GUIDELINES FOR VISITING PRISONERS

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Overview

The Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas (ICPO) was established forty years ago to provide information, support and advice to Irish citizens imprisoned overseas and to their families. It presently works with more than 1,100 clients in over thirty different countries. Serving a prison sentence can be a lonely and isolating experience. Serving a prison sentence in a foreign country is even more difficult as the prison has to cope with an unfamiliar legal system and sometimes very harsh social attitudes about prisoners.

Many ICPO clients come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. As a practical matter this may mean that they will seldom if ever receive visits from their families. In a situation where the prisoner has lost their liberty including the freedom to make even very basic decisions such as what to eat, when to sleep or how and when they can communicate with others, a visitor can provide a very welcome link to the outside world.

In addition a prison visitor can provide reassurance to family members in Ireland that someone is seeing their loved one and monitoring their treatment in prison. This helps to alleviate worry or guilt that families may be feeling as they may be unable to visit themselves.

Planning for a Visit

The Context of your Visit

Be mindful of what role you are assuming in visiting the prisoner. Are you there on behalf of your organisation, ICPO and, or, the Irish Consulate/Embassy to provide a social visit or are you a designated caseworker with responsibilities to follow-up on matters arising. Avoid advocacy or giving advice if this is not something you or your organisation has specific competences in. A social visit is a prized gift for a prisoner, in any event so do not feel obligated to try and do more. Often in the course of a social visit you will be asked to pass on a message or a query to the ICPO or similar – simply take the message, having clarified your understanding of it and move on with your conversation.

Knowing What to Expect
For anyone visiting a prison for the first time, it is good to know what to expect in terms of prison procedures and environment. This can help allay some of your concerns on arrival and take much of the stress out of the security protocols etc. For example, it can helpful if you consider many of the security features as being similar to those found at airports – scanning machines (stationary and wands), occasional sniffer dogs. Similar to airports, the places can be quite busy with many people queuing alongside you. It is always best to get to the prison early so that you do not feel rushed and so you do not lose any time with the prisoner by being at the back of a queue. Travel light and ensure you don't bring your mobile phone into the prison by accident.

Being Organised
It is always worth checking the prison's website to view their instructions to prison visitors; as prisons can have their own peculiarities in terms of what can be brought in, length of visits etc. Prisons also have different security classifications in respect of the prisoners they hold. This can impact on the way in which visits are organised, what permissions are required and how long it will take to acquire them. Accordingly, visits ought to be planned well ahead of time.

Role of the Prison Visitor

Listening
Prisoners like other people want to talk about their lives and problems to someone who is not going to judge them or try to offer simplistic pat solutions. Listening is a skill but it is a skill that can be developed. It is important to allow the prisoner to air their grievances without necessarily taking the prisoner's side or openly sympathising with the prisoner. A prisoner needs to approach their imprisonment realistically and encouraging a prisoner to feel aggrieved will not help the prisoner deal with problems within the prison.

Show Interest
Sometimes prisoners will want to talk about life in prison and their day-to-day frustrations. But sometimes it is helpful to encourage them to talk about other things such as their interests, their families, their views. For a prisoner to be able to talk about such things is often a novelty.

Irish prisoners may want to talk about Ireland. If the prison allows it they may appreciate Irish newspapers if available, or publications like the Irish Echo.

Maintain Realistic Expectations
A visitor should not make promises he or she cannot keep. It is better to tell a prisoner that you cannot do something rather than promise something that you cannot deliver. Otherwise trust that has taken a while to be built up will be lost. In this context a visitor should remember that he or she is not a substitute for the prisoner's lawyer or consular official. If the prisoner makes complaints that would be more appropriately handled by a lawyer or consular official, remind the prisoner that these individuals are better placed to handle these issues. You can also offer to raise the matter with their ICPO Caseworker.

If a visitor makes a commitment to visit on a certain date, this commitment should be honoured if at all possible. If the visitor is not able to visit on that date, the reason for this should be explained to the prisoner beforehand or if not as soon as possible after the scheduled visit.

