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SUSSEX
PRISONERS'
FAMILIES

COMPASSION, COURAGE, CHANGE

Empowering families of prisoners: An impact evaluation



University
Of
Brighton



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Executive Summary



Sussex Prisoner's Families is a Brighton based community interest company established in 2013. Their mission is to inform, advise and support families and friends of prisoners. The organisation provides a number of services ranging from court support, online resources, telephone support, to training and a visitor's centre at the Lewes prison.

The purpose of this study was to explore how the organisation has supported the families of prisoners, the outcome of this support, and the impact of their engagement with the services.

How has Sussex Prisoners Families empowered families of prisoners?

Five semi-structured interviews were carried out with mothers and partners of prisoners who had at least six-months experience and contact with the organisation.

A thematic analysis was then conducted on the interview to identify three overarching themes relating to the impact of the organisation and the empowerment of the families.

Brené Brown's theory on the power of vulnerability was identified as strongly relating to the findings,

allowing for a deeper understanding of the levels of empowerment.

Compassion was identified by participants as a major aspect in terms of meeting other families and developing understanding and supportive relations.

Courage is developed through the organisation by providing the necessary, and otherwise hard to get, information to face the criminal justice system as well as the discrimination and injustice from society.

Change is represented in the concept of a voice given to the families by the organisation, and a platform to explore possible changes necessary in society, the justice system, and their personal lives.

Recommendations included a more in-depth understanding of the theory related to vulnerability and exploring how this theory can be used further to develop services. Additionally, recommendations based on participants suggestions related to an increased need for more regular and practical meetings and training sessions.

Introduction


In the shadow of Prison

In the criminal justice system, the focus is turned towards the individual who serves the prison sentence. While the courts and prisons are concerned about sentencing and executing the sentence of a prisoner, they often forget or ignore the families and friendship networks standing behind. Families of prisoners are part of a strongly discriminated community that is often lost in the shadows of prisons (Codd, 2008). These families are faced with everyday core issues such as financial consequences, relationship disruptions, child support and psychological distress. Additionally, this community is at the centre of stigma and discrimination from society. The media and press contribute to an ideal of 'she must have known', 'guilty by association' or 'bad parenting', developing hostility within society (Codd, 1998) whilst the families are already subject to shame towards themselves (Bates et al., 2003).

Despite research showing the importance families of prisoners play in the prevention of recidivism and the social reintegration of offenders, government policies are criticised for lacking the necessary

support and guidance for the families (Clarke, 2005).

As such, the families are dependent on not-for-profit community-based organisations providing the necessary framework, knowledge and support for the families. These organisations, spread across the UK, provide a necessary service in assisting families during trials and subsequent sentences as well as the re-entry in society. While this support should fall under the responsibility of the public sector, research has shown that the support of organisations has made a significant positive impact in the well-being of the families. An essential need has emerged to further understand how organisations contribute to the empowerment of these families.



"All the support is for the victim and their families [...] but there is no one there for us, expect for SPF, which are brilliant!"

Supporting Families of Prisoners'

As families of prisoners are undergoing a life changing event, having a member of their family taken away, they are dependent on a variety of direct or indirect and formal or informal support systems (Codd, 2008). A holistic approach to community reveals the intricate ways of the different parts of the community, and how they affect each other. While analysing a community, an ecological approach can develop a deeper understanding of the wider social picture contributing to the issues faced by the community. Such an understanding is essential in trying to help and support these communities.

The micro-level, focusing on the individual, can be directly related to the emotional isolation and feelings of shame that research has found in families of prisoners. Organisations have empowered members helping them 'maintain a positive identity when their own social status and identity may have been tainted by their relationships" (Codd, 2008, p143).

The meso-level relates to the families of prisoners as a community, as well as the direct social environment of the families. Families have expressed a loss of social relations in their lives due to social stigma and children are often faced with bullying in school (Comfort, 2008). Research across organisations have found that members often feel a sense of 'family' and 'safe space' within the support groups, expressing the relief from stigma and judgment ever present in their daily lives (Codd, 2002).

The exo-system is concerned with the government institutions and policies of society in relation to the individual. A major issue faced by families of prisoners is the lack of information and difficulty to obtain practical information regarding court proceedings and directions, prison rules, visitors rights and general information regarding the criminal justice system (Davis, 1992). Codd (2007), argues that the input of support organisations allows for a bridge between the different justice system agencies and the families, providing both the needed information and developments in particular situations.

