



European Recommendations for Volunteering in Prisons

Preamble

Since September 2010, under the auspices of the French “Association Nationale des Visiteurs de Prison” and the European Forum of Applied Criminal Policies, a number of cross-border meetings have been taking place in several European cities, between volunteers from different prisons.

The objectives of the volunteers who took part were to

- observe and analyse the practices of volunteers in different European countries, in their work with prisoners, for a mutual enrichment;
- find ways to enhance the visibility, awareness and understanding of the prison environment in our societies.

The ultimate goal is to improve the rehabilitation of prisoners into society, given that practically all of them will return to the outside community.

It is therefore in the common interest that prisons should be places where prisoners can serve their sentences in such conditions that they can understand the point of their incarceration, and prepare for their return to society in the best possible conditions. All through their incarceration, it is essential to ensure that inmates remain in control of their own lives as much as possible. This conviction should guide all the professionals and volunteers who interact with prisoners.

Our thoughts and our actions for the present and the future are based on two simple beliefs:

- No human being should be equated to their offence.
- Only someone who has some sense of their dignity can stand on their own two feet and assume their responsibilities as a citizen.

To ensure a successful return to society after an incarceration, one of the conditions is the building of bridges between the outside and the inside. The humane and active presence of volunteers in prisons has proved to be a necessity. This is particularly true as the economic and social crisis and the crisis in values that European societies are currently living through, make the need for the presence of their representatives in prisons all the more acute.

It seems important to us to emphasize two points:

- Volunteers in prisons have a very specific role; their work is free: they are not paid, and have no personal purpose. They therefore have no other mandate than to listen and try to set up a confidential relationship from person to person, citizen to citizen, acting as links between inmates and the society outside.
- We also deem it important to develop and strengthen the relationships between volunteers and professionals in prisons, in an atmosphere of mutual respect. We are together links in a chain aiming at a better balance in our societies.

From the institutional point of view, the European Prison Rules adopted in 1973, and last updated in 2006, constitute “a range of minimum standards for all those aspects of prison administration that are essential to humane conditions and positive treatment in modern and progressive systems.”

However, from the point of view of other categories of people working inside prisons -notably volunteers- there appear to be practices and statuses that vary from one country to another, depending on their position in the institution.

In order to improve the practices in our work as volunteers, for the benefit of prisoners and our societies, we have therefore deemed it useful to present the authorities in our different countries with a number of recommendations.

Recommendations

I. The meaning of volunteering in prisons

The definition of volunteering such as given by the European Volunteer Centre in Brussels (2006 Manifesto) situates the activity of volunteers in a wide society context:

“Volunteering is an activity undertaken

- Out of a person’s free will, choice and motivation.
- Without concern for financial gain (non-remunerated).
- In an organized setting.
- With the aim to benefit someone other than the volunteer, and society at large, contributing to values of general interest”.

Volunteers in prisons

- introduce into the highly regulated world of prisons the everyday life of the outside.
- can intervene in different ways, for example in individual encounters or group activities.
- have a role to play in society, as witnesses of the realities of prison life.
- need to be appointed, have to abide by prison rules, but do not depend on the Prison Service.
- are not interested in performance: they experience human encounters with fellow citizens.

II. Framework and conditions for the practice of volunteering in prisons

1. The organization of volunteering

Recruitment

- Recruitment should reflect the wide spectrum of society.
- Every applicant should be interviewed by a person specifically designated to this effect, for an assessment of their motivations and abilities.

Training

- Volunteers should receive compulsory training before -if at all possible- they start their activity.
- During this training, volunteers should receive specific information on the running of the prison, security rules, confidentiality, listening skills and other forms of communication, and attitudes to adopt in front of prisoners.

Appointment and withdrawal of appointment

- For an appointment, clear rules should be abided by; the procedure should normally not exceed 6 months.
- A volunteer should be interviewed before their appointment can be withdrawn.

Accompaniment and further training

- Volunteers should be offered the accompaniment and support of a person in charge.
- Volunteers should regularly take part in training sessions and exchanges of information.
- Every volunteer should be a member of an organization.

2. Relations with prisons

- Clear rules should be drawn up by the competent authorities regarding the possibility for volunteers to play a role in prisons.
- Volunteers and staff cooperate to achieve common goals.
- Volunteers should have a liaison officer inside the prison.
- Prisoners and staff should be informed of the inmates' right to meet volunteers and take part in the activities they propose.
- Prison Governors should meet volunteers at least once a year
- The prison administration should provide volunteers with appropriate premises and times for their activities.
- Volunteers should be insured for their activities. They should be offered a refund for their expenses.

Conclusion

It should be made possible to repeat in the future the cross-border meetings that have provided the subject matter for these recommendations. To achieve this goal, our associations need adequate funding. European volunteers would therefore like to ask the European Institutions for their material and moral support.

The recommendations drafted following group work, and adopted during the European Seminar in Trier, Germany, from 26th to 29th May 2011, are meant to be widely circulated among the members of our different associations. Besides, concerted efforts will have to be made to emphasize their significance to the European authorities.

We hope the recommendations will provide support for the volunteers in prisons, as well as an orientation for prison institutions in Europe.

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