

# **Summary of the NGO's Activities for the Development of the Penitentiary and Probation Systems in 2024**

**Center for Legal Initiatives**

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## About the NGO – In Numbers

The Center for Legal Initiatives non-governmental organization (hereinafter referred to as the NGO) was founded in 2017. Its primary mission is to protect the rights of inmates and promote their rehabilitation.

In 2024 (hereinafter referred to as the reporting year), the NGO implemented projects aimed at enhancing social, psychological, and healthcare services for LGBTQ inmates, expanding employment opportunities for prisoners, improving the well-being of female inmates and those on probation, advocating for gender-sensitive policies within the penitentiary system, and developing and implementing gender-sensitive response mechanisms for pandemics in the penitentiary and probation systems.

During the reporting year, the NGO engaged with 82 beneficiaries, including 24 men and 58 women.

Of the men, 9 are inmates sentenced to imprisonment, and 10 are sentenced to life imprisonment, serving their sentences in the Armavir, Nubarashen, Vardashen, and Sevan Prisons. Additionally, 5 are former convicts, 1 of whom was sentenced to life imprisonment before being released.

Of the women, 15 are probation beneficiaries, while 43 are female inmates, including those in pre-trial detention, as well as those serving their sentences in both cell-based and residential conditions.

During the reporting year, the NGO received 15 alerts regarding inmates in the Abovyan, Armavir, Nubarashen, Sevan, and Vanadzor Prisons, submitted by human rights defenders, inmates, and their relatives.

The NGO conducted 15 visits to various prisons as part of the aforementioned reports and ongoing projects. These visits included 8 to the Abovyan Prison, 4 to the Sevan Prison, 2 to the Armavir Prison, and 1 to the Nubarashen Prison.

The NGO also provided humanitarian assistance to 3 women held in the Abovyan Prison. Two of them are foreign nationals, while the third, an Armenian citizen, is accompanied by her young child. The NGO supplied winter clothing to both the women and the child.

As a result of the received alerts and visits to prisons, the NGO sent 117 official letters to obtain clarifications on the identified issues. These letters included inquiries, requests for information about convicts, and other relevant matters, all within the context of the NGO's ongoing activities.



## Alarm Bells: Addressing a Range of Systemic Issues within the Prison System

The NGO has reviewed the clarifications provided by the responsible state bodies in response to alerts from both local and foreign incarcerated individuals, as well as various human rights defenders. This indicates that the authorities have taken relevant steps to address these concerns. However, the NGO observes that the solutions implemented have been partial, while the issues themselves are systemic and, therefore, require comprehensive and fundamental solutions.

For instance, complaints from Nubarashen Prison highlight concerns about the deteriorating condition of the facility's infrastructure, with a call for its urgent closure.

Inmates in various prisons have expressed divergent views regarding the mandatory wearing of standardized uniforms, as required by the internal regulations. This concern is attributed to the poor quality of the fabric used in the uniforms.

Alerts from foreign nationals indicate that language barriers persist, making it difficult for them to access professional services, including medical care, and resocialization programs. In some cases, the legal processes for their deportation remain unresolved due to the absence of clear legal regulations.

The implementation of existing mechanisms has yet to ensure the incentivization of positive behavior among inmates enrolled in resocialization and educational programs. Additionally, it has not alleviated their imprisonment conditions or the prospects for conditional early release. This has resulted in harsher conditions for life-sentenced individuals, undermining the state's recent efforts to expand the scope of these programs.

The shift in responsibility for managing the Penitentiary Medicine Center has led to the neglect of the medical staff's needs, resulting in a decline in the conditions necessary for maintaining the smooth and effective operation of their work. In this regard, the NGO is particularly concerned about the substandard working conditions of medical personnel who are responsible for providing healthcare services to female inmates.

During the reporting year, the NGO also reviewed actions taken to prevent the smuggling of prohibited items into prisons and efforts to enhance mechanisms for maintaining contact with the outside world, as well as early conditional release. Notably, observations and recommendations for improving the conditional early release mechanism were developed by the NGO's beneficiaries - those who have either been conditionally released or are currently serving their sentences in low-security zones under strict conditions.



