

**INQUIRY INTO THE CLOSURE OR DOWNSIZING OF
CORRECTIVE SERVICES NSW FACILITIES**

Organisation: Corrective Services NSW, Retired Commissioned Officers
Association

Date received: 5/11/2012

Partially Confidential



CORRECTIVE SERVICES NSW
RETIRED COMMISSIONED OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

27th October 2012

The Honourable Paul Green MLC
Legislative Council
Parliament House Macquarie Street Sydney 2000

Dear Paul,

I note in your letter that you are chairing a committee that is charged with the big task of investigating the process of closing or downsizing Correctional Centres in NSW.

I fully comprehend the worldwide trend and the need for some cost cutting and restructuring, but so far as closing or downsizing Correctional Centres in NSW – this is a complex issue. I think there is a need for a deal of caution and much thought, before getting caught up with the idea that closing down or downsizing Correctional Centres in NSW is somehow going to be a solution to some of the Government's financial problems.

I am personally very much in favour of prison reform. I wish I had the answers to the big questions. For example, when the courts sentence someone to a length of time in prison – well, at the end of that sentence the person is then released back into the community – less able to cope in society and theoretically able to reoffend at will. Therefore there does not appear to be much logic in locking them up in the first place. I feel that only the people that should be kept in a prison are those who are "never to be released" because of the nature of their crimes. Much more should be done for keeping offenders in the community, using trained personnel and advancing technology. I know there are such programmes in operation – but there should be a huge trend in this direction. This of course will not happen overnight, but this is where a growing percentage of resources should be focused.

One rather successful project – the idea of Weekend Detention – has unfortunately gone out of fashion. Sentenced offenders were able to keep their jobs, stay with their families and have the requirement of the courts were fulfilled by doing community service at weekends based at a Correctional institution.

I even had former detainees come back to see me and tell me with pride about how well they were managing in their work and in their daily lives. It would have indeed been tragic if these same young men had had to have served their sentences in one of the prisons in NSW.

However, your project is much more immediate. The situation is that at the present time there is a huge prison population in NSW and they are accommodated in secure institutions throughout the State.

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I think it would be a huge mistake to end up accommodating these prisoners in a minimal number of prisons. People often say that it is the victims of crime and the families of the convicted people that end up doing the sentences for the crimes committed. And one certain way to punish the families of offenders is to move their family member who is serving a sentence, to some far away place.

Then there are the communities who have an established prison in their midst – many people rely on that prison for employment and for the continuation of their service providing businesses. The fact that some communities may have heard rumours of possible closure of their local prison, does not in any way prepare them for a sudden closure of their local prison. In country communities there are literally few job opportunities, so it's not just a case of walking into another job to help to feed their families and pay their mortgages. Unlike in parts of the sporting world where some effort is made in training people for jobs when their sporting careers are over, this is not the case in Corrections. It is a fact that people usually take on a career in Corrections with the idea of making it their lifetime work. An out of work Correctional Officer is a bit like an out of work policeman or undertaker, in that their social network has been limited by the nature of their career. The skills gained by a Correctional Officer of quietly managing socially challenged and mentally ill people are not regarded as "must have" qualifications by employers in the outside world. A transition into mainstream work has multiple challenges for out of work Correctional Officers. Unlike Nurses and Doctors who are regarded favourably as nobly serving the community - in general there is a wariness of Correction Officers because of the misconception that archaic practises still occur within the prison system. Although the work of Correctional Officers is a noble profession "protecting the community" it is a job that most people would rather leave to someone else to do and they would rather not think about it. It is however, one of the most stressful and dangerous jobs in NSW. It is not hard to understand why Correctional Officers would wonder how they could have a job one moment and then be out of work the next day, because of cost cutting - and as a result, that they might feel somewhat betrayed.

Then of course, there are many other people employed in prisons besides Correctional Officers – there are Clerical Staff, Social Workers, Psychologists, Nurses and Teachers and for these people to lose their job through the closure of a prison, can have cause just as much stress and upheaval in their lives. In a rural town, their prospects of work are probably just as poor as the Correctional Officer put out of work by the closure of a prison.

I know that at the Grafton Correctional Centre that some of the Correctional Officers who lost their employment with the recent changes there, had transferred from Berrima and Parramatta Correctional Centres. These very same people had sold their homes after the closure of the Berrima and Parramatta Correctional Centres and moved their families to Grafton – only to lose their jobs at Grafton Correctional Centre a short time later. This is something that citizens in Australia in 2012 should not have to put up with. But what can most people do? Not much. Because once the Government is moving in a certain direction, the impacts of policies such as prison closures on the lives of workers and their families appears to be of little consequence.

The former Commissioner of Corrective Services Mr. Ron Woodham PSM was a reformer and a compassionate man. He set up many programmes within the prisons in NSW designed to better prepare the inmates for their return to the outside world. He brought in beneficial changes for the female inmates and programmes specific to their special needs. He set up projects for the inmates involving the care of animals and wildlife with a focus on training the inmates for employment opportunities after their sentence was completed. Mr. Woodham was a visionary and his projects for indigenous inmates and some of his projects are held in high regard internationally. Closing and downsizing various Correctional Centres in NSW will inevitably cancel out some of these very worthwhile and successful projects which were designed to reduce reoffending. Without these projects, the cost of people reoffending could well cancel out the savings gained from closing down the prisons where these rehabilitation projects were taking place.

I am certain that Mr. Woodham's wealth of wisdom in the administration of Corrective Services NSW should not be overlooked when you are endeavouring to make the best possible decisions re the process of closing or downsizing prisons in NSW.

