

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Victoria's Criminal Justice System

East Melbourne—Monday, 20 September 2021

#### MEMBERS

Ms Fiona Patten—Chair

Dr Tien Kieu—Deputy Chair

Ms Jane Garrett

Ms Wendy Lovell

Ms Tania Maxwell

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#### PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Rodney Barton

Ms Georgie Crozier

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Enver Erdogan

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Tim Quilty

Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Harriet Shing

Mr Lee Tarlamis

Ms Sheena Watt

**WITNESSES** (*via videoconference*)

Mr Marius Smith, Chief Executive Officer,

Ms Abigail Lewis, Senior Policy and Advocacy Adviser, and

Mr Jordan Dittloff, Lived Experience Consultant, VACRO.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back, everyone. I am sure you are aware that you are watching the public hearing of the Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into Victoria's Criminal Justice System. We are extremely pleased to now be joined by VACRO: Marius Smith, who is the CEO; Abigail Lewis, who is the Senior Policy and Advocacy Adviser; and Jordan Dittloff, who is the Lived Experience Consultant. Thank you very much for making the time to speak with us today and also for your really comprehensive submission, which we have all received and had an opportunity to look at. For those watching at home, that submission is also available on our website.

If I could just let the three of you know that all evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is as provided by our *Constitution Act* but also the standing orders of the Legislative Council. Therefore any information that you provide to us today is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you were to go elsewhere and repeat the same things, you may not have the same protection. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

Thank you again for appearing today. Hansard is in the background recording everything that we say. You will receive a transcript after this hearing, and I would encourage you to have a look at that and make sure that we did not misunderstand you or mishear you.

Would you like to start with some opening comments? Then we can open it up to committee discussion.

**Mr SMITH:** Yes, thank you, Chair, and thanks to the committee for giving us this opportunity. Good morning, everyone. I want to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands on which we are meeting, in my case the people of the Kulin nations, and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging, because this was, is and always will be Aboriginal land.

To briefly introduce VACRO, we are an independent, non-profit organisation created in 1872. We assist people leaving prison and their families to build new beginnings free from the criminal justice system. Our submission tackles three key areas. First, we talk about how people are labelled in the criminal justice system, plus two key concepts that drive successful reintegration—desistance and throughcare. There remains a tendency in the Victorian criminal justice system to label people as offenders, which is identifying them by their past at a time when the system should focus on helping them to plan for a different, better future. Developing a new positive self-image is a key element of desistance, which is the process by which people journey away from the circumstances that led to their offending and into better circumstances that enable better outcomes for them, their families and their communities. Throughcare refers to the imperative that we address people's needs in prison and then ensure a continuity of that care as people transfer back into the community.

The second element of our submission is that we need to transform reintegration. We need to fund reintegration service providers to deliver their programs for longer to a larger number of participants. This will ensure that as many people as possible are connected to the supports they need, including housing, employment, health care, addiction treatment and more, and those supports must be available in the community. It is almost impossible to create a new life you have dreamed of when you do not have, for example, access to housing—and more than 80 per cent of our participants in our ReConnect program leave prison into primary or secondary homelessness.

For most prison leavers employment is another key foundation. That is why our new Second Chance Jobs program fills a considerable void, because there are thousands of men and women in prison capable of working but inadequate programs to prepare them for employment. There are many businesses that are willing to employ prison leavers but no-one to connect the two groups, and there are thousands of people who want to work but need assistance with the things that make holding down a job hard, like a lack of housing or mental health treatment. So Second Chance Jobs has been designed to provide that pre-release support, match people to employers and walk alongside both the participant and the employer in that vital first six to 12 months. The program will commence next month at Loddon and Middleton prisons at Castlemaine for those exiting into

Melbourne, but ultimately this is a program that needs to run pre release at every prison and post release statewide.

The third contention of our submission is that we need to transform prison itself. The desistance journey does not begin at the point of release but at the point of intake, and our staff deal with the long-term effects that some of the conditions in prison have on participants post release. In particular we need to end the use of solitary confinement in Victorian prisons; we need to ensure people in prison receive the same health care and other important care as is available in the community; we need to maintain and strengthen family connections all the way through prison; and we need to recognise that prison causes harm and take urgent action to reduce the number of people in prison through bail reform, other law reform and greater use of diversion programs.

