

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers**

Melbourne—Tuesday, 19 November 2019

#### **MEMBERS**

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Sarah Connolly

Mr Brad Rowswell

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

#### **WITNESSES**

Ms Sarah Hughes, Program Manager, ReConnect,

Ms Melanie Field-Pimm, Manager, Development, Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders; and

Mr Brendan Ivermee.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for attending today for this very important Inquiry. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible.

So you are giving a 5-minute presentation, and then we will ask questions after that?

**Ms FIELD-PIMM:** Yes, and I believe Brendan is going to do a presentation as well.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent.

**Ms FIELD-PIMM:** Thank you for the invite today. A bit of our background: we are a not-for-profit established in 1872, and we specialise in the provision of services within the adult criminal justice system. Currently we deliver key components of the Corrections Victoria Reintegration Pathway, the CVRP, which commences preparation of prisoners for release from the moment they enter prison and right through. For VACRO, that is the ReLink prerelease program and the ReConnect post-release program, which focus on seven key domain areas, including education and employment. We do have a range of other programs that sit alongside of reintegration.

VACRO also has a history in the delivery of employment services for people leaving prison, including a successful corporate partnership with Fabian Dattner and the Second Chance register, and that was the first example of a register for businesses who were willing to employ people with a criminal record. We were also part of the Correctional Services Employment Pilot Program, which initiated the now reinvigorated job fairs, and we currently deliver the Time to Work Employment Service for Indigenous prisoners, which is an assessment and linkage program to improve their connection to employment service agencies on release. We run two social enterprises: Second Chance Cycles is a community bike workshop for people on community orders and men on day release; and Second Chance Coffee, also for people on community orders.

People leaving prison represent a broad range of individuals, and there are many employable people with a vast range of skills and histories of employment interspersed with the socio-economic and psychosocial disadvantage that clearly disrupts their lives. For us the problem sits more with the perceptions of the community and the media and the barrier of a criminal record. So yes, they do require an investment of time and funding to get results, but the majority of people leaving prison pose very little risk to a business. Upon release they are used to having routine. They have been living a structured existence, and they are also fit and healthy. The Federal Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business released in 2018 from one of their surveys that 78% of employers said this target group were hardworking team players liked by their colleagues and customers and that they appreciated the job opportunity and demonstrated the right skills for the job.

Unfortunately, current offender employment support services are piecemeal, and they are not to scale, given 1,000 people are released monthly. So they are all small, they are usually specific target groups—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, youth, women—and most are delivered either in prison or out but not going across, and they are not measured. There is also a disconnection between corrections, education and jobs, so we have TAFE delivering education in the prison, CV managing prison industry and jobs for prisoners through one unit—and they manage their reintegration pathway through another—and then their health is through Justice Health. So on the ground what that looks like—for example, for our Time to Work program—is that we have got to contact each of those separate groups to get each piece of information for one prisoner to support their search for work, and we cannot always get it. And if they do not have a program like that, they are usually going to leave prison without all that information.

Also, from our experience the generalist employment service agencies are not meeting the needs of this group. Last year we supported approximately 300 people post release, and it was rare that they were assisted into employment by an employment services agency. Most who are employment ready are assisted either by us or they are getting that work themselves. What is currently working is the reintegration pathway, the CVRP,

because it is providing one stream of linked programs for an individual through their sentence to release and after. So should a targeted employment program for this group be considered, attaching it to the CVRP, where it can utilise what has already been created and expand on that, makes good sense. Also, attaching it to a system that understands the complexity of this group is critical to its success.

Another existing positive is the employment expos that are held in each prison, which is today's version of the job fairs, where a mix of post-release support services, employment services and businesses who are willing to employ this group come together. The businesses can present to prisoners on what they are looking for in candidates and move through to one-on-one conversations across the day. We have observed direct offers of employment occur at those expos through to invites for those prisoners to contact them on release.

So we think that two things are needed: an integrated, through-care approach—so a service that commences pre release and is linked to their education and the jobs they do while they are in prison and to the supports that they can access pre and post release. I am just thinking how important it is that they have a house to be able to maintain a job. Secondly, more partnerships between government, corporates and not-for-profits—so imagining what could be achieved if we were able to encourage more corporates to get involved in training and prison industry. Then for sustainable post-release employment: engaging and supporting employers at that macro level through the social procurement concept but also recognising that they require some training and support themselves to take on this target group—so anything like brokerage for employers to access training by not-for-profits like VACRO around supporting these individuals. This is why I mention the CVRP as an existing model that could support a comprehensive and effective system. When administrating the reintegration assessment questions are already asked about employment, and referrals can be triggered at that point to create a referral pathway for any future programs and services. So if you want a sustainable solution, you need one that will provide care, coordination and support. I might open to the table.

**Ms CONNOLLY:** That was fantastic; that was very interesting. I have a group in my electorate, in Laverton North, that is a social enterprise but is run by people that hit rock bottom while in prison then got out and turned their life around and now take on people that come out of prison but cannot get a job. So it is ensuring they are having a slow tick-over of part-time employment while encouraging them to get on and find full-time employment. One of the things that they mentioned to me is that the TAFE courses inside the prison are not actually directed at industries that are going to employ them or where there is actually a skills shortage. Do you have any comments on that?

