

Shown the exit revisited: CRC's every day experience in assisting people leaving custody

By Mindy Sotiri and Alex Faraguna

Introduction

The Community Restorative Centre (CRC) provides specialist support programs in NSW to people leaving prison that aim to promote desistance and break entrenched cycles of criminal justice system involvement and homelessness by addressing the systemic and individual issues that impact on post-release re-integration. In an article entitled *Shown the Exit* in the October 2016 edition of *Parity*¹, we presented five essential elements that have been identified through research and CRC's practice over its 65-year history that are crucial to the success of post-release support programs. This follow-up article aims to expand on three of these key themes and share insights gained by CRC's experienced transitional workers, with a focus on issues surrounding homelessness.

A through-care model

CRC's programs are whenever possible based on a through-care model.² Worker - client rapport is established during the final stages of someone's incarceration and this engagement constitutes a fundamental step in building a pathway outside of the criminal justice system. There are many pragmatic reasons for utilising this model including the opportunity to work together to develop a realistic and achievable pre-release plan, but there is also a slightly more complex significance to the importance of reaching out to someone while they are still in an institutional setting.

Although people *do* look forward to getting out of prison, for many this is also tempered by extreme anxiety and fear about what life will be like on the outside. This is particularly the case if someone is looking to make significant changes in their lives which in many instances can mean separating from old friends and communities and starting totally from scratch. For people in this situation, *knowing* that there is somebody who they have *already* met and engaged with, and who has made the effort to visit them inside, is in and of itself a profound motivating factor for change, and often critically important in terms of staying on track with pre-release plans.

¹ Mindy Sotiri and Alex Faraguna, *Shown the Exit: A Snapshot of the Issues Facing People Leaving Custody* in New South Wales (NSW) in 2016, *Parity* Volume 29 – Issue 10 pp 50-51 November 2015 Council for Homeless Persons

² Deakin, E (2013) 'Aboriginal Women Leaving Custody Strategy. Good Practice Paper. A targeted review of literature and stakeholder feedback providing lessons for NSW' A Research Paper commissioned by Department of Family and Community Services, Housing NSW and Department of Attorney General and Justice, Corrective Services NSW

Borzycki, M & Baldry E (2003) 'Promoting Integration: The Provision of Prisoner Post Release Services' in *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, Australian Institute of Criminology

We have also found that when people are referred *after* their release, ongoing engagement is much more difficult to sustain than if a relationship has been built while the person is still in custody. People at the end of their sentences are frequently in a relatively stable state in terms of health and well-being, and often quite optimistic about what it is they would like their lives to look like on the outside. This information can be used as a powerful case-management tool on the outside when things don't go to plan during the high risk initial release period.

We know that people who do not *know* or are not familiar with a service or worker prior to release, frequently simply do not show up to early appointments following release. There are often legitimate practical and emotional reasons for this; lack of transport or knowledge about how to navigate public transport, highly limited financial resources, fear and mistrust of services that have often let them down in the past, as well as the very common drug and alcohol use immediately on release, which can derail even the most well intentioned pre-release plans. Whenever possible, CRC workers spend three months working with people prior to release, and on the day of release meet them at the prison gates to commence the intensive outreach work further outlined below.

Community based, flexible outreach models

Community based outreach models³ should wherever possible build on existing positive family and social networks and strengthen community pathways *outside* of the criminal justice system and *into* the communities in which people are to be living. People leaving prison often struggle to keep office-based appointments due to the overwhelming stress and chaos of immediate post-prison life and the financial and practical difficulties of travelling to see multiple services upon release. Many people on release from prison are also exhausted and mistrusting of services in the community which have historically let them down. Services which are appointment based, where the responsibility is entirely on the client to travel in to meet in an unfamiliar and alienating office environment frequently struggle to engage with people who have been to prison.

