

CAMPAIGN TO RETURN ALL DAY VISITS TO EMU PLAINS PRISON

The Department of Corrective Service has withdrawn traditional "all day visits" for family and friends visiting the women in Emu Plains. Emu Plains is a low security women's prison with a Mothers and Children program. It has always had long visits on weekends and public holidays, respecting the rights and needs of children to bond with their mothers, and providing women with essential contact with family & friends who often live very far away. A lunch was provided for women, their children and other visitors by the local Rotary group, with moneys raised going toward local community projects. Emu Plains is a much sought after step towards successful release for female prisoners, particularly because of the easing of restrictions on contact with children, family and friends that helps them re-establish relationships. The Department of Corrective Services' own research states that one of the most important factors for helping women stay out of prison is having strong support upon their release.

CHANGED POLICY

Without consulting the women, their visitors or any local support groups, the new General Manager of Emu Plains announced via notices that the all day visits would cease, to be split into morning and afternoon shifts. When the Inmate Development Committee complained to DCS and tried to change the policy in line with the women's concerns, it was told that no discussion would be entered into and that soon visits would be further reduced to two hours maximum and visits would have to be applied for and booked in advance. Phone contact has also been markedly reduced.

EFFECTS

The reason given for split visits was to allow visitors to have lunch, but visitors were having lunch - with prisoners. By shutting out visitors, some without transport, in an isolated part of Western Sydney in the middle of the day, DCS is actually preventing them from having lunch as there are no facilities nearby.

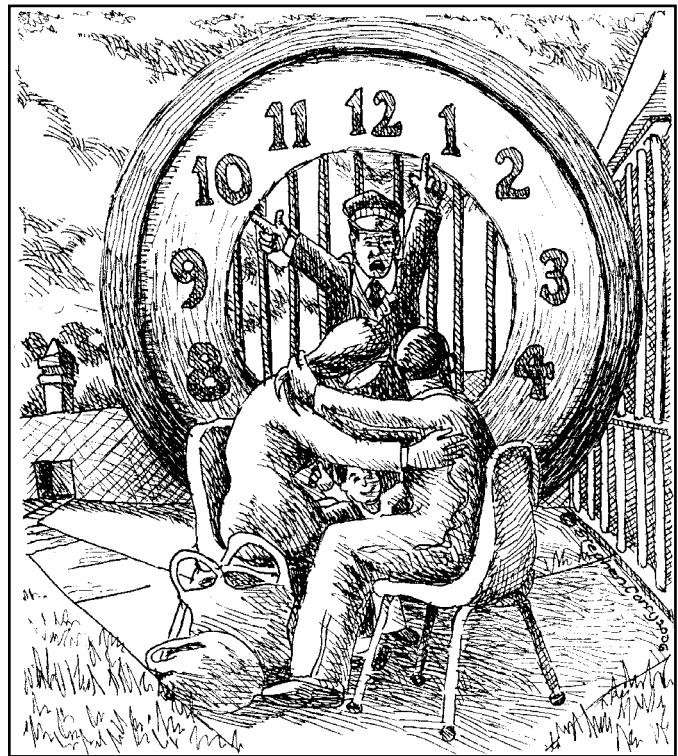
Visitors have to line up and take a ticket and have to wait sometimes over an hour and a half to be processed to get in - twice if they want to visit for both shifts. Soon the visits will be restricted even further to booked visits, which is the normally the procedure for a maximum-security prison. That means some visits won't happen at all, as the arrangements are inevitably over booked or not arranged properly.

These changes result in reduced contact between visitors and the women, making the short time available tense and unsatisfying for everyone.

LIES TO PARLIAMENT/BUDGET ESTIMATES HEARING

Are Ministers and Departmental representatives committing acts of "misleading parliament"?!

On 28 August 2006, under oath, politicians asked Justice Minister Tony Kelly and his three top Departmental officers questions about Emu Plains. Asst Commissioner McLean and Asst Dep. Commissioner Luke Grant said: (pages 35, 36 and 56) "By splitting the full day visits into two three-hour visits, children visiting inmates will be able to spend more time having a proper lunch. That was of concern previous to this change." "This was discussed with the Inmate Development Committee (IDC)...on at least two occasions before the implementation of the split visits on 21 May 2006." "No objections were raised by the Inmate Development Committee or inmates..." "...consensus of that



committee was that this was a better system..." "through the IDC, it has been proven by the follow-up and the monitoring of it to date that it certainly a lot better."

These statements are completely at odds with what prisoners, visitors and support groups are telling Justice Action.

INTIMIDATION OF FAMILIES AND PRISONERS

Women at Emu Plains have complained and in an attempt to stop these complaints, the management at the Jail have employed tactics of intimidation. The many visitors who have written complaints have not received answers. The many visitors and prisoners who have complained orally have received responses such as "keep complaining and it will only get worse." Following requests from prisoners and families, Justice Action investigated and collected information and opinions of those affected to complain to the Minister and Parliament. Five days after visiting a prisoner to discuss the visits issue a member of JA was banned from visiting for two years for "fomenting disharmony and conflict," "causing dissension" and "confrontation" "inciting visitors by the misleading, inaccurate and uninformed handouts" and "has been warned on numerous occasions." When he asked when he had been warned and how the document was inaccurate he was told that a "semantic discussion" would not be entered into.

