

Submission 27. Name Withheld

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

The Time to Work Employment service could be structured so that an Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisation (ACCO) applies for Grant Funding from the Commonwealth for the purpose of the ACCO then engaging a place-based organisation that has re-integration and support service expertise. We believe that a wrap-around integrated support service that delivers service both prior to and immediately upon release is the best model to achieve success against the Priority Reforms. The ACCO would have primacy in ensuring the Integrated Support Services Organisation (ISSO) meet specific goals around each of the Primary Reforms. The ISO may collaborate with other expertise in areas such as employment, housing and other areas of support.

Our experience in delivering the Home Detention Integration Support Service Program (HSSIP) over the last 6 years has clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of an integrated support service to assist in re-integration. This is also borne out in other services we provide such as NDIS and housing. Just under 1 in 10 of the detainees in HSSIP were Aboriginal.

The 2023 Final Evaluation of HSSIP by the Social Policy Research Centre UNSW Sydney found that not only did the service produce a total estimated cost offset of \$200.3 million but that

“the program is also potentially producing a range of implicit positive outcomes that are difficult to measure, particularly in monetary terms. These benefits may include increased ability to obtain and sustain appropriate housing and reduced risk of homelessness, management of drug and alcohol abuse, improved community and workforce participation, improved education and job skill training, improved and sustained physical and mental health, as well as improved outcomes for families, partners and children of offenders”

Whilst employment providers, homelessness providers and family support service providers may each have their own specific expertise it is quite clear that a Support Service that can bring all these services to the optimal benefit of each ex-offender as they look to re-integrate is needed.

How can we design and deliver a culturally competent service?

In structuring the grant to an ACCO a key KPI would be that the ACCO delivers cultural competency training to the ISO they engage. The ISSO in turn would need to ensure any organisations they collaborate with to deliver wrap around support services are similarly culturally competent. Only through this approach and ensuring co-design of the Support Services model can we ensure increase cultural competence.

Our own experience highlights how organisation can approach this issue. Following an [REDACTED] CT Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) Working Group meeting, the Chair of the Committee was approached to discuss opportunities for the organisation to develop and implement an Aboriginal Lead position within the organisation. 22% of the [REDACTED] CT client cohort identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. A specialist Lead role creates internal support to operational and leadership staff to work in a culturally safe manner with these clients, services, and the community.

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

We believe the most effective supports are those that enable participants with both the fundamental skills they would need for employment coupled with practical guidance on accessing essential services on release.

Many Indigenous participants will have literacy, numeracy and digital literacy needs that will have unlikely to be improved during incarceration. In addition, fundamental pre-employment skills are also most likely to be needed by this cohort including expectations of prospective Employers. Many prisons are looking to engage with technology to assist in supporting offenders. We believe where available these initiatives through the use of tablets or remote servicing could allow offenders to access more services and more readily.

Practical re-integration supports should also be at the core of services provided to participants whilst still in prison. These could cover areas such as housing, banking, and filling out seemingly innumerable forms.

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

Utilising existing programs and services can support/address this, however not everyone meets the relevant criteria, or is within the right region/location for the programs that are available. Although several different strategies have been tried these have often been punitive and not always with the customers being consulted or being a willing participant. A complete wraparound service incorporating relevant agencies/services to support and educate customers will be needed. This will require ongoing case management, support and agency involvement for longer than is currently offered. This is the very basis of an Integrated Support Service model.

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

Employer attitudes to ex-offenders looking to gain employment remains problematic. Investment must be made not only in a public awareness campaign but also in providing individual Employers in both the value and social good of hiring First Nations people who have been incarcerated.

In 2017 the then Department of Jobs and Small Business surveyed some 2,900 employers about their experiences hiring job seekers with a criminal record (ex-offenders) and offered suggestions for how they could improve their employment prospects. This survey found that Employers suggested that ex-offenders needed to be upfront in declaring their record, should improve their employability skills and should consider volunteering or work trials to show their enthusiasm and suitability for employment.