CRC utilises an outreach model, whereby workers travel to where the client is at. Much important therapeutic and relationship-building work is achieved by assisting people with the practical and essential tasks on release (such as visiting NSW Housing or Community Corrections). CRC workers drive clients to appointments and support them during interactions with other services. It is frequently the case in the initial post-release period that workers spend entire days with clients completing important tasks (including lining up

³ Deakin, E (2013) 'Aboriginal Women Leaving Custody Strategy. Good Practice Paper. A targeted review of literature and stakeholder feedback providing lessons for NSW' A Research Paper commissioned by Department of Family and Community Services, Housing NSW and Department of Attorney General and Justice, Corrective Services NSW

Scott, M (2013) 'Evaluation of Two Pilot Projects Aiming to Prevent Homelessness in People Leaving Prison' in Parity, Vol. 26, No. 8

with people in Centrelink offices, and waiting for appointments with GP's). This is time-consuming work, but utterly essential if organisations are to take seriously the work that is involved in staying out of prison. The relationships that are built during this intense initial post-release work period lay the foundation for a much deeper therapeutic relationship in the long term. Longer term outreach work involves walking alongside people *in* their communities in order to increase the familiarity and ease with which people can live, connect and engage with life outside of the criminal justice system. CRC workers frequently meet with clients in parks, coffee shops, gyms, sporting clubs, or any other organisation or space that is likely to form an anchor to the community.

A housing-first approach (and the role of advocacy within this)

A housing first approach⁴ acknowledges that people leaving prison require a base from which to work on other factors that they need to address to avoid returning to custody. It also acknowledges that anyone who is homeless is likely to be living in a constant state of basic survival, making it impossible to address other support needs in practical and psychological terms. People on release from prison require intense assistance in accessing *any* form of accommodation, but permanent accommodation particularly.

Accommodation is frequently the first major difficulty to arise post-release. Very few services (in the prisons or in the community) provide the intensive support and assistance that is required for people to access stable accommodation on release. There are many well recognised structural barriers in the way to achieving housing (including the housing shortage in many parts of NSW), however there is also too frequently explicit and implicit discrimination when it comes to housing people who have been to prison.

CRC workers are explicitly housing advocates for people on release. We have recognised as an organisation, that if we don't perform this role, than our clients become homeless. And if they become homeless, their likelihood of returning to prison is extremely high. This advocacy operates on a number of levels. On an individual level, case-workers will assist with housing applications, particularly with regard to ensuring that the clients complex support needs are recognised and understood by people who are assessing their situation. Workers also regularly assist clients to stay calm and manage the stress that is frequently present when people are in housing crisis and there are limited options available. CRC workers will advocate for clients to be (in the first instance) allocated accommodation but also will advocate that they be transferred from accommodation that is unstable or risky. Although not always comfortable, advocacy does sometimes require challenging decisions

⁴ Tsembaris et al (2006) 'Housing First Services for People who are Homeless with Co-occurring serious mental illness and substance abuse' in *Research on Social Work Practice* Vol 16, No. 1 pp74-83
Roman, Cincotta & Osborne (2006) *Principles and Practice in Housing for persons with Mental Illness Who Have Had Contact with the Criminal Justice System*, Urban Institute, Policy Centre, USA

that are made (for instance terminations of tenancies), and requesting explanations when it appears that processes have been discriminatory. This kind of individual housing advocacy is however possible because of the strong and positive relationships that have been established over a long time with housing providers partly because the relationship between the support provider (CRC) and the housing provider is deeply reciprocal; for instance the provider can flag arising issues for them, such as rental arrears or hoarding at an early stage when effective intervention is possible.

CRC also works closely with government and other stakeholders to influence the extent to which housing for this population is recognised as central to breaking entrenched patterns of recidivism. Too often (in both funding allocation and service design) homelessness is framed as just one more disadvantage in a whole series of disadvantages experienced by people who go to prison. However given what we *know* about the relationship between homelessness and imprisonment, and the massive over-representation of homeless people in prison, it is critical to recognise that housing is much more than just one piece of the reintegration puzzle. It is the key. And if we are to be serious about breaking cycles of recidivism, it is here that we must focus our advocacy and our attention.