Photo – Derek Speirs

Newsletter of the Travellers in Prison Initiative

Issue 4 **June 2017**

Traveller Ethnicity Recognised

On the 1st of March, Travellers finally won the battle to have their unique heritage, culture and identity recognised by the State when the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, Taoiseach announced the state's recognition of Travellers as an ethnic group within Irish society.

Being recognised as an ethnic minority is important for the Traveller community because it is an official statement by the Government that it recognises Travellers culture, identity and way of life and the valuable contribution Travellers make to Irish society.

Ethnicity is about people's identity and culture. Travellers have their own distinct culture with their own way of life, shared beliefs and a long shared history. You are born a 'Traveller' – you can't choose to become a 'Traveller'.

Mr Kenny said: "Our Traveller community is an integral part of our society for over a millennium, with their own distinct identity - a people within our people." He also said "We recognise the inequalities and discrimination that the Traveller community faces."

Travellers know that having their identity formally recognised by the state will not automatically solve all the problems they face every day but it's an important statement of respect for Traveller culture. Ian Mc Donagh, BT Young Scientist winner who was in Dail Eireann to hear the announcement said

"Recognition of Traveller ethnicity made me feel so proud of my culture and identity. I hope this recognition will boost the confidence of the young members of the Traveller community to be proud of their identity and to be proud of who they are"

A Native Irish Traveller

Recognition of Irish Traveller Ethnicity

"It is a historic day for our Travellers and a proud day for Ireland."
An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny

A Word of Advice from a Fellow Traveller In Prison

I'm a prisoner in Mountjoy, and I'm also a Traveller. I'm writing this piece on how Traveller men cope in prison and the challenges they might come up against. Most Traveller men in prison find it very difficult because they feel isolated and they don't feel a part of the prison community, and that can lead to self-harming or even suicide.

My view of prison is you have to first try and fit in and get to know your surroundings. Get to know people and try and engage in all the services. There is a lot of services like counselling that can lift a lot of fears and worries. Try and do that on a weekly basis.

Then you need a routine. That is very important. At least when you have a routine you know what you're doing day to day. Traveller men don't really engage in the education centre because they don't feel they can learn anything and a lot of men can't read or write and have a fear of going to the teachers. They feel the teachers could judge them. I'm talking from personal experience.

I came here to Mountjoy from another prison in England where I didn't engage in any schooling. However, the teachers in Mountjoy were great to me and gave me great confidence. I went there and learned how to read a lot better and spell a lot better and I went on to sit my Junior Cert and Leaving Cert. That was a great achievement for me. I felt great so I would advise any Traveller who finds themselves in prison not to give up, not to isolate themselves from others.

Prison is like any community, but there's just a wall around this community. This place is a city within a city, the same fears and worries that you would have outside you have here. You just need to break down barriers, then you will find your place in it. If any Traveller finds himself in Mountjoy it's not as bad as you might hear. There has been a new governor who is giving Traveller men the opportunity to sit a course all about Traveller feuds. He has given the course one hundred per cent. It's a great course and ran for 10 weeks. Traveller men came in from outside to help with the course.

The prison system is changing now for Travellers and they have a voice.

Traveller Mens Health Day

Traveller Men's Health day is a Health event that has been running since 2014 as part of Men's Health week. Every year about 200 Traveller men and women attended the events. Pavee Point along with 9 other Traveller Primary Health Care Projects in the Eastern region invite Traveller men to get health checks and other health information.

We have different health organisations that attend the day such as Irish Heart Foundation, Irish Cancer Society, Asthma Society of Ireland and Pieta house. During the day, men can have health checks such as; blood pressure, blood sugar levels and cholesterol levels. This health event has been getting bigger every year and gives Traveller men a chance to get health checks and encourages them to look after their health.

We also hold a mini 5-aside football tournament for Traveller men which encourages a healthy lifestyle and exercise. This year we are having the day in Phoenix Park on the 12th of June. The event will start at 10:00 in the morning and continue till 3:00 in the afternoon.