So that is all from me for the moment. I will now pass over to Jordan Dittloff for his opening remarks. Jordan came to VACRO through our peer mentoring program and has lived experience of the criminal justice system. He co-produced our submission with us, and we are really happy that he has come along today to take part in this discussion.

**Mr DITTLOFF:** Thanks very much, Marius. And thank you very much to the Chair and all members of the committee for having me, and thank you very much to VACRO for inviting me to join them in their submissions. I think to describe me as a Lived Experience Consultant is over-egging the pudding a little bit. I am a person who works full time. I have now been out of prison for some four years, and I have been able to rebuild a life that does not feature offending and is meaningful and aspirational. And I think those are probably the themes that I am going to be focusing on as I speak to the committee today.

I do not want to go too much into the minutiae of my personal story because I think you have probably heard many stories like it in the submissions you have heard so far, and I think I would really like to give the members of the inquiry the opportunity to speak to me about the many things you will have heard and the many questions you no doubt have of me as someone with lived experience. But suffice to say my journey to prison was long and featured both drug-related and white-collar offending, and I served a 27-month period of incarceration at a range of prisons, including nine months in maximum security facilities and 18 months at minimum and open camp prisons.

For me, I think the real takeaways that I would like to leave the inquiry with today are the importance of preventing recidivism, as Marius said, by focusing on the messaging, the language we use when we are referring to people both in prison and after their release, and the resources that we provide to support connection, integration and meaningful opportunity. I think too often the approach to people with a lived experience of incarceration is reductionist. I think we focus on what people should not do, and the message that we either explicitly or implicitly tell people prior to and after their release is that they should live a small life, that they should put their head down and that they should not use drugs, not reoffend. But as Marius alluded to, people do not desist away from offending as a negative, they desist into something else. That has been my experience, and the vast majority of people that I have kept in touch with who have turned their lives around and managed to stay out of prison and found a path for themselves would all say that as well—that they are not ceasing to offend or avoiding prison because prison is hard or frightening. In reality once you pass through the looking glass and experience incarceration, you realise that it is not like you think it is in the movies. And that is in no way to suggest that prison is not a really challenging and traumatic experience in many respects, but the punishment is deprivation of liberty. The punishment is having the sentence, not where you serve that sentence—or at least it should not be.

Another really key thing that I would just like to flag with the committee is I listened to some of the previous submissions this morning and in particular to Dr Bach's question to the previous submissions about where should the committee focus or where should the inquiry focus? And I think it is really important as you navigate these submissions that you do not take a zero-sum view of these things, and I think that, for example, addressing youth offending and addressing the issue of youth justice must involve people with lived experience who are adults who are released from prison and have turned their lives around. Who better, who more qualified to assist with those very problems that you have identified than the people who have gone through that journey, who these young people will look up to as credible mentors and as people who they can chart a path towards as role models? So I just caution: it is really easy to take a black-and-white or a zero-sum view of where attention should be placed or where resources should be focused, and I think looking at the criminal justice system holistically and not disregarding what people with lived experience who have an experience in incarceration can offer is a really crucial step forward.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, Jordan, and thank you, Marius. I apologise—I neglected to introduce you to the committee prior to starting, but I am sure you know them all. We are joined here by Tania Maxwell, Sheena Watt, Dr Matthew Bach and obviously Fiona—I am the Chair. May I just start by asking a little bit about the ReLink and the ReConnect services. I was somewhat surprised that not every single person in prison has access to ReLink and also that the eligibility for ReConnect seems to be different from the eligibility for ReLink. I wonder if you could speak more to that and about where you think we should recommend changes for, I guess, that preparation for leaving facilities and also that assistance. You touched on extending the time for that assistance, but is it about also providing that assistance to all, or do some people just not need it?