Families are a critical aspect in the re-entry and reoffending prevention of prisoners, providing the necessary emotional and material support. However, the criminal justice system has yet to fully invest into harnessing the family's potential and support the transitions to prevent future criminal offences (Bobbitt & Nelson, 2004; Martinez & Christian, 2009). To support the families and prepare them to help the offender develop a pro-social identity (Edin et al., 2004), organisations play a crucial part facilitating shared experiences and the development of preparational skill (Condry, 2007).

Finally, **the macro-system**, concerned with the wider society and the ideologies of the cultures, directly relates to the social stigma and discrimination experienced by the families (Codd, 2008). While it is challenging for organisations and small communities to change the beliefs and morals of larger societies, their work plays a vital part in social change.

Across the UK, a growing number of support and self-help groups have emerged since the 1960s, focusing on providing a variety of approaches

and specificities in supporting families of prisoners.

ADFAM based in London, focuses their services with families of prisoners in the relation with drug dependency, running a number of community projects including peer support training, support groups and information sessions.

Family lives, a charity registered in 1999, are aiming the majority of their support to partners and children of prisoners. They continuously research the experiences and needs of families of prisoners while trying to increase the family's voices and abilities to change policies and fight social marginalisation.

POPS, a Manchester based organisation established in 1988 was created by and for families of offenders experiencing stigma and distress. The organisation follows a 'continuum of care' model, providing support from arrest to resettlement, working in collaboration with HM Prison services, national probation services, the youth offending service and the department of education.