Events to Celebrate Traveller Pride in Dublin Prison

1. June 13th Dochas Centre
   Intercultural Day: Morning session - Nell and Michael McDonagh, Meath Travellers Workshop will talk about Traveller culture and The Living History Project; Afternoon - Irish music and ceili dancing. Visitors from the Parish of the Travellers, Money Advice and Budgeting Service for Travellers and Pavee Point.

2. June 15th Mountjoy West
   Traveller Culture, Mental Health and Wellbeing – Morning session - Thomas Mc Cann, The Traveller Counselling Service. Afternoon session - John Connors, Actor

3. June 21st Arbour Hill
   Traveller Culture Day: Morning session - Jerry O Reilly, History of Traveller music/folklore/ballads. Afternoon session - Tom Mc Donnell, Tinsmith

4. June 22nd Wheatfield
   Traveller Culture Day: Morning session - David Joyce and Martin Collins, Pavee Point Afternoon session - Prison Band, Traveller music/ folklore

5. July 5th Medical Unit
   Traveller Culture Day: Morning session - Tom McDonnell, Tinsmith..... Afternoon session – Traveller music/folklore

6. July 6th Main Mountjoy
   Traveller Culture Day: Morning session - Chris Mc Donagh and Frank Kavanagh, Midland Traveller Conflict Mediation Initiative.

Gathering Accurate Information about Travellers in Prison

While we don't know the exact number of Travellers in prison we estimate that there are approximately 450 in total. Travellers in prison and prison staff agree that a large number of Travellers are not identified as Travellers on prisons' records. The Travellers in Prison Initiative have been working with the prison service to try to improve systems to gather information about the number of Travellers in prison.

The Travellers in Prison Initiative welcome the recent announcement by the Irish Prison Service that they are going to change the question about ethnicity to the format that is used in the census.

They have also agreed that prison staff will receive training on asking the new question and will learn about the importance of explaining to new committals why they are asking them about their ethnicity. The Travellers in Prison Initiative will work with Pavee Point and Traveller organisations to raise awareness amongst prisoners and staff about the importance of being identified as a Traveller in prison.

The new question will be introduced in September 2017 and we would encourage all Travellers to check that they are identified correctly. This will enable the Prison Service to deliver services to Travellers in prison which are more suited to meeting their needs, both in prison and in preparing them for life post-release.

Michael Donnellan, Director General of the Irish Prison Service (IPS) has said

'When we know the correct ethnic origin of the Traveller population in prison, we can plan and deliver workshops, education programmes, drug treatment and counselling services that are more Traveller-centred.'

Number of Prisoners identified as Travellers in Irish Prisons according to the Prison Information Service Management Systems

Arbour Hill Prison - 3 Prisoners
Castlerea Prison – 28 Prisoners
Cork Prison – 22 Prisoners
Limerick Prison – 27 Prisoners
Loughan House – 5 Prisoners
Mountjoy (Male) – 20 Prisoners
Portlaoise Prisone – 9 Prisoners
Shelton Abbey – 5 Prisoners
Wheatfield Prison – 36 Prisoners
Cloverhill Prison – 14 Prisoners
Midlands Prison – 46 Prisoners
Training Unit – 1 Prisoner
Mounjoy (Female) 22 Prisoners

Total 238 Prisoners

Members of the Traveller women in Prison advisory group at the first meeting which took place in the board room of the Dochas Centre. TPI are particularly pleased that two Traveller women in the Dochas centre represented the other women at the meeting.

National Traveller Women's Forum - Peer Support Group in Dochas Centre

My name is Winnie McDonagh and I have recently started work with the National Traveller Women's Forum as a Prison Peer Support Worker.

I am working with Traveller women who are currently in the Dochas Centre in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin. This is a pilot programme with the main aim of establishing trust and relationships with the women and giving them a space to be able to express themselves and to make more informed choices about their futures by linking them into key services and agencies which we hope will help the women to get involved in education and training and supports for when they leave prison.

Some of these women took part in a piece of research undertaken by the Travellers in Prison Initiative, which highlighted the Traveller women's pathways into prison and their experience of prison life. Following on from this we would hope that some of the women would develop their confidence and abilities to get involved in a peer to peer support group within the prison and with the support of National Traveller Women's Forum to give constructive input to the development in policies and strategies for Traveller women in prison.