**Mr SMITH:** Thanks for the question. I would start by saying that there is unquestionably a much greater need than is addressed by ReLink and ReConnect, and there are other programs. But overall if you look at what is available between leaving prison and what they need and who needs it, there is a clear and very large gap. We always say as an organisation: let us not get stuck into thinking that those who are currently getting support have needs and the others do not, because we do have to rule people in and out and that is a very difficult thing to do. So yes, with ReLink and ReConnect people have to be, you know, quite high need to be eligible for the programs. As you mentioned, there is a difference in eligibility slightly between ReLink and ReConnect. With resourcing, I mean, you can sort of say that some people get through ReLink and that is enough, and you kind of identify that they have got good supports in the community and they will not need that case manager post release, so there can be a reason for that in some cases. But the much bigger picture is what need is out there that we are not meeting.

I mentioned in my opening remarks Second Chance Jobs, which initially will be running at a fairly small level. Generally with people who are eligible for ReLink and ReConnect, some of them—we would say 30 per cent to 40 per cent—are kind of in a place where they could start looking for a job, but there are a lot who are not at that point. Second Chance Jobs really is a program that, apart from being an employment program, can widen that scope to a greater group of people who are either job ready or within six to 12 months pre release could become job ready. And then they have often a similar set of needs; they might have a mental health condition, they might have a disability or something. So that is one way we can expand it.

We know that there is a huge need for family programs in prisons, and at the moment I think there has been a good beefing up of family programs in women's prisons. I think there is not nearly enough in men's prisons, and we are very passionate about the need for programs in men's prisons. Just to give you one small example, we just got funding recently from the Douglas family foundation to extend our family counselling to Beechworth prison, which is a men's minimum-security prison. It is very interesting to hear already the feedback. The men are really liking it, but the referrals are coming because men are going back to their units and saying, 'This is a great program that I'm involved with. You need to do that'. So that is just a few snapshots. We know that there is a huge gap, and yes, it is not just the people who get ReLink and ReConnect that have needs and the others do not; that is not even close to it.

**The CHAIR:** No. Thanks, Marius. I must say just on that, reading your submission and your case study around, I think it was, Mindy really just put a smile on my face—the ability of that family service, and certainly I support that.

Jordan, just touching on what Marius said about moving into work and employment and how that can be such a great protector going forward—and obviously that has been one of your experiences—I note in your submission it talked about expanding some of the spent convictions scheme. Obviously this committee did the work on the spent convictions scheme, and we know that criminal records can and do exclude people from working. I just wonder if you want to speak more to that. I am assuming that expanding the spent convictions scheme is also enabling people to not have to disclose their criminal past when seeking employment.

**Mr DITTLOFF:** Actually it is quite the opposite in my view. The reason I say that is that navigating conversations around disclosure is one of the most crucial skills that I have had to develop and that the people I am familiar with who have managed to make their way and avoid reoffending have. That seems to be a common denominator between many of those people who succeed on reintegrating and those who struggle. I think it is a really challenging area because in prison, particularly towards the end of your sentence, you are told you do not have to disclose. You are told disclosure should be avoided, and it is inferred that disclosure is a can of worms best unopened. I really, truthfully, do not think that serves prisoners or prospective employers well at all. I think that, more important than allowing people to tell legal fictions as the current spent convictions scheme does, a narrative such as a ban-the-box policy would be a far better step.

The spent convictions scheme is an important symbolic step to recognise that people can, after a period of time having reintegrated into the community, be considered to have reintegrated themselves and rehabilitated successfully. The spent convictions scheme is one way of acknowledging that, but it does so by allowing people not to disclose, and the reality is that whether someone discloses on a criminal record check or not, there are many ways in this modern world to learn about someone's past. If you put someone in a situation where they have not shared something at the beginning of their employment relationship and it subsequently comes up, then regardless of whether legally they were allowed to or not, it has a profound effect on their trustworthiness, on their relationship with their employer and potentially on their job security.

