prisoners may develop physical and mental disabilities over long periods of incarceration, and the necessary accommodations should be made accordingly.

Access to quality healthcare services is crucial for the health and safety of prisoners. This includes regular medical check-ups, timely treatment of physical and mental health conditions, access to medications, and preventive care measures. Qualified healthcare professionals who are sensitive to the unique needs of prisoners should provide these services. Given the higher prevalence of mental health issues among life-sentenced prisoners, it is important to provide comprehensive mental health support, including assessments, counselling, therapy, and specialised treatment for various conditions.

Implementing robust suicide prevention measures is paramount to ensuring the safety of life-sentenced prisoners. This entails conducting regular mental health screenings, assessing suicide risk, training staff to recognise warning signs, providing crisis intervention and trauma informed support services, and maintaining a secure physical environment. Maintaining a violence-free environment requires effective security measures, conflict resolution training for staff, addressing overcrowding and gang-related issues, and creating a safe living environment that minimises the risk of physical violence. Comprehensive training for prison staff on safety protocols, human rights, and the unique needs of life-sentenced prisoners is crucial.

Staff should be equipped to recognise signs of abuse, respond to emergencies, and engage in respectful and professional interactions. Regular supervision and accountability mechanisms should be in place to prevent misconduct and promote a positive and safe environment. Additionally, regular maintenance and upkeep of facilities are necessary to prevent health hazards and promote a healthy living environment. Continual evaluation of health and safety protocols, collecting feedback from prisoners, and incorporating best practices into policies and procedures are vital. Engaging with experts, human rights organisations, and community stakeholders can help identify areas for improvement and ensure a sustained focus on enhancing the health and safety of life-sentenced prisoners. By implementing these measures, the prison system can support the well-being, dignity, and fundamental rights of those serving life sentences.

PURPOSE:

“Life makes no sense and what is the point of it all? We just want to feel good for a change. And then there is the glimmer. We catch it out of the corner of our eye, and we are drawn - to the possibilities of freedom.”

The prospect of serving a life sentence in prison can be overwhelming and lead to despair among prisoners. The lack of resources and support services to help them cope throughout their sentence exacerbates the impact on their well-being. The monotony, boredom, and lack of purpose experienced in prison can contribute to the development of complex disorders, behavioural challenges, and changes in behaviour. Many prisoners are psychologically damaged by their long sentences. Every lifer's perception of what matters to them and how they want to approach their sentence will vary. It is crucial for prisoners to have opportunities for work, education, access to the gym, or any productive time outside of their cells. These activities are key to promoting positive functionality within the prison system and supporting prisoners' mental and physical health. The numbing effect of life sentences often drives prisoners to turn to drugs as a means of coping. The absence of purposeful activity and extreme boredom in prison make individuals vulnerable to drug exposure, leading some who may not have had drug issues before to develop reliance on substances to cope with their situation.

Staff members must recognise life-sentenced prisoners who are experiencing a sense of "dead time" and make every effort to help them feel useful and strive towards meaningful goals. Often, prisoners' express feelings of languishing through their long sentences, causing anything they accomplish or strive for within the system to feel "worthless." Despite staffing and resource limitations, prisons should seek external groups or organisations that can deliver successful interventions within their establishments. Seeking feedback from prisoners regarding realistic options for intervention should also be pursued. There is often a discrepancy between how prisoners appear on the surface and what they may be feeling behind closed doors.

Education and skill development play a vital role in providing purpose and personal growth. Engaging in educational programmes, vocational training, or skill-building activities offers individuals a sense of purpose and the opportunity for personal improvement. Activities such as journaling, reading, meditation, exercise, pet therapy, family days or counselling can help individuals gain self-understanding, work through past traumas, and develop strategies for personal growth. Serving as a mentor or seeking guidance from more experienced individuals within the prison community can provide a sense of purpose and contribute to personal development.

