



COACT & FIVE BRIDGES

Response to Improving prison employment services for First Nations peoples.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CoAct and Five Bridges stand at the intersection of employment services and First Nations advocacy. Drawing from years of experience, deep-rooted cultural understanding, and contemporary methods, these two organisations possess an unparalleled expertise in fostering inclusive work environments, supporting the incarcerated, and championing holistic reintegration strategies. As experts in both employment services and First Nations matters, we present a unified perspective on five critical questions pertaining to the reintegration of First Nations individuals who have been incarcerated.

ABOUT COACT

CoAct, with our partners, delivers federal and state government employment programs, such as DES, Workforce Australia (WFA), Transition to Work (TtW), Australian Apprenticeship Support Network (AASN), Jobs Victoria Employment Service (JVES), and a range of smaller regional programs and innovation pilots.

We are the leading national not-for-profit partnership network that operates solely for community benefit and invests over 90% of all revenue back into the same communities in which services are delivered. In 20+ years of being and inspiring others to be change-makers, we've helped over 750,000 people.

Our network consists of 15 for-purpose, not-for-profit service partners across Australia – that's 758 exceptional people working across 367 sites. Our working methods include innovation partnerships, joint delivery, and service partnerships.

We are one of Australia's largest providers and, since 1997, we have successfully helped the most vulnerable in our communities, to secure sustainable employment by building capability, developing their support systems, and connecting people to local employers and jobs.

CoAct is also a specialist in regional communities. For 11+ years we have partnered with local First Nations organisations, servicing some of the most disadvantaged communities across remote Australia. We have also delivered lasting benefits to individuals and their communities through youth-focused green projects, and, over the last 5 years, have worked in partnership with Victorian and New South Wales-based social housing providers to deliver holistically and employment-focussed intensive case management services to people experiencing housing instability.



Our innovative programs are developed in partnership with specialist organisations, piloted, and tested in our unique incubated model before being scaled for delivery across diverse communities, where specialist employment services are needed most.

ABOUT FIVE BRIDGES

Five Bridges is a not-for-profit led by the local community for the local community.

Our South-East Queensland based organisation is passionate about assisting individuals with barriers to education and employment and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Many of our programs and services are focused on assisting local Indigenous individuals and families in a real and practical way, from our Court Support programs that assist Indigenous offenders to navigate the judicial system, to our men's and women's yarning circles that connect people in the local community to the help and support they need.

We are also extremely proud of our work facilitating the Queensland Governments Skilling Queenslanders for Work program which allows disadvantaged Queenslanders to gain skills, qualifications and experience to enter and stay in the workforce.

CEO of Five Bridges Jessica Taylor is a proud Yuwaalaraay Women and experienced professional with a history across multiple industries and a passion for Five Bridges programs and projects. Jessica's strong leadership and commitment to create opportunities for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a positive influence on Five Bridges operations.

The entire Five Bridges team is dedicated to our joint vision, as best expressed in our purpose statement: To provide a range of culturally sound activities and initiatives that build capacity, supporting the social norms and behaviours that constitute a positive, proud and responsible Indigenous community.

HOW SHOULD THE PRIORITY REFORMS FROM THE NATIONAL AGREEMENT ON CLOSING THE GAP BE EMBEDDED IN A COMMONWEALTH-FUNDED PRISON EMPLOYMENT SERVICE?

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap articulates a transformative agenda for improving the life outcomes of Indigenous Australians. A Commonwealth-funded prison employment service should strategically integrate these reforms to enhance the reintegration of First Nations individuals' post-incarceration.

Needs Analysis: Initiate a comprehensive examination of the penitentiary environment, pinpointing the distinct employment and skills advancement aspirations of those incarcerated.



Reform Synergy: Examine the Priority Reforms encapsulated in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Ascertain the correlation between these reforms and the mission of the prison employment service, emphasizing the redressal of inequities and fostering balanced opportunities.

Customized Initiatives: Construct employment initiatives that resonate with the earmarked Priority Reforms. The aim should be equipping inmates with pertinent skills, mentorship, and resources that usher them towards purposeful employment post-release.

Cultural Consideration: Ensure initiatives deeply respect the rich tapestry of backgrounds of the incarcerated. Recognize and alleviate cultural impediments that might impede effective engagement.

Unified Endeavor: Engage proactively with Indigenous communities, relevant governmental bodies, and civil society organizations. This ensures a holistic integration of the reforms while optimizing resource deployment.

Personalized Oversight: Adopt meticulous case management techniques to proffer bespoke support for individuals. This includes career mentorship, curriculum vitae development, interview grooming, and post-release employment facilitation. The support framework should encompass a holistic, customized approach. There should also be ample opportunity to do this over the parole period – 4 months prior to release is insufficient time given the access to resources.

