

Samaritans Scotland response

Scottish Parliament Health and Sport Committee call for views, February 2017

Samaritans Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Health and Sport Committee's call for views on healthcare in prisons. Samaritans is the leading suicide prevention charity in the UK and ROI. We deal with around 300,000 contacts a year from people who need our trained listening volunteers in Scotland. We also play a role in encouraging and supporting suicide prevention activities at local and national levels based on our insight and expertise in this area.

Samaritans in Scotland is a key part of the prison healthcare system. We work in partnership with the Scottish Prison Service to reduce the number of self-inflicted deaths and self-harm amongst prisoners. The core component of this is our Listener scheme; a peer support service which operates in prisons across Scotland. There were 1,803 active prison Listeners across the UK and ROI as of the end of 2015.

From our experience with healthcare in prisons, we will be providing views on the following two questions:

- What are the current barriers to using the prison healthcare system/ improve the health outcomes of the prison population?
- To what extent do you believe that health inequalities are/ could be addressed in the prison healthcare system?

What are the current barriers to using the prison healthcare system/ improve the health outcomes of the prison population?

Committing a crime should not mean losing your life, however currently prisoners face a higher risk of suicide than the general population. Broadly, people in prison are between five and ten times more likely than the general population to take their own lives.¹ Released prisoners are also at considerably greater risk of suicide (and in fact close to the suicide risk for discharged psychiatric patients).²

Samaritans has specific volunteers, Branch Prison Support Officers, who manage the relationship with the prison in their area and the Listener scheme. In regard to barriers to improving the wellbeing of prisoners and associated suicide risk, one of our Branch Prison Support Officers said: "The biggest barrier would seem to be the reluctance of the prisoner seeking help because of stigma and assumed weakness by other inmates". This emphasises the importance of a confidential and anonymous service.

In partnership with the Scottish Prison Service, we are seeking to address this. The majority of prisons now have access to our service and prisoners can access it in a number of ways:

¹ Samaritans' estimate based on 100 per 100,000 compared to either the male only UK rate or the overall UK suicide rate in 2014; 95% of the prison population are male in England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, 2016; ONS, 2016).

² Pratt et al (2006) "Suicide in recently released prisoners: a population-based cohort study"

1. Listener schemes

Samaritans volunteers select, train and support prisoners to become Listeners. Listeners provide confidential emotional support to their fellow inmates who are struggling to cope.

2. Telephone support

All prisons are required to offer prisoners access to Samaritans' helpline free of charge.

3. Correspondence

If prisoners prefer, they can write to us. We offer a freepost service, so there is no need to buy a stamp and freepost envelopes are usually available in communal areas of the prison.

4. Face to face support

If there is not a prison listener scheme available, volunteers from the local Samaritans branch may visit the prison to offer face to face support. Offenders may also have access to Samaritans branches whilst on temporary licence.

5. Support following a suicide

Our services are particularly important following a suicide in custody. At these sad times, we play a key role in supporting both staff and prisoners.

We believe that, particularly with the perceived stigma associated with help-seeking or mental ill health, it is vitally important that prisoners are able to access a confidential service however they feel comfortable accessing it.

To what extent do you believe that health inequalities are/ could be addressed in the prison healthcare system?

Samaritans is a part of the prison healthcare system and we are seeking to address this heightened risk of suicide with the range of services as outlined above.

Of course the risk associated with released prisoners cannot wholly be met within the prison healthcare system and therefore there should be adequate support following release. We have recently worked with organisations that support prisoners on release so that they would become more aware of the risk of suicide, understand how to spot those who might be at risk, how to approach the issue of suicide and make referrals when appropriate. Since one of the main challenges for prisoners on release is lack of money, we also promoted our free call number through this project.

We believe that there is a legitimate concern that at this vulnerable point there is a lack of support for the individual. Some consideration should therefore take place as to the release of prisoners and how they might be supported during this particularly sensitive time.

For further information, please contact the Samaritans Scotland team on scotland@samaritans.org or 0131 556 7058