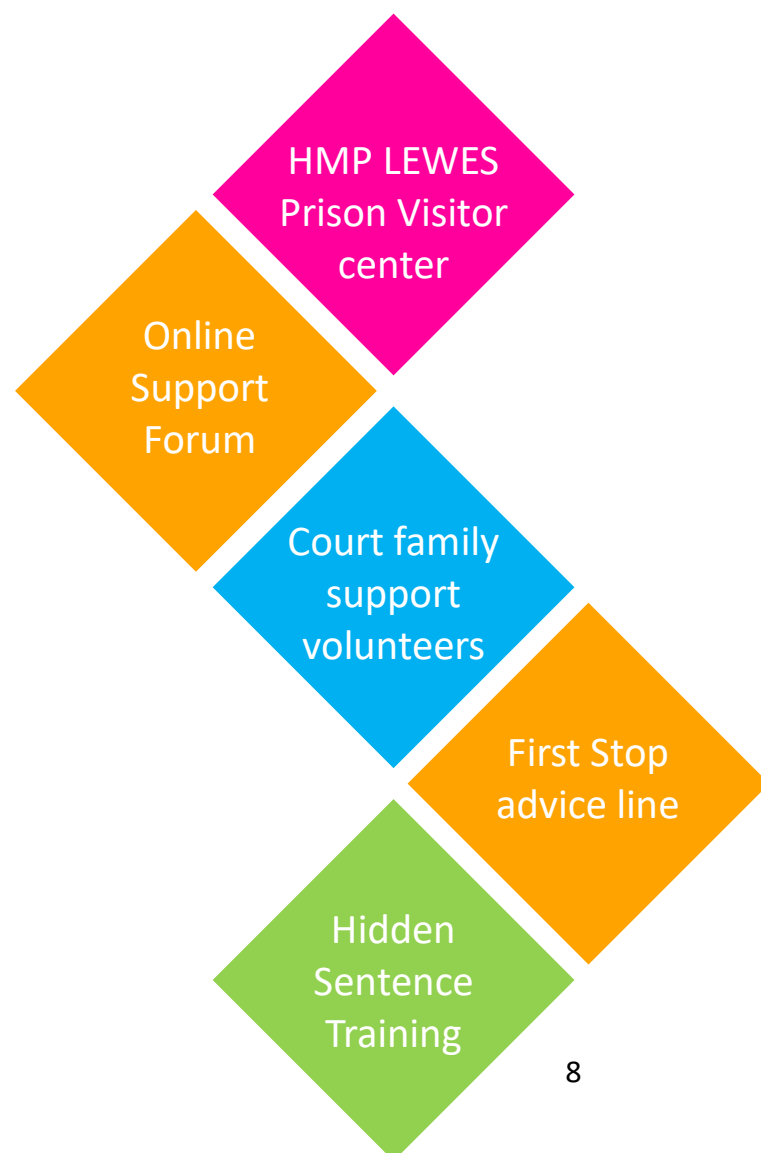
Sussex Prisoners' Families

Sussex Prisoners' Families (SPF) is a 'community interest company which supports local families to cope emotionally and practically with the imprisonment of a loved-one' established in 2013. The organisation supports families through volunteer services in court and visitors' centres, community support groups, first stop advice line and online resources. With 40% of their staff and volunteer team having lived experiences, they are able to provide a comfortable and reassuring environment for families. In 2018, they were able to help 250 families a month at the HMP Lewes visitors centre and over 960 families in court.

In addition to supporting families, SPF provides Hidden Sentence training for professionals and individuals to increase 'awareness of issues facing prisoners' families and 'identify ways to support them'.

Despite their focus being on the well-being and support of families of prisoners, they also aim to increase public knowledge and fight social stigma and marginalization of the families in society.

Previous research conducted with and within the organisation has highlighted the need and appreciation for the services provided by Sussex Prisoners' Families (Goldsmith and Byrne, 2018; Stallwood, 2017).



Methodology



Purpose of the study

The study was carried out by a Community Psychology MA student from the School of Social Science at University of Brighton. The purpose of the study was:

- To draw on the experiences of families of prisoners with the organisation to explore **how Sussex Prisoners' Families has empowered them through their services**

The aims of the study were thus to:

- provide a 'summative' **evaluation of the outcomes and impact of the organisation**
- provide a 'formative' evaluation by **exploring development possibility and recommendations**

Participants

Between march and April 2019, **five semi-structured interviews** were carried out with **three mothers and two partners of prisoners**. Participants were recruited using the organisation as a gate-keeper, thus, acknowledging their personal connections to the families, allowing them to choose individuals they consider to be in a stable and comfortable place to discuss their stories. Prior to the interviews, the researcher and organisation had agreed that a minimum of **six-months experience with the organisation** was necessary for participants to be familiar and experienced with the services provided.



“(SPF) have helped with everything [...] That’s why I really wanted to do this interview”

Data collection & Analysis

The interviews were carried out in a private room, either at the organisations' office or at the private homes of the participants to ensure complete **confidentiality, anonymity and comfortability.**

A number of questions were asked to guide the participants slowly into the interview and allow them to feel comfortable before diving into the more delicate questions and subject. These questions included a general description of their situation and the first contact with the organisation. Further questions developed more into their experience with the organisation in terms of their involvement in dealing with the **justice system, social discrimination and supporting a strengthening family and social life.**

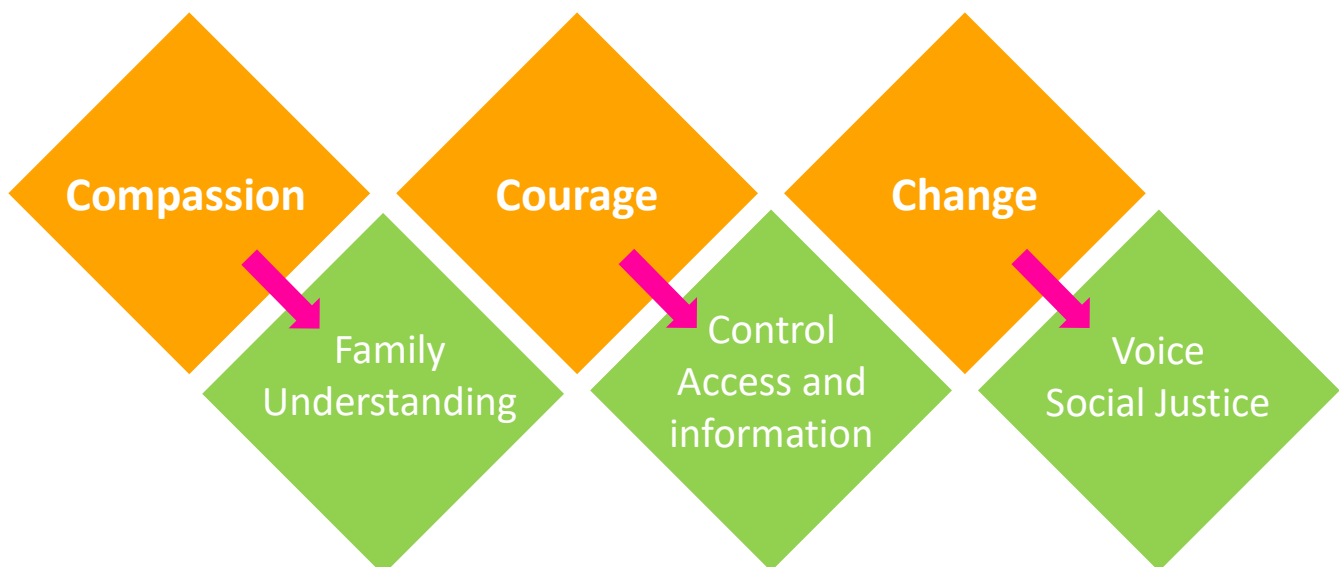
Using one-to-one semi-structured interviews allowed for a more flexible approach, necessary due to the sensitive nature of the topic, as well as to allow for participants to share their stories in their own words and to their own comfort level. All interviews were **recorded** with the consent of the participants and then **transcribed** anonymously before deleting the audio-recordings. This ensured both anonymity and confidentiality of the interviews and participants.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2017). This methodology allows the researchers to analyse and identify central concepts within the data and develop **code and overarching themes.**

