



## ***An Overview of the TMS Peer Mediation in Prisons Initiative: 2016 to 2019***

### **Introduction**

Since its inception in 2016 the Peer Mediation in Prisons initiative has worked with over 200 prisoners within the Irish prison system in order to support them in developing effective conflict resolution skills and with a view to reducing violence in the prison environment. This article will outline how the initiative came about, how it was implemented, who participated in it, what the outcomes were and also what the hopes are for the future of this unique programme.

Mediation is the process of resolving conflict between parties in dispute where a neutral third party, the mediator, facilitates discussions and the exploration of potential solutions by those involved. A key element of mediation is that it is a voluntary process where the parties in dispute choose to engage and participate of their own free will and any agreement reached is created by themselves alone. It is essential that confidentiality is maintained throughout the process and the mediator conducts the discussions in an impartial manner without making suggestions or proposing solutions. The key philosophy underpinning any mediation is that the participants themselves work to create their own agreement based on their own needs and with their interests being accommodated as much as possible.

Peer mediation differs from conventional mediation in that the person assuming the role of mediator is from the same peer group as the parties in dispute. *'The theory behind PFM (prisoner facilitated mediation) is that people in conflict benefit from working with a mediator to whom they can relate..... prison inmates can relate to one another better than to prison employees (or even outsiders such as*

*professional mediators.’ Kaufer et al p. 194. For reasons of trust and familiarity with the culture and context of the environment within which the conflict is taking place, having a mediator from the same peer group as the disputants can encourage engagement by people who might otherwise resist external support in managing their conflict.*

Due to the highly restrictive nature of the prison environment, the large numbers of diverse personalities living in extremely close proximity to one another, and the fact that at least some of the prisoners would have displayed violent behaviour in the past, prisons can be dangerous places. Conflict can develop and escalate rapidly and can have a negative impact, both physically and mentally, on both prisoners and staff. It was in this context that a unique and innovative new educational programme was created within the Irish Prison Service (IPS).

## **Background**

As part of their facilities all prisons in Ireland operate an educational department in order to facilitate the personal and educational development of prisoners. The range of educational programmes on offer are broad and, depending on facilities available, can include practical skills (woodwork, cookery, computer-literacy), personal development (lifeskills, communication skills, anger management), to more curriculum-based academic courses (2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> level subject qualifications).

Since 2009 the Irish Red Cross has been running a community-based health education programme in all 14 Irish prisons. This programme, developed in collaboration with the IPS and local Education and Training Boards (ETB), includes a workshop on Violence Reduction. In 2016 a group of prisoners in Castlerea Prison, which is a facility with a significant proportion of Irish Travellers among the prison’s population, requested more in-depth training in violence prevention and conflict resolution in order to address issues which were happening within the prison. The Traveller Mediation Service (TMS)\* was approached to develop a 6 week skills-based programme which focused on conflict resolution and the 5-step peer mediation model of managing disputes. Following discussions between the ETB staff, the TMS, the Travellers in Prison Initiative (TPI) and senior staff in Castlerea prison, it was agreed that there was a need for ongoing work in dealing with conflict and preventing violence in the prison.

*‘Inmates typically do not act out for no reason: even if the trigger for a violent act seems minor from the outside, the inmate may be responding to a perceived threat to their social standing, the loss of which would threaten their safety and security.<sup>25</sup> When inmates are not provided with superior problem solving strategies, it is almost inevitable that they will resort to violence when faced with a serious conflict.’ PRISONER FACILITATED MEDIATION: BRINGING PEACE TO PRISONS AND COMMUNITIES Laurel Kaufer, Douglas E. Noll, and Jessica Mayer\* (p. 191)*

*\*Formerly known as Midlands Traveller Conflict Mediation Initiative (MTCMI)*

### **Pilot Programme – Castlerea Prison:**

The first programme was run in Castlerea Prison in the autumn of 2016 and involved 21 participants, 11 of whom were from the Traveller community. This was reflective of the fact that more than half of the prison population in Castlerea Prison would identify as being Travellers.

#### ***Topics covered in this pilot training programme included:***

- Listening and communication exercises
- The meaning of conflict
- Exploring Irish Traveller culture
- Exploring Traveller related conflict and how it is different from other conflict
- Group work using questions to explore the nature of conflict and its impact and consequences
- Role play and exercises
- Personal responses to conflict, individual conflict styles and triggers
- How conflict escalates and de-escalation techniques
- Restorative practices in managing conflict/ building relationships and role play exercises

Feedback from course participants was very positive, with a 100% completion rate amongst Traveller participants on the pilot programme. The fact that the programme was developed and led by a Traveller organisation (TMS) and partly facilitated by Travellers led to a considerable amount of enthusiasm, engagement and commitment from participants.

