

Blackfriars Settlement

Prison After-Care Scheme

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HERE AT THE Blackfriars Settlement in London we organise an Associate After-Care Scheme. An easy phrase but not so easy to appreciate. "Scheme" is straightforward enough; "after-care" is not so difficult, but is a very wide term; "Associate" is quickly becoming an acceptable title but without any particular definition. A dozen people will say "I am an Associate," and each will have totally different ideas of his role and methods of working. Apart from all the confusion likely within the service and among the outside organisations, the ultimate position will be disastrous at the very root of the work being attempted. The only aim of Associate work is to help men and women establish or regain a useful and acceptable position in society. This will only be possible if confidence and trust can be established. To expect this from a prisoner without understanding or any accurate pre-release knowledge of what to expect is ridiculous.

If the whole value of Associate work is not to disappear in a cloud of mixed ideas, it is very necessary that the exact role of the Associates

attached to different organisations is known. As a first consideration then, what do we at Blackfriars mean by Associate?

The average volunteer who comes to us interested in prison after-care has no special knowledge of the field nor experience or training in social work generally. He or she will be leading a full life with a usual amount of family and personal commitments. Therefore, we have to think of the role of the Associate as something that is possible within limited amounts of spare time. Another consideration is that the prudent volunteer would not think it feasible to commit his spare time, uninterrupted over a long period, say of two or three years.

For us the voluntary Associate is somebody able to establish a companionship with a prisoner that will encourage a continued contact during the original months of re-settlement in society. The Associate becomes the person to whom the ex-prisoner turns spontaneously for advice, for help and support. The person who can demonstrate personal interest and concern.

interest and concern which cannot in the ex-prisoner's eyes appear as of duty or reward. The Associate offers to share a part of his spare time with a selected companion, to encourage him out of loneliness and isolation and help him out of inadequacy.

The best way of conveying an idea of the sort of person who volunteers for this work is to give one or two examples:-

Example 1.

Male: 55 years old: Married.

Religion: Humanist.

A Civil Servant with previous experience as Prison Visitor and teaching at Evening Institute.

(1) Realisation that after-care best practical work.

Reason for volunteering:

(2) Need for assistance for those already engaged in such work.

Example 2.

Male: 34 years old: Single.

Religion: Presbyterian.

An Advertising Executive, with no previous social work experience.

Reason for volunteering:

Interested in doing social work, layman's interest in prisons and after-care.

Example 3.

Male: 49 years old: Married.

Religion: Church of England.

A schoolmaster, with experience of education and rehabilitation of disturbed children.

Reason for volunteering:

A consideration that experience and personal qualities may be of some value.

Example 4.

Female: 31 years old: Single.

Religion: Congregationalist.

A secretary with voluntary experience with Family Welfare Association, Old People and Youth Work.

Reason for volunteering:

Interest in people and their problems.

Assuming the volunteer to be available and the role of Associate to be of possible value, why then not let the individual get on with it? Why the need for a scheme? Of the people who come to us at the Settlement interested in prison after-care, many not only have little specialised knowledge or information in that field but have no real experience of general social work. Immediately they are within an organisation with a wide range of activity, of which they become a part and from which they can draw experience and information of value. They are not confined narrowly to prison after-care, but can relate their work to the much wider issues involved.

Within the prison after-care work, the volunteer has the very real need of supervision. The need is not only there but is recognised by the volunteer. The field of work in which he is entering will contain many situations and demand varied action about which he will require guidance and instruction. In that he is an Associate on our scheme to which mainly recidivists are referred, the responsibilities he is taking on are very real and he must be able to call on adequate support and advice. This will indicate a very clear role for a professional organiser.

Any person who volunteers for Associate work is in no position to know either if the work is suitable for him or he for the work. He will have no real knowledge of the problem, of the people and situa-

tions he will be in contact with, of the work that is expected of him or of the physical and emotional demands involved. If he has to become involved without first being able to find answers to these, he will either decide against it and potential voluntary help is lost or he will take something on with which he cannot cope, achieving nothing either for himself, or most importantly, for the person he has wanted to help. Indeed, he may well intensify a condition he is there to overcome.

All voluntary workers should not only have the opportunity but should be expected to participate in, preparation and training at which they could understand in some measure the field of their volunteered activity. The training should not only include factual information as of the Associate scheme, the prisons and the penal system, welfare and after-care facilities, but must instruct on relationships particularly of Associates and prisoners, drawing value and guidance from the experience of other Associates in such things as case discussions and group discussions.

