“EVERYONE I’VE MET HAS COME BACK AND THANKED ME FOR MY HELP AND ADVICE. IT MAKES MY DAY THAT I HAVE ACTUALLY MADE SOMEONE ELSE’S DAY A BETTER AND HEALTHIER ONE”

NAME
Jamail

ORGANISATION
Offender Health and Social Care (part of Yorkshire and Humber Improvement Partnership)

PROJECT
Health Trainers within the Criminal Justice System

WHAT HE DID?
• Trained as a Health Trainer Champion while serving a prison sentence in HMP Everthorpe.
• Helped to set up an in-house Health Trainer Champion service at Moorlands Open Prison, offering advice and support to fellow prisoners who want to improve their diets and lead more active lifestyles.
• Signposted people to other services, including sexual health clinics, drug rehabilitation services and homelessness charities.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DID HE MAKE?
• Broke down barriers to healthy lifestyles among prisoners by building up trust.
• Helped 20 people to improve their diets, lead more active lifestyles or access other services to improve their health.
• Found a vocation as a Health Trainer Champion and now hopes to work with ex-offenders on his release, providing a vital stepping stone for their return to society.

ABOUT THE PROJECT
Health Trainers within the Criminal Justice System started in 2009. To date there are seven prisons out of 16 delivering the health champion service. Significant evidence has been collated proving that this low-cost service engages with the seven pathways to reducing re-offending. To discuss any part of this project including sustainability and replication or to request a copy of a report entitled “Implementation of the Lord Darzi Recommendations and Health Trainers into the Criminal Justice System”, please contact Geof Dart.

FACTFILE

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COMMUNITY HEALTH CHAMPION

Jamail knows only too well the effect prison can have on mental and physical well-being. Imprisoned three times since the mid-nineties, he has first-hand experience of the helplessness than many feel and how this impacts on health. “A lot of people come to prison, feeling down,” he said. “They easily get into a pattern of doing nothing – not eating or over-eating, for instance. I try to find a way of talking to them.”

Jamail’s current prison term resulted from a traumatic period in his life. After ‘going straight’ for a number of years and running his own business as a personal fitness instructor, his new life started to unravel following a personal tragedy. “My ex-girlfriend lost a baby and it was a really difficult time for both of us,” he said. “She had no one besides me. Her family wasn’t supportive and I hadn’t told my family or friends about what had happened. My head was in bits because I never shared with anyone what was going on.”

Jamail started taking cocaine and as his usage increased, both his personal and work life started to suffer. It culminated in a drugs binge that resulted in arrest and conviction for possession of drugs and assault. “I didn’t even remember most of what happened,” he said. “I only realised what I was like from reading statements.” After being sentenced, Jamail started to get the help that he needed. “I started using the Samaritans’ Listeners’ Group – prisoners trained by the Samaritans – and I got a lot of stuff off my chest,” he said. “They really helped me to feel comfortable to talk. Then I got help with my drug addiction from the prison drugs team and counselling for the baby we lost.”

Following his own positive experience, Jamail was inspired to become a Listener himself. While helping vulnerable prisoners at HMP Everthorpe, near Hull, he heard about ‘Health Trainers within the Criminal Justice System’, a project to establish a network of Health Trainers and Health Trainer Champions to tackle health inequalities among offenders. Chronic problems for prisoners are among the highest in the country, with higher than average levels of mental health problems, blood-borne infections, sexually transmitted diseases and drug and alcohol dependence. Benefitting from his previous experience as a personal fitness trainer, he immediately set about putting his skills to good use as one of four Health Trainer Champions, first at Everthorpe and now at Moorlands Open Prison, near Doncaster. The project is partly a referral scheme, signposting people with sensitive matters such as sexual health to appropriate services. But Health Trainer Champions also work more directly to improve inmates’ health, chatting to them about the healthy options available and encouraging them to eat well and take more exercise.

“I try to get them to reduce certain foods they could do with less of – snacks and comfort eating. Prison can be quite boring and eating is a way of getting through it. “I can also take them through a cardio programme at the gym.” For some prisoners, getting out of the cell, let alone making it to the gym is difficult and as a Health Trainer Champion, Jamail is on hand to help. “The gym facilities are brilliant,” he said, but it can be quite an intimidating place – there are a lot of big lads there. I can help by providing an induction.” He also runs Walking to Fitness sessions as a way of introducing prisoners to gentle exercise. “For some prisoners, their favourite phrase is ‘I can’t do that. That’s too difficult.’ But then you come back two weeks later and see they’re enjoying it. They just need a push.” At Moorlands Open Prison, Jamail helped set up a new Health Trainer Champion scheme from scratch, overcoming scepticism from both staff and inmates.

Knowing that the prison officers thought that it was just a gimmick that wouldn’t last,” he said. “Hopefully I’ve won them round. “Getting prisoners on-side is all about trust and confidentiality. Most have been through closed prisons where there isn’t much trust. But they can relate to someone like me.” Having worked with 20 clients so far, Jamail is hopeful that all his voluntary work as a Health Trainer Champion will stand him in good stead when he comes before the parole board later this year.

“The Health Trainer Champion Scheme has really helped a lot with my rehabilitation,” he said. “I’ve been active as a Health Trainer Champion for over a year and in that time I’ve spoken to all types of prisoner and helped them along with what they wanted to achieve. “Everyone I’ve met has come back and thanked me for my help and advice. It makes my day that I have actually made someone else’s day a better and healthier one.”

If released, Jamail hopes he will be able to continue working as a Health Trainer Champion in a pilot scheme for ex-offenders in his home town of Bradford. “Health and exercise give a lot of lads a stepping stone to better things. It’s also something to look forward to when they get out – an opportunity to get involved again.”

“It would be great for me, having that experience and then actually working with ex-offenders,” he said. “It would motivate me and keep me on the right track.”

Altogther Better was founded on the firm belief that community health champions have the potential to make a significant impact on health inequalities. In 2008, we were awarded £6.8m from the BIG Lottery Well-being Fund to run our innovative, five-year programme in Yorkshire and the Humber. We have 16 locally-delivered flagship projects across the region, testing out different community health champion approaches in a range of settings. Altogther Better is also bringing together a network of health champion projects across the UK and forging links with international health champions.

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