So far having met with the women a number of times I have found them to be very welcoming and eager to talk about themselves and their families. What struck me is how structured their daily routine is which has to be difficult for Traveller women who mostly would experience a more casual routine due to their nomadic lifestyle or mind-set. They find it particularly hard not to be able to meet up and chat or have a cup of tea when they might like due to the lock up regulations of the prison. This is even harder in the long summer evenings.

The biggest issues for them is worrying about and separation from their children and families. The women often talk about feeling depressed and being lonesome for friends and relations, missing out on family events such as weddings, Holy Communion, christenings and doing ordinary everyday activities that are usually taken for granted.

They talk about attending education classes and training as a way of occupying their minds and to make the time pass more quickly. They are anxious to get their sentences over and regretting their actions resulting in prison, expressing hope to turn their lives around in making better choices for themselves, their children and families in the future.

I am looking forward to getting to know the women better and helping them to develop their own personal skills and the future progression of the Peer Support Group.

Peer-mediation Training in Castlerea Prison

Conflict leading to violence has been idenified as an issue in Castlerea prison by both staff and prisoners. Getting involved in violence can have serious consequences in prison such as getting a P19, being placed on protection wings and having privileges taken away such as access to phone calls and the shop.

Impact of Conflict on Travellers

For Travellers, the impact of conflict can be particularly hard, as issues from the outside within the Traveller community can carry over into prison. According to the Traveller men, sometimes existing conflicts from outside are family related, and can be long-running and can affect relationships in prison. Conflicts within prison can also impact on family members on the outside, as events that occur in the prison are carried out into the community.

"Your name can bring you into it, then drag others into it...makes it bigger"

In an effort to try to reduce the problems, Travellers who are volunteers with the Red Cross in Castlerea prison have developed and delivered workshops on conflict and violence in the prison. Following on from this some of the men contacted the head teacher about the possibility of doing training as mediators.

Peer-Mediation Training

It was agreed that training on 'peer-mediation in prison' would be provided in Castlerea prison. A partnership between The Midlands Traveller Conflict Mediation Initiative, the Red Cross (Conflict Mediation programme in Castlerea prison), Travellers in Prison Initiative (St Stephen's Green Trust), and Castlerea Prison was set up to deliver the training and support the peer-mediation.

The programme started in September 2016 with a six week training programme delivered one day per week by both the MTCMI, and the Education and Training Board ('the school') in Castlerea.

The topics covered in the 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

A total of 21 participants started the training, 11 of them were Travellers. All 11 Travellers completed the 6 week programme and received certificates from MTCMI.
By the end of the programme eight participants (seven Travellers) asked for more training, and the programme was extended by another 4 weeks, mainly involving role plays and practice of mediation.
In 2017, an independent mediator examined the participants to see if they were ready to take on the role of peer mediators in the prison. Six participants qualified as peer-mediatiors - Five of these are Travellers.

Impact of Peer-Mediation in Castlerea

At the start of March 2017, it was reported that at least 32 incidents were prevented as a result of informal peer mediation undertaken by the peer mediators. Overall it is estimated that the peer mediators have had an impact on 100 people in prison, which is likely to result in a reduction in conflict, sanctions and P19s occurring in the prison.

Impacts of Peer-Mediation Training

Personal impacts were wide ranging, in terms of the accreditation achieved ('the certificate'), and views towards conflict and how a willingness to take part in mediation had resulted in fewer incidents, and less conflict:

"It has changed my view in that things can be talked out instead of conflict....I look at it in a different light"

"Yes, I'd look back and assess a situation before going in to try and stop it or whatever"