These are some of the reasons why we feel our scheme at Blackfriars is necessary. We give this preparation and training to all potential Associates. The need for a professional organiser is obvious but we believe there is also another very necessary role. To attempt to give volunteers some understanding of Associate rela-

tionships, to lead case discussions, to advise on or interview the more difficult recidivist, this is the job of a psychiatrist. At Blackfriars, we retain a psychiatrist for just this role and his experiences on our scheme make him an invaluable consultant for the individual Associate.

Potential Associates can decide after the training sessions if they still wish to take up individual Associate work but are they likely to be suitable for the work, or the work for them? Here we have another reason for the scheme and a very definite responsibility. Responsibility to the volunteer that he does not become involved in something to his detriment, responsibility to the prison staff and welfare departments and to the men we are trying to help. On our scheme, individual Associate suitability can in some measure be decided by the organiser during interviews and the course of training meetings but the final decisions are taken by a panel of experienced professional workers.

Our Associates are given preparation and training not to create a body of like-thinking, like-acting personnel, but to allow them to use their individual approach to the situation to the maximum effect, and are given the opportunity of continued discussion and interchange of experiences and ideas with other Associates as well as with the organiser and psychiatrist, to allow full benefit to and from their work.

Having the organisation, the Associates, and an accepted idea of the role of the Associate, to which ex-prisoners is the scheme best geared? Two considerations are that we are concerned with recidivists and that our Associates, though training has been mentioned a lot, are still non-professional, unqualified people. Just because they are volunteers, it is hardly sensible to think that their introduction to any prisoner is a good thing, or that they are likely to be able to create stability in a prisoner who has already received, unavailingly, a great deal of specialised professional help.

We have felt that a broad group from whom prisoners could be referred to Associates is that of the friendless, inadequate person whose isolation probably goes back to childhood. It is best here to give examples of one or two of those who have been referred and been accepted.

Example 1: 27 years old male. No relatives and friends. No fixed abode. Occupation given as labourer. Serving eight months for larceny. History of petty larceny, many cases, starting with an Approved School sentence. Previously in orphanage, no knowledge of parents.

Example 2: 35 years old male. Married with two children. Separated, no hope of reconciliation. No other relatives. Occupation given as painter. Serving two years for office breaking. Eight previous similar. Extract from Welfare Officer's report: "This man is without doubt immature, he feels very rejected and lonely, and might, if not shown interest and warmth, become psychopathic."

Example 3: 48 years old male. Divorced: 3 children. No contact

with other relations. Occupation given as engineer. Serving nine months for attempted larceny. 5 previous—all larceny and attempted larceny. Trouble started from time of break-up of family.

These examples have been selected not only as typical of those referred in the past but also because they represent examples of cases when contact with an Associate has been retained over a useful period. To relate this in some fashion, the following information may help:

Example 1: Two months between last two sentences. 15 months contact with Associate.

Example 2: Four months between last two sentences. 26 months contact with Associate.

Example 3: Seven months between last two sentences. 13 months contact with Associate.

The contact given is the time period since date of discharge.

It must be remembered that this work at the Settlement has only been in operation just over two years, during which time studying the possibilities of the work and formulating procedure and conditions have played a big part. The introduction, preparation, primary and continued training of Associates have altered and enlarged in structure and content, selection method improved, the creation of a very experienced Advisory Group together with the continued involvement of the psychiatrist, have all greatly increased the support available to the individual Associate.

But the Associate is only one half of what is hoped will be a beneficial relationship. What of the other half and how does the relationship come about. As has been mentioned, we are concerned with recidivists and, in that our Associates are mainly from the Greater London area, with recidivists who will be living in London on discharge. This means we are principally concerned with Wandsworth, Pentonville, and Holloway prisons. Since the scheme started all referrals to us for Associate after-care have been made by the Welfare Officers at those prisons. The procedure is: -

1. Referral by a Welfare Officer.
2. Prisoner interviewed by organiser.
3. History advised to organiser from Welfare Officer.
4. Acceptance or rejection by organiser.
5. Organiser checks availability of selected suitable Associate.
6. Associate introduced to prisoner by Welfare Officer.
7. Associate can visit further through Welfare Officer.
8. Attempted continued contact after discharge.

As a selecting agent for Associate after-care the Welfare Officer has many difficulties. In Wandsworth and Pentonville, the numbers of prisoners and the high discharge rate combine to reduce the time of selection to the pre-discharge board. Outside this, the choice of

selection can only be those men previously known to the Welfare Officer or those who have reason to request interviews.