Following an evaluation of this initiative, and in light of the positive response of stakeholders and participants, it was decided to continue the initiative in Castlerea Prison and develop a follow-on programme for participants who had completed the first 6-week module. Part 2 of the Peer Mediation Programme involved a focus on practical mediation and conflict coaching skills with a view to developing a pool of prisoners who would be able to provide effective conflict resolution interventions amongst their peers in the prison setting. This was also run as a 6-week module at the end of which a Mediators' Institute of Ireland (MII) accredited external mediator would independently assess the participants on their mediation skills.

#### ***Topics covered on Part 2 of the Peer Mediation Programme included:***

- Understanding the skills of a mediator/co-mediator

- The 5-Step Diamond Model of Mediation
- Framing and Re-framing
- Exploring Needs and Interests
- Developing and practicing role play exercises

The first 6-week Part 2 Peer Mediation Programme was run in February 2017 and resulted in 6 participants passing the independent assessment. As a result of the success of the programme and the continued support of stakeholders, prison staff and prisoners themselves it was decided to continue to run the Peer Mediation in Prisons Initiative in Castlerea Prison on an ongoing basis. Between its inception in 2016 and December 2019 a total of 42 prisoners had passed the Part 1 training programme with almost half of them, 17, going on to successfully complete Part 2 of the training.

As the pilot programme was delivered a process evaluation was carried out which documented the process of the training and follow-up as it unfolded. The evaluation assessed and documented the set-up and implementation of the programme and also reported the impacts on participants.

The evaluation found that amongst the key strengths of the pilot were:

**The delivery of the training by Travellers:** this enabled a focus on Traveller identity and how conflict impacts on the Traveller community. Participants noted that this resulted in high levels of Traveller participation in the training

**The oversight structure** in the form of the advisory group which included, crucially, two representatives of peer mediator trainees (acknowledging their importance in the design and implementation of the programme).

### **Impacts on the Participants**

The evaluation found that there were notable impacts in three distinct areas – the personal impact on participants, the impact within the prison itself, and the wider impact in the community outside of the prison.

**Personal impacts** included changes in how conflict was viewed and addressed (e.g. resulting in talking through issues), and reduced violence in the prison with the availability of peer mediation. Some participants expressed an interest in pursuing further (accredited) training on peer mediation, and continuing to utilise their skills post-release. The process of participating in and completing the course had a very positive impact on the men and many spoke about how it gave them a better awareness of their own past behaviours as well as giving them practical skills and tools for managing potential conflict in the future.

**Prison impacts** included a view that there was a reduction in sanctions for breaches of prison discipline, and that there were improved relationships between prison staff and prisoners (arising

from the co-operation in the delivery of the programme). At the start of March 2017, it was reported that at least 32 incidents were averted as a result of informal peer mediation undertaken by the peer mediators; 31 conflict coaching sessions had been undertaken; and one formal referral to peer mediation was made (which resulted in a mediation session successfully undertaken by two peer mediators and two participants).

The informal nature of peer mediation meant it was difficult to fully quantify exactly how many 'mediations' took place as a result of the programme but there was strong anecdotal evidence from prison staff and prisoners that the skills were being applied in the general prison population to good effect.

In terms of **community impacts**, participants noted as conflict in the prison environment spilled over into the wider community, reduced conflict in prison similarly impacted on the wider community. The participants were sharing some of their new learning with family members outside of the prison and in some cases were trying to actively reduce external conflicts. Many spoke about how they were keen to utilise their conflict resolution skills once they were released from prison and had re-joined the wider community.

### **Expansion and Development of the Peer Mediation in Prisons Initiative**

The success of the pilot initiative in Castlerea led to the programme being expanded to other prisons in Ireland. From 2018-2019 Part 1 and Part 2 of the Peer Mediation in Prisons Initiative was rolled out in a further four prisons nationally:

- **Loughan House** open prison in Co. Cavan
- **The Dochas Centre** women's prison in Dublin
- **Cork Prison** in Cork city
- **Midlands Prison** in Co. Laois.

