

## **Bridging the Gap: Supporting the Implementation of Family Conferencing for inmates and their families**

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### **Abstract**

Corrective Services New South Wales (CSNSW) aims to reduce re-offending by individuals who are under its supervision or in its custody by providing programs, services and opportunities for change. There is a growing body of evidence supporting the argument that prisoners are less likely to re-offend if they can maintain family contact during their sentence. Staying connected to family and social networks while in prison has been documented to reduce the risk of someone reoffending once they get out, and may also reduce the risk of relapsing into drug and alcohol use. (Hairston, 2003; Visher & Travis, 2003). This paper seeks to discuss the current literature around the issue of family focused interventions and to highlight the value of the use of family conferencing within CSNSW. It explores the research outcomes and practical experiences of national and international criminal justice agencies in their attempts to implement family focused initiatives and concludes that the inclusion of family conferencing within a suite of programs and services offered by CSNSW may add considerable value to service delivery throughout CSNSW and impact significantly on the likelihood of an offenders risk of reoffending.

### **Background**

Corrective Services NSW provides a number of services for families of offenders in custody to facilitate contact and manage family crises as well as strengthen and maintain relationships. Visits facilities, parenting and other family-related programs are available to support contact between offenders and their families. Travel and accommodation assistance is available to families who face hardship in meeting the costs of travel and accommodation when visiting correctional centres a long distance away from their home. In July 2010 the Families of Offenders Strategic Framework was endorsed by the Commissioner for Corrective Services NSW.

The framework was developed to address the negative impact community and custodial based sentences can have on family members. Corrective Services NSW has a number of services for families of offenders in custody. These services facilitate contact and work towards supporting and maintaining family relationships during a period of incarceration.

The guiding principles of the Framework are:

- Families of offenders in custody and under community supervision can expect to be treated with respect and courtesy by Corrective Services staff.
- Corrective Services NSW does not hold families responsible for the criminal activities of their family members.
- Corrective Services NSW takes a broad view of the definition of families, particularly in relation to Aboriginal families and same-sex relationships.

The framework includes two strategic goals each with a number of planned outcomes.

Specifically this project focuses on the strategic goals of:

1. Families of offenders are considered in policy and procedures, services and programs, in both community and custody

- Promote Family Restorative Practice and Conferencing, facilitated by the Restorative Justice Unit, for offenders in custody and in the community
- Family Conferencing is incorporated into case plans and offender management practice

2. Innovative use of information technology developments support communication needs of offenders' families and children

- Explore effective utilisation of technology to support contact between families and offenders e.g. video conference visits, filtered email contact
- Video conference visits facilities are widely available and fully utilised by families in rural and remote areas.

The aim of this ELP project is to support the implementation of Family Conferencing as found in the Corrective Services NSW Families of Offenders Strategic Framework.

## Context

The Families of Offenders Strategic Framework was developed within the broad strategic objectives of Corrective Services NSW Corporate Plan and the NSW Government's priorities of reduced re-offending and crime prevention. (Corrective Services NSW Families of Offenders Strategic Framework July 2010)

This ELP project has inter jurisdictional links to the Department of Corrective Services Western Australia, Strategic Plan 2011 – 2014 and links to broader Government agendas in which Corrective Services New South Wales is identified as a lead agency including the NSW Suicide Prevention Strategy 2010 – 2015 and the New South Wales Homelessness Action Plan 2009 – 2014.

## Project Rationale

Despite the significant benefits, maintaining meaningful contact between prisoners and their family and friends does not generally feature as a priority for treatment in terms of preparation for release. The specific nature of prisons makes it difficult for productive environments that are conducive to

maintaining family relationships to be provided.

Prison facilities are typically located in out-of-the-way areas, often long distances from where families live, making visiting difficult for families with limited resources. Although external agencies such as Shine for Kids can provide some assistance with transport and accommodation costs, demand is often higher than the ability to supply. As such, for many prisoners the telephone is the only means available for maintaining contact with families and significant others.

The 2009 NSW Inmate Health Survey (IHS) demonstrated in its findings the severity of separation faced by offenders when in custody.

- Close to half (47%) of 2009 IHS participants reported that they had not received any visits from family and/or friends in the four weeks preceding the survey
- One in ten (11%) 2009 IHS participants reported having received no phone calls or letters from family and/or friends during the two weeks preceding the survey
- Close to half (45%) of the 2009 IHS sample reported that they were the parent of at least one child under the age of 16 years

Indig, D., Topp, L., Ross, B., Mamoon, H., Border, B., Kumar, S. & McNamara, M. (2010) *2009 NSW Inmate Health Survey: Key Findings Report*. Justice Health. Sydney.

