



**Support, Help
and Advice for
Relatives and
Friends of
Prisoners**

Issue 16 Summer 2011

SHARP Making a Real Difference

Dear Donna,

Firstly a huge thank you for getting in touch with me. I think that SHARP and all of you that work there are legends and I'm sure that without you and your team a lot of us on the inside would be worse off. I read your newsletter with keen interest. I wish I'd known about your services sooner.

I was not aware of the Family Impact Statement and the judge wasn't aware of how much my family meant to me.

I had a nervous breakdown a couple of years back that saw me in a psych ward for several weeks. No real help came from the mental health team and the situation just went from bad to worse. This was exacerbated by the diagnosis of my bipolar which I'd been inflicted with all my life. It was a hell situation for my parents as they tried to get help for my emotional problems throughout my life but the medical services dismissed my problems as 'growing pains'.

I hadn't worked for 6 months when I landed a job in a retirement home as the head of catering. It was a private place and it was my dream job. My own budget, menu, staff and a belly full of fire! Great pay – I was finally there. Pay the debts off, get married, start a new life. Now every time I see a Disney World ad on the TV it breaks my heart as I so wanted to take my family – our first holiday together. I committed a dreadful crime – got 8 years and lost my family. My parents have been incredibly supportive. My mother is 60 next year, disabled, and also a bereavement counsellor for a local cancer hospital. I am so grateful to her for all she has done.

Prison itself has been a mixed bag. You soon learn to toe the line – but I've seen some truly amazing people with great stories to tell. I've started to attend church, I'm in the choir, I've taken up Tai-Chi and am due to start an Open University degree in History shortly. A lot of these opportunities weren't open to me on the outside, so I now have a purpose to my life for now, unlike so many who basically roll over and die once sentenced.

But for every positive there is a negative. The mental health team here is a shambles, as is the medication system. It seems that, for many who suffer from any sort of medical illness who commit a crime (and the BBC highlighted a huge number of such individuals) the easiest way for society to deal with them is bang them up and drug them up. I see it everyday – people who seriously should be in a specialist hospital wing. Indeed, my best mate here suffers from multi-personality problems and has waited over a year to see a specialist.

Luckily - the majority of the staff here make life a bit easier – once you get used to their ways! It's nice to be treated as a human occasionally – even if there are those who seem to want your life a misery. As one officer said – 'prison isn't your punishment, the sentence is.' But there are exceptions to the rule.

I enjoy art and write a lot of poetry. It's a great cure for stress. It frustrates me that it seems that no prisoner can tell the truth. That we are all treated the same in the system – when they don't actually know you and who you are. Luckily here I have nice grounds with lots of gardens and surrounding farmland. I love nature and shooting, and we have a huge amount of ducks in the grounds who visit from the nearby lake, and this little thing has often kept me sane. To be incarcerated in a concrete jungle would destroy me. Sometimes it's the little things that count.

I just wish all prisons had the same rules. At my holding prison we could have our own clothes and enjoy property exchanges. No such system works here. We do have catalogues so that we can purchase CD's, radios and clothes etc – which I guess is better than nothing.

Well enough of my drivel. Thanks for being there and please do contact my mother. She's waiting!

Regards
Graham

LOOK INSIDE

A woman's view of prison

Lola describes the lasting impact a prison sentence will have on her.

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Family Impact Statements

An important feature of SHARP's work. Find out more about the benefits they can bring.

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Got a question? FAQ's might help

SHARP is always ready to answer questions and to offer advice. It's why we're here.

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Unsure who can help & support?

Take a look at our Useful Contacts page to see the wealth of organisations ready to help.

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My Prison Experience – a female perspective

On 23rd September 2010, I was sent to prison. I was sentenced to 10 months for 2 counts of fraud. I was to serve 5 months in prison and the next 5 months without re-offending or else! I'm a single mum with 2 kids aged 15 and 8. In the end, I served 11 weeks mainly at HMP Drake Hall, with 5 days at the start on a remand wing at HMP Foston, something akin to being in a zoo! I then had 11 weeks on tag with a curfew, but at least I was home again with my kids. I'm still serving the last 5 months.

Looking back I should consider myself lucky, compared to the women I left behind in prison. Many would certainly not be going home to their kids, have a home, have a family and great friends to support them every step of the way. Like me, they will not get good support from the "system" inside or outside. Just meaningless courses and more medication, which makes up the rehabilitation we prisoners and ex-prisoners are supposed to get.

The most help and support I got in prison was from other prisoners. Many are caring, supportive and look out for each other. I supported one Polish lady, who was bullied because she was Polish, was nice, very afraid and had very poor English. I worked on Officers to get her moved to a safer wing, helped her learn English by setting exercises and reading with her, read her letters from her solicitor, got her on the appropriate medication by going to healthcare with her. We're still in touch.