Building positive relationships and supporting fellow prisoners foster a sense of belonging and fulfilment. Exploring creative outlets such as painting, drawing, writing, or music allows individuals to express themselves and find purpose. Artistic activities enable emotional channelling, storytelling, skill development, and a sense of achievement. Volunteering in educational programmes, mentorship initiatives, or charitable projects provides an opportunity for giving back and making a positive impact. Active engagement in restorative justice programmes can help individuals find purpose by taking responsibility for their actions, seeking to repair harm, and reconciling with victims or the affected community. Participating in victim-offender dialogues, mediation, or reconciliation processes promotes personal growth and accountability. Some prisoners may find purpose in advocating for criminal justice reform and addressing systemic issues.

Engaging in legal research, writing, or participating in advocacy initiatives allows individuals to work towards positive change and contribute to the improvement of the criminal justice system. Sharing knowledge, skills, or personal experiences through peer education or support groups provides a sense of purpose. Organising workshops, leading discussions, or providing guidance to others who may be struggling creates a sense of responsibility and fulfilment. Maintaining external relationships is essential, as it provides a sense of purpose and connection. Staying connected through letters, phone calls, visits, and actively participating in family life contributes to a sense of belonging and support.

Creating an environment that supports purposeful activities and encourages rehabilitation is crucial for positive outcomes for incarcerated individuals and society as a whole.

SEEKING SUPPORT:

“Prison forced me to build a steel wall around my emotions to keep them in check. I had days where I wanted to cry, scream, and slit my wrists all at the same time but I couldn’t expose my weaknesses. Exposure to extreme stress can (and very often will) cause damage - mild or severe, temporary or permanent. I had to shove every emotion down so deep and just never think about much but making it through another day.”

Prisoners serving life sentences often feel apprehensive about seeking support from the system due to the scrutiny they face. They may also hesitate to rely on their loved ones, fearing that they would burden their families who already have their own daily life pressures, such as parenting, employment, health conditions, and caring responsibilities. It is essential for the safety and smooth running of the prison that staff make efforts to accommodate prisoners serving life sentences and support them in their day-to-day activities, allowing them to contribute meaningfully to themselves, their families, and the prison environment. To ensure support is readily available, it is recommended to have services like Listeners or Samaritans accessible at all times, with posters providing information about these services. Keeping prisoners well-informed about available sources of support and reaching out to relevant organisations is advisable.

The use of segregation should be minimised unless necessary for safeguarding purposes, and even then, it should be reserved for the shortest periods as specified in legislation. Segregation can worsen prisoners' circumstances and conditions, and many countries have eliminated it as an option for managing challenging behaviour. Health Organisations have criticised its desired outcomes, noting that it has a detrimental effect on prisoners' mental health, which, in turn, affects the overall prison environment. Some prisoners may view segregation as an escape, particularly in cases involving privacy, debt, or bullying issues, which can further contribute to unwanted behaviour. Privacy concerns pose significant challenges for prisoners, particularly long-termers. The prison system should prioritise the physical, mental, social, and spiritual health of both prisoners and staff, adopting a holistic approach. This approach helps prevent the deterioration of prisoners' health during their incarceration and enables them to adopt healthy behaviour patterns that aid in their progress. These skills can eventually be carried into the community upon their release.

The prison system must play its role in supporting prisoners serving life sentences by focusing on promoting personal growth. Each of these prisoners should have a dedicated case manager who closely collaborates with them to develop a comprehensive progression plan. This plan should address their specific needs, risks, and goals, considering factors such as education, vocational training, mental health, and substance abuse treatment. Offering a diverse range of educational and vocational programmes within the prison setting helps prisoners acquire new skills, improve their employability, and maintain a sense of purpose. Recognising the potential mental health challenges faced by prisoners serving life sentences, the prison system should prioritise mental health support. This includes providing access to mental health assessments, counselling, therapy, and specialised treatment for conditions such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance abuse disorders. Tailoring evidence-based programmes to the unique needs of prisoners serving life sentences is crucial.

Creating a prison environment that is supportive, therapeutic, and conducive to personal growth is essential. This involves providing opportunities for recreation, exercise, and cultural activities, as well as fostering a sense of community and meaningful social interactions among prisoners. Access to libraries, religious services, and expressive outlets like art and music can also contribute to their well-being. Recognising the importance of maintaining family connections, the prison system should facilitate regular visitation, encourage communication, and support family relationships. Regular evaluation and improvement of the support and services provided to prisoners serving life sentences are necessary.

