

ACQUIRING A ROOF OVER YOUR HEAD!

Laura Orger is the Community Care Caseworker who primarily assists prisoners with mental or physical disabilities at the Prisoners' Advice Service (PAS), an independent legal charity which provides free legal advice to prisoners on matters of prison law throughout England and Wales.

HOW WE CAN ASSIST WOMEN PRISONERS OBTAIN SUPPORTED ACCOMMODATION

As well as advising and assisting prisoners with a wide variety of prison law matters,

PAS sometimes assists women prisoners to obtain support and accommodation upon release, particularly relating to parole hearings where they need suitable accommodation before being released into the community.

For example, I recently acted for a disabled woman whose release on parole had been delayed twice for over a year because no suitable supported accommodation had been identified. We acted for her in her parole case. We sent a pre-action letter to the local authority and the responsible NHS body, threatening a judicial review regarding



the accommodation. We then liaised/ negotiated with the local authority and NHS teams. The NHS body responsible then offered her a place in a therapeutic care home with 24-hour support for the first 18 months, before potentially moving on to more independent living when she's ready. The parole board deemed this accommodation was suitable to meet her complex needs and eventually directed her release.

Last year, our Women Prisoners' Caseworker acted for a prisoner detained in a low secure psychiatric hospital. Eventhough she was considered well enough by a Mental Health Tribunal to be released from hospital, her release needed to be directed by the parole board before she could be discharged into the community. Her local authority rejected the application on the grounds of the cost of her post-release accommodation and care support services in the community. PAS corresponded with the local authority, setting out our client's legal rights and putting it on notice that judicial review proceedings would be instigated if funding was not agreed. The local authority then agreed to provide the funding. This case highlights the difficulties that women prisoners with mental health conditions can face in obtaining the discharge care packages they require upon release.

Also last year, the Women Prisoners' Caseworker took on a case for a woman prisoner with complex learning difficulties, brain damage and schizophrenia. At her automatic release date, she was released to a hostel without appropriate support. Her mental health quickly deteriorated and she relapsed into drug use, leading to her recall to prison. Due to her disabilities, she struggled with the prison regime and was subject to bullying.

She spent the last year on the mental health unit within the prison. Securing appropriate supported accommodation was vital to her chances of re-release and successful rehabilitation.

We attended several multi-agency Care Planning meetings, involving external and internal medical health

professionals and probation officers to devise a plan to progress her release into the community. She had also requested parole board directions to assist with timely release planning and accommodation referrals for her. Following our intervention, the parole board issued detailed directions, setting out a timeframe for actions to be taken by community/forensic mental health teams, as well as prison/probation officers. This ensured that a fully developed release and risk management plan, including "aftercare" accommodation (under section 117 of the Mental Health Act 1983), was in place by

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the time of her oral hearing.

In 2015, PAS assisted a vulnerable woman prisoner suffering from depression, alcoholism and drug abuse, who had previously attempted suicide. She was due to be released and was, therefore, in need of suitable accommodation. Our Women Prisoners' Caseworker helped to ensure that an Approved Premises hostel had a vacancy for her in advance of her release. We persuaded the parole board to grant her release on licence, as her risk was now manageable in the community thanks to the supportive accommodation we had secured for her. We wrote to her Offender Manager and Offender Supervisor to confirm her place at a supportive hostel. Following our intervention, she was granted release on licence and was successfully housed in a special women's hostel that assists ex-prisoners.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE GOING TO BE RELEASED BUT HAVE NOWHERE TO LIVE

If you have physical or mental disabilities or a debilitating illness, you should contact your local council's Adult Social Services department. This is usually the local authority where you lived before you were sent to prison. You should ask them to conduct a "community care assessment" of your needs because you believe you have social care needs and will need support on your release. They should assess you in prison. Sometimes, in less severe cases, they will assess you once you have been released. It is a good idea to contact them as much in advance

as possible and to do so in writing. The Care Act 2015 requires local authorities to assess anyone who "may be in need" of their help or in the case of patients or prisoners about to be released "who may be about to be in need".

If you do not have any significant health problems or disabilities, you should contact the Housing Department of your local authority at least 28 days before your release. You should ask them to send you a homelessness application form. You should fill this in and return it to the council 28 days (or as soon as possible) before your release. If you have any vulnerabilities (like having suffered from depression), put those on the form. You should be treated as "in priority need" for housing.

ORGANISATIONS THAT MAY BE ABLE TO ASSIST

PAS only deals with helping prisoners to acquire accommodation in very specific circumstances (such as major disability and the prisoner cannot assist themselves). However the following Housing organisations may be able to help you.

HOUSING ORGANISATIONS

Shelter England: 0808 800 4444

Crisis: 0300 636 1967

St Mungo's: 020 8762 5500

St Giles Trust: 020 7708 8000

Emmaus UK: 0300 303 7555