

6. CORPORATE IMAGE

6.1 Problems of a Poor Image

In its submission, the Archdiocesan Catholic Prison Ministry spoke of a more positive and informed attitude towards crime and sentencing developing within the local community. This was attested to from the Ministry's own experience in community activities and supported by recent studies from the Australian Institute of Criminology.

Nevertheless, it is clear from the many submissions received from members of the public and from the comments of correctional service staff about their experiences as members of their own communities that working in corrective services in this State evokes a very low rating in the community's eyes. Prison officers are referred to as "screws" and the work they do is not properly recognised by the community they serve.

The families and wives of prison officers particularly suffer in this regard. Here are some incisive and pertinent comments:-

"The peculiar aspect of the Prison Officer's job in comparison to the other(s) . . . is the low image in the eyes of the media, they are more often than not depicted as bullies and nothing more than turnkeys often on strike at the gates of Brisbane prison whilst enjoying well above average wages. I admit the Department has been trying to change this image through higher academic achievements and a psychological softer approach to the prisoner but is this the answer? I think not. The result will be Ph.D.s getting beaten whilst trying to analyze the Freudian aspects of their assailant."

(Prison Officer's Wife)

and

"I acknowledge that the prisoners also have needs, but I consider that these people who have broken the law, and thus deserve the punishment given by the Courts, have been getting the lion's share of attention and consideration for some time. The media make much of a riot and fires at the Prison, and yet don't mention that Officers have been severely assaulted. If a Prisoner is injured it makes headlines along with the riots and fires, yet the people (namely the Officers) to whom the Government have given the job of keeping them and society safe from those who have broken the law, are overlooked.

In fact, just the type of work an officer does, the hours he works, the effect the stress and environment has on him, greatly effects his family and social life. Some years ago, when we were on the North Coast on holidays, my husband took our two young sons to the shop and was accosted and threatened verbally by an ex-inmate who had two other men with him. My fear was so great, that I would not allow my children to leave the unit unaccompanied for the rest of our stay."

(Wife of an Officer who had been seriously assaulted)

The Professional Officers Association submission is also concerned about an erroneous image.

"Community liaison and particularly the involvement of the community in the work that we do is an area of particular anxiety and concern to us, and we are aware that our colleagues in the Prisons Service are just as sensitive about their public image. The public's present perception of corrections is vague and ill-informed. Both the Prison service and the Probation and Parole

Service have put some degree of effort into de-mystifying their work through involving members of the public in the programs presently running; however, perusal of the popular press (and it is this level of newspaper reporting which is read by 80% of the population) shows that in the main only the more sensational happenings, such as prison rapes and beatings or parolees who re-offend after their release, generate public interest. Our success stories are seldom reported and our daily measure of achievement receives no accolade at all, least of all, one feels, from politicians who see no vote-winning potential in the field of offender-management.”

(Professional Officers Association)

The sensationalism inherent in much of the popular media's coverage of “events” and “happenings” within the prison system does little either to overcome this or to inform and educate the public in understanding the many aspects of corrective services and their concomitant problems.

Really, the situation is pretty ironic. The police who catch the offenders generally have in the community a good understanding of their role and a good public image. The lawyers who defend them unsuccessfully have an upstanding position in the community as has the judge who sentences them to imprisonment. The social worker who tries to help them is regarded as a “professional” community worker. But the prison officers who actually have to deal with the offenders long term, in a prison environment, who try to pick up the pieces and return them to society better than when they left it, seem to be held in very low regard. They are in fact just ordinary people like you and me trying to do a difficult job with little help or understanding from the community they serve. In reality they are performing an essential and vital service far more important to the well being of the community than most occupations. It is about time we recognised them and what they do.

6.2 The Consequences

The consequences of this poor image are really quite serious. It impacts on the morale of staff and their productivity. Excessive sick leave, and overtime and sudden strikes are some of the expensive outcomes. The poor image makes it difficult to recruit suitable staff. The poor image makes it difficult to retain caring staff. Moreover, from the criminal intelligence briefings I have received, I have no doubt that a section of the criminal element in the prisons is able to use this poor image in manipulating the media to its own ends. A shabby cartoon in a Brisbane newspaper recently depicted prison officers and prisoners as identical thugs. It was based on unproven allegations sensationally depicted on T.V. Every serving prison officer was defamed by that ill informed, unthinking portrayal.

In part, this appalling situation seems to have developed through the lack of a corporate image with which the community can identify and by which it can relate to the service as a whole, as well as the inability of prison officers to defend themselves publicly due to public service rules and regulations.

6.3 A New Image for Corrections

No modern organisation should operate the way Corrections in this State have presented themselves. We need to give the Service, and especially the staff an image and reputation to live up to. The Service needs to take immediate steps to correct its image. A Commission will help this process. There needs to be developed an on-going program aimed at informing the public, in a positive manner, of the activities of the Corrective Services and to encourage active community involvement, where appropriate.

A better image will have real positive benefits. A positive, assertive image would create greater confidence and awareness in the community corrections arm of the Service. I feel fairly certain that one reason why community sentences appear to be "under utilised" is because of its failure to project its true image of professionalism and success. There would be considerable financial benefits to the State from greater use of community sentencing options.

A more professional image will produce in the prison service a self disciplined body of officers with pride in their work. It will provide no ground for false allegations to take root. We will find the staff strive to live up to their image and they will ensure their workmates also perform to this standard.

The problems arising from the present situation are so acute an immediate start at implementing a professional image is needed. Professionals in this field should be hired to assist.