Acting as a Link between the Prisoner and the Outside World
Sometimes a visitor will be asked by a prisoner to pass on messages to someone on the outside. Generally a visitor should be wary of making direct contact with a prisoner's family unless the family has expressly agreed to this in advance. Sometimes family relationships have broken down and the prisoner's family may not want contact with the prisoner. A prison visitor should respect the family's wishes.

However it may be appropriate for a visitor to contact either the relevant Consulate or ICPO if requested to do so by the prisoner.

Confidentiality
In order to maintain trust, the prisoner must know that what he or she has said to the visitor will not be passed on to other prisoners, prison authorities, the Consulate or the ICPO unless the prisoner has explicitly requested that such information be passed on. When in doubt about whether or not the prisoner wants what they have said to be passed on, check directly with the prisoner.

Qualities of a Good Prison Visitor

The ability to listen
During the first few visits a visitor may be called upon to do little except listen. Remember for the prisoner this may be the first time in a long time that they have had the luxury of just being able to talk freely to someone who is not a fellow prisoner or a guard.

Non-judgemental attitude
Prisoners may be incarcerated for crimes like murder, serious assault or sex crimes. Whatever their personal views of such crimes, a prison visitor needs to be able to keep those views to themselves. The prisoner has already been judged and condemned. It is not helpful to a prisoner to be lectured or preached to as many prisoners are already filled with guilt and self-loathing over the crime and the position they have placed themselves and their families.

Recognition of one's own limitations to solve problems for a prisoner
Prison systems are inherently rigid and bureaucratic. Security is the paramount concern in a prison regime. This means that many issues a prisoner presents cannot be dealt with by a visitor. A prison visitor should be very clear about what they can and cannot do for a prisoner and be able to communicate that clearly to the prisoner.

Common sense and a good sense of humour
These are the qualities to which prisoners will respond and will help to build up rapport.

Recognition that the visit is for the prisoner not the prison visitor
Prison visits can be deeply rewarding for prison visitors but the visitor should not be trying to meet their own needs through the visit. Appropriate boundaries must be maintained at all times. These qualities rather than any specialised knowledge of the law, penal systems etc. make for a good prison visitor.

Topics of Conversation

Prison Life
Some prisoners will just need an opportunity to complain about conditions in prison and the frustrations they may feel with the legal system etc. It is important, however, that the visitor avoid a situation where the prisoner feels that the visitor is siding with him or her against an "unfair" prison system or an "unjust" legal system. The visitor should make it clear that he or she is not in a position to sort out the prisoner's complaints although they can offer to pass on such complaints to the prisoner's lawyer, consular official or ICPO caseworker.

Family and Friends
Other prisoners will want to talk about their families and friends. They may be experiencing a sense of hurt and rejection or they may be buoyed by the support they have received from their loved ones. Either way the prisoner may wish to discuss these feelings. However in some instances discussing families may be too painful for the prisoner and if they do not want to discuss their families this should be respected.

Prisoner's Interests
Some prisoners have keen interests in art or spirituality for example. Sometimes prison life has given them the opportunity to be exposed to interests they might not have otherwise pursued. For example many ICPO clients develop an interest in learning Irish. Although there is naturally no obligation on the visitor to share these interests, the prisoner will appreciate an opportunity to talk about these interests.

The Prisoner's Offence
Visitors should never ask about a prisoner's offence. A prisoner may never want to discuss the offence and this should be respected. However over time the prisoner may come to trust the visitor and bring up the offence themselves. Then it is important for the visitor to remain non-judgemental and continue to distinguish between the prisoner and the offence. If the visitor becomes uncomfortable with this topic it is okay to move the conversation on to something else.

Personal Beliefs
Like all of us prisoners may hold strong beliefs about religion or politics. Although the visitor may disagree with the prisoner's beliefs, disagreement should be expressed in a respectful way. Visitors with strongly held religious beliefs should be careful not to preach to the prisoner or otherwise try to impose their beliefs on the prisoner. Dialogue builds rapport with the prisoner where sermonizing may alienate the prisoner.

