

## **President Higgins visits Cloverhill Prison to mark 10 years of the Samaritans Listener Programme.**

To mark the tenth anniversary of the Samaritans' Listener Service in Irish prisons, President Michael D Higgins made a visit to Cloverhill Prison, Dublin on Friday, 14<sup>th</sup> December to meet those prisoners who act as 'listeners'.



**President Higgins addresses the "listeners"**

Samaritans has said that its prison Listener Scheme was an important infrastructure for people who needed emotional support in a prison setting, and that those prisoners who act as listeners deserved the highest commendation for their professionalism and commitment to the service.

According to the National Chair of Samaritans, Pio Fenton: "The impact which prison can have on the mental health of its inmates is well documented. Many people suffer emotional distress relating to their crimes or concerns over their families who they cannot connect with in a meaningful way. Instances of self-harm and suicide are also higher among prisoners than other groups. Our Listener Service offers acts as an important emotional safety net for those in distress; it also has an important overall function in the prison setting."

Samaritans' Listener teams operate in six prisons in Dublin (Wheatfield; Arbour Hill; Mountjoy; Mountjoy Training Unit; and Cloverhill). A scheme is also being introduced in the Dochás Centre). In each prison, Listeners establish a rota to ensure a 24-hour service is available to anyone who needs it. Support is offered on a one-to-one basis to ensure confidentiality. The scheme was initiated in Ireland in response to the 1999 report of the National Steering Group on Deaths in Prison.

According to Pio Fenton: "Our teams of Listeners deserve to be commended for their commitment and professionalism which they bring to the service. Those who become Listeners make taken on a large responsibility: they undergo substantial training in the first instance; then they become known within the prison as listeners because they wear a branded shirt so that inmates can approach them in the yard or other open setting; and – most remarkably – they listen. They often listen to issues that they themselves have inevitably had to grapple with, like isolation, loneliness and remorse. They can be woken from their cell at night and brought to visit an inmate and to listen. They then go back to their own confinement after listening. They don't make judgements and they treat all interactions in confidence.

In the past year, Samaritans recorded 1,100 formal contacts within the six prisons in its Listener Scheme. This represented an increase of 83 per cent on contacts for 2011. Samaritans has attributed the significant rise to the extension of the service to the Dochas Centre this year; an increase in training for new Listeners, which has resulted in greater capacity; as well as more pro-active engagement by Listeners of new committals.

During the event, a number of inmates highlighted their positive experience of becoming a Listener. "Clearly, the benefits of our Listener Scheme is two-directional: In some cases, the training offered by Samaritans is the first piece of training or education that a prisoner may have

undertaken outside of the formal education system. Most Listeners take great pride in the work, and many would cite greater levels of self-confidence and self-control as impacts of the training and subsequent work. We also have evidence to suggest that some of our Listeners – upon release – have reduced reconviction levels and go on to further education or training," said Pio Fenton.

Mr Fenton also paid tribute to the Prison Authorities for supporting the Scheme. "We have established excellent working relationships in all of the prisons where we now operate a scheme. The authorities are hugely cooperative in the implementation and on-going support of the service. In more recent years, we have rolled out training days to prison staff so that they become familiar with the operation of the service. In addition, Samaritans has an input into the formal training of prison officers, and sits on a number of the suicide awareness committees of the country's prisons."

The Director General of the Irish Prison Service, Michael Donnellan, said: "The Listener Scheme has proven itself to be an effective and necessary infrastructure in a prison setting. It is another example of prisoners taking responsibility for their own healthcare and the needs of those who may be vulnerable in their community. Prison Governors have observed the positive impact which it has on both the prisoner in emotional distress and the Listener and I would like to see a listener programme running in all prisons."

Ends