

Prisoners' Advice Service

Firstly, I would like to thank the Human Rights Lawyers Association for awarding me the bursary. Without their generous help I would not have been able to undertake a full-time summer internship with the Prisoners' Advice Service.

Introduction

The Prisoners' Advice Service (PAS) is an independent charity offering free legal advice and information to prisoners throughout England and Wales, covering issues in relation to their rights, conditions of imprisonment and the application of the Prison Rules. PAS assists prisoners in pursuing complaints about their treatment by providing advice and information and, when necessary, taking legal action. The organisation also publishes a quarterly Prisoners' Legal Rights Bulletin which is sent out to prisoners on the mailing list. Prisoners are some of the most marginalised people in society; in the current legislative climate, with the reduction of legal aid in prison law matters and large-scale structural changes in the custodial system, prisoners are increasingly in need of legal support. This means that the work PAS does is now more crucial than ever.

Prison law and prisoners' rights are extremely important to me, and the area of law in which I want to build a career. I have volunteered for PAS since 2014, and have learnt a great deal under the supervision of the solicitors I work with. I had previously only been able to volunteer there one day a week; this bursary enabled me to commit full-time to PAS, thus gaining a greater depth of knowledge and experience of prison law. Working at PAS has been the most positive work experience I have ever had. I think the organisation is amazing; the staff are supportive and encouraging, and working with the clients is a challenging but enriching experience. During my internship I was given a number of responsibilities such as assisting with the advice line, casework support and providing face-to-face support in prison at the PAS legal clinics.

Advice Line Work

The PAS advice line is an integral part of the work that PAS does, offering immediate advice to prisoners over the phone three days a week. This means that prisoners with urgent issues have the opportunity to speak to a legal advisor who can, if necessary, provide follow-up action straight away. Simply by placing me in a position to answer calls when the line was

open, this bursary directly enabled PAS to provide telephone advice to a greater number of prisoners than would otherwise have been the case. Although I was not qualified to provide in-depth legal advice I was able to provide advice for matters in which I had experience and was being supervised. I assisted prisoners with urgent problems, such as safety and healthcare issues, by contacting the prison on their behalf. I was also able to filter calls from prisoners who required information sheets, case law, prison service instructions or other basic information. Dealing with these queries myself enabled prisoners who needed more advanced legal advice to get through to a qualified advisor more quickly.

Working on the advice line and speaking to prisoners on a regular basis gave me a real insight into the issues that prisoners deal with on a day-to-day basis. One issue that seemed to dominate the advice line during my internship was violence suffered by prisoners. Recently, especially in private prisons, PAS has encountered an increasing number of calls from prisoners who are at risk of physical attacks and have reason to fear for their safety. My job therefore was to follow up these concerns by contacting prison staff and requesting immediate action; where this proved not to be a priority for a prison we raised this concern with the Prison and Probation Ombudsman.

Casework Support

During my internship I was able to provide casework support to solicitors at PAS. This ranged from all aspects of casework such as opening a new file that was compliant with legal aid agency requirements, providing a prisoner with updates as to their case progression, organising legal visits, chasing the prison for information, and pursuing complaints submitted on behalf of prisoners. For example, I assisted a prisoner with disabilities who was having difficulties communicating with their offender supervisor about an issue concerning their ability to progress through their sentence due to a lack of adjustments made to accommodate his disability. This matter involved me communicating with two different prisons and several members of staff, making sure that all involved were made fully aware of the situation, and thus speeding up the resolution of a protracted issue. I was also successful in getting a prisoner moved back to their original prison, enabling them to resume regular contact with their family, and in the case of their child allowing it to have regular contact with their only parent. The difference this made to the prisoner and his family was tremendous, and I was extremely pleased to have been able to assist to bring about this outcome. Work such as this

has enabled me to develop my communication and negotiation skills, giving me more confidence in my approach to dealing with the prison system.

Outreach: legal advice clinics

PAS also provides face-to-face advice in free legal clinics at a number of prisons around the country. I assisted at an advice clinic in a women's prison HMP Downview. This was an invaluable experience, and I am grateful to the solicitors at PAS for giving me this opportunity. Being able to attend and assist at an advice clinic has given me further confidence in speaking to clients and a greater insight into the different issues prisoners face. Women's prisons are somewhat different to the male estates and the issues that women prisoners face are often different to men. The main issues on which women prisoners required advice were home detention curfews, release on temporary licence and parole hearings. The majority of women in prison are incarcerated for non-violent offences and have childcare issues. Therefore home detention and release on temporary licence are common areas of prison law women prisoners seek advice on. Despite being eligible for these options, many women prisoners have not been fully informed as to their rights and options and feel they have been kept in the dark with regards their sentence progression. Whilst PAS offers face-to-face advice to prisoners in the clinics, we often follow up this advice with actions when required. I assisted with a number of these issues at the advice clinic. I was able to offer immediate advice as to actions they could take, but I also followed up prisoners' concerns after the clinic by chasing prison for updates of their particular issues.

Conclusion

I encountered a really wide range of issues affecting prisoners during my internship. PAS receives around 70 letters on average each week, and almost 300 phone calls. My time at PAS meant that I was able to assist an organisation that focuses its very limited resources on providing prisoners with clear information and advice to further their own cases, and attempts to hold the prison system accountable for their actions. The work that PAS does is invaluable and the people that work there are dedicated to their clients. Not only are they committed to a vital and perhaps unpopular cause, but they are also encouraging to those at the beginning of their legal careers. I have grown in confidence and ability since I became involved with PAS, and that is all due to the people I have worked with at PAS. I have also gained an insight into an area in our society that is often kept hidden. Thank you, once again, for this opportunity

which I believe will go some way to building a strong portfolio of knowledge and experience that is relevant to an area of law I am committed to.

Alice Gambell 2015