



Australian Government  
Department of Employment  
and Workplace Relations

# Reconnection, Employment and Learning (REAL) Program

## Discussion Paper



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**The document must be attributed as the Reconnection, Employment and Learning Program Discussion Paper.**

*The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations acknowledges the traditional owners and custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures, and Elders past, present and emerging. We extend that respect to the First Nations peoples who have so generously shared their wisdom, time, knowledge and lived experience with us in developing this program.*

## **We want your feedback**

The purpose of the consultation is to seek your views on the design and implementation of the Reconnection, Employment and Learning (REAL) Program. This paper outlines what we have heard from you so far about what a First Nations<sup>1</sup> prison to employment program should look like in both youth and adult justice settings. The paper then asks questions about what else needs to be considered to make the REAL Program the best it can be.

We are committed to working in partnership with First Nations people on the policies and programs that will affect them. We value the experience and wisdom of those that work with First Nations people who have lived experience of the justice system. Your collective feedback and ideas will help inform the design and delivery of the REAL Program.

Stage 1 of consultations in 2023 directly informed the bigger picture of the REAL Program. Building on what we have heard, your feedback through Stage 2 of consultations will help inform the detailed design of the program so it delivers what is needed, is successfully implemented and brings about positive outcomes for those participating in it.

This second stage of consultations will involve written submissions in response to this paper, as well as in-person and online community and stakeholder meetings. What you tell us will inform how we implement the new program, including the development of a guide about delivery of the program and how to apply for the grant.

The guide on how to apply for the grant will be released in early 2025, and Phase 1 of the REAL Program will start on 1 July 2025.

## **What is the REAL Program?**

The REAL Program is a grant program that will help First Nations people to transition from the justice system and to reconnect with jobs and/or with learning. The program is voluntary. Support will start up to 6 months before release and continue for up to 12 months after release. Support will be delivered by services providers who successfully apply for grant funding.

The REAL Program will be available to First Nations people aged 15 and over who are in prison, on remand, or recently released from prison. By ongoing participation in the program, participants will meet any mutual obligations they may have related to their Centrelink payments.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people are referred to in this paper as First Nations people. 'Indigenous' has been used when the term forms part of a name.

Initially the program will begin in a cross-section of facilities across states and territories from 1 July 2025. It will be available in all locations (youth and adult facilities) from 1 July 2026. Organisations will be selected to deliver the program through a competitive grant process.

The Australian Government has committed \$76.2 million over 5 years towards the program. This funding includes delivery of the program by selected providers, along with the following complementary initiatives:

- \$2.5 million per year from 2025-26 for the REAL Project Fund. The REAL Project Fund will provide grant funding for small scale projects delivered by the private and community sectors to create alternative pathways to work for First Nations people released from prison. Any eligible entities can apply for this funding, it will not be limited to the organisations delivering the REAL Program.
- Funding to support the establishment of the National Indigenous Employment and Training Alliance (NIETA) as a national peak body. NIETA will support Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and other First Nations providers to build their capacity to deliver employment services, including the REAL Program.

## What you have told us so far

Under stage one of the consultations in 2023, we heard from First Nations people with lived experience of the justice system, First Nations groups, justice reform advocates, community organisations and service providers from across the country on how employment supports can be improved for First Nations people who have been incarcerated. From these consultations we heard that:

- First Nations people being released from custody need help with the barriers they face that make it hard for them to get jobs or have their needs met (for example police checks for certain jobs, restrictive parole conditions, bias against those with a criminal history).
- Services should be expanded to include people on remand and in juvenile justice.
- Greater support is needed for First Nations women who have been incarcerated.
- Services should be people-centred to lessen the need move from one organisation to another after being released from incarceration.
- Better coordination of support services is required.

## What the new program will include

This first stage of consultations helped shape the central features of the REAL Program. These include:

- ACCOs and other First Nations organisations will be prioritised to deliver the program.
- Providers will deliver trauma-informed, holistic services. This will include directly providing services and connecting participants to other services where appropriate.
- Funding will be available to providers to bring together local services in a way that is tailored to the unique needs of each participant.
- Providers will help participants navigate and connect to social services, community, learning and jobs.
- Each participant will have a personal action plan to help set goals to successfully reconnect to the community, learning and jobs.

- Program providers will aim to work with participants in the ways that best suits the participant’s circumstances, to enable a consistent connection for the duration of the program. This could be a mixture of online, via telephone or in-person at the provider’s or another location.
- Tailored support to ensure the program can meet the needs of the diverse First Nations community, including young people, veterans, women, parents and people with disabilities.

