

Good Morning

First of all I would like to take this opportunity to welcome everyone and to thank the organizers for affording me the privilege of being here to speak to you, as not only an ex listener but as a current Samaritan volunteer. So Thank-you.

A little background.

The listeners scheme was first introduced into the prison service in the late eighties in response to a YO whom had taken his own life in Swansea prison. The first peer support scheme introduced by a probation officer called Kathy Baker who was also a samaritan. She observed that the most useful tool that she had at hand were the other prisoners in supporting the people she had concerns about. So she hatched the idea of selecting prisoners and training them in order to offer them the support they would require in order to listen to and support people in crisis. Something she was recognised for in her award of an OBE. I had the privilege of knowing Kathy personally and she lived and breathed the belief that we all needed to be kinder to each other. Something more recently echoed by tv personality Caroline Flack before her tragic suicide.

The theme of this conference is keeping safe and the importance of this topic. My personal feeling is that it isn't just about the individuals but about the journey of everyone working, living or having a connection with a custodial environment. Good relationships across the board are what is vital in the goal for keeping people safe to work, develop and grow within such a challenging environment.

Within the listening scheme the Samaritans, Listeners and Prison service all play equally important roles within this relationship and it can only continue in its success and grow with the dedication and support from all the relevant parties. Understanding each others roles is a vital component to ensure our continuing success in driving forward our joint purpose of reducing death in custody.

This conference presents a unique opportunity to expand our understanding and exchange ideas and good practice to enable this scheme and other peer support schemes to be the best that they can be in what can often be challenging circumstances. I cant begin to explain the importance of having somewhere safe to talk without fear of judgement or the responses that the prison is bound by its duty of care to have. As has been said many times before we have no figures to determine how many lives are saved by this scheme sadly we can only show the figures of those who have died, incidents that cause so much distress to all involved.the persons families prisoners staff and all connected to these individuals. Their is no sadder time on a prison landing when someone you have shared space with takes their own lives and it affects everyone without exception.

The key to the success of the listeners is first the consistency in every aspect of how these schemes are implemented in every establishment we all need to be singing from the 'same hymn sheet'. I have been blessed to have been a listener in a number of establishments and I'm sure there are many establishments who understand that this scheme only operates because of confidentiality. This being the key to a successful scheme that is trusted by the prisoners. Somewhere safe

they can talk without judgement or response - something a prison employee is duty bound by there duty of care to implement.

The listeners scheme has been on an amazing journey over the years and has grown and developed with the same core principle at its heart, of providing somewhere safe for people to talk. Somewhere they can trust. In the early days as a Listener we were viewed with suspicion from a lot of staff and our own peer group, the big question being Why would you ? My answer why wouldn't I, but it wasn't long before we established credibility gaining amazing support from staff Samaritans and other prisoners and our journey began to move forward. At first the protocol for the use of listeners were a little blurred I remember going to a cell one day and could here the loudest bangs and shouting the officer opened the door just enough for me to slip in, the room was trashed and the caller was basically bouncing whatever she could lay her hands on off the walls she stopped in her tracks when she seen me and asked what on earth they had put me in there for i just smiled said I'm the gym orderly have you seen what i squat at which point she fell into fits of laughter and we ended up having a very productive call. This would never happen these days but then it was pretty common that as a listener I would be in a position to diffuse situations. As a listener I really began to grow with the sense of privilege of being allowed into the private pain of callers and it helped put the world into perspective for me. I became more patient and understanding of situations. Self harm was rife in fact it bordered on self mutilation and mental health was a huge problem. We were all in a situation where we tried to make the best of the situation we were in. Protocols were developed quite often through the mistakes we made as the scheme went from strength to strength. Support grew so quickly and I've yet to meet anyone involved with prisons who didn't wholeheartedly support the scheme.

The importance of this scheme really hit me when an ex listener took her own life. She was well known in the prison and was so funny she did an amazing impression of Patrick Swayze in dirty dancing and had been an amazing listener when part of the team. It was Friday afternoon and I'd been at work with her that morning. The regime was on lockdown and I just knew in my gut something was wrong. I looked out of a window towards the wing she lived on and seen a small paramedic car. i turned to a friend and fellow listener and said it was her it was strange I just felt it. Anyway staff came on the wing and shouted me to the office choking back tears they told me there had been a death and that i was to get the team ready to go out. They were all visibly upset and id actually watched a couple of the staff in tears at the bottom of the wing who had been working on her. The Sams were called in and they were there supporting us and out listening with us and for us the gov gave us the room outside his office and staff were moving us about till gone five that morning providing support to all whom this tragic event had affected. I was so sad that night but so incredibly proud of this surrogate family that I belonged to. It could have been so different as I have been in establishments where there has been a domino affect after a death and what started with one rolled into a much higher number in a very short period of time. There is nothing more heartbreaking when such a tragic event takes place but it also in that dark time that humanity and kindness shines through something I have witnessed first hand on many occasions from Samaritans, prison staff and listeners and other prisoners. I have been blessed to live this journey with some of the most amazing inspirational people. It's been a shocking journey a sad journey a beautiful journey and a truly humbling one.

I have attended a number of these conferences and have always come away inspired.....

Please use your time at this conference to embrace the experience and absorb as much as you can to take back to your respective establishments to help what is already an amazing drive in reducing deaths in custody and supporting vulnerable people to become the best versions of themselves they can be.