Academic and Vocational Endeavors: Introduce academic and trade-based advancement opportunities that harmonize with the Priority Reforms and contemporary job market requisites. Focus on fostering skills, securing certifications, and amplifying employability. This should be introduced as soon as possible once parole is agreed.

Engaging Employers: Cultivate robust relationships with employer entities receptive to onboarding those with criminal antecedents. Enlighten employers on the intrinsic value of this cohort, striving to dismantle prevalent biases and stereotypes. This type of support should come from Government, with increased promotion of the program and a calling on employers to participate in second chance initiatives.

Post-release Facilitation: Furnish sustained support for individuals post-release, ensuring their seamless assimilation into the professional realm. This could span continued mentorship, linkages to community services, and building support networks. It is imperative that wrap around supports (outside of purely financial supports) are provided for rehabilitation and security in finding employment.

Current Limitations of TWES:

Low Take-up and Success Rates: The program's low engagement and success in connecting participants to post-release employment services are concerning.

Youth Exclusion: It's evident that by excluding the youth, particularly those in the youth justice system and prisoners on remand, we are missing a segment at heightened risk of re-offending.

HOW CAN WE DESIGN AND DELIVER A CULTURALLY COMPETENT SERVICE?



Central to any culturally adept program lies a profound appreciation for the cultural values, traditions, and histories intrinsic to Indigenous communities. This understanding paves the way for invaluable partnerships with Indigenous community leaders, elders, and advisors who offer unique insights and direction. Given the immense diversity that characterizes Indigenous communities, it's paramount that the program steers clear of generalizations, instead focusing on customizing its offerings. One such customization would be aligning programs with traditional Indigenous learning methodologies, ensuring a genuine connection with participants. Furthermore, ensuring a sense of cultural safety is paramount, crafting an environment where incarcerated Indigenous individuals feel wholly accepted and free from judgment.

Recognizing and addressing the historical traumas faced by Indigenous communities through trauma-informed care is integral, and this underscores the need for a participatory approach that invites continuous engagement from these communities. The trust and rapport between the incarcerated individuals and the program's facilitators become amplified when staff members demonstrate an authentic understanding and experience of Indigenous cultures. Flexibility is also vital, allowing the accommodation and respect for spiritual practices, cultural ceremonies, and other pivotal occasions that enhance the program experience. To ensure an unwavering standard of cultural competency, it's indispensable for all staff members to undergo cultural awareness training.

The program must also maintain an open channel for participant perspectives, incorporating feedback mechanisms that pave the way for its continual refinement. Amplifying this sense of community spirit and cultural pride is the regular hosting of cultural events and gatherings. Evaluative metrics and data should consistently guide the program, ensuring its ongoing cultural relevance and effectiveness. Central to this initiative should be the uplifting of Indigenous leaders into decision-making roles, ensuring that the program genuinely mirrors its community's essence. Moreover, the establishment of relationships that outlive the program ensures a consistent support network for participants upon their release.

The essence of cultural competency within a program's framework isn't a mere set of checkboxes to be ticked off but an evolving journey. Through a commitment to understanding, collaboration, and respect, we can sculpt a program that transcends mere service, truly elevating its participants.

WHAT SORTS OF SUPPORT DOES THE SERVICE NEED TO PROVIDE TO PARTICIPANTS WHILE THEY ARE IN PRISON?

Through the provision of educational and vocational programs, we can equip participants with a myriad of skills and certifications, enhancing their prospects for employability upon release. A core component of this support system is the prioritization of psychological well-being, achieved through dedicated counselling and mental health services. This holistic approach to rehabilitation extends to life skills training, imparting invaluable tools such as effective communication, conflict resolution, and financial management, all crucial for a smooth reintegration into society. The spiritual and cultural dimensions are not overlooked, with tailored initiatives ensuring that participants remain connected to their cultural roots, thereby instilling a sense of grounded identity.



Effective case management, offering personalized guidance and advocacy, can significantly impact an inmate's prison journey, transforming it from a mere sentence, to a period of growth. Recognizing the importance of familial bonds and community ties, our programs aim to bridge the gap between inmates and their external support networks, fostering a sense of belonging. As the time for their release approaches, our emphasis shifts to equipping them with strategies and resources to transition confidently back into society. Additionally, fostering a constructive prison environment is essential, and our conflict resolution programs offer tools to mediate and manage disputes amicably.