Findings & Discussion

The analysis revealed three overarching themes related to the impact of the organisation and the empowerment of the families. The first theme, compassion, unpacks the idea of meeting other families and developing understanding and supportive relations. The second theme, courage, is found in the concept of control given back to the vulnerable families and the access to necessary, and otherwise hard to get, information. The final theme, change, is represented in the concept of a voice given to the families by the organisation, and a platform to explore possible changes necessary in society in terms of discrimination and injustice.

Each theme is related to Brené Brown's theory on vulnerability and how this contributes to the empowerment of the families. The analysis also found that some of the subthemes are related to more than one themes as they all form a strong foundation for empowerment.



Compassion

“Compassion is the feeling of wanting to ease the suffering of others. Self-compassion is the feeling and desire that we, ourselves, not suffer” (Brené Brown).

Families of prisoners are subject to shame, isolation and confusion when it comes to confronting the justice system, society and their personal lives. Support groups provide an understanding and non-judgemental environment for the families to connect and share compassion (Codd, 2008).

Family

Throughout the interview a very strong sense of connection, empathy and family emerges as the families talked about each other. They expressed caring thoughts and the desire to share their own experiences to help the others while also appreciating the help they were given and the support they found. This sense of family found in the research is an important factor in the empowerment and sense of positive identity (Codd, 2002). Participants talked about losing family members and friends because of their opinions and stigma on having a family member in prison. Through the organisation they have found a new family and made strong social relations allowing them to freely talk and express their feelings about the situation. This supports Gutierrez

(1995) argument that empowerment within organisations facilitates a change in self-belief, from victims to survivors through connections with other.

“You get to talk to people who are going through the exact same thing as opposed to having to fake it. you can actually let your guard down. Yeah this is how it is, this is what I’m struggling with. It’s just such a brilliant group of people that I see when I get to the group.”

“It’s nice being able to just talk to the people that know what you feel like, what you’re going through. as opposed to keep bottling it up.”

“I’ve got a new group of friends”

Understanding

While having new friends and a new-found family is essential in the empowerment of the individuals in terms of the closeness and social environment it provides, it is particularly the non-judgmental and understanding environment facilitated by Sussex Prisoners' Families that the members appreciated. A feeling of 'safe-space' emerged throughout the interviews based on the marginalisation and discrimination they felt from the outside society and sometimes even their own person social environment. This enabled a sense of freedom and normality, related to the creation of positive identity and empowerment by overcoming stigma through social connections (Shih, 2004)

"It's definitely a safe-haven"

"Say that I'm out with good friends, we wouldn't discuss it. [...] because they don't understand. [...] But when I'm with (SPF) it's just normal, it's just having a normal conversation about it. We can chat freely, we can talk about all of the things about prisoners. We all understand how each other feel. And we don't judge each other."

"Because you know you're never going to get judge for them. whereas so many people judge you as supposed to. you can ring them up and go angry like. they don't judge you which is so nice cause so many people do."

