

Deaf Inmates in Canadian Prisons: Addressing Discrimination through Staff Training Videos with Deaf Actors

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Abstract : Deaf inmates, whose first or preferred language is a Signed Language, experience barriers to accessing the necessary two-way communication with correctional staff, and the educational and social programs that will enhance their eligibility for conditional release from the federal prison system in Canada. The development of visual content to enhance the knowledge and skill development of correctional staff is a contemporary strategy intended to significantly improve the correctional experience for deaf inmates. This presentation reports on the development of two distinct training videos created to enhance staff's understanding of the needs of deaf inmates; one a two-part simulation of an interaction with a deaf inmate, the second an interview with a deaf academic. Part one of video one demonstrates the challenges and misunderstandings inherent in communicating across languages without a qualified sign language interpreter; the second part demonstrates the ease of communication when communication needs are met. Video two incorporates the experiences of a deaf academic to provide the cultural grounding necessary to educate staff in the unique experiences associated with being a visual language user. Lack of staff understanding or awareness of deaf culture and language must not be acceptable reasons for the inadequate treatment of deaf visual language users in federal prisons. This paper demonstrates a contemporary approach to meeting the human rights and needs of this unique and often ignored inmate subpopulation. The deaf community supports this visual approach to enhancing staff understanding of the unique needs of this population. A study of its effectiveness is currently underway.

Keywords : accommodations, American Sign Language (ASL), deaf inmates, sensory deprivation

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