Promotion of holistic well-being doesn't stop at the mind; recreational and physical activities play a pivotal role in nurturing the body and fostering camaraderie and integrating a person back into team driven environments. Supplementing this, educational resources encourage continuous learning, fostering personal and intellectual growth. The value of shared experiences and mutual support within the prison ecosystem cannot be underestimated, and peer support groups aim to provide just that. Effective communication remains key to positive interactions, and specialized workshops empower inmates with these skills. Recognizing the therapeutic potential of the arts, we should provide avenues for artistic expression, which can serve as outlets for emotional catharsis and introspection. To map out the trajectory of everyone's development, tailored personal development plans should be devised, offering clear and tangible incentive-based goals that project growth into the future and promote rehabilitation as a journey that may take time post release.

The period of incarceration should be more than just serving a sentence; it presents an opportunity for metamorphosis, preparation, and readiness for the world outside prison walls. By weaving these support mechanisms into the fabric of the prison system, we envision a transformative journey for inmates, enabling them to emerge with brighter prospects for their future.

HOW CAN THE SERVICE HELP FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN INCARCERATED AFTER RELEASE (INCLUDING CONNECTION TO MAINSTREAM SERVICES, FAMILY SUPPORTS, OR PAID WORK)?

Our service is deeply committed to ensuring a smooth transition for First Nations individuals' post-incarceration, emphasizing not just re-entry but genuine reintegration into society. To this end, we have prioritized bridging to mainstream services, streamlining access to vital pillars like healthcare, housing, education, and social services.

Recognizing the profound significance of kinship within First Nations communities, we should have a special focus on family reunification, providing dedicated support to rebuild and strengthen these vital connections.

Employment remains a key determinant of successful reintegration, and we should be actively collaborating with forward-thinking employers, offer comprehensive vocational training, and facilitating job placements, all with the goal of equipping individuals with the skills and opportunities needed for stable employment. This should be costed into the service recognising that placement requires in most cases, capacity building to develop new skills, but in any case, confidence for the employer on their hire – and work experience and an extended probationary period, without cost risk to the employer may assist with providing this.



Emotional and psychological well-being is addressed through a holistic approach encompassing counselling, peer support initiatives, and broader mental health strategies – these all come at significant cost, which should not be underestimated, or ended upon placement. Extended access to these supports for up to a year post placement will ensure that habits are embedded, and support is available through a period of significant change.

At the heart of our program is a steadfast commitment to cultural sensitivity. We consciously infuse Indigenous cultural values throughout our initiatives, ensuring that every participant has opportunities to connect deeply with their heritage and traditions. This cultural foundation is complemented by practical skill development and employment training, encompassing everything from resume crafting to interview strategies. We believe that support shouldn't end at job placement, and hence, we extend continuous mentorship to help individuals navigate the dynamic employment realm.

HOW CAN THE SERVICE HELP EMPLOYERS TO HIRE FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN INCARCERATED?

Recognizing potential misconceptions, we initiate with education and awareness campaigns for employers, highlighting the unique advantages of employing from this demographic.

In particular, we underscore the invaluable skills and perspectives these individuals, especially those from First Nations backgrounds, can bring to the professional realm.

Concurrently, we enhance the employability of incarcerated individuals through targeted skill development and training, ensuring alignment with current industry needs. Serving as a bridge, our service seamlessly connects potential employers with job-seeking incarcerated individuals, tailoring matches to cater to specific requirements of both parties.

Integral to this process is the provision of pre-employment preparation, which encompasses vital areas such as resume crafting, interview tactics, and workplace dynamics, ensuring incarcerated individuals are primed for re-entry into the job market. We place a strong emphasis on cultural sensitivity, offering education to employers about First Nations cultures, thereby fostering an environment of respect and inclusion.

Mentorship initiatives further cement the bond, offering continued support for both employers and their new hires. In essence, our service envisions a holistic approach to employment for incarcerated First Nations individuals, emphasizing mutual understanding, skill enhancement, and fostering meaningful employer-employee relationships, thereby paving the way for their successful reintegration and enriching workforce diversity.

The service could provide more support to employers if funded appropriately to provide holistic cultural awareness training, periods of work experience or extended work-trials that would ensure adequate fit, and potentially education on First Nations cultural requirements.

SUMMARY



In a world striving for inclusivity and diversity, the changes we've proposed for the service would champion the cause of incarcerated First Nations individuals. By bridging cultural understanding with professional demand, we aim to not only reintegrate these individuals into the workforce but also to enrich the tapestry of our professional landscape.

This isn't just about filling positions; it's about dismantling misconceptions, empowering marginalized voices, and fostering an environment where every individual, irrespective of their past, is provided an equitable chance to contribute and thrive. Our approach is a testament to the belief that societal advancement is deeply intertwined with how we uplift and support those who are most often overlooked.

Through holistic targeted training, meaningful connections, and unwavering commitment, we are setting a new standard for employment services, one that underscores the true essence of diversity and inclusivity. As we move forward, our vision is clear: a world where everyone, regardless of their background, is recognized for their potential and given the tools and opportunities to realize it.