Despite prison being an awful, awful place I can understand why women re-offend - life for some is easier on the inside. They are free from abuse, can become drug free, have a roof over their head, don't have to face the realities of no family or children being taken away, they are warm and have hot food, no responsibilities and are safe from the big bad world. What I don't understand is that the "authorities" don't understand this and don't do more to really help prisoners and ex-prisoners with their issues. Yes - we all have them, that's why we ended up in prison. I would agree a few in prison are really bad people, but the majority I think are victims of circumstances they got themselves in, and couldn't get out of.

Prison has left me with lifelong scars - despite the fact I have my kids, my home, my dogs, my family, my neighbours, my friends. I'm now medication free for depression and managing my panic attacks, and have just got a job. I'm claustrophobic, untrusting, feel like I don't fit in, don't sleep, have to take long walks, have constant flashbacks. Prison is always with me.

This is all about me – but what did this do to my children? Why was my sentence also theirs?

Lola

Ex-offender, still serving their official sentence



SHARP Family Impact Statements

Following a conviction, either after a trial or guilty plea, SHARP encourages clients to write to the Judge dealing with the case in which their relative is involved.

Why do we do this?

Many relatives and friends of the accused tend to feel helpless when someone is going through the justice system.

In a court case most accused people submit character references, but by sending a **Family Impact Statement** the judge is able to see what sort of person the accused is in the eye of his/her family and friends.

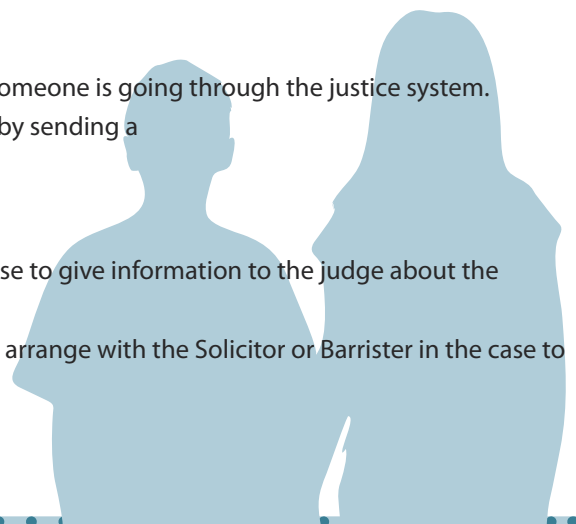
This is where writing to the judge can really help.

SHARP has prepared a Family Impact Statement form which you can use to give information to the judge about the impact of his decisions on the defendant and their family.

A blank form is available from SHARP and once completed you should arrange with the Solicitor or Barrister in the case to pass on a copy to the judge.

THIS SERVICE IS FREE AND CONFIDENTIAL

Ask SHARP for further information on the Family Impact Statement.



Frequently Asked Questions

Q - My relative/friend has just been sent to prison. How can I find out where they have been sent?

A - All prisoners can usually make one phone call on arrival in prison. If you do not hear from them then you can contact: The Prisoner Location Service by fax on **0121 626 2773** or www.prisoner.location.service@hmps.gsi.gov.uk

They will need the prisoners name, date of birth and reason for the enquiry. They do not have a telephone number and can take up to two weeks to respond, due to having to locate the prisoner and ask their permission for their whereabouts to be passed on.

Q - What happens when they get to prison?

A - The Criminal Justice System has a very useful website which has the answers to many questions about sentencing and prison life. The Prison walkthrough is particularly helpful. www.cjsonline.gov.uk

Q - What can a prisoner take into prison?

A - This varies from prison to prison and unfortunately it is not possible to give general advice. However all prisoners should take a sum of money to be put on their prison account, any medication they might need. It is useful to memorize or write down any important telephone numbers, as mobiles etc will be taken away.

Q - When can I visit my relative?

A - Usually you must arrange your visit with the prison beforehand. You may have to wait for your loved one to send you a 'visiting order' or inform you of their 'pin number' to call and book a visit. Other prisons may just have a booking line where you can simply call and book your visit. Some prisons allow a 'reception visit' in the first few days of a prisoner's sentence, contact the prison for information.

Q - How often can I visit?

A - Initially two visits per month. This can increase as prisoners gain privileges for good behaviour.

Q - Can I get help towards the cost of travelling to the prison?

A - There is an Assisted Prison Visits Scheme which you may apply to, to get your travelling expenses from prison visits refunded, when you are claiming certain benefits. It is possible to apply for payment in advance of travel, but this may take a while to organise. Contact: **0845 300 1423**

Q - How can I find out how to get to the prison?

A - The prison service website has all the details. See contact details on back page.