Other Important Elements of Prison Visitation

Respect for Prison Rules
Prison rules may seem unnecessarily harsh or bureaucratic. Nevertheless it is important for a visitor to comply with these rules. Do not take anything out of the prison at the prisoner's request if the prison rules prohibit it. Conversely don't bring in items that are forbidden by prison rules. Most prison system websites will list rules for prison visitors and they will also be posted at the prison reception/visitation centre. **A breach of the rules by a visitor can have serious consequences for the prisoner and for other prisoners and their visitors.** For example the prison

could place restrictions on the prisoner's other visitors (including family members) or implement stricter rules on all visitors.

Courtesy
Prison officials can come across as brusque or arbitrary. Despite this a prison visitor should make every effort to be courteous. The visitor should remember that while he or she will leave at the end of the visit, the prisoner stays behind. A prison visitor should say or do nothing that might cause problems for the prisoner after the visit. However if a visitor has serious concerns about the prisoner's treatment - for example an allegation that a prisoner is being denied necessary medical treatment or being abused in prison, the visitor with the prisoner's consent should contact the relevant Irish Consulate and, or, their ICPO caseworker.

Boundaries
Remember that the visit is for the prisoner. Visitors should not be attempting to meet their own needs through the visit. However much a visitor might empathise with a prisoner, it is important to remember that there are two sides to every story and the visitor is only hearing the prisoner's side.

ICPO strongly recommends that visitors do not give out their addresses or phone numbers to prisoners. If the prisoner wants to correspond with the visitor they could do so through the local Irish centre or through the ICPO. Likewise it is not appropriate for a visitor to give their details to a prisoner's family. The prisoner may have been convicted of a serious offence and the visitor should remember this at all times.

What to do After a Visit

Debrief
Some people find it really upsetting, sad or stressful when they visit someone in prison. Such feelings are undoubtedly heightened for family members but nonetheless apply to other types of visitors as well. It is important to acknowledge this fact before each visit as a way of reminding yourself to "guard" against becoming emotionally involved in the prisoners situation or circumstances.

It can also be helpful to remind yourself of a number of statements both before and after a visit:

a. You didn't create this situation;
b. You are not expected to fix the un-fixable;
c. Your visit – in and of itself – is of significant worth and value to the prisoner;
d. Just by visiting you have made a positive difference in the life of another.

After a visit it is very important to debrief in confidence with a colleague about the experience. It is healthy to speak aloud to someone "the good and the bad" of your experience. If for confidentiality and data protection reasons there isn't someone you can share this with, an ICPO caseworker would be happy to discuss the visit with you.

If you find yourself becoming bothered or preoccupied by the experience talk to your line manager. Prison visits are not for everyone and there are many other ways of using your talents to help vulnerable people in society. You should never compromise your emotional health and well-being to go on prison visits.

Processing Information

It is helpful to both prison visitors and the ICPO for visitors to share any particular issues or concerns they may have arising from a visit (see debrief section above). Similarly, if the prisoner raising any matters needing attention, please bring these to their ICPO caseworker. It is not uncommon for a prisoner to write to ICPO or ask a family member via the telephone to ask for ICPO's assistance on some matter, that has since been resolved but without an update from the prison visitor considerable resources may be expended unnecessarily. Also visits allow for a more detailed exposition of a particular issue (more so than a letter from a prisoner) and this additional information can greatly assist their ICPO caseworker in advocating on their behalf.

Secondly, it is important that all information in respect of the visit is treated confidentially. Any written materials must be stored or destroyed securely. Information relating to a prisoner can be sensitive in nature and there are strict data protection guidelines as to how this information is treated or shared. As a rule of thumb you should seek informed consent from the prisoner before sharing any information they give you. All ICPO clients/prisoners are required to sign a detailed authorization form permitting it to store and share the client's information.