Of necessity, many of the prisoners have been referred to us at the time of their pre-discharge board, a few weeks before discharge. They are unlikely to understand anything of the voluntary commitment they agree to, or of the position of the Associate to whom they are introduced. Indeed, at this stage, with the "fever" mounting, any help offered would be seen only in terms of money, accommodation or job, and the worth of the Associate will be measured only in terms of the production of one or all of these. This is not only demanding the impossible of the majority of Associates but is obviously no basis for a continued relationship.

Records of our work so far show a high proportion of "lost contact" in the cases of men referred at this short notice before discharge and have convinced us of the necessity of the introduction of the Associate at a stage well before gate-fever onset, allowing for a succession of visits before discharge. In this way, the Associate and prisoner have the opportunity of getting to know each other, the Associate to know the problems of the prisoner, the prisoner to realise the help he can get from the Associate, and above all time for preparation.

In an attempt to overcome some of the difficulties of late referral, we have started an experiment at

Wandsworth, which could be valuable. The facilities have been given to us on the H and K wings and allow us to visit every week. The procedure being attempted is as follows: -

- (a) Talk by the organiser to any group of prisoners interested in hearing more about Associates.
- (b) From those still interested, a smaller group of men, each with similar discharge dates about six to nine months ahead, is formed and names submitted to Welfare Office.
- (c) Consultation between the Welfare Office and organiser decides the men suitable for Associate after-care.
- (d) The group meets weekly and Associates are introduced successively each week until all are paired off.
- (e) Between now and discharge meetings can be singly or in groups.

The advantages of this are:

- (1) Men are given the opportunity of knowing something of the role of an Associate at the very outset.
- (2) The value of group discussion.
- (3) More natural pairing and ample time for personal interviews.
- (4) The opportunity for the organizer to use the knowledge and advice of the Assistant Governors and prison officers on the wings, as an aid to selection.

The potential help of group discussions, as mentioned above,

has already been tried in another experiment at Pentonville. In this case, Associates have been introduced to the existing pre-release course run on H Wing by the Deputy Governor. The Associates sit with the prisoners during the talk and question time, after which, for a further period, each Associate sits with a group of men, continuing the discussion. Every third week there is no speaker, the whole time is used in groups.

The advantages are:

- (a) To the prisoners, Associates become people instead of bodyless ideas.
- (b) An aid to selection of suitable referrals is created.
- (c) Some natural pairings are possible.

Two other factors connected with the Settlement have value to Associates. Accommodation here can be used at times by discharged men, which, even though only for short periods, is an extra link. Small working-parties of four men at week-ends are paroled to the Settlement, and work side by side with Associates.

In considering the future, an essential consideration is the role of this scheme as a model or prototype for others to observe, modify and adopt in time. As mentioned before, a considerable amount of development has taken place during the two years, in factors of selection and training of voluntary workers, in selection of prisoners and in conditions of introduction and interview.

These developments have been made from a study of the work to date, together with suggested improvements forthcoming from case and group discussions.

We could, at this stage, quote a lot of facts, the number of men referred, varying stages of referral, quote cases of prolonged association and short association, of men settled down, of men back inside, but this would not constitute firm and objective evidence of the possible role and work of voluntary workers in this field. This will come from a future detailed assessment of the operation of the scheme and then we will have achieved the object of making it a prototype for the use of others.

What seems to be necessary now is that we should explain our work to other people and to note the many possible pitfalls of Associate work. The main one of these would appear to be that mentioned right at the start, the diversity of ideas as to the role of the Associate. Not that our idea of the role is the only one, but at least the role as interpreted by different organisations should be known and understood. The Associate idea is catching on, and there are many dangers in it, being welcomed too freely, without sufficient control and investigation.

If the Associate idea is worthwhile, then there should be opportunity for visiting in prison,

for information to be received concerning the man to be helped, the need for a link with not only the Welfare Officer but with the prison staff and prison visitors. These will hardly sensibly be available to an individual, about whom the only thing known is that he is called an Associate.

At Blackfriars, we now attempt to supply this assurance by a process of careful selection: selection which not only considers the prisoner and prison staff but also the volunteer himself.

Our other consideration is that the idea that a prisoner can find out what it is all about after his discharge is not substantiated. If a contact is made in these circumstances then it is for mere practical after-care and the chances of sustained contact are rare. There is a need for a full explanation to the serving prisoner not only of Associates, but of his own particular Associate.

The great advantage of this type of scheme is that the voluntary Associate represents society and the community, and not only does he offer to the prisoner through his interest and concern, that of the community at large, but through the Associate, the community is educated in this field. This will contribute towards community understanding of social work and provide encouragement and support for the social workers.