

## Submission 23. Name Withheld

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

When incorporating the Priority Reforms from the National Agreement on Closing the Gap into a Commonwealth-funded prison employment service, it's crucial to ensure that the interests of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and other First Nations-owned entities are at the forefront of service delivery design, implementation and setting and measuring outcomes. These organisations have a deep understanding of the unique challenges faced by First Nations individuals in prison or post-release and their expertise and cultural awareness can significantly enhance the effectiveness of traditional employment services.

Whilst First Nations-owned organisations can have the potential to deliver superior outcomes for their own communities, particularly when services align with traditional customs and practices, collaboration between these organisations and specialised service providers, such as Workforce Australia Specialist providers, can also yield sustainable, long-term results and this should be considered when designing a prison to employment service. This will ensure that the program is complementary to, rather than duplicating services already being provided by other programs.

When considering service delivery design, the involvement of First Nations people in determining the service's deliverer, and a co-design approach is recommended to ensure their voices are heard and needs are appropriately addressed.

A strong commitment should be made by service providers of prison to employment services to upskill First Nations individuals so they can take on roles in service delivery in the future. Providers should commit to co-delivering and designing programs that not only offer employment opportunities but also facilitate skills development and capacity-building within the community. To gather meaningful data that inform First Nations communities and organisations, several key factors should be tracked. These include recidivism rates to assess the service's impact on reducing reoffending, long-term employment outcomes to measure sustained success, and the comparison between supported and unsupported transitions to understand the influence on recidivism rates. Sharing this data will enable First Nations communities to make informed decisions, advocate for their needs, and continuously improve the services provided.

### ***How can we design and deliver a culturally competent service?***

Designing and delivering a culturally competent service requires a comprehensive approach that respects, integrates, and empowers First Nations people and communities. To achieve this:

**Inclusive Design and Delivery:** First Nations people and communities should be actively involved in the design, delivery, and measurement of the program. Their insights, perspectives, and needs are invaluable for creating a service that truly meets their requirements:

**Lived Experience:** Employing staff members with lived experience of the justice system fosters a deep understanding of the challenges faced by individuals seeking support. This can enhance empathy, trust, and the ability to provide effective assistance.

**Upskilling:** Implementing minimum quotas for employing and upskilling First Nations individuals within the service ensures representation and promotes community capacity-building.

**First Nations-Owned Businesses:** Committing to utilizing First Nations-owned businesses reinforces economic empowerment within the community and bolsters the sustainability of the service.

**Culturally Appropriate Practices:** Culturally appropriate practices must be embedded into the service's service delivery model. This promotes an environment of understanding and respect,

catering to the unique cultural needs of First Nations individuals.

A positive experience for a First Nations person accessing this support entails an inclusive and respectful atmosphere. Encouraging engagement involves providing a safe space that acknowledges and respects cultural traditions, values, and customs. Effective support providers should possess strong communication skills, cultural sensitivity, empathy, and an understanding of the complex challenges individuals may face.

In line with this, envisioning a successful scenario, a First Nations person accessing this support would experience a journey where they are actively involved in decisions about their own pathway. The service would provide support not only prior to release but also for six months post-release. This extended service delivery period ensures continuity and stability during a critical transition phase. The seamless referral to a specialist provider, whether within or outside the community, further enhances the support network. This approach could be modelled after successful initiatives like the Queensland Corrective Services re-entry services such as CREST (Community Re-Entry Services Team) and MARA, building upon its strengths and extending its benefits to encompass post-release support. Importantly, the co-servicing aspect allows for flexibility and collaboration between different support providers, all contributing to the overall well-being and success of First Nations individuals.

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

In terms of supporting participants while they are in prison, the service should encompass a range of essential elements including facilitating access to education and skills training programs that prepare individuals for employment upon release, mental health and well-being support, cultural activities, and counselling services should be available to address the unique challenges faced by First Nations prisoners. Additionally, establishing relationships with potential employers and employment service providers will improve transitions post release.

To address policy gaps and improve coordination of service for First Nations people who are justice impacted, a holistic approach is crucial. Identifying and filling policy gaps within states, territories, and at the Commonwealth level requires collaboration between all stakeholders. Communication breakdowns between different levels of government and departments should be rectified to ensure a seamless support network for First Nations prisoners. For example: prisoners in QLD not having access to work release programs which limits the ability of Workforce Australia providers to commence servicing prior to release where it could be a great example of co-servicing pre and post release to improve long-term employment outcomes.

Addressing specific supports, an ideal service should operate with a front-ended payment model similar to Transition to Work (TtW), underpinned by well-defined KPIs that outline how funds will be utilized. Eligibility criteria could extend up to six months prior to release, allowing sufficient time for comprehensive preparation. An effective service would also ensure a warm handover between prison to employment services and Workforce Australia providers, facilitating the seamless transfer of vital information and expectations to support successful reintegration. Inclusion of securing identification, preparing resumes, cover letters, copies of certificates, licenses, and links to support services like mental health resources is essential to provide comprehensive assistance.

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

A prison to employment service can play a pivotal role in supporting First Nations individuals post-release by establishing a comprehensive continuum of care. This involves creating connections to mainstream services that address employment, housing, health care, mental health support, and family reintegration.

To streamline connections with specialist employment service providers, it's vital to address policy gaps, such as the Queensland perspective of being unable to commence servicing prior to release. A warm handover approach, where relevant information and expectations are seamlessly transferred, ensures a smoother transition and would lead to better outcomes for individuals.

An ideal service delivery model would span from 6 months pre-release to up to 12 months post-release, tightly linked with specialised WFA providers to collaborate to provide complementary services. Essential components of the service should include activities to prepare for a handover to an employment service provider such as ID documents, resumes, cover letters, certificates, and registration with social services.

Incorporating social enterprises is crucial in creating opportunities for First Nations people post-release. The social economy can offer not a pathway to ongoing employment but also skill-building, fostering self-confidence and enhancing long-term prospects. By providing structured pathways into the workforce, social enterprises align with the goal of sustainable reintegration.

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

A prison to employment service can play a pivotal role in supporting employers to hire First Nations individuals who have been incarcerated by linking with specialist service providers, such as Workforce Australia, who have the skills and experience to support employers. The prison to employment service could complement this by providing employers with guidance, cultural awareness training, and information on the unique challenges and strengths of this demographic and any workplace modifications or cultural competency training required.

Incorporating post-release services within the SDM, such as intensive mentoring, reinforces the commitment to successful placements. Drawing inspiration from successful models like the Queensland Corrective Services re-entry services such as CREST (Community Re-Entry Services Team) and MARA, this approach ensures ongoing support, addresses potential fallout reasons, and highlights the tangible benefits of mentorship in promoting successful transitions.

Collaboration with specialist WFA and Disability Employment Services (DES) providers, particularly those with expertise in ex-offender support, is crucial. Linking with these specialists allows for a seamless transition from the service to the workplace, ensuring tailored and continuous assistance.

A prison to employment service can act as a bridge between employers and First Nations individuals, offering tailored guidance, education, and ongoing support to facilitate successful hiring and retention post-release. By aligning with specialist employment services, offering advisory services, and emphasizing the importance of mentoring, this service can enhance the likelihood of positive outcomes for all stakeholders involved.