

Official Visitors' Induction Program

*Brush Farm Corrective
Services Academy*

Wednesday 5 October 2011

Commissioner Ron Woodham,

Official Visitors

Members of the Board of Management, and senior officers of
Corrective Services NSW.

Ladies and gentlemen.

Introduction

I am delighted to be here this morning to meet and welcome
Official Visitors to this very important Official Visitors' Induction
Program

First, I would like to sincerely congratulate each of you on your
appointment. I was very encouraged by the strong interest and the
high number of applications that were received for appointment as
an Official Visitor.

This demonstrates to me that our community is interested in how
correctional facilities are run and managed, and the well being of
the inmates and the staff who work there.

For the record, there were 267 applications, from which 59
appointments have been made. 40 of the appointees are Official
Visitors who have been re-appointed, and 19 are new to the role.

Between you, you will visit, nine court cells and 38 correctional
facilities including two transitional centres.

It would be in no one's interest to send you out to do your work as an Official Visitor without first knowing what is required and the support that is available to assist you. That is the purpose of these two days.

Overview of Induction Program

I understand this formal Official Visitor Induction Program was introduced for the first time two years ago, and while the benefits to newly appointed Official Visitors should be obvious, I am pleased so many re-appointed Visitors are also here.

The Induction Program has been organised to cater for the needs of both groups.

Today's sessions are designed to acquaint you with the structure of Corrective Services NSW so that you can see where the facility that you will be visiting fits in.

You will also be given an overview of the 'bigger picture' issues that the organisation faces everyday.

Later this morning, you will be introduced to, or re-acquainted with, members of the executive of Corrective Services NSW, and GEO Australia, the private sector company that has management responsibility for Parklea and Junee Correctional Centres.

This will be followed by an outline of the administrative arrangements that currently operate within Corrective Services to support you, including essential things such as your legislative responsibilities – and how you get paid – remembering that it is from the public purse and there are certain requirements that need to met.

Two very important sessions are scheduled for this afternoon, one is about the role boundaries for Official Visitors and will cover some of the more unique aspects associated with working in a correctional environment, what to be aware of, and how to manage certain situations should they arise.

The other session will take you through the more significant aspects of security in correctional centres. This session will be both an introduction to tomorrow's more comprehensive security awareness sessions for new Visitors, and what I expect will be a worthwhile reminder for re-appointed Visitors.

I encourage you to actively participate in these sessions because when it comes to security in correctional facilities there is no room for complacency.

In addition to learning about the environment you will be working in, today you will also meet your colleagues, both those who will be attending the same facility as you, and those attending other facilities across the state. This is an opportunity for networking with other Official Visitors.

The formal aspect of this is the mentoring arrangements. Mentors were assigned to newly appointed Official Visitors following the 2009 appointments and I understand this was a very successful initiative.

I have visited correctional facilities on a number of occasions and they can be quite intimidating. Mentors will accompany new Official Visitors on their initial visits and give them the benefit of their experience.

You will also have the opportunity during the day, and especially at dinner this evening to spend time with colleagues and learn a little about each other.

Overview of Official Visitor program

An Official Visitors program has been operating in New South Wales correctional facilities for more than 20 years.

The program has a great deal of credibility with both inmates and correctional facility staff.

During that time, Official Visitors have become an integral part of the support available to inmates in terms of inquiry and complaint resolution.

A key reason for this is the independence of the role which means the complaints and inquiries that are raised are received in an unbiased, non partisan, non judgemental way.

Official Visitors have quite a degree of flexibility in terms of how they undertake their work. However, there are certain expectations that need to be met in order that the integrity of the program is maintained.

In accepting your appointment you will be agreeing to attend your assigned centre on a regular basis.

You will also be agreeing to follow current arrangements for lodging your quarterly reports to the Commissioner, and half yearly reports to me, in a timely fashion. These reports give us an independent appraisal of how you find the facility.

If you haven't been able to resolve complaints locally they should be recorded in your reports. It may be that the issue has State wide implications, or that it has been raised at another centre, or through another means.

During the course of your appointment you will be given the opportunity to attend the Annual State Conference, and regional conferences. At these conferences you will hear from experts, get a better understanding of corrections, and have the opportunity to raise issues of concern directly with senior executives of Corrective Services and GEO Australia.

Importantly also, these conferences give you the opportunity to further network with colleagues. I would encourage you to attend these conferences.

Since 2008 Official Visitors have been contributing to the CSNSW Food Services Working Party, and more recently Official Visitor representatives have been attending the Families and Children Steering Committee.

These are important forums and your contribution, through the Official Visitor representatives on them is a very practical way of getting the concerns of inmates addressed.

Through these forums and your reports there is the opportunity to seek continuous improvements throughout the correctional system.

Budget savings

You will be aware that Corrective Services NSW, along with all other areas of the NSW public sector is required to make budget savings.

It is expected that as a result of the closure of Parramatta, Kirkconnell and Berrima Correctional Centres significant savings will be achieved.

The Commissioner and his staff have put into place a range of strategies to manage the impact of the correctional centre closures and other related organisational changes, and every effort is being made to meet the needs of affected staff.

Inmates will be transferred to other centres relevant to their classification and I understand that the transfer of each inmate will be considered by his/her Case Management Team.

The safety and security of the community, of correctional centre staff, and of the inmates in the care of CSNSW remains the first priority of both the Commissioner and this Government and this will not be compromised in the closure of excess inmate beds.

Year in Review

Finally, a word about the achievements of Official Visitors in the past 12 months.

During 2010/11 Official Visitors made 1,421 visits to 46 correctional facilities. Inmates raised 5,871 matters with Official Visitors that were recorded as complaints, around 500 more matters than in 2009/10

I know that Official Visitors of long standing can point to examples of where resolutions to complaints have been a long time coming – or not possible at all.

Nevertheless that hasn't, and shouldn't, stop Official Visitors from continuing to raise them.

I'd like to take this opportunity to remind you of some recent outcomes for which Official Visitors have been either partly or wholly responsible.

The individual representations and collective voice of Official Visitors have resulted in:

- the weekly buy amount being increased to \$85;
- the inmate unemployment rate being increased in August this year;
- General Managers being reminded to ensure that a penalty of 'off amenities' for an inmate who is in a shared cell does not disadvantage a cell mate;
- a relaxation in the policy relating to inmate photographs so that medium and minimum security inmates can have their photographs taken and sent to family members and friends;
- improvements to physical amenities and maintenance at some centres, such as X Wing and the visits section at Goulburn Correctional Centre; and
- improvements in supporting children and families of inmates.

I look forward to hearing of your activities in the future and I wish you well for this Program and for the term of your appointment.