"We've all literally been through it or are going through it. we all know, all there to help each other."

The interviews demonstrate the importance of shared vulnerability in the creating of safe-spaces and normality, particularly during the support group meetings. Brené Brown discussed the concept of compassion within the idea of vulnerability, arguing that human's numb vulnerability out of fear and shame, however it is vulnerability that creates connections and ultimately empowerment (Brown, 2002). Furthermore, within community psychology, this relates to the importance of the relation between the micro and meso-levels in empowering individuals and communities (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2004).

Courage

“Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage.” (Brené Brown)

When a member of a family is going to court or taken away to prison, the families often find themselves lost in a world of policies and criminal justice procedures. Families are scared and vulnerable leading to a lack of courage and ultimately a sense of loss of control in their lives (Travis & Waul, 2003). The relation between the families as a community and the public sectors, the meso and exo-levels of the ecological model, are essential in the empowerment of the families.

Control

The families expressed the imprisonment of their family member as a feeling of grief and a sudden loss of control. Between the complexity of the justice system, finding out the necessary information, the invasion of their private lives as well as the fear of societies' judgment (Condry, 2007).

“With your services, to know you're not alone, there is people there to listen, understand and advice you, you have a bit more control back with yourself.”

The interviews revealed a deep trust and sense of control related to courage emerging from the services provided by Sussex Prisoners' Families, such as the court volunteers and prison visitor centre. Families talk about having the

organisation helping them and guiding them to build up their courage and take back control of the situation, be it about their own lives or the situation in prison. This is a particularly important factor in terms of empowering the families through the work on their vulnerability perception (Fawcett et al., 1995). Brené Brown argues that vulnerability is an opportunity for courage in the face of risk, uncertainty and emotional exposure (2015), and, with the right tools and guidance, it can be an empowering experience.

“I felt I had a little, maybe a little more say in what was happening. or a little bit more control.”

“I feel a lot more myself.”

Access and Information

Probably one of the most common problem faced by families of prisoners is the difficulty to find and access information about procedures and prison visitors rights and directions. Research has shown that access to information is essential in the empowerment on vulnerable individuals (Chamberlin, 1997). Within the interviews it was clear that the families felt discouraged and unprepared in the face of the criminal justice system leading to uncertainties toward the court proceedings and meanings.

“There isn’t a website [...] nobody has information [...] the prison wasn’t forthcoming, and it’s always been an us vs them situation”

With the input of Sussex Prisoners’ families, through their first stop advice line and court volunteer service, families instantly reported feeling more informed and reassured about the right steps to take.

“We get information of each other through our experiences. “

“The amount of times I’ve not been able to talk to my son and been refused visits for no reason but yet you guys have contacted the prison cause you can go further than me and straight away I get a phone call. “

Most importantly, the interview revealed that a majority of the empowerment felt by the families did not only come from the access to information, but from being able to share the information and help other families. This contributed to the reinforcement of a positive identity and empowerment (Fawcett et al., 1995), as well as linking back to the concept of compassion. As such, Sussex Prisoners’ Families support towards an ideal of empowerment for and by vulnerable communities. This demonstrated a strong interconnection between the macro and exos-level and how supporting one can also empower another.

“The organization would point us in the right direction, or we could phone them and say we’ve got this through the letter what does it mean. “

Change

“Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change.” (Brown, 2012)

The criminal justice system is prepared to deal with the offenders and the policies are in place to support the families of victims, however, this is not the case for families of prisoners. They are faced with societies stigmatisation, reinforced by the images and ideas portrayed in the media. Condry's (2007) research revealed a shocking game of blaming families, and in particular mothers and partners, for ‘failed parenthood’ and ‘kin contamination’.

Voice

Throughout the interviews, families have discussed their experiences with the criminal justice system and the way they are treated. They expressed their desire to fight the system and demand a change in policies, however they didn't feel strong and confident enough to step up on their own.

“It gave me pride, not only that I could show my voice, but that people were listening.”

Chamberlin (1997) theorises that by developing a more positive self-image, an individual becomes more empowered and vice-versa, ultimately overcoming stigma.

Sussex Prisoners' Families provides this safe-space and platform for the families to share their experiences and develop their own confidence to

rebuild their vulnerability and contributing to social change.

