

# 'GATEKEEPER MODEL' MOOTED TO PREVENT SUICIDES IN PRISONS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights Issues - Human Rights and NHRC

The MHA said COVID-19 posed unique challenges, which had affected prisons and correctional facilities. File Photo

In a bid to prevent suicides triggered by mental health issues in prisons across the country, the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS), Bengaluru, has recommended the "Gatekeeper Model" where selected inmates, trained to identify prisoners at risk of suicide, would refer them to treatment or supportive services.

Acting on the request of the Ministry of Home Affairs, NIMHANS, an Institute of National Importance, issued a set of guidelines on the management of mental health issues of the prisoners and prison staff. Referring to the Bangalore Prison Mental Health Study, the advisory pointed to the prevalence of mental illness and substance use disorder in about 80% of the prison population.

NIMHANS experts said prisoners with mental disorders had to be regularly assessed for severity of suicidal risk and also put on regular and supervised medication. To address the prisoner's mental health needs, the correctional facility should have links to community-based initiatives like the District Mental Health Programme.

## "Buddy system"

The advisory said the concept of a 'Buddy System' — social support through trained prisoners called "buddies" or "listeners" — was found to have a good impact on the well-being of suicidal prisoners. Periodic telephone conversations with friends and family would also foster support, it said.

These initiatives were part of several other recommendations made by NIMHANS to effectively manage mental health issues among prisoners and staff.

Communicating the guidelines to all States, the MHA said the COVID-19 virus had posed unique challenges to the world and prisons and correctional facilities were also affected by the pandemic.

Though appropriate measures were taken by the authorities to check the spread of the virus in prisons, there was a need to continue monitoring the situation rigorously without letting the guard down and provide care to inmates and prison staff.

Emphasising on the mental health of prisoners, the Ministry said incarcerated people could face many vulnerabilities during the pandemic, which might impact their mental wellbeing. The prison staff was also working under tremendous pressure and faced challenges in performing their duty while safeguarding themselves from contracting the infection.

In Tamil Nadu, Director-General of Police, Prison & Correctional Services, Sunil Kumar Singh said 58 mobile phones were purchased for prisoners to make video calls to their family members in lieu of the physical interviews that were temporarily suspended in view of the pandemic.

*(Assistance for overcoming suicidal thoughts is available on the helpline number 104.)*

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