## What else we need to consider

We are seeking your knowledge and experience to tell us of any key factors we need to consider or may have missed and how the program, and its supporting initiatives, can:

- Build the capacity of ACCOs and other First Nations organisations to deliver the service.
- Guarantee the provision of trauma-informed and culturally safe and appropriate support.
- Integrate smoothly into the justice systems (youth and adult, remand, prison) and work with the appropriate services and supports.
- Maintain participant engagement and retention in the program both pre and post release.
- Reduce rates of re-offending.
- Successfully support First Nations people in a way that is meaningful for each participant.

**Overall, we would like to understand what you consider success in this program would look like.**

**There are questions on the next few pages that might help prompt your thinking.**

## How to provide feedback

If you have any questions about this discussion paper, this second round of consultations or how you can make a submission you can contact us at [FirstNations\\_EPPsecretariat@dewr.gov.au](mailto:FirstNations_EPPsecretariat@dewr.gov.au).

By making a submission, you give the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (the department) permission to use the information provided to inform design of the Reconnection, Employment and Learning Program (REAL) Program and the REAL Project Fund.

Submissions on this discussion paper are **due by 31 October 2024** and should not exceed 10 pages.

Responses can be emailed to [FirstNations\\_EPPsecretariat@dewr.gov.au](mailto:FirstNations_EPPsecretariat@dewr.gov.au) or posted to:

REAL Program Consultation  
Department of Employment and Workplace Relations  
GPO Box 9828  
LOC: 14M4 Canberra ACT 2601

The deadline for submissions has been extended **to 8 November 2024**.

## Discussion questions

The following questions are a guide only. We welcome any feedback you would like us to consider.

When considering these questions, it would be helpful to understand any unique needs or program elements required for:

- First Nations youth
- First Nations women
- First Nations parents
- First Nations LGBTQI+ people
- First Nations people with disabilities

### **Program success:**

- If the program worked well what would success look like?
- What are the risks and barriers to the successful delivery of this program?
- How can employers be encouraged to hire people who have had contact with the justice system?
- What could be done to maximise the effectiveness of projects funded through the \$2.5 million Real Project Fund for the purpose of providing job opportunities for those released from prison?
- What meaningful data on the program could be collected and shared in future, to inform First Nations communities and organisations?

### **Pre-release:**

- What would increase uptake of the program?
- To achieve success, what do participants need from the program while on remand or in prison?
- How often should the service provider be in contact with the participant?

### **On release:**

- To achieve success, what do the participants need from the program while transitioning out of remand or prison (in the first 4 weeks)?
- How often should the service provider be in contact with a participant during the first 4 weeks?

### **Post-release:**

- To achieve success, what do participants need after the first 4 weeks post-release?
- How often should the service provider be in contact with a participant during this period?
- What will help keep the participant actively engaged in the program?

### **Program delivery:**

- What does a culturally safe program look like?
- What could the program include to help connect participants to Country and culture?
- How should participants be prioritised if necessary?
- If a provider couldn't help a participant in-person, what would be the next best way to work with them (e.g. online, over the phone, outreach/site visits)?
- What support is required from adult and/or youth facilities to ensure the success of the program?
- What can the program include to make sure it is flexible for the unique requirements of different types of correctional facilities, including the difference between youth and adult settings?
- What are the key challenges delivering the program in metropolitan locations versus regional and remote locations?

**Program Provider:**

- What specific qualifications, skill sets, or experience is essential for delivering this program?
- How can the Grant application process and requirements be more accessible to ACCOs and First Nations organisations?
- How should NIETA work with organisations to build the capacity of ACCOs to deliver this program?
- What additional work can the department do to engage with ACCOs when delivering the program?
- What are the most successful ways to support local organisations to implement programs?
- What characteristics/features should a project have to be considered for funding under the REAL Project Fund?
- What sort of projects should **not** be eligible for funding under the REAL Project Fund?

**What else do you need us to know?**

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### Purpose of collecting your information

Collection of your personal information is collected for the purposes of considering your feedback on the design of the Reconnection, Employment and Learning (REAL) Program and related purposes. If you do not provide some or all of the personal information requested, the department may be unable to contact you about the consultation or publish your submission, however we will still consider your comments.

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To contact the department about your personal information email [privacy@dewr.gov.au](mailto:privacy@dewr.gov.au).

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Submissions made to the department in response to this discussion paper will be used by the department to inform the consideration and design of the Reconnection, Employment and Learning (REAL) Program.

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