Intensive Tenancy Support Services (ITSS) for Ex-offenders

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The Salvation Army (TSA) has been involved in ‘Prison Gate’ services since 1895; it is part of the organisation’s core business. It is also a very important social justice policy issue and someone in government, usually the Department of Justice, has to own it and fund it. Non-government organisations like TSA rely on government and community support to provide re-integration services for people with convictions.

The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute research indicates why intensive support is important to people returning to the community from Corrections. Baldry et al. demonstrate the crucial role secure housing and housing assistance plays in preventing people with convictions from returning to jail. Her study considered how accommodation influenced people’s transition back into community life and found that moving house often post-release and/or experiencing worsening problems with drug or alcohol abuse made it more likely that they would end up back in jail.

Eileen Baldry\(^2\) states that prison can ‘make a person a target for re-arrest and re-imprisonment; it disrupts social connections and locks people into serial institutionalisation, does not guarantee good or appropriate treatment and often any treatment started is not continued in the community upon release; it makes homelessness more likely, creates connections with criminal culture, ensures the learning of prison culture to survive and often causes self-harm and depression’.

In Tasmania, Hinton\(^4\) identified the transitional support needs of ex-offenders. As a consequence, The Salvation Army and the Department of Justice initially funded the XCELL Prison Support Service to work with people pre and post release to deal with their identified needs for emergency housing and support to prevent and reduce re-offending behaviour.

There have been various iterations of re-integration service provision in Tasmania, for example:

1. The XCELL program started in 2003 with funding from the Tasmanian Community Fund, TSA and the Attorney General’s office. Between 2005 and 2011 funding was provided by the Tasmania Prison Service and was supplemented by The Salvation Army to support 1.6 FTE staff. Since 2011 The Salvation Army has funded the XCELL program without any financial support from the Attorney General.

2. The Transitional Support Model Program (TSMP) ‘pilot’ was funded by Housing Tasmania between 2007–2010 and it provided transitional support to inmates, parolees and remainder who were at risk of homelessness and reoffending behaviour on exiting the correctional system.

3. The Reintegration of Ex-Offenders (REO) state-wide program was also funded by Housing Tasmania between 2011 and 2015. REO worked pre and post-release with ex-offenders at risk of homelessness and re-offending behaviour in Tasmania. An independent evaluation conducted by the University of Tasmania in 2013 found that the REO program, through the development of trusting relationships and intensive support, ‘significantly reduced recidivism rates for people exiting prison’.

4. In 2015 it was again left to the Minister for Housing in Tasmania to provide funding to the Intensive Tenancy Support Service (ITSS) program for 12 months so that the program could continue to provide Intensive Tenancy Support Services for people with convictions who were already housed in the community. The Department of Justice was unable to make a financial contribution even though it was supportive of the program.
The ITSS program has been funded by The Salvation Army since 2016. ITSS is a southern based reintegration program that works pre and post release with people with convictions who may be at risk of homelessness and re-offending behaviour. ITSS is a continuation of the REO program and has supported up to twenty-five ex-offenders who required intensive support since August 2015. At the 30 January 2017 the program has had a zero recidivism rate. The services provided by ITSS include:

- relationship and trust building pre-release
- case planning and case management
- intensive, flexible and responsive support post-release
- access to mainstream services, for example, accommodation, training and employment
- linkages with the Integrated Offender Management Unit, Parole, Police and Courts
- mentoring and life skills coaching
- service coordination.

If we equate these successful outcomes against a cost of $144,000 per annum to incarcerate one person the expected saving in 12 months for 25 people would be $3.6 million. A very good investment return on an outlay of $50,000 by government! With four staff the Salvation Army reintegration program worked intensively with over 100 clients and achieved potential savings for the Tasmanian government and taxpayers of up to $14.4 million.

Rob White* suggests that within Australia, Tasmania has been running counter to the trend of constantly increasing numbers of prisoners:

- Over the decade June 2005 to June 2014, Tasmania’s adult prison population fell by six per cent from 551 to 448 adult prisoners, despite an increase of six per cent in the population of Tasmania.
- Over the same decade, the rate of adult imprisonment fell by 25 per cent from 149.6 per 100,000 of the adult population to 112 per 100,000 of adult population in Tasmania. For the other jurisdictions the overall increase was 33 per cent.

White* has identified several reasons for this success, including an expansion of better support services within the corrections system; the establishment of innovative projects that engage people with convictions; and the use of systematic measures that encourage rehabilitation. Unfortunately the capacity for innovative services in the community sector that can be funded by the Department of Justice appears to be limited.

In 1910 Winston Churchill* suggested that ‘the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilisation of any country’ and the TSAs approach to intensive support highlights that with assistance people with convictions are able to exit prison and take their place as productive members of the community. Desistance is a dynamic process for people with convictions and for the community to expect that this will occur without appropriate supports in place is naïve. Popular public attitude suggests that society needs to get tougher on crime when in fact society needs to get smarter on crime.

The Department of Justice in Tasmania is eight years into the ‘Breaking the Cycle’ ten-year strategic plan for corrections. This planning has engaged stakeholders across the sector to identify challenges and to develop solutions that will increase the chances of successful reintegration into the community. A recent review highlighted ‘throughcare’ as a significant part of the process in the reduction of recidivism to maximise the value that an effective justice system can have in our community.

What is needed in Tasmania?

- A state wide reintegration service — Returning People to the Community (RP TC) that provides intensive and responsive support services.
- The cost to government would be $500,000 per annum to provide a state-wide flexible support service for people with convictions.
- The aim of the program would be to reduce recidivism and support people with convictions to achieve social reintegration, accommodation, education, training and employment outcomes.
- The program would work intensively with over 100 ex-offenders per annum and seek to reduce recidivism rates within this cohort by over 90 per cent. The flow on effects of this program would ensure that the general community is a safer place and in practical terms it would reduce police, court and correctional costs and workloads.

The community sector is keen to work collaboratively with the Department of Justice so that the Tasmanian Government can divert funding from a proposed feasibility study into the construction of a new northern prison, and away from punitive measures that would inevitably see an increase in the prison population; towards measures that would assist in the diversion of people from incarceration, and action that will promote successful reintegration in the social and economic life of the community.

Conclusion

It is hard not to agree with the Hon. Michael Kirby AC who argued in the 2016 Australian Red Cross Vulnerability Report that:

‘In a climate of fiscal restraint, where scarce governmental resources must deliver to the community the best value and outcomes in services, the time is right for a more rational, economic and humane approach to our national ways and our trend of incarceration.’

Endnotes


6. Ibid.