Collaborating with external stakeholders, including community organisations, experts, and researchers, can help identify best practices, address service gaps, and ensure that the prison system remains focused on support and successful outcomes. By implementing these measures, the prison system can contribute to the well-being of prisoners serving life sentences, enabling them to lead purposeful and productive lives inside while maintaining safety.

PROGRESSION:

“Progression seems to be drifting away the closer I come to my liberation date. How is it possible for some people to progress so fast, while others, despite their best efforts seem to be going nowhere?”

The incentives for good behaviour in prison may initially hold little meaning for those serving life sentences, particularly during the early stages or while experiencing stagnation, especially when prisoners feel that they have many years ahead of them. Even for those who maintain their innocence, it is crucial not to exclude them from participating in courses and activities. Prison staff should make efforts to help all life sentenced prisoners engage. The primary goal for staff members should be to guide prisoners through the system and assist them in achieving progress. Understanding how prisoners' feelings towards themselves and their sentences will unfold at different points along their journey is essential for everyone involved. The relationship between staff and prisoners plays a significant role in a prisoner's behaviour and is built on support and understanding. While certain individuals may present complex challenges, the development and progression of a prisoner often reflect the intervention and interaction of the prison system. Unfortunately, there is evidence to suggest that staff may be quicker to focus on negative reports regarding prisoners rather than acknowledging the positives.

It is of utmost importance that prisoners who are doing well or making positive contributions to the prison environment and their relationships are recognised and praised, especially for those in the high-risk category. Trust between staff and prisoners increases the likelihood of relevant information being disclosed and correctly interpreted. Staff members responsible for assessments often have large and complex caseloads, particularly in cases of life sentence prisoners, and may work at a distance from those they need to assess. Engagement from both prisoners and staff is necessary for activities such as sentence plans, risk assessments, OASys, and category reviews. If an individual poses a risk, it is essential to help prisoners understand why and provide them with the support and resources to practically improve and reduce those risks. Progression should ideally be based on various factors, including behaviour, attitude, educational achievements, and pro-social interactions throughout the system. For those facing difficulties in progressing, the OMiC policy framework states that prisoners whose release is determined by the Parole Board should have the opportunity to address their offending behaviour and progress before their parole eligibility date. Establishments must ensure they facilitate this process.

Importantly, prisoners should not be disadvantaged for not achieving an objective beyond their control. It is common for information about personal development to not reach recording systems that are later used in risk assessments. Boredom is a significant issue, and when staff and management are unable to address it, motivation can suffer. The years of stagnation often feel like a regression, undermining prisoners' sense of accomplishment. Restrictions on the regime for life-sentenced prisoners should be based on risk assessments and security concerns rather than the length of their original sentence or index offence.

Staff should be attentive to opportunities for prisoners to apply for pre-tariff reviews or make referrals through Guittard applications, which allow consideration for transfer to open prisons without the cases being referred to the Parole Board. Involving the family or loved ones of the life sentence prisoner, where appropriate, in the planning, delivery, and review of interventions addressing the risk of harm to others and the likelihood of reoffending is important, aiming to maximise the positive influence of the family on the prisoner. Progress cannot be achieved by the prisoner alone; they require support from prison staff.

For lifers and particularly those who are category A, consistency should be maintained by assigning the same offender manager whenever possible. Access to a dynamic source of useful and up-to-date information and guidance is vital. Staff should explain and assist prisoners in reducing their risk. Many prisons have their own programmes and initiatives designed to support prisoners' progress.

Offering programmes that strengthen family bonds, provide parenting support, and assist with reintegration into the community can improve prisoners' chances of progression and successful re-entry. Prison authorities should actively engage prisoners serving life sentences in pre-release and re-entry planning.