## Efforts to Improve the Conditions of Women within the Criminal Justice System

During the reporting year, the NGO continued its collaboration with Women's Fund Armenia. In April, the sub-grant project "A Healthy Mind in a Healthy Body" was launched, focusing on enhancing the well-being and strengthening the health of female inmates and those on probationers.

Training sessions were organized on topics such as healthy living and health maintenance, emotional and conflict management, and positive parenting. These sessions engaged 12 incarcerated women and 15 female probationers. Additionally, 5 podcasts were produced, highlighting the personal experiences and key concerns of incarcerated women. These podcasts were made available on the NGO's website and YouTube channel.

Based on the issues identified during the program's implementation, a policy brief was developed aimed at improving the conditions of female probationers and women sentenced to imprisonment.

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|------------------------|---|
| ✓ Healthy lifestyle    | ▶ I implore you, please be careful  |
| ✓ Emotional management | ▶ I've suffered a lot here; this is no place for a woman                    |
| ✓ Conflict management  | ▶ Mothers, don't leave your children with eyes full of unanswered questions |
| ✓ Health maintenacnce  | ▶ I was afraid that I would be forgotten...                                 |
| ✓ Parental skills      | ▶ I thought that if I were kind, others would be too, but no...             |

### Policy brief Enhancing the condition of women sentenced to imprisonment and those on probation

The NGO has remained committed to safeguarding the rights of female inmates and those on probation, while also supporting their successful reintegration into society through the implementation of a number of other projects. The NGO analyzed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on detained and sentenced women. It developed a policy paper outlining gender-sensitive responses to the pandemic within both the penitentiary and probation systems. Additionally, the NGO conducted research on the development and implementation of gender-sensitive policies in the penitentiary system. It also explored the sexual and reproductive health challenges faced by female inmates and those on probation.



## Transforming Treatment of LGBT Prisons in Armenian Penitentiary Institutions

The reporting year was notable for the NGO's collaboration with the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Armenia. In April, a grant project was launched to promote the well-being and rights of LGBT inmates by enhancing the quality and accessibility of social, psychological, and healthcare services.

As part of the project, a guidebook was developed to enhance social, psychological, and healthcare services for inmates. Printed copies were distributed to the Penitentiary Service, the social, psychological, and legal departments of prisons, as well as the Penitentiary Medicine Center and its units within prisons.

The guidebook outlines the essential principles and approaches that prison social workers, psychologists, and healthcare professionals should adhere to when providing professional services to LGBT inmates.

✓ Guidebook on Social, Psychological and Health Service Improvement Provided to Imprisoned persons

## New Employment Opportunities for Incarcerated Individuals

The concept presented by the NGO became one of the winning projects of the Zartir Fellowship 2023. The project's goal is to provide prisoners with employment and stable income through the development of craftsmanship skills.

As part of this initiative, the NGO established "Hand in Hand" Social Enterprise, added a "Shop" section to its website, and created a Facebook page to showcase inmates' handmade crafts for the first time in Armenia through online sales.

In addition to financial support, the NGO's president, Nare Hovhannisyan, participated in several seminars as part of the fellowship, where she explored key aspects of entrepreneurship with the guidance of expert facilitators.



## Supporting Resocialization Initiatives in Penitentiary Institutions

In promoting the effective realization of the creative and cultural rights of inmates, the NGO organized several events during the reporting year. Among the highlights were the National Library of Armenia representatives visits to the Sevan prison, as well as the visit of Sevak Ghazaryan, Director of the Paruyr Sevak House-Museum, to the Abovyan prison.

The visit of the National Library of Armenia to the Sevan Prison marked the beginning of extensive cooperation with the Penitentiary Service. On October 16, 2024, a memorandum of partnership was signed between the 2 institutions. The scope of the cooperation is quite broad, including actions aimed at addressing the issues outlined in the research article “The Role and Importance of Libraries for Inmates: A Study of the Armenian Experience”.

