

Moorland's Lifers Group



Darrell Fisher, Probation Officer, Moorland Prison and YOI on behalf of the staff team.

The Life Sentence Prisoners' Group is an innovative offence-focused group run by probation and prison officers for young adult offenders starting their life sentences. The 30 week programme helps them to recognise the build up to their offence and to address the risk factors which will help them progress through the lifer system and reduce the risk of re-offending. The group enables its members to become articulate young men wanting to talk about their offences and the difficult issues associated with them and with a greater understanding of their victims.

The award of the Butler Trust Certificate to the 'Life Sentence Prisoners Group' (LSPG) in March 2002 has certainly made an impact on our work. It is our impression that young adult male prisoners, between 18 and 21 years old, who have received a life sentence, are in certain respects, a forgotten cohort of the general lifer population. Procrastination and prevarication seem to be the response when a young lifer asks about help to address and understand their offence. This can best be summed up in the oft-heard phrase, 'wait till you get to the adult estate'.

The LSPG was established to start the long and painful process of addressing their abusive behaviour that brought about the events leading to their life sentence. The award from the Butler Trust has helped our efforts in that the subsequent publicity and recognition has attracted interest and indeed validated our work.

We are able to produce a 'Treatment Profile' after they have completed the LSPG course. For those who have completed the course we can see that they can now talk about the offence and who understand the relevance of addressing their associated dynamic risk factors, a process that is the core of the management of a life sentence.

One of the noticeable consequences of the work of the LSPG has been that there has been a marked increase in the transfer rate of young lifers from Moorland to adult therapeutic community prisons such as Dovegate and Grendon. Such transfers reflect the recognition by the individual

prisoner that they have 'problems' that they need to address in order to make themselves less abusive in the future. This recognition has been prompted by their attendance on the LSPG. In some cases, such referrals have involved the prisoner electing to defer their panel hearing for release consideration as a discretionary life sentenced person. This means that these prisoners are deferring the date when such a panel would consider releasing them from custody onto licence supervision in the community. The transfer rate of our prisoners to therapeutic prison communities from December 2001 to November 2002 compared to previous years has risen nine times.

The vast majority of our young lifers have a personal history of being victims of emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Some have experienced separation from their families through periods of Local Authority residential care and have suffered the loss of significant adults. All these experiences validate the research of Gwyneth Boswell in *Violent Victims: The prevalence of loss and abuse in Section 53 offenders (Princes Trust 1995)* into the history of young people who have committed serious and grave crimes.

The LSPG is a groupwork programme based on adapting and applying various established models to help the young men begin to understand how they committed their abusive behaviour. We would look to have the programme accredited and so are involved in a rigorous professional debate with our colleagues in the Psychology Department about how we address the needs of the ubiquitous What Works agenda, the criteria of the Offending Behaviour Programmes Unit and the demands of the Joint Accreditation Panel.

Whilst the LSPG has established that there is a way to help young men address their serious and grave abusive behaviour early in their life sentence, other issues still need to be tackled.

- ❑ What to do to help prisoners experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder because of their offence.

- ❑ What to do with those prisoners who express extensive denial regarding their offences.
- ❑ What range of cognitive/psychometric tests should we use to assess the criminogenic needs of our prisoners.

All these are challenges for the future.

The format of the LSPG has been extensively disseminated and was presented at the recent 9th European Groupwork Symposium in London. For those interested issues concerning the LSPG and the general management of young adults serving

life sentences can be found in the British Journal of Community Justice which contains the papers presented at the first ever Prison Service conference on dealing with that group. (G. Boswell, D. Fisher, F. Flaxington, M. Loughlin. 'Working with Young Adults Sentenced to Life' in *British Journal of Community Justice*. Vol. 1. No 2. Summer 2002. Sheffield Hallam University, pp 77-89)

Working in a prison can leave one feeling somewhat isolated and insulated. Recognition by the Butler Trust serves to remind such workers that their work is recognised and appreciated.



Brixton's Best

Information, Advice and Resettlement Service

Joyce Headley, NACRO Information and Service Manager.

Joyce Headley was a Butler Trust Award winner in 2002: her unfailing energy and enthusiasm in the face of very difficult circumstances prompted several prisoners to nominate her. Dealing with about 100 referrals a week, she provides an essential service to prisoners to help them resettle in the community. Advocacy work with landlords, local authority housing departments, benefits agency and potential employers is complemented by events in the prison involving outside agencies.

Working in a prison is like no other working environment. The fact that it is a place of incarceration means that it is important to strike the right balance between working to the regime in place whilst meeting the needs of the prisoner population.

Gaining respect from both the prisoners and the prison staff is essential to being able to carry out an effective, professional service. Adopting a professional working approach, which seeks to build positive working relationships with staff at all levels and so becoming part of the team helps bring this about. As the representative of NACRO in the prison, I act as the information link between the prison and NACRO.

I write to say a BIG thank you for all your efforts in helping me to obtain accommodation. Without your help I would now be facing even more problems. Keep up the good work, I think that a lot of lads here really appreciate NACRO being here. I would dread to think what would happen without you.

The NACRO Brixton Prison Information Advice and Resettlement Service contributes to the prison's policy of providing purposeful out-of-cell activities, enhancing its profile as a community prison moving into the twenty-first century. Brixton Prison funds it.

I have over ten years' experience of working with offenders, both in prison and in the community. From 1990 I worked as a Job Club Manager at Pentonville prison for six years, (the first Job Club pilots scheme set-up by the Employment Service in a prison). I was responsible for getting prisoners into work on their release by developing links with employers. Through this experience I gained a thorough understanding of the diverse needs of both ex-offenders and those at risk of offending in institutional and community environments.

I have been at Brixton managing the NACRO Information Advice and Resettlement Service as its full-time worker since June 1996. My role has been to develop what was previously a voluntary service, and expand both its accessibility and also its range of services. I achieved this by creating more comprehensive referral and information procedures and networking with a wide range of other agencies. I made use of the internal means of communication such as notice boards in Reception and