

South Africa: The Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons' online reporting system

I. Overview: The Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons' online reporting system

Initiative: South Africa's Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons (JIP) -- a watchdog body overseeing treatment of prisoners and prison conditions -- uses an online system for reporting on prison issues and communicating with independent prison visitors and prison managers.

Implemented by: JIP and the South African Department of Correctional Services.

Funding or financial model: The JIP is funded by the South African Government, and recently by the European Union.

Timeframe: Officially established on 1 June 1998.

Local context: South Africa's prisons are seriously overcrowded. Prisoners have to cope with restricted living space, poor sanitation, spread of disease, unsatisfactory food, and inadequate healthcare, all of which breeds tension and violence and can lead to human rights violations. In 1998 the South African Government established a Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons (JIP) to inspect and report on the treatment of prisoners and conditions in prisons. Independent Prison Visitors were appointed countrywide to visit prisons, interview prisoners, and file monthly reports to JIP. As part of prison oversight, it has also become compulsory for prison managers to report all deaths in prisons to JIP and to seek permission from the office before putting prisoners in mechanical constraints, segregating them, or putting them in solitary confinement. These mechanisms are intended to safeguard against mistreatment of prisoners, but instead they often lead to a backlog of red tape. Moreover, the management of independent prison visitors who are dispersed across the country has sometimes resulted in bureaucratic processes for JIP. For example, these prison visitors are paid according to billable hours approved for various job functions, which requires a complex accounting process.

The development problem/obstacle addressed: While the JIP reporting requirements help to ensure that agreed prison standards are upheld, JIP has been flooded by reports from independent prison visitors and requests from prisons, which threatened to paralyse the JIP efforts. In addition, the bookkeeping needed for time-tracking and monthly payment of independent prison visitors was an administrative burden for JIP.

How ICT is used to overcome the problem: JIP developed a password protected, online system that enables the JIP office, its dispersed prison visitors, and prison managers to remotely upload information onto a central database and exchange messages with each other. Instead of faxing through paper reports, independent prison visitors submit an electronic version of prisoner complaints and other reports directly into the system using the Internet. An online "Wizard" guides the independent prison visitors through a step-by-step

process and allows them to check the entries. This method has not only speeded up reporting, but also improved the comprehensiveness and accuracy of reports. An electronic bulletin board allows two-way messaging between JIP's office and the independent prison visitors. And now the independent prison visitors simply fill in an electronic timesheet that automatically calculates their billable hours. The message system is set up so that independent prison visitors can only bill JIP for their time once they have opened their electronic messages, thereby forcing them to read important messages from JIP, and also creating a communication audit system that prevents people from falsely claiming they have not received messages. The system also keeps a permanent record of all transactions. The system has a myriad of other functions, including a Short Messaging Service (SMS) utility and an online link to the Department of Correction Services's database, which enables JIP to access the complete history of a prisoner.

Next steps: JIP hopes to have the entire system fully functional at the end of 2004, which will enable them to run a paperless office. The system is already programmed to capture spatial information and they hope to eventually establishment a geographic information system that would identify trends in prisons and pinpoint prison trouble spots that investigations should focus on.

Geographical area targeted: All prisons throughout South Africa.

Contact information:

Gideon Morris, Director of the Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons

Tel: +27 (0) 21 421 1012/3/4

Fax: +27 (0) 21 418 1069

Eml: Gideon.Morris@dcs.gov.za

URL: <http://judicialinsp.dcs.gov.za>

II. Gauging Real Impact

This section considers whether and how the Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons's electronic system has made a Real Impact at the ground level by looking through the lens of basic best practice guidelines for successful initiatives. The bridges.org 7 Habits of Highly Effective ICT-Enabled Development Initiatives are used here as a framework to highlight what the initiative has done well.

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective ICT-Enabled Development Initiatives

1. Implement and disseminate best practice:

In shaping its approach, the South African Government researched the structure of Britain's Inspectorate of Prisons; however, the British did not have an electronic system and JIP had to follow commercial best practice in setting up their online system. The British Commissioner of Corrective Services has recently visited JIP to see how this system operates.

2. Ensure ownership, get local buy-in, find a champion:

JIP has developed a manual that instructs independent prison visitors how to use the system and has appointed eight regional co-ordinators to provide hands-on training. JIP obtained buy-in from the independent prison visitors by using the system first to speed up their payment. The independent prison visitors also receive two hours extra pay if they submit their invoices electronically.

3. Do a needs assessment:

Before designing the system, JIP assessed the major problems and needs of independent prison visitors. It was during this assessment that speedy payment was identified as a priority. A year later JIP obtained the prison visitors' feedback on the system and received a mandate to continue further development.

4. Set concrete goals and take small achievable steps:

Before national implementation, a six-month pilot involving 41 prisons in the Western Cape was undertaken in 2002. Independent prison visitors were introduced to the system in phases: first they were only requested to invoice JIP online, then to use the messaging system and research complaints, and eventually to capture complaints and file reports online.