This involves developing personalised re-entry plans, providing access to job placement services, housing assistance, educational opportunities, and connecting individuals with community-based organisations that can offer support and resources towards progression and upon release. The prison system should ensure transparency, fairness, and accessibility to the progression process and reviews, providing clear information about eligibility criteria and facilitating assistance which can help prisoners understand what they are working towards.

PRISON TRANSFERS:

“Transfers can be bittersweet but are a painful reminder of the journey you are on, sitting in those sweatboxes for hours looking outside the window at a world that can’t see you and that you can’t be a part of can break you.”

The process of transferring prisoners from one prison to another can have a significant impact on both prisoners and their loved ones. Often, prisoners are not notified in advance of their wing or prison transfers for security reasons. This unexpectedness and lack of information can create uncertainty and frustration, leading to attrition among prisoners and staff.

Numerous prisons, and specifically Category A prisons, are typically situated in remote locations, and enforce a policy that prohibits the use of in-cell phones, which poses challenges for families who struggle to afford travel expenses and maintain communication with their incarcerated loved ones. Consequently, the already strained connection between prisoners and their families is further impeded. It is important for staff to take these difficulties into account when making decisions regarding prisoner transfers. Such transfers can amplify the reality of a prisoner's situation as they are uprooted from their previous facility and compelled to resettle in a new prison. This transition holds significant emotional weight in their journey, particularly when they had become accustomed to their prior environment. The experience of arriving in a new prison after feeling settled in their previous establishment can be disorienting and unsettling. However, in certain cases, transfers may be well-received, especially if they involve a lower security category, proximity to the prisoner's home, or access to resources that align with their sentence plan. To avoid disrupting prisoners progress, staff should refrain from transferring them while they are actively engaged in courses, as such transfers could impede their advancement. Irrespective of the circumstances, when staff facilitate a transfer, it is crucial to ensure that the prisoners' medical notes, including any details pertaining to the Assessment, Care in Custody, and Teamwork (ACCT) process, accompany them.

This crucial information is often overlooked, leading to complications for both the prisoner and the receiving establishment. Without proper awareness of a prisoner's history of self-harm or suicidal behaviours, the receiving prison relies solely on the prisoner's self-report of their current state of mind, which may not provide a comprehensive understanding. Conducting a thorough background check can mitigate potential issues and ensure appropriate care throughout the transfer process. When facilitating a transfer, the handling and transfer of prisoners' property assume paramount importance. Some prisoners possess only a few belongings that hold immense personal value, and the loss of these items can cause significant distress and disruption. Both prisoners and their loved ones often lack the means to replace or recover lost property. The Prison and Probation Ombudsman consistently receives complaints regarding property loss, highlighting the necessity for proper handling procedures to save time and prevent unnecessary grievances. The guidelines outlined in the Prison Service Instructions (PSI) regarding prisoners' property management emphasise the importance of this matter. It states that *“How HMPPS looks after prisoners' possessions may be symbolic of how we look after the people in our care. A prisoner's property is likely to mean more than just what an item's specific use is or its monetary value. It may hold personal significance, especially for those with few possessions in prison. Adhering to these instructions not only ensures the physical preservation of prisoners' belongings but also acknowledges their emotional significance, particularly for individuals with limited personal possessions in the prison environment. Having one's own possessions and having some choice about them may foster feelings of autonomy and, in a small but potentially significant way, provide individuals with a small space of their own while in prison.”*

It is crucial to prioritise several key aspects when facilitating a prisoner's transfer to a different establishment. Clear communication is necessary to ensure that the prisoner comprehends the reasons behind their transfer. This understanding helps to alleviate confusion and maintain transparency throughout the process. Additionally, measures should be taken to prevent the loss or misplacement of the prisoner's possessions during transit. Safeguarding their personal belongings not only preserves their material value but also acknowledges the significance these items may hold for the prisoner, promoting a sense of stability and continuity during the transition. Furthermore, it is important to provide the prisoner with comprehensive information about the available resources in the new location. This includes access to support services, educational programmes, healthcare facilities, and any other pertinent resources that can assist in their rehabilitation and well-being. Equipping prisoners with this knowledge empowers them to navigate their new environment effectively and take advantage of the opportunities and support systems available to them.