The article, authored by the NGO president Nare Hovhannisyan, was published in the first issue of Bulletin of Armenian Libraries in 2024. This publication represents the first comprehensive study of this topic in Armenia.

✓ The Role and Importance of Libraries for Inmates: A Study of the Armenian Experience



Staying true to its mission, the NGO also remained committed to supporting the resocialization of inmates throughout the reporting year. It participated in 7 events, 5 of which were held at the Armavir and Sevan Prisons. These events marked the celebration of various holidays, the conclusion of educational programs, and the exhibition and sale of inmates' handicrafts. The remaining 2 events took place at the Artists' Union of Armenia and the "Open Platform" NGO, showcasing the handcrafted works of 2 life-sentenced prisoners.

## Supporting Resocialization Initiatives in Penitentiary Institutions

During the reporting year, the NGO published materials written by inmates, providing them with a platform for self-expression and helping them maintain a connection with society. A total of 13 publications, written by 2 men sentenced to imprisonment and 4 men sentenced to life imprisonment, were shared with the public. These included 1 open letter and 3 interviews.

During the reporting year, the NGO's president, Nare Hovhannisyan, was appointed as a member of the Penitentiary Service's certification commission. The NGO maintained its membership with the Juremonia Platform and took part in over 30 working meetings and training sessions organized by this platform, along with other international and state partner organizations. Nare Hovhannisyan delivered speeches at 2 events and served as a committee member at 1.

## Involving People with Lived Experience in Criminal Justice Reform Discussions

Undertaking criminal justice reform by including the views and opinions of those with lived experiences is a growing trend in many jurisdictions for its meaningful and fruitful impacts. People with direct experience of incarceration can provide invaluable contributions to discussions on reforms in the penitentiary and probation systems by offering their personal and practical insights.

This method allows public stakeholders to hear directly from those who have experienced the system, providing an opportunity to evaluate the impact of existing policies and actions from their lived perspectives. By doing so, it supports the government's efforts to enact reforms based on evidence and real-world experiences. Including firsthand accounts ensures that reforms address tangible issues, ultimately strengthening the justice system's effectiveness and fairness.

Exactly, by incorporating the perspectives and experiences of those directly involved in the justice system, reforms become more grounded in the realities faced by individuals, leading to more meaningful and impactful changes. This approach not only improves individual outcomes but also strengthens the broader justice system by ensuring that reforms are both practical and equitable.



## Involving People with Lived Experience in Criminal Justice Reform Discussions

In the reporting year, the NGO partnered with Penal Reform International to support the implementation of the “Adding Seats to the Table” project, which aimed to introduce the principles of this method in Armenia. The project engaged 5 of the NGO's beneficiaries, who had served sentences in various penitentiaries and also interacted with the probation service.

A training course was organized for them, helping to develop communication and listening skills, map out the issues within the criminal justice system, and explore potential solutions to those challenges. This was followed by a roundtable discussion, where people with lived experience presented their opinions and perspectives to the relevant state institutions. The discussion encompassed a wide range of topics, including contact with the outside world, reintegration, employment opportunities, conditions of detention, treatment of incarcerated individuals, grievance mechanisms, mechanisms for release from punishment, the probation system, preparation for release and aftercare, healthcare services, and other related issues.

The principles and ethical considerations for involving individuals with lived experience of incarceration in the criminal justice reform process have been distilled into a 10-point action plan. This plan also acknowledges the names of the NGO's beneficiaries, ensuring their active participation and representation in the reform process.

## Effective Cooperation with the Media

Throughout the reporting year, the NGO, in collaboration with the Media Center, held 6 discussions on critical issues, including the reproductive health challenges faced by incarcerated women, changes in the status of the Probation Service, the new framework for conditional early release, the draft law on Probation, and the resocialization process of inmates.

The NGO's efforts in the penitentiary and probation systems also received extensive media coverage, providing a platform to highlight existing challenges and showcase progress. The NGO maintained strong partnerships with leading media outlets, including Public Television, Public Radio, Armenia TV, Free News, Aravot Daily, and CivilNet. As a result, these outlets produced 8 reports and published 10 articles featuring the NGO's activities.



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non-governmental organization

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