In-cell computers

International breakthrough 20 year campaign ends in victory

Justice Action is the face of the Australian Prisoner Movement that links its history to the penal colony from 1788. Prisoners and ex-prisoners direct our efforts, funding ourselves by a social enterprise Breakout design print web.

The Computers in Cells program affirms the human right of communication, allowing prisoners to safely email families, lawyers and authorities from the place where they spend most of their time - in the cell. From their cell they can confidentially engage with outside rehabilitation services having no conflict of interests, do vocational training and education without distraction, research and present legal cases, and lessen the destructive effects of physical isolation and boredom. It is a tool to deal with problems and end social isolation in prisons using safe modern technology that is particularly appropriate to the concept of imprisonment.

The campaign for Computers in Cells began in 1997 giving recycled computers to prisons and proposing an inside industry for repair and software development. Years of negotiation and lobbying yielded little, so we focused on the benefits of services that would be available. Online counselling offering rehabilitation services to lessen recidivism was a central focus. The argument was that counselling via computers in cells allows prisoners to effectively use the eighteen hours a day otherwise spent in boredom and isolation. External providers of therapies get greater trust, give choice and stability through detention and after release, and allow empowerment and self-management. Additionally, research showed that online counselling is actually more effective than face-to-face counselling, and is relatively cheap.

Access to the law was the next lever. The issue was argued in the Tony Lirstis case where he was continuously denied computer access to examine police documents on DVD or present his own case. Courts expressed their frustration as his trials were postponed and bail was being considered. He eventually got his computer.

Brett Collins is Coordinator for Justice Action and a former prisoner

A major campaign asset was the example of computers in cells in the Australian Capital Territory working since 2006. A former Attorney General inspected and issued a Report. Each week 22,000 emails are sent and received by the 440 prisoners. Statistics showed 39% of ACT prisoners returning to prison within two years, as opposed to 50.7% in NSW, and education participation was more than double the national rate.

As a way to leapfrog government reluctance to give prisoners internet access, Justice Action created aExpress in 2013 with world media attention as the first platform for prisoners to maintain an internet profile and email service. It was designed to break down social isolation by bringing prisoners into the digital world, maintaining a presence with their own view of themselves, but in a positive, non-aggressive way. Despite threats of legislative action aExpress held its ground, and gained the support of victims' groups and Huffington Post for its restorative justice value.

Comparing Australian prisoners to those in the UK, we're probably worse. Australia’s imprisonment rate is 76 per 100,000 people and you have to serve almost all your sentence. UK is 148. Smoking was lost after a major battle in several states. Some prisoners are in overcrowded cells 16 hours a day. This has contributed to a 37% increase in the rates of assault within prisons, and a decrease in employment and education. A recent development, stuck in, has been the creation of two 400 prisoner Dormitory Prisons with 25 maximum security prisoners to a dormitory! But an Inquiry is taking it on.

Computers in Cells should allow everyone to present themselves as real people and end the stereotypes. It is time for UK prisoners to be allowed out of the dungeons to end their unnecessary IT isolation too.