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LEADERSHIP CHANGE: Prisons director Chua Chin Kiat (left) handing over the baton to Mr Ng Joo Hee at the change of command ceremony yesterday. Mr Ng pledged to live up to Mr Chua's legacy.

Prison-rehab champ steps down after 9 yrs

He transformed prison system to one with key focus on rehab and reintegration

BY TEH JOO LIN

TEN years ago, inmates were addressed only by their serial numbers, female prisoners turned to face the wall when men passed and – for security reasons – books thicker than an inch (2.5cm) were disallowed.

These practices went out of the window after Mr Chua Chin Kiat became prisons director in 1998. He relinquished his position yesterday, after nine years.

Under his watch, the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners into society became a key focus, which new director Ng Joo Hee pledged to continue.

In an earlier interview with The Straits Times, Mr Chua reminisced about his switch from hard-nosed crimebuster – he was a former Criminal Investigations Department chief – to a champion of transforming jailbirds.

He confessed he did not believe in rehabilitation but changed his perspective when he visited the lock-ups.

“Logic told me that when inmates come in, you can’t just lock them up and throw away the keys, because one day they will be released,” the 54-year-old said. Many officers hardly knew the inmates under their care.

More than four in 10 of inmates released in 1998 back-slid to a life of crime within two years of their release. About 11,000 inmates are released every year.

Mr Chua then jump-started a series of changes, including the adoption of a vision in 1999 that designated prison officers as “Captains of Lives”.

On the ground, this translated into a slew of reformative and reintegration programmes, among them the Yellow Ribbon Project and the Community Action for the Rehabilitation of Ex-Offenders (Care) Network.

The “systemic change” did not pass without resistance.

He was hard-pressed to describe the low point of that period of his career, but there were grouses that the prisons “were go-

ing soft”. But the statistics seemed to suggest the changes worked: Among the batch of released prisoners in 2003, only one in four broke the law.

But a lot remains to be done, the father of three said. For one, he noted, it was “quite common” for wives to divorce their husbands when they are in jail.

“When someone goes to jail, it affects not just him, but also the family. If a person has no more loved ones in the world, the chances of rehabilitation aren’t very good.” A family resource centre was set up to help prisoners’ families cope.

Mr Chua, who is moving on to become the executive director of Aetos Security Management, added that the prisons were also looking for better ways to handle mentally ill prisoners.

Paying tribute to his predecessor, Mr Ng, 41, said he had to live up to Mr Chua’s legacy.

The former police intelligence director said one of his priorities was to focus attention on running a modern prison, with the upcoming Changi Prison complex expected to house all the nation’s offenders by 2012.

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