



Workskil
Australia

Prison Employment Services for First Nations People

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Introduction

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Background on Workskil Australia

Workskil Australia Ltd (Workskil Australia) is a South Australian not-for-profit charitable employment and community services organisation that operates across South Australia, Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. The organisation currently has 700 staff. Workskil Australia has delivered employment services for 36 years and been an outsourced employment service provider since employment services were first outsourced in 1998.

5% of Workskil Australia's workforce are Aboriginal and we have a very strong focus on building cultural competency in all that we do.

Workskil Australia is the 2nd largest Workforce Australia Provider in Australia and operates in the following 8 Employment Regions:

- Inner Metropolitan Melbourne, Victoria
- Adelaide North, SA
- Adelaide South, SA
- Mid North SA
- North West Country SA
- Perth North, WA
- Perth South, WA
- Geraldton

Workskil Australia is the 2nd largest Transition to Work Provider in Australia and operates in the following 6 Employment Regions:

- Adelaide North, SA
- North West Country SA
- Mid North SA
- Perth South, WA
- South West WA
- Sydney East Metropolitan

In addition, Workskil Australia is a Specialist Workforce Australia Provider and delivers services to Ex-Offenders in Perth South and Adelaide North. Within this service we offer pre-release employment services. Workskil Australia subcontracts to Asuria, to deliver the Time to Work Employment Service (TWES) in South Australia.

In addition, Workskil Australia delivers Work Ready, Release Ready for the SA Department for Corrections, which is a case management service for prisoners and ex-offenders, with a strong focus on supporting First Nations Peoples, to reduce reoffending and gain employment.

Executive Summary

Workskil Australia welcomes this review of TWES and employment services for First Nation Ex-Offenders and the focus to improve services for this cohort. First Nations People continue to be overrepresented by vast numbers in the prison system compared to non-First Nation People. It is an area that requires significantly more focus, programs and support.

Workskil Australia provides services currently to over **2,200** First Nations People who have experienced incarceration at some time in their lives.

Workskil Australia has delivered the SA Department for Corrections, Work Ready, Release Ready program since 2018 and believes this program is able to make a difference for this cohort.

Workskil Australia is passionate about reducing re-offending for First Nations People and we actively contributed to the CEDA 2022 Report, Double Jeopardy: The economic and social costs of keeping women behind bars, which is quoted in the Discussion Paper.

1. Discussion Questions

How should the Priority Reforms from the National Agreement on Closing the Gap be embedded in a Commonwealth-funded prison employment service?

Existing Commonwealth employment programs already support First Nation Ex-Offenders. These participants are in the Community Development Program, Workforce Australia, Transition to Work, ParentsNext and Disability Employment Services. These programs reside under three different Commonwealth Departments.

CDP and Workforce Australia support the majority of First Nation Ex-Offenders who are on welfare and seeking employment post release. A consistent single program across remote, regional and metropolitan geographies would be beneficial for this cohort.

Workforce Australia, Specialist Contracts exist for Ex-Offenders and these are delivered in 13 Employment Regions across Australia. The program design doesn't vary from the Workskil Australia Generalist contract, so there is opportunity to put more flexibility and support into this program for First Nation Ex-Offender job seekers. Currently Transition to Work, the youth employment service, doesn't have First Nation outcomes, nor Ex-Offender outcomes in its performance framework, which could be an improvement.

A Commonwealth funded prison employment service should commence at least six months pre-release and focus on the critical time between release from prison and engagement into employment services. This time period is a high-risk period where many participants will re-offend, while trying to negotiate housing, Services Australia services, transport, health and medical services. Issues such as a lack of digital technology, lack of digital or literacy skills, a lack of safe housing will often cause the participant to re-offend, due to these challenges.

The future program will only be successful if the relevant State Correctional system is highly engaged in the design and agrees to proceeding with the program.

How can we design and deliver a culturally competent service?

Any future service, should if possible, operate across a whole State or Territory and should be limited to ideally one or at most two Providers, so that engagement from State based systems is more effective. Prisoners rotate through various prisons within a State or Territory, based on crime severity, availability and location of criminogenic programs and behaviour while in prison. Therefore, a future program can't assume a prisoner will be in one geography for their sentenced period. A whole state approach with one provider, would minimise participants having to re-engage with different providers. Further, State based correctional systems will likely engage more effectively with one provider and this may improve program referrals, communication and notification of potential participants who may be close to their release date.

Providers who deliver these services will need to demonstrate strong cultural competence, employ skilled Aboriginal workers (male and female), as well as demonstrate strong knowledge of correctional systems

and operations. The services need to be flexible and responsive due to the intensity and varied needs of participants upon release. Workers in the program will ideally need to be experienced employment service professionals with tertiary qualifications.

The future service should be a two-year program. It would commence while the participant is in prison and ideally around six months prior to release and continue to support the participant for a further 12-18 months. This would assist the Mentor to develop a trusted relationship with the Participant to ensure they engage upon release. We suggest this service is voluntary. Ideally this service could replace other Employment Service programs and operate in a similar manner as Transition to Work, in that this becomes the default employment service, but no or low engagement could result in an exit back to mainstream employment services.

Strong tailored support in the first four to six weeks from release will reduce or mitigate reoffending in this period. Support should be non-vocational and vocational, and focussed on basic living and foundational skills, advocacy and connection to the correct services. The service should be community based and would require a strong focus on risk management and worker safety, and would therefore require strong WHS management practices.

The future service needs access to funds for customers, such as an Employment Fund or built into the fee structure, as it does in Transition to Work. These customers are high needs and require significant investment in non-vocational areas such as housing, health, transport and basic welfare.