For me, I have been very, very fortunate to have had the same employer since I got out of prison. I walked into that business at the end of my intensive parole and basically told them that I had gotten out of prison and I was looking for gainful employment, told them my story and told them the lessons I had learned, and they invited me for a job interview the following week. That was an incredibly terrifying and vulnerable conversation to have, as you can imagine, especially when you are speaking to someone and you think it is going well. I had a more recent experience where I was in an interview for a volunteer internship as part of my studies—and I know I am competing with five other candidates. The interview has gone really well and I feel as though I have a good shot at it, and then having to—what feels at a very visceral level like sticking the stick in the spoke of the bike wheels—say, 'This has gone really well, but I just need you to know something about my past that I feel it is important to share with you', is one of the hardest things anyone could ever do. And if the first time you are thinking about it is when you are in that conversation, then it is unlikely to have a good outcome. I think rather than emphasise when people should or should not have to disclose, disclosure should be encouraged, and I think the skills around how to have that conversation should be emphasised.

And I would just like to state, importantly, because this is a public hearing, my experience and the experiences of many of the guys I have stayed in touch with of people in the community's response to that kind of disclosure and vulnerability is overwhelmingly positive. I think it would be very, very easy to think based on what you read in the papers and what you see on certain programs on TV that the society we live in is incredibly judgemental and discriminatory towards people with a criminal record, and I think my lived experience and the lived experience of many others is that when you can show that you are acknowledging your past mistakes and that you are having a go and trying to make amends and build a life for yourself, the average Australian is extremely, extremely willing to give people an opportunity.

**The CHAIR:** Look, I think that is really encouraging, Jordan, and certainly we heard different messages during the spent convictions scheme, but I note your recommendation that we ensure that irrelevant convictions become a protected attribute under our charter, and I think that goes to what you were saying, that—

**Mr DITTLOFF:** That would be the crux of my submission, yes.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, being able to talk about it but knowing that you can be protected from discrimination as a result balances that for you. I will go to Tania Maxwell.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, everybody, for attending today. A great submission—and, Jordan, thank you so much. It really is great to be able to see and hear from someone who has a lived experience. And you are right; sometimes it is blanketed. The opinions that people can have are very blanketed and do not provide the opportunity for people to actually sit down and hear from someone who has that lived experience, and I would encourage the committee to probably have more witnesses—because we have so much to learn from.

Something that I am struggling to understand is with ReLink and ReConnect—and they are programs that have been around, I believe, for a considerable amount of time—if they are so successful and they offer so much, why are we still seeing the rates of recidivism that we are seeing?

**Mr SMITH:** I will start by arguing that if you were to pull them away you would see even worse results. And we do know that there has been a considerable uptick in recidivism rates since about 2010 and a considerable uptick in the prison population since then. To draw a line between those two things, what we try to do through ReLink and ReConnect is help people to put in place the structures they need. We talk about positions theory, but what it really comes down to is: people need to be able to develop a new self-narrative, a new identity, for themselves and that starts with them taking responsibility, saying, 'Yes, I did those things'. You will classically hear a comment along the lines of, 'I take responsibility for that, but that's not who I am and that's not who I am now'. That is about taking responsibility for the past but looking forward to something

new. Then it is creating the material conditions, which is housing, employment, mental health support—whatever you need—and it is different in every situation, as you would imagine, but there are some common themes. Then having those personal supports and deep personal relationships with family and friends and community and then also a role in the community, whether that be volunteering at a local club or you see your role as an employer or a parent or whatever it is that brings your life meaning—all these things we try to develop together.

What prison can do is take those supports and kind of brush them aside. We would argue that when you have an ever-increasing prison population you are making it harder for people to maintain those connections. We are certainly arguing here in our submission that for those who come into prison there needs to be the support that is there and more support to maintain those things and maintain a through-care out so that people can start to build a new life or put their life back together as the case may be. One example of that for us would be: family programs are not about preparing people for release, family programs are about maintaining and strengthening the family unit, whatever form that might take, from the day a person goes into prison all the way back out. We see particular problems with the growth in the remand population where it is very hard to give people support in prison. When you put them in prison on remand for three, six, nine or 12 months, most people do not have access to a lot of programs because it is hard to run a three-month or a six-month program for someone when you do not know and they do not know when they are going to get out. So people are coming in, they have been warehoused in prison on remand and while they are there maybe they lose their lease, maybe they lose custody of their kid, maybe they no longer have access to the mental health support that they had in the community, so you are kicking away all those structures.