PAROLE:

“For a lifer who is trying to earn his freedom, the margin for error is razor thin. I've seen lifers seemingly do everything right and seemingly still be denied for things out of their control.”

Life sentenced prisoners, even after serving their minimum tariff, do not automatically qualify for release. Many prisoners exceed their tariff expiry period, sometimes by several years. The period leading up to a parole hearing is critical and highly stressful, as prisoners may let their emotions overwhelm them during this time. The denial of release by the parole board can act as a catalyst for self-harm and self-sabotage. For most prisoners, especially those who have spent a significant portion of their lives in prison, a rejection by the parole board instils despair and despondency. Prolonged incarceration can make individuals feel increasingly hopeless and institutionalised. Therefore, systems must focus on providing practical support to prisoners as they work towards parole and establish clear objectives for this period. Building a strong rapport between key workers and prisoners is essential, and regular engagement with probation services is crucial.

It is vital to provide a fair assessment of the prisoner's progression and accomplishments. Many prisoners express that they often have limited time to build rapport with staff, hindering their ability to fully understand the prisoners' needs and behaviours. Staff must make adequate preparations to prevent unnecessary parole delays and ensure all necessary documents are filed and up to date. Prisoners must be given every opportunity to seek legal representation and access key documents to improve their chances at parole, and staff should facilitate this process. If the parole board denies release or suggests an alternative course of action, they should clearly communicate the reasons for their decision. Staff and prisoners should then work together to establish an action plan to work towards before the next hearing. Emotional support should be offered following a negative decision from the parole board, as unfortunately, there have been cases of deaths resulting from parole rejections. To effectively support individuals seeking parole, familiarise yourself with the parole process.

Understand the criteria, guidelines, and expectations for parole eligibility, as well as the steps involved in the decision-making process. This knowledge will enable you to provide accurate information and guidance to those seeking parole. Assist individuals in preparing their parole case by helping them gather relevant documents, such as employment records, educational certificates, treatment and programme completion certificates, and character references. Work with them to present their case effectively, highlighting their personal growth, rehabilitation efforts, and plans for successful reintegration into the community. Offer to review and provide constructive feedback on their parole letters, statements, or any documents they need to submit for their parole hearing. Help them articulate their achievements, goals, and commitment to positive change, ensuring their submissions are clear, coherent, and compelling.

It is important to support individuals in creating a comprehensive re-entry plan that addresses their housing, employment, healthcare, and support needs upon release. Assist prisoners in identifying resources, connecting with community organisations, and providing referrals for services such as housing assistance, job training programmes, mental health counselling, and substance abuse services will help individuals develop essential life skills that can enhance their chances of successful reintegration.

Other assistance can include resume writing, job interview practice, budgeting and financial planning, conflict resolution skills, and communication skills. Encourage prisoners' participation in educational or vocational programmes to further develop their skills and increase their employability. Encourage the development of a support network for individuals seeking parole, connecting them with mentors, support groups, or organisations specialising in assisting individuals during the re-entry process.

A strong support network provides emotional support, guidance, and encouragement during the transition from incarceration to community life. Throughout the parole process, provide emotional support and encourage individuals to express their feelings and how they can overcome challenges. Remind them of their progress and strengths and help build their confidence as they prepare for parole hearings and potential release.

It is important to note that supporting individuals towards parole should always be within the framework of legal and ethical boundaries. It is advisable to collaborate with professionals, organisations, and individuals experienced in parole support to ensure the best possible guidance and assistance.

OPEN CONDITIONS:

“The tough part is readjustment to freedom. Forming or re-establishing relationships is difficult after leaving an institution where you could never trust anyone. Significant time spent in prison can permanently damage your ability to form close ties to others. That's the biggest tragedy of incarceration, since a meaningful life cries out for deep, human connection.”

