



Perth WA
5th March 2010

The Principal Research Officer
Dr Brian Gordon
Community Development and Justice Standing Committee
Legislative Assembly
Parliament House
Perth WA 6000

Email: lacdjsc@parliament.wa.gov.au

RE: "MAKING OUR PRISONS WORK"

Dear Dr Gordon,

This letter is a submission on behalf of Lifeline WA on matters relating to the Terms of Reference of the Standing Committee with regard to the Inquiry into the efficiency and effectiveness of prisoner education, training and employment strategies.

By no means do we intend to provide a comprehensive submission relating to all relevant aspects of the inquiry. As a whole, the matter of prisoner rehabilitation is very complex and would require collaborative efforts on many levels.

However, from a Lifeline WA perspective we would like to submit the following:

- 1: Some facets of the inquiry resonate with our service delivery goals relating to:
 - 1: suicide pre/intervention and post care
 - 2: crisis support and
 - 3: creating opportunities for emotional/mental/spiritual well being.

With these in mind I would in particular, but not solely, refer to our comments as they relate to items 2, 7 and 8 of the Terms of Reference that the Committee will examine and report on.

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- 2: On a national level, Lifeline has expertise in risk assessment and emergency interventions particularly in the suicide prevention field.

Lifeline South Australia has been involved in prison work since 1994. Their involvement relates to training provision for prison staff in basic counselling skills, suicide prevention and the delivery of the ASIST (suicide intervention skills) program. For prisoners, Lifeline SA introduced training to become peer support prisoners (“Listener Course”) and a community visitors’ scheme to provide personal companionship for isolated inmates.

- 3: Lifeline WA provides the “Dads@Lifeline” program for separated or bereaved fathers in the community and very recently started a pilot service in Hakea Prison. The program is funded through the Department for Communities.

The service caters for a vulnerable and high risk group of men in the community and recognizes that fathers separated from partner, children, society, family and friends, and placed in a prison environment, are at even higher risk.

- 4: Lifeline WA would like to extend and share its relevant know-how within the WA prison and corrective services settings, and we trust that our submission contribution will be of value to the Committee.

Our clinical staff have expertise in face-to-face counselling as well as group facilitation work in complex cases, this includes the fields of child abuse/protection, Court mandated perpetrators of family violence work, creative programs development, counselling the unemployed, supervision, men’s well being etc.

The statement: “Making our prisons work” may mean different things to different people, but the Committee’s subtitle suggests that current prison rehabilitation programs in the areas of education, training and employment strategies could do much better in achieving their goals.

Indeed, recidivism research in Australia indicates that 44% of inmates are re-imprisoned (a high percentage of those already within 12 months up on release). The research findings of “Reducing recidivism through vocational education and training programs” (Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, 2008) suggests that such training reduces return to custody but that the reduction in recidivism is less than 10% compared to prisoners who have not attended vocational training. In addition, the study named numerous barriers that exist for prisoners to actually register, undertake or complete such courses in their prison setting. Changing criminal behaviour and life styles requires more than psycho-educational and/or vocational training.

Nevertheless we acknowledge the likely benefits that vocational training programs may bring for people who have been surviving in an alternative (criminal) economy and life setting, and who are in due time going to be returned to their communities.

The prison environment itself creates various stresses affecting the mental and emotional health of prisoners who in the community already grew up in high risk and high need

circumstances. As such the prison system could be its own impediment to successful rehabilitation.

It was suggested that prisoner rehabilitation may benefit from operating in a “shared responsibility model” rather than a “control model” prison environment (“Healthy or Harmful – Mental Health and the Operational Regime of the New ACT Prison”, 2008). Indeed its first recommendation indicates that: “A corrections board should be established with mental health expertise to be responsible for the prison’s operational regime....” Further recommendations all refer to improving prisoners’ emotional and mental health in a context of reducing recidivism.

A control model of operational regime relies mainly on rules, hierarchy, monitoring, compliance, conformity, control and punishment. Such an environment is not conducive to motivated learning as it kills the spirit.

General incarceration stresses such as:

- sudden disruption of a person’s life
- separation loss of family, people and resources
- submission to a coercive regimented daily routine

could all have detrimental influences on the person’s capacity and resilience to cope. They could render inmates powerless and helpless, harm the sense of mental and emotional wellbeing and reinforce a sense of failure rather than stimulate “non-prison think.”

In particular in remand centers, which are first port of call for many accused, inmates are likely to get overwhelmed by the shock, uncertainty and isolation in an unfamiliar location. Higher rates of suicide and suicide attempts occur in remand centers compared to other prisons that hold sentenced prisoners. The suicide rate for men in WA prisons between 2001 and 2006 was over five times higher than the general population (“Western Australian Suicide Prevention Strategy 2009-2013”, p.22).

Lifeline WA’s view on creating a more efficient and effective prison training strategy would necessarily include service provisions aimed at improving prisoners’ sense of wellbeing that also promotes an intrinsic motivation to change criminal lifestyles prior to addressing training needs. Education and training alone could make us skilful in certain areas, but not necessarily wiser or acting in our own long term best interests. It would necessarily follow that the prison culture and system may need to adjust accordingly.

In summary Lifeline WA’s contributory submission to the Committee emphasises the need for pro-active attention to prisoner wellbeing in an adjusted prison regime prior to offering vocational training programs in order to maximise the outcomes of such training.

Lifeline WA would like to offer its support and services in the areas of:

- promoting prisoner wellbeing and self-care as precursor to vocational training in order to improve the fruitfulness of such training
- proper balancing and integration of such services both inside and out of the prison environment

- providing training opportunities for staff and prisoners in suicide prevention and suicide intervention skills training

On behalf of the Dads@Lifeline team and Lifeline WA,

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