

Prison Reform in NSW

Public statement By Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish and Hindu Faith Organisations.

March 2011

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The twelve religious groups below join the many voices calling for prison reform in NSW in this important pre-election period. We seek to apply the values of compassion, healing and social justice to all members of society, including prisoners, who are often the forgotten ones - 'out of sight, out of mind'. The measure of compassion and social justice we extend to prisoners reflects on the presence of those values in our society. We are actively involved in the pastoral care of prisoners through the prison chaplaincy programmes.

For too long, NSW has seen an increasing rate of imprisonment, and the highest rate in Australia of prisoners returning to prison after release (43%). These "prisoners" are children of the Australian society, we have a choice to support their rehabilitation and allow them to be constructive members of society, or keep them in this vicious cycle of relapse and recidivism. We believe that many prisoners can be reformed if there is the political will to do the work required. Prisoners should not be used for political gain with some political parties using the fear tactics around crime, and promising more harsh treatment to gain votes.

We recommend the incoming government consider the following measures to improve this situation.

1. To increase the focus on rehabilitation and education programmes and other measures to assist prisoners reintegrate into society, thus decreasing the rate of return to prison. To reduce the current rate of recidivism by 10% within the next 3 years.
2. To reform the bail laws that have been increasingly toughened, causing far too many to be imprisoned on remand. Restore the presumptions in favour of bail in all cases except where there is genuine evidence of harm, if the alleged offender is left in the community.
3. To create strong and independent oversight of the Corrective Services Department to ensure full transparency of their operations. In particular, official visitors should be able to report any concerns about prisoner management to an independent regulatory body without fear of being dismissed or locked out of prisons.
4. To provide a stronger pastoral care resource in the prison system. The government accepted a target of one chaplain per 200 inmates but this has not been met. If that ratio were implemented, pastoral care resources would be improved by 30%. Chaplains should also have better access to inmates in terms of longer visiting hours and better facilities for interviewing inmates and holding religious services.
5. To create a planning and review body to look at all of the ways that the performance of corrective services in NSW could be improved. NSW should be a model of best practice. This would benefit all citizens of NSW through lower rates of incarceration and crime.

It is our role as religious organisation to make a strong stand on these issues by upholding the values of compassion and social justice. We urge the people of NSW to expect and pressure the incoming new government to adopt policies to improve the rehabilitation of prisoners. This will create a more wholesome society for us all.

Supporting Organisations

<p>Missionaries of the Sacred Heart Justice and Peace Centre <i>Father Claude Mostowik msc</i> <i>Director,</i> <i>PO Box 146</i> <i>Erskineville NSW 2043</i></p>	<p>Australian Federation of Islamic Councils <i>Ikebal Patel</i> <i>President</i> <i>PO Box 7185 SSBH,</i> <i>Alexandria, NSW 2015</i></p>
<p>Justice and Peace Office, Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney <i>Dr Steven Lovell-Jones</i> <i>Justice and Peace Promoter</i> <i>133 Liverpool St Sydney 2000</i></p>	<p>Federation of Australian Buddhist Councils <i>Mr Kim Hollow</i> <i>President</i> <i>PO BOX 6479</i> <i>Footscray West (Vic) 3012</i></p>
<p>UnitingCare NSW.ACT <i>Rev Harry J Herbert</i> <i>Executive Director</i> <i>Level 4</i> <i>222 Pitt Street</i> <i>Sydney</i></p>	<p>The Hindu Council of Australia <i>Prof. Nihal Singh Agar</i> <i>Chairman</i> <i>17 The Crescent</i> <i>Homebush</i> <i>NSW 2140</i></p>
<p>Islamic Council of NSW <i>Khaled Sukkarieh</i> <i>Chairman</i> <i>PO Box 423, Greenacre</i> <i>NSW 2190</i> <i>Australia</i></p>	<p>Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes in NSW [CLRI(NSW)] <i>Sister Sharon Price rsm</i> <i>Executive Director</i> <i>PO Box 259</i> <i>(72 Rosebery Ave)</i> <i>Rosebery NSW 1445</i></p>
<p>Friends of Refugees Of Eastern Europe <i>Rabbi Yoram Ulman</i> <i>Judge, Jewish Ecclesiastic Court of Sydney</i> <i>Past President, Rabbinical Council of NSW</i> <i>Chabad House Bondi</i> <i>25 O'Brien St</i> <i>Bondi NSW 2026</i></p>	<p>Council Of Imams NSW <i>(Affiliated with Australian National Imams Council)</i> <i>Tarek El-Bikai</i> <i>Secretary</i> <i>PO Box 145 Lakemba 2195</i> <i>NSW, Australia</i></p>
<p>Australian Sangha Association <i>(representative body for monks and nuns of all Buddhist traditions)</i> <i>Sujato Bhikkhu</i> <i>Secretary</i> <i>P.O. Box 132</i> <i>Bundanoon NSW 2578</i></p>	<p>Churches Together NSW.ACT <i>(NSW Ecumenical Council)</i> <i>Rev. Paul Swadling</i> <i>Acting General Secretary</i> <i>379 Kent St</i> <i>Sydney 2000</i></p>