Families of prisoners are often a hidden group in society due to the shame and stigma associated with incarceration. Trying to navigate the criminal justice system can be frightening and families are often left to carry the emotional, financial and physical burden of incarceration on their own. Many experience social isolation and may spend hours travelling to visit a loved one in prison. They are often expected to provide the majority of support for a prison inmate prior to, during and after incarceration, often with very little support of their own. (Community Restorative Centre, No Bars)

Some thirty years of research from other fields suggests that family support can help make or break a successful transition from prison to community. But in practice, criminal justice systems have only recently tried to harness the family's investment by engaging them in the transition. Such engagement has been encouraged by the fatherhood movement of the 1990s, which increased both parental programming for men in prison and child support orders when they leave. (Vera Institute of Justice 2004)

In New South Wales, Corrective Services as the lead agency in offender management is committed to delivering professional correctional services and strategies which work towards meeting the NSW Government's priorities of reduced re-offending and crime prevention. It is recognised that family members play a significant role in offender re-entry.

There have been a number of programs and strategies implemented to engage family in offender re-entry. These programs have seen the value in tapping into the family as a valuable re-entry resource and include the London Resettlement Strategy (London 2005) and Project Green Light (New York 2005)

National research concludes the same. In Western Australia researchers found that 44 per cent of women prisoners surveyed received no visits from the children or other dependants for whom they were previously caring (Department of Family and Community Services (2003). Some of the reasons were reported as:

- ▶ carers refusing to bring children to visit because they perceived the prison as 'no place for kids'
- ▶ children not wanting to visit
- ▶ a parent not wanting their children to visit
- ▶ security measures that was intimidating
- ▶ children not being told that their parent was in prison
- ▶ the carers having no transport or living too far away from the prison
- ▶ children being prevented from visiting because of family conflict and consequently the unavailability of an adult to accompany them on visits

(VACRO 2000; Gursansky et al. 1998; Department of Justice 2002a; Healey et al. 2001; Wellesley 1999; Martin 1997).

The Department of Corrective Services Western Australia have been actively working towards reducing the impact of incarceration on prisoners and their families via the use of technology such as video conferencing and Skype to promote and enhance the relationship between prisoner and family. The use of Skype commenced in Hakea Prison in October 2009 as part of the Good Beginnings Program, a family support program aimed at assisting fathers to reconnect with their children.

Video conferencing has been utilised by the Department of Corrective Services Western Australia for some time; however this in itself presents challenges due to the vast distances that need to be travelled to access these systems. Moving forward a computer based technology seemed the most practical and logical direction for expansion. Since the successful introduction of Skype at Hakea Prison, it has been introduced into the Albany Regional Prison and is also in use in the Acacia Prison which is Western Australia's privately operated facility. The use of this technology in these centres has expanded further to include legal and other family communication purposes and since introduction has been considered to be very successful particularly for remand offenders and their families. The use of Skype to facilitate legal visits has provided an opportunity for visual interaction between the parties and the added benefit of reduced time spent travelling to the correctional facility.

## Recommendations

This project recommends expanding current parenting / family-focused interventions to include family conferencing to support the broad needs of inmates and their families.

Family Conferencing is a family centred; strengths based approach to decision making and case planning. It helps to engage and empower families to make decisions and build relationships.

Much like criminal justice conferencing, family conferences are organised and chaired by a facilitator, in the case of CSNSW this may be a Psychologist or external facilitator. This person is independent of decision-making and case management responsibility. While the facilitator has substantial contact with family members in the lead up to a conference, the facilitator will not have an ongoing role with the family after the conference unless another family group conference is needed.

Conferencing:

- Engages inmates, families and agencies in problem-solving and release planning
- Area arranged and facilitated by specialist staff
- Include the inmate, their spouse / partner; parents, children and extended family members and other supports

What is unique about family group conferencing is the degree to which they empower families (Adams & Chandler, 2004; Burford & Adams, 2004; Pennell, 2004).

Although decisions are made with advice from professionals the inmate and their family play the central role in identifying how they can address concerns and the best way to implement solutions.

It is imperative that a connection with family and / or significant others is established early in the prisoner's sentence and maintained throughout the duration, being built into the case management plan and considered during the pre-release planning stages.

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