THE PRISONER CONSULTATION

Justice Action sent a letter to each of the prisoners suggesting they and their visitors make their views known to the Minister, either directly or through JA anonymously. The women reported that "During the week all the girls in the compound were asked to go to visits as the GM had an announcement. She walked out with a big garbage bag of letters and said these letters are from JA - as you can see I have not opened them. There is a letter addressed to each of you. This has disturbed me quite a bit as I have come from meetings with the Ombudsman and Official Visitors of this jail, enquiring as to who has complained and why. After going through

every phone call made to the Ombudsman, I was quite content that these complaints about visits were coming more from the outside and not you girls. I would be very disappointed if any of you were to complain!”

PRISONERS' RESPONSE

Women at Emu Plains have been forced to break the law to ensure that their position is known to the outside. They have smuggled out letters as they knew their complaints would affect their personal situation badly.:

One prisoner told us: “When my family came [adults and children] we had no concern of our visit finishing – we were comfortable knowing that we had plenty of time to relax and enjoy each others company. We were able to purchase lunch and have a meal together as a family. This created such normality and my [visitor] was happy that she could buy me something, even if it was just a steak sandwich or sausage sandwich. Spending time with my children, playing in the playground gave me strength for another week and calmed them considerably as they saw that I was coping and surviving behind bars. Having broken visits has created a lot of unnecessary anger and upset. After visiting me for an hour in the morning session, my kids become very upset that they have to leave so quickly. Then they have to go through the lengthy process of re-entering again and wasting another hour waiting in line to enter again.” “I have been listening to the complaints of other inmates where old parents catch public transport. It takes them ages to arrive at [Emu Plains] and then they end up waiting due to the congestion at reception. Before they know it the session is over so they have to walk to the main road, sit and wait until the afternoon session begins. They don't have transport to drive to a take-away and buy some lunch, so they go without. Then again the whole process of re-registering and waiting up to one and a half hours to enter.” “Haven't our families suffered enough? They end up doing our jail with us. Every time they walk out those doors and leave us behind they suffer quietly. Why does the system need to inflict more pain on them and minimise our visiting time with our family and friends?”

COMMUNITY/POLITICIANS RESPONSES

Peter Breen MLC: “New South Wales has an incarceration rate per head of population double that of Victoria because we lack the imagination to devise diversionary programs and the political will to help our prisoners recover their lives....The [visits policy] change is designed to suit the convenience of staff rosters and allows prison management between one and two hours in the middle of the day to make up for staff shortages. One direct consequence of this new roster arrangement has been an increase in lockdowns. Another consequence is more hurdles and hoops for families and friends of visitors...denying mothers important contact with their families...it is difficult to know how the children would benefit”

Hon. Meredith Burgmann: “We fought for many years for this type of facility [for women inmates] ... It would be a sad situation if the children stop visiting regularly and their families suffered as a direct result of these changes.”

Clover Moore MP: “...85% of women prisoners are mothers, and the majority have primary responsibility for raising children before incarceration.” “...the strength of

the mother-child bond is the most significant indicator of recidivism for females with children.”

Paul Lynch MP: “(This change) is allegedly on the basis that the visitors need to be allowed to have lunch. Such a rationale is of course preposterous.”

Some other individual and organizations who have written to the Minister are: Sandra Nori Minister for Women, Linda Burney MP, Noreen Hay MP, YWCA Canberra, Canberra Rape Crisis Centre, Women's Legal Centre (ACT), Dr Deb Foskey MLA.

REQUEST TO MINISTER

JA wrote to the Minister asking the Minister to immediately reinstate full day visits, and suggested: “ In light of those comments to Parliament we propose a community panel comprising a politician, a member of the Commissioner's Women Advisory Committee (WAC), a representative of Justice Action and yourself meet with the members of the Inmate Development Committee (IDC) to clarify the position of prisoners at Emu Plains and to ensure Parliament has not been misled. It is important that prisoners are allowed the opportunity to clarify their position as your officers claim these changes to visits have occurred because the women at Emu Plains want them. Prisoners and their families have expressed grave concerns that they will be punished by removal of their “C” classification and access to their children if they object to this attack on their existing conditions. The meeting with the IDC should be sensitive to this concern. The community panel could also work with the women prisoners, their families and staff to ensure the visiting system is the best possible. This would bring benefit to the wider community, through less women coming back to jail due to the improved family and community relationships that are established.”

ESTABLISHMENT OF VISITING COMMITTEE AT EMU PLAINS JAIL

The campaign to return all day visits to Emu Plains women's prison has achieved its first objective. On September 16, an invitation was given for “interested parties” including prisoner and visitor representatives to join management on a Visits Committee. A Visits Survey was distributed asking for ratings 0-10 on 7 issues including length of visits. Justice Action has written to the Minister and the General Manager of Emu Plains congratulating them for their actions and setting out important requirements for the community, prisoners & visitors regarding the Visits Committee. However many people don't believe this apparent reversal of imposed policy change.

HOW TO HELP WIN THE CAMPAIGN

Write a letter to Tony Kelly, Minister for Justice, NSW Parliament House, Sydney 2000 Fax (02) 9228 3988

Email: Sharon.Armstrong@lands.nsw.gov.au with a copy to us, or contact us to help. Any assistance appreciated.

Justice Action

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