To come back to your original question, just to sum up: if you were to see ReLink and ReConnect constricted or disappear, you would see even less outcomes than you are getting now. A big part of why things are getting worse is because it is so hard to provide any sort of meaningful support and then through-care back to the community for people who are on remand. As I am sure the committee is aware, that is currently over 40 per cent of the prison population.

**Ms MAXWELL:** I guess, Marius, that is what I was getting at: do you think that people going in on remand need to have access to more programs, and does your program require further funding so that you can actually extend the longevity of that program to individuals?

**Mr SMITH:** Yes. To the greatest extent possible, programs need to be provided to people on remand. But it can be like trying to catch lightning, because you do not know when court dates are coming up and all that kind of stuff. And in terms of length, yes, we believe that the right period of support for people post release is 12 to 24 months. We often see that things start to fall apart at the kind of six-month mark, or around about there, or they fall apart when parole ends or things like that. They might get out and actually stay with their parents and that might be okay for three to six months but if they have not been able to build a life and get out, then that relationship starts to fall apart and they end up out on the street again—that kind of thing. So we see 12 to 24 months as the ideal window for post-release support. And that is very different: it can be light touch in some cases and much more intensive in others.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Do you have the opportunity to work with the victims of those crimes that have been committed and that that person was incarcerated for or remanded for?

**Mr SMITH:** No, we do not work with someone who is on the other side in that sort of restorative justice sense, but a lot of our participants are, you know, victims of crime. We know that a huge number of people in women's prisons are victims of family violence, for example, which often leads directly or starts the course towards the criminal justice system—you know, you flee a home, you end up as homeless and then there is a series of events that result in your criminalisation.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Thank you.

**Mr DITTLOFF:** If I might briefly just touch on a couple of those things that Tania mentioned, I think it is really important to acknowledge that since 2010, when these recidivism rates have been rising, there have been shifts in the way that people who commit offences and people who go to prison are spoken about in the media, in society and in narratives. I think there seems to me to be an increasing tendency to demonise or other people who have made mistakes and in some cases have made more than one mistake or have reoffended after being released, but I think there really needs to be an acknowledgement that the two narratives seem to be rational actors completely responsible for their actions and choosing to offend in quite a calculated fashion on the one

hand and then on the other hand the narrative of victims of trauma completely powerless and buffeted by forces outside their control. I think it is really important to acknowledge that the truth in the vast majority of respects is somewhere in between and work out a way that we can speak about and speak to people in that situation, including people who are affected by offending and who are victims of crime. I know for myself that one of the most crucial, pivotal moments in my journey and my rehabilitation was hearing the victim impact statements in my sentencing of those who were impacted by my offending, and that had a profound effect on me. Since that time I have really made efforts for social reparations and social rehabilitation, which goes beyond the legal rehabilitation that is afforded by serving a sentence—you know, people will serve their time and then they have paid their debt in a legal sense, but often in a social or moral sense that is not true. I think we just need to be mindful of the way we are describing people and the way we are crafting this narrative, because the language we use to describe people often shapes the way they think about themselves and if you are telling people, ‘You’re an offender, you’re a serious violent offender, you’re a criminal, you’re an other and you have no place in our society’, then that is definitely going to have an impact on their future choices and their future path.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Jordan. Sheena.

**Ms WATT:** Thanks, Fiona. And thank you to VACRO for being with us today. I want to ask a question just about what your organisation considers around the link between housing and recidivism. It has come up amongst a range of other witnesses, but I wonder if you have any specific contributions to make to our inquiry regarding the linkages between housing and recidivism.

**Mr SMITH:** Yes, thanks. So to come back to what we were talking about before, about all those things you need in place to create a new life for yourself, there is never one thing, but we know that housing is just such a pivotal foundation upon which you can build everything else. As I said, in our ReConnect program, which is for particularly high needs prisoners, over 80 per cent are coming out to primary or secondary homelessness. It is just a huge problem, and it is hard for you to start your journey towards a new life when you do not have that housing covered off, and a huge part of the hours we spend in ReConnect is trying to get people into housing.