Q - Can my children visit?

A - Yes, if they are the dependants of the prisoner, or are over the age of 18 and no restrictions are in place.

Q - What can I take with me on my visits?

A - The easiest answer is nothing but loose change. Visitors may buy prisoners drinks and food whilst in the visitor's room, but they must be consumed before they return to their cells. Cigarettes, money and phone cards are not permitted.

Q - Can I send money into the prison?

A - Yes you can. Cheques and postal orders can be sent in and should be made payable H.M.P.S with the prisoner's full name and prison number on the back. Keep the counterfoil of any postal order you send and address the envelope to the prisoner themselves.

Q - How often am I allowed to write?

A - You can write as often as you like, there are no limits to the amount of letters a prisoner can receive.

Q - My relative has only just been sent to prison, why is he / she being moved already?

A - After leaving the court prisoners are very often taken to what is known as a 'holding' prison. They will only remain there until a placement becomes available for them at a suitable prison (one of the correct category).

Q - What are prison categories?

A - Prisons have categories from A – D. Category A prisons are extremely high security establishments for high risk offenders and category D prisons are open prisons. Most offenders will be taken to a category B or C prison depending on their offence. The aim is to work their way through the categories until they reach a category D open prison which is intended to prepare them for their return to society.

Q - I have trouble getting through on the visits booking line, what can I do?

A - Unfortunately, this is quite a common complaint. Usually the problem is simply that the line is busy and you just have to keep trying. If this continues you can try calling the main line number for the prison to inform them that you cannot get through.

Please call us on
01743 245365
to answer any other
questions that
you have

USEFUL CONTACTS

ACTION FOR PRISONERS FAMILIES

National organisation for the support of prisoners' families
0808 808 2003
www.actionpf.org.uk

CITIZENS ADVICE BUREAU

Shropshire
08444 99 11 00 (see website for local CAB)
www.citizensadvice.org.uk

COMMUNITY LEGAL ADVICE

Website available in different languages
0845 345 4345
www.communitylegaladvice.org.uk

GATEWAY FOUNDATION

Helps ex-offenders, drug users, alcoholics with mentoring and recovery
www.gatewayfoundation.org.uk

GINGERBREAD

Organisation for single parents
0808 802 0925
www.gingerbread.org.uk

HM PRISON SERVICE

Website has details of all prisons, their visiting times, contact numbers and the regime
www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk

INSIDE INFORMATION

A comprehensive guide to Prisons and related services
www.information.insidetime.org

KIDS VIP

Specialist national agency working to improve contact between children and their imprisoned relatives.
www.kidsvip.co.uk

NACRO

National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Prisoners
Head Office 020 7840 7200
www.nacro.org.uk

ORMISTON CHILDREN & FAMILIES TRUST

Help for children and families following a family members' imprisonment
01473 724517
www.ormiston.org

PACT

Prison Advice and Care Trust
0808 808 2003
www.prisonadvice.org.uk

PRISON FELLOWSHIP

Support and help for families
01621 843232
www.prisonfellowship.org.uk

PRISONER LOCATION SERVICE

Assistance in locating prisoners. **MUST** include full name and date of birth
Fax: 0121 626 3474
Email: prisoner.location.service@hmpps.gsi.gov.uk

SHELTER

Housing & homelessness advice charity
0808 800 4444
www.shelter.org.uk

SSAFA

Help for prisoners who have served in HM Forces, and their families
0845 1300 975
www.ssafa.org.uk

STORYBOOK DADS

Help for prisoners in recording bedtime stories for their children
01822 322287
www.storybookdads.co.uk

THE IMMIGRATION ADVISORY SERVICE

Independent organisation with advice for immigrants and asylum seekers
www.iasuk.org

VICTIM SUPPORT

Support for victims and witnesses of crime
0845 3030 900
www.victimsupport.org.uk

WOMEN'S AID

Free phone 24 hr national domestic violence helpline
0808 2000 247
www.womensaid.org.uk

ABOUT SHARP

When someone is sent to prison, family and friends usually have no chance to speak to them before they are taken away. They may have no idea where their loved one is being taken to, or when they will be able to see them again.

Dependants may have financial difficulties and may struggle without practical and emotional support. It all probably seems very bleak indeed.

That is why we are here, to help, support, advise and befriend.

SHARP exists for you...

...for those serving the silent sentence.

Free and confidential advice, support and friendship are all available for the relatives and friends of prisoners or those awaiting trial or sentencing.

SHARP is a registered charity supported by donations from Charitable Trusts and private individuals.



CONTACT US

SHARP

Fletcher House
15 College Hill
Shrewsbury
SY1 1LY

www.sharp-uk.org
info@sharp-uk.org

01743 245365