*'No one is born knowing how to resolve conflicts. These are skills that one typically picks up from observing family and friends. Unfortunately, prison inmates often come from violent, abusive, or neglectful backgrounds. As such, many have not been exposed to examples of healthy communication and conflict resolution. This lack of experience does not, however, indicate a lack of ability. PFM (Prisoner Facilitated Mediation) training gives people the opportunity to develop these skills by teaching them a variety of techniques designed to help keep conversations constructive, minimize misunderstandings, and shift the discussion from the parties' positions to their underlying needs.'* PRISONER FACILITATED MEDIATION: BRINGING PEACE TO PRISONS AND COMMUNITIES Laurel Kaufer, Douglas E. Noll, and Jessica Mayer\* (p. 195)

### **Loughan House:**

- Peer Mediation Programme Part 1 training commenced in September 2018.
- Peer Mediation Programme Part 2 training commenced in January 2019, and an external accreditor completed assessments for 4 participants in February 2019. All 4 were successful.
- A certificate presentation event for those receiving their Peer Mediation certificates was held in March 2019, with the IPS Director General presenting the awards.
- The autumn Peer Mediation Part 1 course started in November 2019 and was completed in December 2019. 12 students completed the programme and were presented with their certificates by the Prison Governor.

Due to it being an open prison with smaller numbers and considerably more freedoms and autonomy available to its prisoners, Loughan House would traditionally have a minimal amount of conflict and violence amongst its prisoner population. The desire to remain in the open prison and avoid being transferred to a stricter regime in one of the bigger prisons means that inmates are generally good at managing issues which might arise within the prison. Nevertheless, it was felt that there was value in running Peer Mediation training in order to provide good conflict resolution skills to equip prisoners for life back in the community post-release.

### **The Dochas Centre Women's Prison:**

- In autumn 2018 Peer Mediation Part 1 training was delivered in the Dochas Centre Women's Prison. 6 prisoners successfully completed the programme
- In July 2019 the TMS ran a Conflict-Awareness training workshop in the prison with a view to the possibility of running further Peer Mediation in the future.

A combination of timetabling issues and the fact that some of the inmates were also mothers with parenting responsibilities meant it proved something of a challenge to run the Peer Mediation training in its usual format. This resulted in less consistent attendance and engagement by participants as they often had competing demands on their time. TMS is exploring how the Programme might adapt to these challenges in the future in order to run further training.

### **Cork Prison:**

- The Peer Mediation Part 1 programme started in February 2019 and was completed in April 2019.

- TMS ran Part 2 of the Peer Mediation Programme during April and May, and this was completed in June 2019.
- In July TMS ran a Peer Mediation role play session for the group of prisoners who passed the assessment in order to continue to upskill the group.
- A second programme commenced in late September 2019. 11 men completed the Peer Mediation Part 1 course in December 2019.

### ***Roll-out of Peer Mediation Service in Cork Prison***

- In September TMS met with the Governor and IPS ETB staff re. the roll out of a peer mediation service run by prisoners who had completed Parts 1 and 2 of the training earlier in 2019.
- The prisoners are working on designing posters for the service and the proposal is that they will also design t-shirts for the peer mediators to wear as they launch the service in the prison in 2020.

There has been considerable support and engagement at all levels within Cork Prison for the Peer Mediation Initiative. Staff and management are keen to develop the programme within the prison and ensure that a Peer Mediation service is made available to prisoners. Prisoners were facilitated to design and produce special t-shirts for mediators to use and it is envisaged that a Peer Mediation service will officially launch within the prison during 2020.

### **Midlands Prison:**

- The Peer Mediation Part 1 course started in September 2019 with 15 prisoners attending. The course was completed in November 2019, with certificates being presented to the 13 prisoners who completed.
- The Peer Mediation Part 2 programme commenced in January 2020.

The Peer Mediation training expansion into the Midlands Prison was a direct result of the feedback and impact from other prisons in Ireland where the programme had been delivered. Given the large population size within the prison it is anticipated that the training will be offered on an ongoing basis into the future.

Each of the programmes was facilitated by a combination of TMS core staff and TMS external panel members contracted in to support the delivery of the programme. The fact that the delivery of the programmes was predominantly Traveller-led resulted in positive support and engagement amongst the Traveller prison population in all of the prisons where the Initiative was offered.

In the autumn of 2019 the TMS was also approached to explore the possibility of running the programme in Portlaoise Prison in Co. Laois. This was as a result of both prisoners and prison staff in the prison's education department becoming aware of the successful introduction of the programme in the Midlands prison nearby, and in Cork prison. It is anticipated that this new location will be added to the list of existing locations where the programme is delivered by the end of 2020.