**Ms FIELD-PIMM:** I might hand over to Brendan.

**Mr IVERMEE:** My background is that I have lived experience. I was an accountant for about 20-plus years and a terrible gambler. I got into some financial difficulties at home. I had a business to run, and unfortunately that was not going too well—that was outside of work—and subsequently I got myself into a whole lot of trouble and ended up in prison. I was there for three years of a six-year sentence, so I have got a fairly good understanding of what actually happens in there. It is a terrible place—no-one wants to go there—but there are a lot of shortcomings. I think the information that is provided is generally not that accurate, and that could be because the place is overcrowded for one thing. It is all based on security. It is not so much about trying to get people rehabilitated but making sure they do not riot. It is that sort of attitude.

So it is very difficult for people to get what is required so they can be released and move forward. Believe me, there are a number who just want to do that. I hate to say it but there are a few that are going to be very difficult to change, and probably they will end up back at some point in time. But there are a number, a lot, that just want to put it behind them, which is very, very difficult to do—not only for your own self-esteem and shame but because the community makes it hard.

There are certain things that I have recently tried to change in my life. I have struggled to get employment since I have been released. It has been very, very difficult. I have never had a full-time job. I have been out for over four and a half years, and I am just getting bits and pieces here and there. I just recently applied for a hire car licence so I can drive hire cars. I have been given an opportunity from a person who owns several of them, who knows about my history and who knows about everything that I have been through, but the organisation that actually processes your application makes it very, very difficult to do so. It took me five months as opposed to two weeks to actually get that application processed, and that was with support from VACRO and also

references. It took some time. It is just simple things like those. It is stuck with you for the rest of your life. It just is, and you cannot do anything about it. I was recently in New Zealand doing some work, and I was unable to enter the country. I was detained, and I thought I was going to be on *Border Patrol* at some stage. I had to go through a whole process of filling out this special visa, which I was unaware of, to get into New Zealand for three weeks to do some work there. It is just one of those things that you cannot shake.

To go back to that point, the training that is provided is just not up to it at all. I think it is just a numbers thing. Quite often people would go to their chosen program or what they have been directed into, and it is as simple as ticking off your name and walking out the door. They are not really valued. They are not, as you say, directed to what is available upon release. A lot of these guys cannot read or write; they get to a point where they are under pressure from peers and they do not want to show that, so they walk away. They do not want to show people that they cannot read or write. It is not the thing that they want to be known as. So there are all these issues that go on inside prison that just really are not identified with or not highlighted. I might be a bit of a sceptic here, but I do think it is just a numbers game. They say, 'We're doing this; we're doing that', but realistically they are not.

**Ms ADDISON:** How could social procurement processes be improved and provide more opportunity for ex-offenders?

**Ms FIELD-PIMM:** I think if they are generic in terms of, 'You need to have a certain percentage of disadvantaged jobseekers', people coming out of prison are still going to be at the bottom of that pile. They are going to select migrants, veterans. So it would have to be a targeted—

**Ms ADDISON:** Category for ex-offenders.

**Ms FIELD-PIMM:** Yes. Anyone is definitely going to put them to the bottom of the pile.

**Mr IVERMEE:** Yes.

**Ms CONNOLLY:** Do you think that Government has a role in trying to do something about that stigma? Because what really hit home to me when meeting with this group—and they had similar stories to yours; not all of them were violent offenders—was that they came out feeling a real sense of shame. No-one would give them an opportunity. The opportunity they got just sort of packing fruit boxes and delivering them around the city was the first time, sometimes the first time in their life, they had actually ever had a job legitimately earning money. All of these people had children, so it was the first time they were able to reconnect with their children and provide things like even Christmas presents and stuff like that. It was also helping teach them to be better parents. One woman ended up getting custody of her child that she had been separated from for a long time. Those social benefits of just what to me seem like such a small opportunity actually had this tangible ripple effect across the community and would change their life but also the lives of their children and the way in which they saw mostly their father. Do you think that there is a story to tell around that for Government to help encourage employers to give people an opportunity when they are on the bottom of the pile when it comes to other disadvantaged cohorts?

**Ms FIELD-PIMM:** There is definitely a story. We need different messages out there. The messages have been the same for a really long time and very much focused on *Mobsters* and *Underbelly*, and that is simply not the bulk of people in prison. And what has always been difficult for us as an organisation is the shame. It is quite hard for us to tell the story because they do not want to be seen as that person, and if we want to use mainstream media, they want photos and—

**Ms ADDISON:** The backstory.

**Ms FIELD-PIMM:** The backstory. So it is quite difficult to do, but I think that if there was a concerted effort we would be able to pull together a group of people who have moved through their disadvantage and are willing, like Brendan, to come out and talk about things in a realistic, reasonable way—'These are the difficulties. This is what we need. This is who I am. I'm not actually someone to be terrified of', which I think at this point in time the majority of our community is.