We consider the transfer of a prisoner from closed to open conditions to be a significant milestone in their life sentence. This transition marks a crucial phase in the journey of a life-sentenced prisoner as they move closer to eventual release. The purpose of open conditions is to facilitate re-entry by providing greater freedom, life skills, and autonomy. For long-term life-sentenced prisoners, who have spent a considerable time in closed conditions, adjusting to and alternating between life inside and outside the prison can be extremely challenging. Inadequate preparation for this change can make it difficult for prisoners to cope with the demands of everyday life beyond the prison walls. To progress towards a semblance of normalcy, prisoners are gradually moved through the system and into open conditions in preparation for their eventual release. However, there have been concerns raised about the lack of collaborative planning, preparation for modern working life, and improved digital skills specifically tailored to assist long-termers through the system and towards release.

Life skills should be a greater focus throughout the entire system, particularly in open conditions, considering the duration of imprisonment for life-sentenced prisoners. The transition to open conditions can sometimes be experienced as a "culture shock" by life-sentenced prisoners, despite the time it took to reach that point. Moving to open conditions can evoke a sense of hope and anticipation for life-sentenced prisoners. It may be seen as a step towards increased freedom, greater independence, and an opportunity to demonstrate progress and readiness for eventual release. However, along with excitement, there can be feelings of anxiety and uncertainty about the unfamiliar aspects of the open prison environment.

Adjusting to new rules, assuming increased responsibility, and navigating the challenges of reintegration can be sources of worry. Lifers may feel pressure to prove themselves and fear the repercussions of any missteps or setbacks during their time in open conditions, as it may jeopardise their progress and potential release. Transitioning to open conditions means experiencing greater freedom of movement and fewer physical restraints compared to closed prisons. This change requires adapting to a new level of personal responsibility and decision-making. Building trust with prison staff and authorities becomes crucial for life-sentenced prisoners in open prisons. They understand that their behaviour, compliance with rules, and engagement in programmes and activities play a significant role in demonstrating their commitment to rehabilitation and eventual release. Lifers may feel the weight of societal expectations and judgments regarding their progress and behaviour in open conditions.

Moving to open conditions often entails forming new relationships and support networks within the open prison environment. Lifers may seek connections with fellow prisoners who are also working towards release and can provide positive influences. Adjusting to increased freedom requires finding a balance between enjoying personal liberties and fulfilling responsibilities.

Lifers must understand the boundaries and expectations of open conditions while making responsible choices that contribute to their rehabilitation. They should remain actively engaged in ongoing rehabilitation efforts, such as participating in educational programmes, vocational training, counselling, and addressing any underlying issues. Lifers need to focus on personal growth, acquire new skills, and develop strategies to maintain positive change. While in open conditions, lifers should actively prepare for their eventual release by working on their reintegration plan, securing employment opportunities, reconnecting with family and support networks, and addressing any remaining legal or logistical requirements. It is essential for prison staff, case managers, and support systems to understand and address the emotional and practical considerations faced by life-sentenced prisoners during this transitional phase. Providing appropriate support, guidance, and resources can help lifers navigate the challenges and embrace the opportunities presented by this phase of their sentence.

RELEASE:

“When I was released from prison after 29 years, it was a mixture of emotions. There was fear, excitement, anxiety all rolled into one. I didn’t know what to expect and so many thoughts were going through my head. It can be quite difficult and discouraging. For some it’s a huge adjustment. Finding employment can be difficult. There are obstacles to overcome at every step. A great many wind up blowing it and come back to prison quickly. Not unexpected, since they are put into situations with not much support, only now they have extra hoops to jump through and you have to do it on one leg.”

The period of release is a highly vulnerable time for many prisoners, as they face immediate practical challenges when reintegrating into the community, despite their anticipation of the release date. Securing housing becomes the top priority, followed by establishing a source of income through employment or state benefits. It is crucial for them to connect with agencies that can assist with other issues such as mental health or substance misuse.

Preparation for release among life-sentenced prisoners is often insufficient. Approaching release can be the most turbulent time during a prison sentence, characterised by uncertainties, anxieties, and the need for adjustment. The newfound freedom to make independent choices can be daunting. Both prison staff and the prisoners themselves should prioritise creating a comprehensive release plan. Individuals who have spent most of their lives in prison, with limited exposure to the outside world, will find it increasingly challenging to adapt to a new way of living.