One thing we have done recently is introduce a new role to build relationships with real estate agents in areas where we work, because we do know that there is a proportion of our participants who for one reason or other can afford to get into the private housing market. They might have some savings, they might be on a higher sort of payment, like a DSP, or they might have a payout from an accident in the past—you know, there are various reasons. If you can forge that relationship with real estate agents and make them comfortable that this person is being supported, we have seen you can get some really good outcomes in that way. But we know that social and public housing has to be part of the mix, and we know what an incredible problem it is. We also know that there has been a really, really important commitment to spending by the government, which will make a difference, but it is obviously going to take while to wash through.

I will just put a bit of colour from our point of view. We are putting people into hotels, motels, when they get out, or caravan parks. Then we are trying to get some of them into crisis accommodation, but because there is no public housing, that blocks up transitional housing, that blocks up your crisis accommodation and the whole system is blocked. Abigail, did you have anything you wanted to add there?

**Ms LEWIS:** Yes, definitely. Thanks, Marius. I can add a little bit of colour as well around post-prison homelessness, and this links actually to Tania’s question as well—you know, why are we seeing recidivism rates where they are? And I think a big factor in that is housing and the lack of available housing. We would really like to see right from the beginning, thinking about principles of throughcare as well, really detailed, meaningful needs assessment at intake—where does this person plan to go after release, where would they like to go and what supports need to be in place to get them there?—and then support during their sentence and then also immediately pre release to set that option up. But the clear issue, as Marius mentioned, is of course supply. More social and—for our participants particularly—public housing is desperately needed and then also more supported housing specifically targeted to people leaving prison, so Corrections Victoria properties, properties that are available through the Corrections Victoria Housing Program. I was chatting to some of our ReConnect case managers the other day. They think there are about two units available in Ballarat and three or four in Geelong. So we are trying to find housing in the Grampians and Barwon South West regions, so regional Victoria, where the dearth of Corrections properties—I mean, two in a hub like Ballarat is just not enough. So we would like to see more Corrections Victoria properties available statewide, but particularly in those regional and rural hubs where a lot of people are being released.

Marius touched on opportunities for private rental as well. Many of our participants can hold down private rental, and there needs to be more funding for post-release support services to be able to build relationships with local landlords and real estate agents. As Marius said, we have just brought on a new role to do some of that. But yes, more funding to enable that kind of support as well as private rental subsidies perhaps for people leaving prison.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Matthew Bach.

**Dr BACH:** Thanks very much, Chair. And thanks to you all for being with us today. I am fascinated in particular by some of your views, Mr Dittloff, and I was heartened by what you said about your experiences of disclosing past offending. I noted your views about how important it is to ensure that those coming out of our prisons have tools to be able to have conversations like that. But then I also noted your views in response to a subsequent question—I cannot remember who from—and I agree with you wholeheartedly about the negative impact of labelling those coming out of the criminal justice system. What else could be done in your view? I think the implication of your previous comments is that certainly through our public commentary, through the media, we could do far better to make sure that we do not label in a negative way those exiting the criminal justice system, and I am pleased that overwhelmingly your view is a positive one about the capacity of Victorians and the capacity of businesses to welcome those with a history of some offending behaviour. But what else could we do differently and do better, in addition to the specific programs, which all sound fantastic to me, that we have spoken about today, to get that sort of societal shift that I think we would all love to see?

**Mr DITTLOFF:** That is a really good question, and thank you for it. If you look, for example, at a program South Australia has in the recent past run, and I do not know whether it is still a current program, you had a high-ranking official in corrections in South Australia talking about the benefits of employing ex-offenders—although that is not the language that we want to work towards; that is the language he used—and the benefits that employing somebody who has gotten out of prison can bring to a workplace.

You have got second-chance hiring schemes. I believe Linfox or Toll, similar companies like that, used to run something like that. I could not find any information current about that on their websites, but what they actually found from those kinds of programs was that it was not just an act of charity to employ somebody with a criminal record, and this is what I want to stress. It is not doing some social duty or an act of charity; there are actually significant benefits to giving someone an opportunity when they are not expecting to receive one. When they are prepared for red lights and you give them a green or even an amber light, where you give someone the opportunity to prove themselves, that is all that most people are looking for. That window of trust and vulnerability, mutual vulnerability, is I think very fertile ground for genuine rehabilitation and can be the start of a different path for someone.

