

HANSARD – TASMANIAN STATE GOVERNMENT

Tasmanian Legislative Council Tuesday 17 November 2015

SPECIAL INTEREST MATTERS

Risdon Prison - Video Visiting

[11.10 am]

Dr GOODWIN (Pembroke) - Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council) - Mr President, there has been an amount of negative media around Risdon Prison over the last few months, and perhaps for many years prior to the current Government's incarnation. However, today I would like to draw honourable members' attention to positive happenings within the prison, some of which are catching worldwide attention for the right reasons.

The Hodgman Liberal Government is committed to reforming our justice system to deliver better results for families and communities. One such example is the Dads and Homework Program emanating from Pastor Norm Reed's 2014-15 Churchill Fellowship report. Norm is from the Christian Family Centre next door to the prison. A planned research program between the director of the prison and Norm took in overseas jurisdictions such as Singapore, the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, and Switzerland with a view to developing a framework for future developments of the family visiting program within the Tasmania Prison Service.

A startling fact from this research in the United Kingdom is that offenders who received at least one visit during their time in custody were 39 per cent less likely to re-offend than those who had not received such visits.

U.K. research, specifically the Ministry of Justice Resettlement Survey 2008, highlights the vital role that children and families play in helping to reduce recidivism, and also the reintegration of prisoners back into the community.

The Tasmania Prison Service and family liaison team, together with Norm, expanded the video visiting initiatives whereby families can connect remotely with each other from various locations around the state. Norm and a range of TPS staff have implemented the homework program. Children, via a regional centre or personally with the involvement of family support workers, connect with their fathers inside the prison, which in some cases is the first contact they have had since incarceration. The child and the prisoner are equipped to complete a piece of homework during the session. This initial connection can be a fantastic bonding tool for future contact. For example, Dad can ask next time, 'What mark did you get for your schoolwork that we did together?' Some people may think, 'If some father could not be bothered to help his child whilst on the outside, why would it be any different whilst in prison?' but our experience shows they are very interested in what their children are doing.

To facilitate this program, a combination of uniform and non-uniform staff are required. It is a program that can be embedded within the prison structure, but ultimately thrives with the insight compassion, and skills of people like Norm Reed, Julie Bunyard from the prison, and the re-integration team from the prison.

Developing relationships is what works. A platform of trust between us and them. Positive programs such as the homework program are gaining international attention.

Sir Richard Branson and his well-known organisation, Virgin, have noted the value of connecting prisoners and families through technology. I will read a post from Richard Branson's online article about this very topic. He says:

Being able to speak to my family every day is something that I take for granted, like most people, but for prisoners, staying in close contact with their families is incredibly difficult.

The main purpose of prison should be to rehabilitate people so they have the opportunity to return back into society and play a meaningful role in society, but if prisoners are cut adrift from their families, if their loved ones live too far away, it makes reintegration even more difficult.

For the past three years, Igniting Change has been working with Pastor Norm Reed to support his groundbreaking work connecting families through video visiting. The program currently operates from Risdon Prison in Tasmania, and when I arrived in Melbourne, I was fortunate enough to join an imprisoned father in Tasmania and his son via video.

As father and son spoke, they both had the most beautiful smiles on their face. I asked the dad what being able to speak to his son meant to him. 'It is hard to put into words,' he told me. 'We are a very close family. Seeing my boys is everything to me. They live a long way from the jail. I cannot explain how nice it is. I really appreciate it.' After I left them in privacy the father listened to his son playing the guitar and was reduced to tears as the connection means so much to him.

United Kingdom Prison Reform Trust research found that 65 per cent of boys who have a father in prison go on to offend themselves. Creating and encouraging healthy family contact whilst in custody can reduce the likelihood of reoffending by up to six times. What is more, video visiting can save money because visits to prison are so expensive and time-consuming.

Being in prison, dads have one thing to offer that many did not have on the outside, time. The prisoners are really engaged in the program and it was clear to see the positive impact it can have straightaway. The family connection is so important and makes a huge difference.

You can take a tablet to a birth, to a wedding or to a funeral. Helping your child with their homework, having a chat, or perhaps one day even reading a story to them before they go to bed can make an enormous difference.

As many of you would be aware, I am very interested in breaking the cycle of intergenerational crime. Supporting the families of prisoners is an important way to address this through things like Kids' Days at the prison, the books on CD program, and the homework program. They all help prisoners to develop their parenting skills and strengthen family bonds.

I will finish off with the fine example of the results that are being achieved. Names have been changed to protect the identities of those involved but these comments are by the carer and grandmother of one of the children participating in the program.

This one is dated August 2014:

I would just like to let you know that Judy's grades have improved at school since she has had the opportunity to spend time studying with her father. Judy's last two maths quizzes have her getting 40 out of 40 when she used to struggle to pass these quizzes.

Judy is also more positive in herself now, realising she can improve her grades if she works harder and puts in extra time with her homework.

Judy is seeing her father in a positive light, with her now saying, 'I will ask Dad when he rings' if she is struggling with her homework, when she would have usually hidden her homework book and told us she did not have any homework.

Thanks for making this possible for Judy. Thanks.

This next one is dated September 2015:

I am pleased to advise you that the tutorial sessions Judy has with her father continue to be a success. Judy has completed her latest project at school with her results being 27 out of 28, the highest marks in the class.

The teacher's comments indicated that the content of the project covered all of the marking criteria and the point lost was related to punctuation.

Judy has also changed in the way she now looks forward to going to school and is confident in completing her schoolwork or talking about what she has studied.

Judy and her father also enjoy spending time one-to-one discussing these different topics which has given them a more normal relationship.

Please thank everyone involved in organising these tutorials and let them know that I feel Judy is now going to enter high school in 2016 as someone who looks forward to learning and that she now knows if she puts in the extra time to study, she is capable of getting good results.

Feel free to pass this information on if needed to support ongoing tutorials.

The following week Judy was called out in school assembly and given a certificate for the most improved student in the school.

In closing, I commend and congratulate Norm Reed and the Tasmania Prison Service staff on this initiative, the Dads and Homework program, and also all the other work they are doing supporting the children of prisoners.