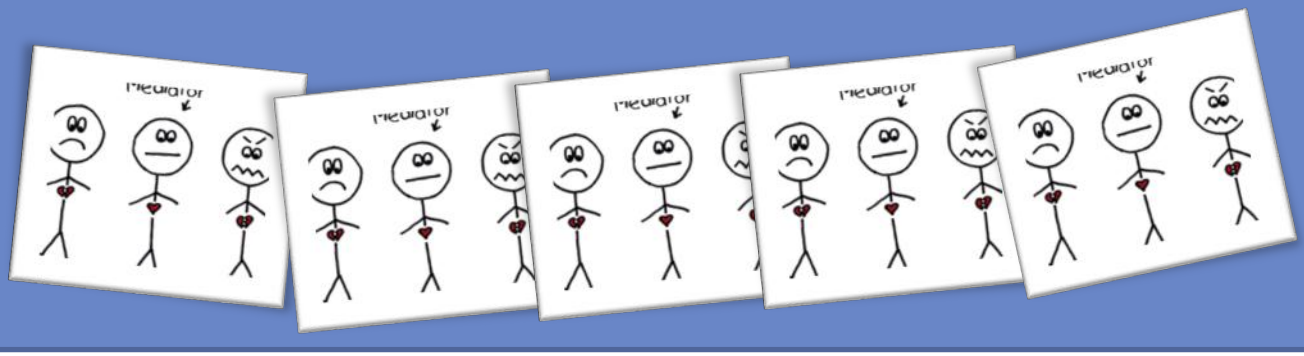
"I would like to see this programme being introduced as a Fetac Level 5 in the prison"

"A major impact, stopped getting people P19s, gives people an option...they go looking for peer mediators and they will assist them"

"I think there is less violence than there was"

Travellers Evaluation the Training

Travellers were very involved in delivering and evaluating the training. They included Chris McDonagh from MTCMI and Frank Kavanagh and Hugh Nevin, who recently studied mediation in NUIM. The Traveller participants said that the involvement of Travellers in the training was very important in that it reflected the Traveller community's experiences and culture.



Training for Prison Officer Recruits

Approximately sixty men and women are undergoing training to be prison officers. The Prison Service Training College invited IPS psychologists to deliver training to the new recruits about working with specific groups of people, for example Travellers.

Brendan O Connell, the senior psychologist from Castlerea prison was nominated to deliver the training about Travellers. When developing the training it was agreed that Travellers who had been in prison would be invited to deliver the training with Brendan. Hughie Nevin and Martin McDonagh from Mullingar agreed to participate in the training session that took place in May.

Hughie, Martin and Brendan provided information and everyone discussed particular issues for Travellers such as education, health, suicide, accommodation, unemployment and imprisonment. The group looked at how racism and discrimination affects Travellers and how the Irish Prison Service expects prisons staff to treat all prisoners and fellow staff members, including Travellers fairly and equally.

Hughie and Martin talked about their experiences of being in prison and the recruit officers had an opportunity to ask questions and talk about Hughie and Martin's experience and to learn from this. They talked about the difference it made when prison officers treated them with respect – the things Prison Officers do day to day that brought out the best / worst in them and other prisoners. They talked about why Travellers might hide their identity in prison and how this affects them. And they talked about the impact prison has on Traveller men, Traveller women and their families.

Below is a photo of Brendan, Hughie and Martin with the trainee prison officers

Finbar Furey in Wheatfield Prison

When I heard that Finbar Furey was making an appearance in the Education Unit in Wheatfield in December 2016, I felt all my Christmases had come together!

Not only did I have the pleasure of meeting him, but I also had the honour of singing 'Sweet Sixteen' with him on stage. I often listened to my father singing 'Sweet Sixteen' to my mother in my childhood. It brought back many good memories of my family being together in Galway City. So, for me it was fifteen minutes of fame in my life, despite being behind bars.....I felt as free as a bird again!

This memory of singing with Finbar is something that I will cherish for the rest of my life.

This is the fourth edition of the Travellers in Prison Initiative Newsletter.

We are delighted that this edition contains many articles written by Travellers in prison. If you would like to write an article for the next edition of the newsletter please contact Anne Costello, Co-ordinator of the Travellers in Prison Initiative.

Anne can be contacted at anne@ssgt.ie or 087 6577666.

St. Stephens Green Trust also provides funding to Traveller organisations to work with Travellers in prison and their families. They are currently funding Traveller organisations to work with Travellers in prison in Wheatfield, Limerick, Midlands, Castlerea Arbour Hill, Dochas Centrea and Loughan House.