

Submission 35. 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 four priority reforms contained within the First Nations Employment Service Discussion Paper all speak to a First Nations involved service design, delivery and evaluation.

From our experience delivering in-prison employment services, we support an element of co-design to create a meaningful program, which responds to all four priority reforms.

We have seen the benefit of working with First Nations individuals directly to determine the level of service and the type of service they need. Overwhelmingly, there is a critical need to provide culturally sensitive and appropriate services. We found the best approach to this was to employ First Nations people to deliver the in-prison service.

This not only enabled offenders to realise a cultural connection, but it also enabled culturally appropriate connections beyond prison as follow up and support.

How can we design and deliver a culturally competent service?

As indicated above, employing First Nations people to deliver the service has proven for us, to be effective and responsive to people's cultural needs. It provided a strong ability to "open up" and share while planning for post release activities, such as employment.

An important factor is the connections needed by offenders post release, be that back in their Community or not but just having that cultural connection with an Indigenous worker when planning for past release activities, did make a sustainable difference.

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

The critical success factors to the in-prison services we delivered, included:

- Time – regular and frequent in-prison supports were needed to maintain connection and success.
Fortnightly visits were maintained throughout each of these programs and our staff entered each prison to maintain that connection with each of the offenders in each program. This was enabled for the last six months of incarceration
- True employment service – we made it an absolute that the service we provided within the prison to each offender was as close to a mainstream employment service as possible. This ensured that post release each person had a true sense of what to expect. This included completion of resumes, application letters, how to dress and importantly reverse marketing. We started reverse marketing the individual before the left prison with the aim being that they were able to consider starting employment as soon as possible after release. This was done in conjunction with an identified employment service provider in the location of their intended release. We would work with that provider to identify opportunities if possible.
- Utilise skills attained in prison – we maximised the skill development achieved by offenders while in prison. Skill development through the prison industry was an invaluable resource and made up some of the detail we captured in resumes and promoted through reverse marketing.
- True handovers – a critical element of our service was to hand over a well-articulated summary of progress to the receiving employment service provider. Connection with an

identified provider in the release location had already been made during the service, and when release occurred, we were well placed to handover all the progress notes and actions. Interestingly, on this point we are not aware of any referrals or handovers from a Time To Work Provider during the current program, across our network in three states.

- Continued connections – even if the individual is referred to another provider, post release, there is still a need to enable a continued connection to the in-prison staff member. Even today, years after our service, our staff member is still being contacted by ex-offenders to touch base.

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

With a regular and realistic employment service within prison, the offender can and does develop a level of trust and understanding that there is support beyond prison.

What doesn't help though is when an offender is released, and they are automatically given an extended exemption from mutual obligation. This is directly related to Key Finding #2 and why offenders do not connect with an employment service provider. The last thing someone needs after being released is to be set free with no support or obligation requirements. At the time of our service, it was this immediate period of time that recidivism occurred.

Recommendation: ensure that connection to employment service providers is mandated. If it has to be a reduced obligation, then make that happen, but don't leave someone alone immediately after release.

We have already indicated that time is critical. Adequate time and regularity of service is a must. Fortnightly visits and supports are essential. Key Finding #3 speaks to this directly.

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

Our experience delivering in-prison services and the ability to reverse market the offenders before release allowed us complete transparency when approaching employers.

What we found, in selected industries, the fact we were reverse marketing an offender while they were still in prison, resonated with many employers. This resulted in us being able to address many of the assumptions and perceived issues held by an employer before the person was released. This resulted in the employment opportunity being genuine.

The program can also maximise the skills attained while in prison. Each offender is generally involved in some form of industry and often training attached to skill development. This was maximised intensely as these skills were frequently aligned to skill shortage areas. This assisted with reverse marketing and also enable a current and well presented resume to be developed