



Volunteering by prisoners

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Introduction

Volunteering by prisoners and
the Listener scheme

The Listener scheme

- Peer support scheme supported by Samaritans
- Confidential, non-judgemental emotional support
- Based on a model trialled in the US
- In operation since 1991
- 1,750 Listeners trained in 2009
- Approximately 85,000 contacts in 2009

The research

- Four establishments visited: 2 adult male local prisons, one female prison and one young offender institution
- Mixed methods – surveys and interviews
- This presentation will concentrate on the qualitative interview data gleaned from Listeners
- Listeners were asked about: motivations, experiences, benefits and issues



Listeners' voices

Motivations to volunteer

- Desire to 'give back'
- 'Unofficial listening' and a helping personality
- Empathy for other prisoners
- Experiences of support
- Suggestions by others to volunteer
- 'Desire to 'progress'

“When I first met the Listeners they were different. I mean they’ve developed more and achieved more and that. It was good being around them.”

(Adult male Listener)

Benefits of volunteering for Listeners

- Skill development and confidence building
- Understanding the meaning of 'listening'

"You hear the word 'listener' and you think that's not hard all you've got to do is listen. But until you go on the course you don't realise actually how complex listening is, and how many different ways you can listen in."

(Adult female Listener)

- Communication
- Self-esteem and coping

Benefits for service users

- Proactive care

“Sometimes it’s just about being a friend, just being there so [prisoners] know they have got someone to talk to.”

(Young offender male Listener)

- Reaching out to prisoners
- Support in areas of prison where prisoners’ needs were particularly acute

The support of prisoners by prisoners

- Significance of being a peer
- Empathy
- Support for those who are not willing or able to seek help and support from staff
- Relief
- Expressing feelings

“When I left he said ‘thanks’ and he come and hugged me as well and said ‘I just wanted someone to talk to.’”

(Adult male Listener)

Over-use of prisoner volunteers

- Prisoner dependency on Listeners
- Staff over-reliance on Listeners

“I was getting stressed because I was living on healthcare. All the prisoners were patients with mental issues. They’ve got loads of problems. I was the only one there, twenty-four/seven, you know only me. [...] I couldn’t sleep. I think they used me as much as they could, the officers.”

(Adult male Listener)

Barriers to conducting Listener peer support work in prison

- Security prioritised over prisoner safety
- Staff as gatekeepers of prisoners' access to Listener support
- Conflict of confidentiality and duty of care
- Heavy monitoring and control of Listeners
- The nature of the prison environment is not conducive to talk in prison
- 'Atmosphere like a cave'

Conclusions

- 'Qualities' of a volunteer
- Enhanced communication skills
- Supportive environment in prison
- The importance of prisoners feeling 'heard';
- Support for volunteers is important
- Duty of care
- Prisoners as more than passive recipients of punishment