**The CHAIR:** This is a big issue for whichever government is in power. Obviously law and order, community safety, is a big issue. The more police you put on the beat, the more crime is detected, the more people go through the judicial system, the more prisons we have to build and so on and so forth, and it is costly. The \$180,000 it costs to house a prisoner you would rather spend on education to prevent them, but unfortunately we are where we are and stigma is attached. There is no question of that. But you have done some great work in finding employment. VACRO has done a great job. How do you measure your success? And if you are given the opportunity, how much more can you do?

**Ms FIELD-PIMM:** In terms of measuring?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Ms FIELD-PIMM:** Measurement is really poor, and that is mainly because we do not have access to data about our participants because it is owned by Corrections Victoria. So even in terms of recidivism we do not have access to that information to know the impact of our programs. Sarah is the Program Manager of the post-release program. So that is certainly something that we are about to commence on. We would like to look more at measuring things like desistance rather than recidivism in terms of looking at what are the changes that have been put in place, what is the difference in the length—if last time they were cycling through every three months, are they now doing it in six months? Are they now doing it in a year? And is the type of sentence reducing? All those sorts of things. We are looking at employment programs ourselves right now. I recently spoke to Corrections Victoria, and they do not have any statistics on post-release employment, so it is not there. Work needs to be done in terms of matching up the data systems between Corrections Victoria and Centrelink and all those data systems that are around, where we could actually start to track people and what is going on once they leave prison.

**Ms ADDISON:** I recently was down at Lara—it is not Marngoneet; it is the one next to Marngoneet.

**The CHAIR:** Chisholm Road.

**Ms FIELD-PIMM:** Karreenga?

**Ms ADDISON:** Karreenga. I had a tour of Karreenga, which I very much enjoyed. I saw the bakery and got to speak to someone who was coming up for parole and saying that he would really like to get a start with a Bakers Delight in his new community. He had worked really hard in terms of building up his skills in the sector. For someone like this young man, what type of support should he receive in terms of mentoring to make sure that he can try and get into the industry that he is passionate about to get a fresh start? What support could the Government provide assistance with for mentoring to try and help this young man get to where he wants to get to?

**Ms FIELD-PIMM:** Would you like to take that one?

**Ms HUGHES:** Yes, sure. I suppose in terms of mentoring I guess it is important to acknowledge that mentoring is different to case management. It is the very soft outcomes and debriefing and bouncing things off rather than goal setting and planning and achieving. I think mentoring is extremely valuable. We used to have a mentoring program that worked in really well with our ReConnect program, which is our post-release program. It provides that different layer of support. I think buddying is a really good opportunity in terms of partnering up with somebody who is already in the workplace as someone who they can go to, ask questions of and have support from. Do you want to add much more to that?

**Ms FIELD-PIMM:** I think in terms of that, that goes back to the previous point that we need to support the employers to take that young person on.

**Ms ADDISON:** My concern is he is feeling optimistic, he is being supported and he really has a clear pathway of what he wants to do but he talked about how previously when he had been out that he was quickly back in because he did not have a pathway. So he is seeing that this time is a real opportunity for him to get the start that he really wants so he does not end up in prison. But what I am really concerned about is a few rejections by employers, who are going to say, 'Good on you', or 'Just not interested'. As well as having

someone to get him there, he needs someone to support him to say, 'Don't give up. Let's see what we can do'. Am I being idealistic?

**Ms FIELD-PIMM:** No, absolutely not. And even if he was successful in getting a job, you cannot just place someone who has had that experience into a job, because they are going to be dealing with a whole range of other transition issues that may end up making that job fall over. So they absolutely need case management and mentoring, because the case management can only go to a certain point and the mentoring can continue on until that person feels that they can stand on their own. As Sarah described, that layered approach is fantastic, but it needs to commence prerelease. Someone needs to be doing that realistic testing with him, and that does not exist at the moment. You have got your TAFE education. You can go and do your barista course or your this or your that, but they do not really focus on the soft skills of employment and teamwork and resilience and—

**Ms ADDISON:** Turning up and staying—

**Ms FIELD-PIMM:** Turning up on time. Yes, correct. That is the kind of thing, for example, we do in our Second Chance Coffee social enterprise. When we evaluated it—did I bring the information? I do not know if I did.

**The CHAIR:** If you have not, can you provide that information?

**Ms FIELD-PIMM:** Yes, we can send that. It is a small number, but it is about a 50% employment outcome for those people because we spend 280 hours training them. That includes the soft skills, and that includes communication and how they feel about themselves and their ability to then transfer that to another job. That is a package.

**Ms HUGHES:** Karreenga is a really perfect prison to start the prerelease because it is also one of those prisons where they can get daily prerelease. We take a lot of men who are coming out of Langi Kal Kal. Usually it is a long sentence, so we have sort of changed our approach with that particular cohort in terms of trying to get those day permits happening more often and starting to set up that stuff and make that transition easier rather than just waiting for, 'Bang—day of release', and then you are out. So I think if you could get an employer to agree to take on, like, this young man and if he has got day permits, that is a perfect time for him to go out and do trials, meet the employer, make it a warm handover and—

**Ms ADDISON:** Develop a relationship and build some trust.

**Ms HUGHES:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. Thank you so much. Thank you for being here today.

**Witnesses withdrew.**