Participants in the program should meet the following criteria:

- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander;
- Working age (18 to 65) (Transition to Work may be a better option for 18-24-year old's provided pre-release eligibility is built into the program);
- Able to work (have a work capacity of at least 15 hours per week);
- Require support to find work (low levels of education, sporadic work history, low numeracy and literacy levels).

The future service could advertise the program to current prisoners and commence those who volunteer. A 'Work Mentor' could meet with the prisoner at least every month in the six months prior to release to develop a documented Release Plan. The Work Mentor could engage with the participant upon release from prison to ensure they connect with the correct services, including Services Australia, health services, housing and welfare, and once stabilised focus on employment support. The program would have minimal compliance other than to engage. It would operate as an intensive case management service, that would provide community outreach, with caseloads of 30-50, with a focus on employment. Employment Outcomes could be paid similar to other programs.

The outcomes for the program could focus on Commencements in Prison, Post Release Engagement, Employment and No Reoffending (noting reliance on correctional systems for this data may be required).

We think the program could be open to referrals from Employment Service Providers, Services Australia or from state prisons and community corrections. Eligibility may want to focus on those participants with recent incarceration within the last two to three years, so that it doesn't replicate Specialist WFA Ex-Offenders. We would recommend a percentage of participants must be engaged while in the prison system,

but from experience participants move, get released without notice, may change their minds about doing the program and so on, so there may need to be flexibility in how and who can make referrals to the program.

Work Ready, Release Ready Program

The Work Ready, Release Ready Program is delivered across South Australia by one provider Workskil Australia, and is a good example for how a future program could operate.

Participants engage up to two years before release, so a trusted relationship with a Mentor is developed before release and up to two years post release. It is aimed at any prisoner who has low education, low numeracy and literacy, sporadic or no work history and is likely to need employment support upon release.

The structure of this voluntary program is as follows:

- **Work Ready Phase:** Up to two years before release, participants can volunteer for the program. A *Training Plan* is developed based on the Participants background with suggested accredited training or prison industries options. Previous participants come back to these sessions to prove that employment does happen upon release.
- **Release Ready Phase:** Up to six months before release a *Release Plan* is developed with the Mentor that focusses on non-vocational and vocational needs upon release, including health, housing, family and friends support, access to children, drug/alcohol services, ID, licences, Services Australia, clothing, food, mental health, education and work.
- **Employment Phase:** This occurs once the Participant is released and involves picking the participant up from the prison on release in some cases, supporting the participant with clothes, food, housing options, taking participants to Services Australia for appropriate assessments and payments, connecting the participant to the correct employment service. This phase operates for 18 months to 2 years.

The program has been evaluated in February 2023 and the following important outcomes were reported:

- 27.9% of the WRRR caseload is Aboriginal out of 1,235.
- 57.5% of Aboriginal participants gained paid employment during the Work Ready Phase (post-release).
- Aboriginal Employment Phase participants record lower recidivism compared with a matched comparison group who did not participate in WRRR (48.5% compared with 54.5%).
- For Employment Phase participants who did find employment, over $\frac{3}{4}$ (77.7%) did not reoffend in a two year follow up period.

What sorts of supports does the service need to provide to participants while they are in prison?

The current TWES service has a small service scope and has been difficult in practice to implement due to challenges with correctional facilities identifying and making timely referrals to providers. There is scope to increase the scope of this service to ensure improved outcomes are achieved.

The Service should focus on:

- Obtaining identification and items such as Medicare, TFN's, and so on.
- Engaging with Services Australia for assessment and welfare payments;
- Early engagement with an Employment Service and support to engage;
- Housing Support;
- Welfare Support (food and clothes);
- Transport Support;
- Access and use of technology;
- Health referrals for mental health, drug/alcohol and other health issues;
- Supporting positive reconnection with children, family and friends;
- Motivation, confidence and foundational skills.

How can the service help First Nations people who have been incarcerated after release (including connection to mainstream services, family supports or paid work)?

The service should be focussed on ensuring the First Nation participant, can be assisted from the day of release. It is well evidenced that participants exiting prison who do not have the correct support will re-offend in the first 4-8 weeks, generally before they have engaged in employment services.

The program needs to literally pick up participants from the prison gate and provide whatever help is required to stabilise housing, welfare, identification, banking, clothing and food. The provision of a smart phone and support to use it. Setting up an email address. Help to complete Services Australia paperwork.

For most First Nation participants who exit prison their priority is to reconnect with their children and families. Significant work should go to assisting participants re-unify with their children, and this may require the Service to advocate with various government agencies on their behalf.

Once non-vocational needs are stabilised the service should focus on work skills, experience and employment.

The program should also offer placed based solutions, such as the Road to Redemption delivered by Workskil Australia for Aboriginal Ex-Offenders (male and female), as example. This program includes: Aboriginal Mental Health First Aid Certificate, Reconnecting with Culture, Work Readiness Training and a Certificate II in Construction or Civil Construction. We have had overwhelming support from employers and industry for this program. The program partners with Aboriginal owned RTO Carey Training.

All services should be delivered in a culturally appropriate manner.

How can the service help employers to hire First Nations people who have been incarcerated?

Employment Service Providers actively promote Ex-Offenders to employers now. There are generally good employers who do engage Ex-Offenders across most industries. The future service should market directly to employers, as TTW does to employers for young people. It would be good if the program could also have access to future work experience programs.

We believe the service should offer the same complementary options offered in other employment services, such as Wage Subsidies, free recruitment services.

The service should have post-placement mentoring as a core element to the program rather than as an add-on service.

The program should offer pre-employment programs, like Road to Redemption, which is an Aboriginal Ex-Offender Construction program to address skill shortages for employers. Large construction companies have shown significant support for this program. We also deliver an in-prison program for mining and infrastructure in Port Augusta Prison, called Out2Work, as a further example.