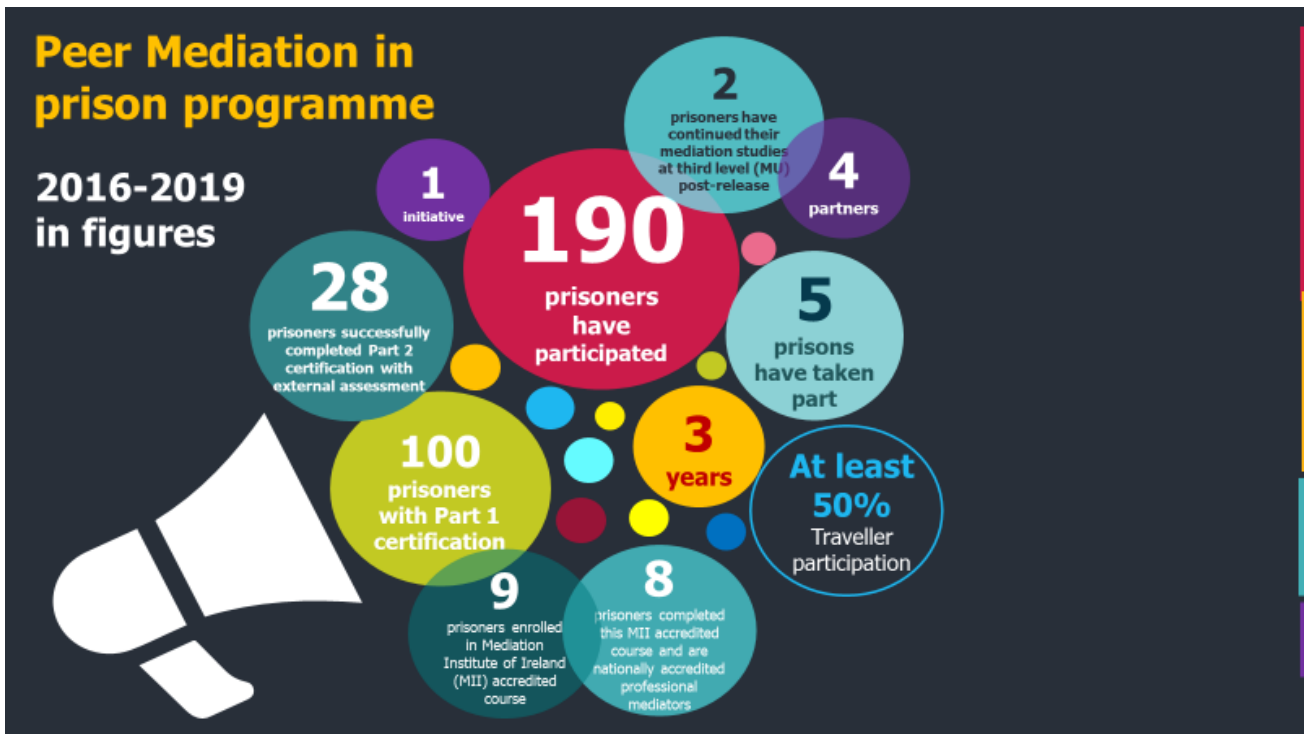
### **MII Accreditation**

Due to the ongoing success and consistent prisoner engagement of the original Castlereagh Prison peer mediation programme a number of the prisoners who successfully completed both Parts 1 and Parts 2 of the programme requested the opportunity to gain fully-accredited status as mediators with the MII. In collaboration with the Kennedy Institute in Maynooth University, Castlereagh Prison management and staff, and the ETB it was agreed that the prisoners would be offered a 12-week training programme which would enable them to become fully qualified mediators upon successful completion and assessment.

This programme was run over 2 half-days per week between October 2019 and December 2019. One half day was spent learning the in-depth theories and processes involved in mediation and the other half day was entirely devoted to role play practice and skills development exercises. The programme was led by TMS staff and a lecturer from the Kennedy Institute, supported by staff from Castlereagh Prison's educational department.

The assessment of this programme involved a role-play of a mediation session which was videoed and assessed by MII-accredited examiners. It also involved assignments and self-reflection exercises by all of the participants. The 12-week programme was attended by 9 prisoners and was successfully completed and passed by 8. These 8 prisoners received full accreditation as mediators with the MII. This was the first time in Ireland that any prisoners had attained this level of accredited training and certification in mediation practice and was a remarkable outcome for all involved. For all of the prisoners it also represented the highest level of educational qualification that they had achieved in their lives to date.