You know, in my experience I started off washing dishes. I was not given the keys to the kingdom. I now manage a roster of 30 people and essentially have control over significant financial trust in the position I occupy, but that was not what the case was at the outset. There was a period of time where my employer gave me an opportunity to show who I was now, to show what I had learned from my mistakes and to prove myself as someone worthy of trust. And I think when you do that, when you give someone that window, often you will get an incredibly loyal employee. Now, I have worked for this business now since September 2017. There have been many times when I have had other opportunities or considered other things, and in the end my loyalty and gratitude to that employer is huge because they gave me a peace of mind that you cannot put a price on.

I recently spoke with the ABC *Conversation Hour* in the context of employment for people after release, and the young guy who was on the call before me while I was waiting to go on air spoke about being in his dream job after being released from prison but not having had that conversation and disclosure and waking up every morning fearing that today was going to be the day that someone revealed his past or something came to light that painted him in a less than honest light and might have consequences for his job. Listening to him share that counter-story or alternative experience really made me so aware of how beneficial having that baseline of disclosure is.

And I think, in addition to, as you flagged, the very simple and non-expensive changes that could be made at all levels of government in terms of the way people are spoken about, the language that is used—Marius mentioned it earlier—a lot of the language is very attributive. If you say someone is an offender or an ex-offender or a serious violent offender, you are not describing something they have done, you are describing someone they are, and that could not be more different and could not be less conducive to change. But in addition to that, I think programs like those Marius is talking about where you are actively marketing people



into the job or employment market prior to release, reverse marketing prisoners who have a certain skill set, who have worked in certain jobs in prison or have acquired certain skills in industry or have certain tickets. Why not begin the process of marketing them to employers and actually providing a hub for employers who would be willing to give people an opportunity to work to actually flag that willingness and then create that pipeline where people can start to get out to employment rather than having to hit the ground running and navigate everything else at the same time?

**Ms LEWIS:** To Jordan's excellent testimony there, I think it would be remiss of me not to add that politicians have a responsibility here too. I think the public mirrors the language that is used in public debates and contests like elections, and while we sort of continue to run law-and-order elections where the main parties essentially compete to punish the people that we are talking about here this level of discrimination is unlikely to change. Where we have seen real reductions in prison populations, in discrimination, in recidivism rates, is where there is bipartisan support for these results—places like Norway, certain jurisdictions in the United States where there is bipartisan support. And this cross-party inquiry is a fantastic start. I just really encourage the committee to keep working with their colleagues across different parties to speak about these issues differently moving forward.

**Mr DITTLOFF:** I am mindful that we are very nearly out of time. But just as a closing remark I think, going off what Abigail was saying, there is a dichotomy at the moment that seeks to frame rehabilitation and community protection as in tension inherently, that any program or step like the ones that I have been speaking with Dr Bach about and like those that you would have heard as suggestions for reform through the course of this inquiry—that any improvement in the conditions of prisons, any step to aid people who have committed an offence to rebuild a new life—somehow comes at the cost of the rights of victims or somehow comes at a decrease in the safety of the community, and in reality the opposite is true. Community protection and rehabilitation are synergistic: they do support each other, and the cheapest, most longstanding way to secure increased protection for the community is to rehabilitate people genuinely into a positive, aspirational life.

**The CHAIR:** I could not think of a better sentence to finish this session. Thank you so much. There was so much in your submission that we did not get an opportunity to get to. I encourage anyone who is interested in this to have a look at VACRO's really great submission that goes to a lot of those issues that Jordan was just speaking about. Thank you again.

You will receive a transcript of today's hearing. Please have a look at it, because it will ultimately go up on our website and form part of our inquiry. Again, we very much appreciate the submission and the time that you have given us today. Jordan, really your candour has been a real highlight, and I think it really provides us with that much more personal and detailed view of these issues. So thank you again. The committee will just take a short break to reset for the next witnesses.

**Witnesses withdrew.**