

Hearing of inmates in Helsinki Prison on November 17, 2022

Present: Paulina Tallroth and Laura Sairanen, Ministry of Justice, and Maija Helminen, University of Turku. Three inmates from the Helsinki Prison.

General observation: All inmates had been previously in police detention facilities and remand prisons. Several of their observations referred to experiences they had before arriving at Helsinki Prison. All inmates were placed in an observation section (arviointiosasto) at the time of the hearing and they emphasized that prison conditions and prisoners' rights might be different when they reach their final placement within the prison.

1. About the hearing

Amendments concerning the Imprisonment Act are drafted in the Ministry of Justice. The Ministry drafts a government proposal that consists of the draft bill and its reasons. As part of the legislative drafting process, the impacts of the bill are assessed. That may include hearing the people influenced by the legislation or their representatives. It is important to hear the people affected the legislation when drafting bills. The hearing was organized as part of the revision of the Imprisonment Act, administered by the Ministry of Justice.

The names of the inmates remain unknown and they will not appear in any documentation of the Ministry of Justice. Participation in the hearing is anonymous and voluntary.

2. Free telephone calls for prisoners

- The inmates told that when the police first arrested them and after that, when they were in remand prison, they were allowed to make one phone call after they had spent 10 days in police detention or remand prison. This was the case even though in court they were asked to write down two phone numbers of close persons, to whom they want to call.
- The inmates told that in remand prison, officers told that the reason why they were not allowed to make phone calls was that it would risk the investigation. One inmate was allowed to make phone calls when he arrived in prison but he could call a free call only to his attorney; for other phone calls he had to pay.
- The inmates did not know about their rights to free telephone calls to family and close persons. They only had information that they can call to their attorney for free. For that, they had to apply and

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tell the reason why they need to call their attorney.

- The inmates told that they do not usually need to call officials or anyone else than their family and attorneys. If they need to contact officials, they usually do it via their attorneys.
- Calling the bank had been at the prisoner's own expense.

3. How can you use the internet in prison?

- The inmates did not know that they could use internet in prison. None of them had used the internet in prison even though some of them have been in prison for many months.
- The inmates had used internet only for skype calls.
- The inmates told that they would need to use the internet but they have not been informed about their rights for that.
- The inmates wish for written information about their rights in prison.
- The inmates think that access to internet would help them with their personal development. One inmate had been told, while in remand prison, that it is possible to study online and he can ask about this possibility when he moves to a proper prison.

4. How can you use email in prison?

- The inmates told that they have not used email in prison. They have only written letters.
- The inmates think that it would be good if they could use email in prison because sending letter via mail takes such a long time to arrive, especially if they send it to family that lives on another continent.
- The inmates think that there would only be positive impacts if they could use email and inmates would not misuse it.
- The inmates think that officers would need to guide them in the use of email.
- Email would be less expensive than making telephone calls.

5. How can you use a mobile phone in prison?

- The inmates told that there is only few telephones in prison and the time they can use telephone is limited. Usually one call can last 10 minutes, sometimes less. This was the case especially in remand prison.
- The inmates think that it would be best if they had mobile phones in their cells. Then the time to call would not be limited and it would be easier to keep contact to family members who live on another continent.
- The inmates estimated that more phones in prison would lead to less telephone queues. Mobile phones would solve the queuing problem.
- The time difference makes it difficult to keep contact with family members who do not live in Europe.
- The inmates had differing experiences of making phone calls outside the regular phone call times: Some guards have let inmates call their family in the night time, others have said that the protocol does not allow them to make exceptions, in some cases inmates could make phone calls anytime when the doors of the cells are open.
- The inmates do not feel that they need more privacy for calls, but they need more time and timetables.
- The inmates think it would be good if there were a chance the make phone calls in more private place.
- The inmates think that a mobile phone would be better than a landline phone but any phone would be an improvement.

6. Video calls (Skype calls)

- The inmates told that they have made skype video calls.
- The inmates wish that they could make skype calls without an application procedure. After applying, they now have to wait for days to get the permission to call via skype.
- The inmates wish that they could make more skype calls; now the maximum is one skype call per week.
- The inmates wish that they would not have to choose between a skype call and having a visitor. Especially for foreign inmates is difficult to choose between calling family who lives abroad and on the other hand meeting in person a friend who lives in Finland.
- The inmates hope that skype call time and visiting time would not be scheduled during the same hours. This is now the case at least in their current section (arviointiosasto).
- Skype calls are made in room where is 3-4 inmates calling at the same time. Sometimes it is difficult to hear what the person at the other end of the line says. The inmates wish that they could make the calls somewhere where is more easy to hear the call.
- The inmates feel that the current time for a skype call, 30 minutes, was good.
- The inmates do not feel that it does not disturb that the guards listen the calls because the guards do not understand their language.
- Over all, the inmates have good experiences of skype calls and think they are arranged quite well.
- The inmates think that skype calls and regular phone calls are both equally important: Some people do not have access to skype so a regular phone call is only way to reach them.

Distribution: the attending inmates and the researchers from Turku University who participate in the project of hearing prisoners.