“I've got my voice, I have my voice, I'm supported by Sussex Prisoners Families. I'm supported by them. But there is lots of people who want to say things but can't. So, Sussex Prisoners Families can be their voice as well. we can do it together.”

Sussex Prisoners' Families has not only built a trusting and close community, but also enabled the empowerment on a macro-level, fighting to change societies ideologies towards families of prisoners.

“I think Denis and Sam have encouraged me to actually speak out”

Social Justice

An important aspect in the empowerment of marginalized communities is the fight for social justice. Condry (2007) uncovered in her intense ethnographic fieldwork that families are subject to extreme discrimination and stigmatization as relatives of the offender, as well as by association to the offence itself.

“I think they’ve given me a platform as well [...] Sam and I are hoping to go to another country to look at different prisons so I can say to the government, this isn’t working for us, but they do this here, why can’t we try this.”

Sussex Prisoners’ Families already provides a platform for the families to feel comfortable and speak up about their situation. However, as Chamberlin (1997) argues, empowerment also comes from the given communities hope that things can change on a larger scale. The interviews support this idea as the families are showing increasing interest to expand their involvement in the fight for justice, be it the justice policies for families or the

social stigma surrounding the families.

“I started to get a lot more involved. Like this is what I want to do, this is what I want to help. I want to be there. I know how people are feeling. I know what they’re going through.”

Drury & Reicher (2009) describe empowerment as a model of social change through the power of crowds. This related back to families of prisoners as their disempowerment is a consequence of social rejection and discrimination (Granja, 2016). While it is a difficult task to change societies beliefs and stigma, Sussex Prisoners’ Families demonstrates how their work, changing the lives and self-identities of individuals, is essential when fighting stigma and discrimination as well as changing policies.

“Denis does Hidden Sentence Training which I think is really good. It’s getting bigger and bigger, we are reaching more and more people. I think it’s really important to have something like that”

Conclusions



This impact evaluation has developed a deeper understanding of the problematic faced by the community as well as highlighted the important work of Sussex Prisoners' Families in providing the need and support of the families.

The impact of the organisation was described through the four levels of the ecological model of community psychology, while also incorporating Brené Brown's theory on vulnerability.

1.

On the micro and meso levels, looking at the individuals and the close community, Sussex Prisoners' Families have created a safe-space where families can explore their vulnerability freely and gain valuable compassion. The organisation empowers families through the creation of a new family and sense of connection. This in turn allows for a change in self-belief and the development of normality based on a shared sense of understanding.

2.

The evaluation has revealed a strong disconnection between the families as a community and the public-

sectors. The organisation has empowered the families by giving them access to information and helping them take back control. Sussex Prisoners' Families works on the problematic on multiply levels, such as the connection between the community (meso level) and the government polices (exo-level) by reinforcing positive identity. This was particularly shown when families expressed their growing sense of courage through access to information and being able to help other families.

3.

Finally, the evaluation has shown that the organisation plays an important role in social change and the fight for justice on the wider cultural level (macro-level). By developing a sense of community, giving families new hope and courage, Sussex Prisoners' families are ultimately helping families fight against stigma and for their rights as well as to change the public's perception of families of prisoners. The families expressed wanting to share their voice and feeling that with the organisation, they will be heard.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations have been highlighted during the interviews with the families as well as concluding from the direct analysis and the development of the findings.

1.

A more in-depth understanding of Brené Brown's theory on vulnerability to explore the potentiality of empowerment of families through a change of the perspective on vulnerability.

2.

Explore the relationship of empowerment on and between different levels of the ecological system. How to help the individual, the community and the wider society, separately and as an interconnected entity.

3.

Continue raising awareness in the wider society about families of prisoners and their experiences with court and prison visits aiming to change the policies and the public sectors involvement and contributions.

- Set up talks and meetings with governors

4.

Increase the number of support group meetings to allow for a stronger connection to form between families and provide families with more opportunities to share their experiences and emotions. Additionally, taking into account the group meeting times, offer more flexibility or different times for families who are working or taking care of children.

5.

Consider offering monthly group sessions with a therapist or psychologist to help explore the psychological effect of the situation and how to deal with them.

6.

Develop a variety of services and workshops to help the families with practical problems:

- Monthly or weekly 'themes' to explore, discuss and share with professionals.
- How to write official letters
- Dealing with media and the press
- Preparing families and prisoner for release day

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