This difficulty is exacerbated when they lack stable relationships and financial resources. Despite the preparation and steps taken towards their release, adapting to a new lifestyle remains a significant responsibility. The importance of this phase in the reintegration process cannot be overstated, and prisoners require extensive support to navigate their release and reintegrate into an ever-changing and digitally advanced society. For many individuals, the world will have advanced beyond their recollection, making technological systems and societal structures feel alien to those newly released. Assistance should be provided to prisoners in applying for identification documents and ensuring they have their national insurance number. Arrangements for accommodation must be made, and establishing a bank account becomes a necessity. Regular communication with loved ones should be maintained whenever possible.

Often, prisoners leave prison without proper travel arrangements, which can affect their probation attendance. Therefore, it is essential to check and provide maps or instructions for geographic navigation. Many life-sentenced prisoners will be required to live temporarily in Approved Premises upon release. People transitioning from prison face various challenges, including lower levels of education, limited work experience, untreated mental illness, histories of substance abuse, and emotional trauma. The two most significant adjustment challenges identified for prisoners who have served long sentences and have been out of society for an extended period, are adjusting to less structure in daily life and having fewer social contacts. Prison life is highly structured, and prisoners with long sentences become accustomed to this structure. Therefore, the absence of structure in the outside world can cause shock and deep distress. Additionally, while some individuals may return to their home communities or families, their social networks may have dissolved or changed, necessitating the need to rebuild or create new social connections.

Supporting life-sentenced prisoners upon release involves securing stable housing. Assistance should also be provided in obtaining employment or vocational training opportunities. This may involve offering job search assistance, helping create resumes, and facilitating connections with employers or job training programmes that are open to hiring individuals with a criminal record. Promoting the development of skills that are in demand in the job market is crucial. Education and skill development should be supported to enhance the knowledge and skills of life-sentenced prisoners.

Recognising the potential mental health challenges faced by life-sentenced prisoners is important. Assistance should be provided in accessing appropriate support, such as mental health professionals, counselling services, or support groups, to help with emotional well-being and adjustment to life outside of prison. For individuals with substance abuse issues, support should be given to access specialised treatment programmes or support groups. It is crucial to help them find resources for overcoming obstacles and maintaining their re-entry into society.

Encouraging the development of a strong support network can be achieved by connecting life-sentenced prisoners with mentors, peer support groups, or community organisations that provide guidance, understanding, and a sense of belonging. Rebuilding relationships with family members and loved ones is important, and support should be provided to facilitate this process. This may involve facilitating communication, encouraging family counselling if needed, and addressing any underlying issues that may impact reintegration.

Family and peer support is crucial for the successful transition of life-sentenced prisoners. Providing guidance on understanding legal rights, obligations, and restrictions is important as individuals reintegrate into society. Assistance should be given in navigating post-release supervision requirements, probation conditions, or restrictions placed upon them. Educating them on their rights and connecting them with legal assistance, if needed, is beneficial. Encouraging life-sentenced prisoners to participate in community activities, volunteer work, or programmes that promote positive social involvement is important. Supporting their engagement in pro-social activities helps them build a sense of purpose and belonging within the community.

Ongoing support and monitoring are crucial after their release. Regular check-ins, encouragement, and provision of resources as needed are important for their successful transition. Collaboration with community-based organisations, social service providers, and other stakeholders is necessary to establish a comprehensive and coordinated support system.

In summary, supporting life-sentenced prisoners upon release requires a multidimensional approach that addresses their practical, emotional, and social needs. Collaboration with various service providers, community organisations, and support networks is necessary. By addressing these needs, we can facilitate a successful transition and promote the long-term well-being and reintegration of life-sentenced prisoners into society.

Failing to address the need for reform in life sentence policies might result in consequences that surpass the original goals, ultimately compromising the safety of prisons. It is of utmost importance to provide prisoners with hope and opportunities for redemption. Otherwise, upon release, they might be in their later years, lacking vital life skills and meaningful relationships that could showcase their transformation beyond the crime for which they were incarcerated.