### Challenges

Each prison in Ireland is its own unique environment with its own dynamics, population and challenges. All of these factors must be considered when deciding to develop and implement a peer mediation service. Staff and prisoner safety and security are paramount at all times and any peer mediation service must complement and stand alongside existing internal prison procedures for managing conflict. Some prisons have higher levels of conflict than others due to larger populations or the types of prisoners which are incarcerated there. For example, Loughan House has relatively low incidences of conflict due to it being an open prison and therefore the prisoners place a particular emphasis on maintaining the peace and avoiding getting transferred back to a more regimented and secure facility.

As prisoners receive training in peer mediation it is also crucial that staff in the prisons are made aware of how the process works. It is important that staff and prison officers feel supported by the service being made available rather than feeling that it in some way undermines or interferes with their authority. The demanding nature of any role within a prison means it can be challenging to incorporate any new initiative. To this end it is essential that all prisons interested in developing a peer mediation service take the time to effectively communicate to staff and prison officers how the service works and what the benefits are to them in their respective roles.

One of the ways that TMS has been working to raise awareness with Prison Officers since the beginning of 2019 is through running Traveller information/awareness raising sessions for the Recruit Prison Officers in the Irish Prison Service Training College

In 2019 TMS ran a total of eight sessions in the IPS Training College with the aim of raising awareness of Traveller culture, and particularly regarding issues arising for Travellers in prison.

The sessions were run by TMS, with co-facilitation assistance from panel members and Traveller ex-prisoners.

### **Plans for the future**

Through the experience of introducing the Peer Mediation Programme to a number of prisons since 2016, TMS has noted that each prison has implemented the programme differently. The next steps for each prison in terms of progressing this initiative, maintaining the momentum, and ensuring sustainability will therefore also need to be individualised. A key factor is the raising of awareness in the prisons so that both staff and prisoners are aware of the service and understand what is involved.

As the implementation of an ongoing peer mediation service within any prison is a complex undertaking which can take time to embed fully, it is essential that prisoners who have completed their peer mediation training continue with role play practice so that they can regularly use and develop their skills. The TMS is actively involved in ensuring that opportunities to develop and improve their skills is provided to all trainees.

The TMS consults with prison authorities to explore a number of key considerations which must be taken into account when setting up any peer mediation service within a prison. These include:

- *Where will the mediation take place within the prison setting?*
- *When will mediations take place?*
- *Which types of disputes are suitable for mediation?*
- *What will be the referral process for cases? Will prison staff be involved in the referral process?*
- *How can peer mediators be supported in their work? What opportunities for supervision will be available to them?*

- *How will peer mediators be identified and recognised within the prison population? (eg. wearing of specially designed t-shirts etc.)*

*While there is an up-front cost to create the program, once the initial intensive training is complete, the program can be largely self-sustaining, costing very little as time progresses. By training inmates, particularly those with long sentences who are a consistent presence within the prison, the inmates themselves can eventually run the program largely on their own. Professionals continue to serve in a supervisory role as needed, but once the program has gained internal sustainability inmates are able to take over the day-to-day operations and all teaching of the program.* PRISONER FACILITATED MEDIATION: BRINGING PEACE TO PRISONS AND COMMUNITIES Laurel Kaufer, Douglas E. Noll, and Jessica Mayer\* (p. 202)

In the four years since the pilot peer mediation training was delivered in Castlereagh Prison it has been encouraging to see the interest in peer mediation spread to other prisons. The TMS is committed to providing ongoing support to prisons where training has already taken place, while also offering the necessary skills and expertise to prisons which are interested in running the training for the first time. It has been encouraging to see how an initial pilot programme in one prison has subsequently expanded to include further prisons around the country and it is hoped that this will continue into the future.

The TMS is constantly exploring ways to develop and expand the Peer Mediation in Prisons Initiative, in collaboration with stakeholders and the Irish Prison Service, in order to provide an additional and effective means of managing conflicts and disputes within Irish prisons. As a way of supplementing existing procedures for managing prisoner behaviour and maintaining a safe environment for prisoners and staff alike, peer mediation has enormous potential as an additional resource within the Irish prison system. By empowering prisoners to take more responsibility for managing their disputes safely, and supporting prison staff in their already challenging roles, the TMS is committed to its ongoing role in developing this innovative initiative within the national prison system.

## **Reference**

*Laurel Kaufer, Douglas E. Noll, and Jessica Mayer, "Prisoner Facilitated Mediation: Bringing Peace to Prisons and Communities," Cardozo J. of Conflict Resolution, New York: Cardozo Law School, vol. 16, 2015.*