

We can all choose to make a difference

Samaritans endorse IAP call for help from people in prison

Jim Sanders

My name is Jim, I have been a Samaritan volunteer for the last eight years and have been supporting Samaritan involvement in prisons for seven of those years. It was some 18 months ago that I was honoured to take on the role of coordinating the Listener Scheme within the Samaritans nationwide. Listeners are people in prison who we train to support other prisoners who are in distress, in need of listening support - and at worse may be feeling suicidal.

It is a privilege to be a part of the personal transformation that people go through when they become Listeners and to witness the moment when they realise the power they have to save lives and make a difference. What we all do together makes a positive difference to so many lives.

A belief that everyone should be heard no matter what they have done underpins Samaritan values. It feels like this is more relevant than ever in prisons. I don't believe that there is anything that anyone can do which means that they don't deserve to be listened to. At the end of the day we can only change the future not the past. How we choose to spend our time matters and our Listeners in prison are living proof of this.

“ There are people who walk amongst us who want to help, who want to make a difference, who want to be there for other people who are experiencing their darkest hour. They care not because of who they are but because they choose to do so ”

I am not just talking of the Listeners and the Samaritans but of all the different people who imagine that things could be better in prisons, who don't accept things as they are but want to try to improve them. There are moments in all our lives when we have the chance to help and make things better but we have to choose to take those moments, we have to choose to make our voice heard.

A 32% rise in self-inflicted deaths in custody tells us that something significantly negative has happened in recent years - that lots of people aren't getting heard or are not receiving the support they need. We all need to try and do something about this. Last month a collaboration between the IAP (Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody) and Inside Time

was initiated to ask you who are in prison and understand more than anyone outside could, how we can prevent suicide and self-harm. I whole heartedly support and endorse this collaboration and encourage you all to share your thoughts and ideas and solutions with them through the IAP Freepost address.

We want fewer people to feel like they have no other option than to kill themselves or to believe that the only way they can manage how they feel is by hurting themselves. Samaritans have always believed that we can help by doing one simple thing: listen. Listen to all the stories, the pain, the despairing hurt. Listening is incredibly powerful it can give hope, restore dignity, stop isolation and save lives.

Samaritan volunteers had already begun to support prisons before the day that a 15-year-old boy called Philip hanged himself in HMP Swansea more than 25 years ago. Everyone knew we had to do more after this tragic event and with encouragement from HMPS and Samaritan's Executive, HMP Swansea and their local Samaritan Branch agreed to pilot a way of involving prisoners in the support needed by those in crisis. They supported fellow prisoners at risk so successfully that the scheme was eventually rolled out nationally. They were just ordinary people in prison who chose to do something extraordinary with their time and when asked, the prisoner volunteers chose the name of 'Listeners' for themselves. A quarter of a century later we have more than 1800 Listeners in over 140 prisons stretching all the way across the UK and Ireland.

This is an example of one of the things that has been done to prevent self-harm and suicide in prison. We have a great opportunity over these next few months to amplify your voice and suggest other ways we can achieve this. You now have a chance to have your say in how we make things more manageable for everyone in prison, how we can make coping a little easier and living in prison less painful. You know the everyday reality and what will make a difference so please spend some time having a think about it and then write to the IAP with your thoughts.

Please use your imagination. How can this terrible increase in suicide, murder and early deaths by natural causes be turned around? Is it lots of little changes to the current way we do things or is it a big shift in how we approach the problem? Should suicide and self-harm be seen as a medical issue more than a safety issue? Please help others around you by sharing with us what you think would make a difference. Your voice counts.

Jim Sanders is the Functional Lead for Prison Support at the Samaritans

Keeping safe

Juliet Lyon

After the dreadful news about 119 self-inflicted deaths and almost 38,000 recorded incidents of self-harm last year in prisons in England and Wales, the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAP) and Inside Time began a collaboration to help keep people safe. In February we launched our call to prisoners to tell us how best to prevent suicide and self-harm.

We want you to draw on your own experience and knowledge from work maybe as a Samaritan trained Listener, Insider or peer mentor or because you have helped someone in need or you have felt at dark times that life is not worth living. We will respond to each letter. What everyone says counts and your messages will reach those with the power to change things.

A huge 'Thank You' to Inside Time readers who have already used Freepost IAP to offer advice on the best ways to prevent suicide and self-harm. Your thoughtful letters are so helpful. Some have called for

care for people with mental health needs or a learning disability so we will present your ideas and concerns in evidence in Parliament to the Human Rights Committee as well as discussing them with the Health Minister on 1st March.

In a scheduled meeting with the Prisons Minister we will present your recommendations for reform ranging from dealing with drugs, violence and debt through to ensuring decent conditions, nourishing food, exercise, real work, time out of cell, contact with family, care for vulnerable and transgender prisoners and justice and mercy for people serving an IPP sentence. One man wrote about hope: "As a prisoner I need to see progress. I need to see light at the end of the tunnel."

Because of what you told us about the contrast between compassionate, professional staff and disrespectful, dismissive staff, we are feeding these messages into staff training and delivering them to the Safer Custody conference in March. Prompted by you, the IAP will examine how the new Prisons Bill ensures

The three questions

- What do you think are the best ways to prevent self-harm in prison and respond to people's needs?
- What do you think are the best ways to prevent suicide in prison and keep people safe?
- What do you think can be done outside prison in the community that would help reduce the risk of self-harm or suicide - either before imprisonment or on release?

It is important the envelope is addressed to: Freepost IAP
IAP **must** be in capital letters, no stamp and nothing else on the envelope

prisoners' safety and the duty of the State to protect life. This isn't a one off - reducing deaths in custody is too important for that. We need to hear from as many prisoners as possible. We are pleased that National Prison Radio want to get involved in this work to keep people safe. Many family members read Inside Time on the website - we welcome your views too. Together we can help reduce the tragic toll of avoidable deaths in prison.

Feeling Suicidal? IT'S OKAY TO TALK

What are suicidal feelings?

Suicidal feelings can range from having abstract thoughts about ending your life, or feeling that people would be better off without you, to thinking about methods of suicide, or making clear plans to take your own life. If you are feeling suicidal, you might be scared or confused by these feelings. But you are not alone. Many people think about suicide at some point in their lifetime.

If you are feeling suicidal please speak with someone. There are many people who can help:

Members of staff, wing staff, chaplaincy, healthcare and many others

Peer Support such as the Listeners

Samaritans you can call them from the Samaritans phones or from your PIN

Friends and Family

It's important to remember that you deserve support, you are not alone and there is support out there. Please speak with someone and tell them how you are feeling.



National Offender Management Service