At the end of the day the people serving sentences in NSW are people who need assistance from the community at large. For whatever reason they have offended, society must take responsibility

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for their welfare and their rehabilitation. It breaks my heart that the reality of the situation in society today is that someone who has "done time" is unlikely to get a good job, because their "criminal record" will always cancel them out of the best chance to turn their lives around. There needs to be some serious rethinking on this subject and society needs to grow up in regard to its attitude to the less fortunate.

I know that the victims of crime would not necessarily see the situation this way, but they too have to be shown a lot more compassion by society at large. There should be far more done to care for and to protect the victims of crime. The victims of crime and the families of offenders are very often the two most disadvantaged groups in our society.

I am happy to say that the new Commissioner for Corrective Services NSW Mr. Peter Severin, seems to be a very fine person. I have not met him as yet, but I have received a very warm letter from him.

I know that Mr. Severin has a welfare background and one of my recommendations to you is that you should consult with him personally. I rather feel, although it is not my place to say, that he would not only be happy to talk to your committee, he would be a fountain of sound advice for you.

Getting right back to prison closures in NSW - there has been a history of prisons being closed and then down the track reopened again. This does not seem to equate to wise practice to me. The resulting stress to the communities who have had their local prison closed, only to be reopened at a later date, seems to me to be bad management in the first degree.

Now for example, Cooma Correctional Centre was originally opened in 1873 and has since then has been closed twice and reopened twice. The most recent closure was in July 1998. This was a shock to the town and the citizens worked tirelessly to have the prison reopened. It was finally reopened in November 2001 and has contributed greatly to the vitality of the town. One Correctional Officer was left in charge of the Correctional Centre while it was closed during the period 1998 – 2001 and he was extremely diligent in caring for the complex. It was a huge task for one man and he battled the rats, the birds and the weeds. He worked hard to carry out maintenance to ensure that the complex did not fall into a state of irreparable neglect. His work kept the dignity of the complex alive with mown lawns and tended gardens and his efforts kept the up the hopes of the local townsfolk that one day their Correctional Centre would be functional again. Today the Cooma Correctional Centre is not only fulfilling its role in the custodial sense, giving employment and aiding the economy of the town of Cooma and the district of the Monaro, it also has the Corrective Services NSW Museum. The Museum is a real asset to the town from a tourist point of view, it gives employment to inmates training them as Museum Tour Guides and it is one of the most important projects ever set up by Corrective Services NSW.

Everyone is interested in history and into the future when every Government policy re prisons, wise and not so wise will pale into insignificance – what people will want to see and touch will be the artefacts preserved by the Corrective Services NSW. The history of Corrections in NSW dating back to white settlement in Australia is preserved at the Cooma Correctional Centre Museum. The Museum curator has made every effort to preserve not only the many and various tangible artefacts but also some of the intangible history of Corrections NSW, by recording the stories told to him by serving and retired Correctional Staff. The Museum has international status for the quality of the historical artefacts and the way in which the inmates of the Cooma Correctional Centre are part of the project – so that it is a living Museum. I cannot stress to you enough the importance of this project and if any of your committee members are unaware of the significance of this project, I think it would be good if they could spend some time familiarising themselves with the project's absolute importance. This is one project that morally and ethically should be spared any hint of the "chop".

Parramatta Correctional Centre closed recently and has, I believe, been sold off by the NSW State Government. I visited this Centre after its recent closure and what struck me about it was that it is a very foreboding place. I worked at the Long Bay Prison Complex, so I am not unfamiliar with old style prisons, but Parramatta would have been a very sombre and oppressive environment to work in or to be imprisoned in.

The Parramatta Correctional Centre had its own history of closures and reopenings, but if it has in fact been sold off, I think that a big opportunity has been missed to make good use of the Centre. In my opinion a fortune could have been made by the NSW Government by turning the Centre into a

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Museum – not an artefact Museum like the one at Cooma, but more like a Museum for tourists to experience something similar to the Old Sydney Town project – like with re enactments of prison life for example. Inmates from other Correctional Centres could have been gainfully employed at the Museum. It could have been managed by a small number of Correctional Officers and could have been kept open seven days a week. There could have been eating facilities for the tourists, souvenirs for sale made by the inmates, evening tours with video or film documentaries featuring things of historical interest and such things as "overnight stays" for those who wanted that "reality" experience.

What worries me with the talk of the possibility of more prison closures and more downsizing of prisons in NSW, is the inevitability of the advent of more private Correctional Centres. Personally I do not like to see privatisation of hospitals and prisons. The basic principle of making money from the misfortunes of others is abhorrent to me. The trouble is with privatised prisons is that the focus is on making it a paying concern and consequently staffing levels are kept at a bare minimum. Then the purpose of the prison to contain the inmates securely for the duration of their sentence is the primary goal of the private prison. I fear that the safety of Staff and the rehabilitation of the inmates in the form of industries and educational projects will not be funded by the owners of the private prisons. I have heard that the reporting of incidents at private prisons is less likely to occur, because it could impact on the funding for that prison. The common practise in prisons in the USA, where inmates are very often in their cells for 23 out of every 24 hours should be a trend that in modern Australia should be avoided even if it comes at a cost.

Basically while ever there are prisons in NSW there will be a considerable cost to running them. The prisons should be run as well as we know how. We will be judged in the future for how we care for the Staff and the inmates in our prisons, whether they are government run or private. The government run prisons can be managed and regulated in the proper manner. Shortcuts will always be a problem in private prisons and no amount of regulation will put a stop to that.

Well, Paul, I really want to thank you again for your letter and for giving me the chance to offer my opinions to you. I hope what I have written is of some guidance to you and the members of your committee. I feel that you have been given a huge assignment, but I know from meeting you that you have the capacity to achieve good outcomes.

All the very best,

Warmest regards,

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