5. Critically evaluate efforts, report back to clients and supporters, and adapt as needed:

On a macro level, JIP organises annual workshops to get feedback from independent prison visitors on the system. On a micro level, each independent prison visitor is audited at least once a quarter to check the accuracy of information that is uploaded.

6. Address key external challenges:

Prison managers are obligated by law to use the online system, which has swept away any bureaucratic resistance. External obstacles that are proving difficult to address are the unreliability of rural network systems (which frustrates online access of independent prison visitors in rural areas), and a full court roll that slows down the processing of complaints.

7. Make it sustainable:

It does not cost much to operate the system. In fact, the system has dramatically cut the human resource needs of JIP. The European Union has been so impressed by JIP's system that they have agreed to provide funding for the continuous training of independent prison visitors. At the moment independent prison visitors have to negotiate their own Internet access. However, if JIP requires them to do more extensive data capturing using the online system, they will have to help independent prison visitors get easier and cheaper online access.

III. Lessons Learned

We invited Gideon Morris, the director of the Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons, to share his views on the initiative's greatest success, the challenges faced, key constraints and dependencies that affect the initiative, opportunities for future improvement, and other lessons learned. This is what he said:

"The electronic system produced two remarkable successes. The first and most important was the empowerment of our people. The Independent Prison Visitors are all appointed from the ranks of Non Governmental Organisations (NGO's) many of them from rural communities with no computer literacy. During the planning phase of the project many people felt that the project will fail because of lack of skills however, with its implementation the hunger of people to learn and the effectiveness of the system motivated people to acquire the skills needed. The training and new skills lifted the motivation levels of all staff and a strong partnership between the JIP and the independent prison visitors was established. The independent prison visitors are appointed on a fixed term contract of 2 years and these skills will also assist them in their work as community representatives after their contracts expire.

The second success was the savings in staff cost and increased efficiency. We have been able to reduce the administrative time it takes to calculate billed hours and pay the independent prison visitors from about 20 days to less than 5 days. We now have only 2 people dealing with all payments and reports from independent prison visitors; without this system we were looking at a staff complement of about 10 people."

IV. The Story

An online system is giving new momentum to prison reform by helping to improve the reporting of poor conditions in prisons and violations of prisoners' rights.

There are many examples of human rights violations against prisoners in South Africa that are given little or no attention by the police. But thanks to the new online system -- which makes reporting about prisoner treatment more efficient and transparent -- prison officials and the police are being held accountable. For example, according to one entry on the system, a prisoner suffered vigilante justice at the hands of the warden and his complaint was neglected by police for over four months. But this matter is now under close scrutiny.

The system was developed by South Africa's Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons (JIP), a body created in 1998 and tasked with inspecting prisons to report on the treatment of prisoners and the conditions in prisons. JIP appoints independent prison visitors countrywide that monitor conditions in prisons and interview prisoners. The JIP's on-the-ground monitoring made prison management more transparent, but has also opened a bureaucratic can of worms. Early on, JIP was flooded by paper reports filed by independent prison visitors relaying the complaints of prisoners, so much so that JIP's office soon started running out of storage space to file all these reports. At the same time, prison managers were compelled by the Government to seek permission from JIP before putting a prisoner in solitary confinement or mechanical constraints. It became essential that JIP reply to such requests speedily, as delays could interfere with the already overwrought management of prisons.

To speed up response time and their ability to process reports, JIP decided to set up an online reporting and communications system. Designers were commissioned to create a system that was extremely user-friendly, since most of the independent prison visitors had never used a computer before. Once the system was up and running, JIP encouraged the

independent prison visitors to use the system by offering to pay them two hours extra if they would submit their time-tracking and billing online. Thanks to an online "Wizard" function that guides the independent prison visitors through the process step-by-step, the majority of independent prison visitors were soon using the system and benefiting from faster payment mechanisms, being paid within five days, instead of the usual three weeks.

Now the independent prison visitors have also started using the system to submit reports about their prison visits and the complaints of prisoners. The system has not only speeded up the reporting process, but also improved the comprehensiveness and the accuracy of the reporting process. In addition, the system automatically sends alerts to management if a complaint is not dealt with before a set deadline. Communication between JIP and the independent prison visitors has also improved because users can send e-mail and SMS messages from the system. The system is also reassuring prisoners. Once an independent prison visitor has filed an online report, a complaint number is issued for following progress on a case, which helps independent prison visitors to update prisoners more effectively. Independent prison visitors can also print out an acknowledgement for the prisoner proving that a complaint has been registered, which can also be used as proof in a court of law.

JIP has already begun to use the information uploaded onto the system to compile spatial information about trends in prisons and identify potential trouble spots so that JIP could focus their inspections and use their human resources more effectively. All-in-all, the system has improved the efficiency and output of JIP not only by speeding up processes, but also by improving the accuracy of information, cutting down on administrative personnel, using less paper, and maybe most importantly, by underscoring the desperate need for prison reform.

Author bridges.org

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