

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Children Affected by Parental Incarceration**

Melbourne—Monday, 9 May 2022

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Dr Tien Kieu—Deputy Chair

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**WITNESSES** (*via videoconference*)

Mr Glen Fairweather, General Manager, and

Mr Richard Boonstra, Victorian State Manager, Prison Fellowship Australia; and

Ms Holly Nicholls, and

Ms Clarisa Allen.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back, everyone. As I mentioned, this is a public hearing for the Inquiry into Children Affected by Parental Incarceration. For this part of the hearing we are very pleased to be joined by Prison Fellowship Australia. We have got Glen Fairweather, the General Manager; Richard Boonstra, the Victorian State Manager; and Holly Nicholls and Clarisa Allen, who are very kindly and generously appearing in a personal capacity. Welcome to you all. Thank you very much.

As I mentioned, my name is Ms Fiona Patten. I am the Chair of the committee. I am joined today by Dr Tien Kieu, the Deputy Chair; Mr Rod Barton; Ms Cathrine Burnett-Wake; and Ms Nina Taylor, who is joining us online.

Before we get going, and we are very much looking forward to this conversation, just to let you know, all evidence provided at a parliamentary inquiry such as this is protected by law, and that is under our parliamentary privilege that is provided under our *Constitution Act 1975* but also the standing orders of the Legislative Council. This means that 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, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

I am not sure how broad our camera is, but we have Hansard and the AV unit in with us. They are recording today's session. You will be provided with a written transcript of today. Please do have a look at it. Make sure that we did not misrepresent you in any way—it is very unlikely; they are a gun team here. But ultimately those transcripts will make their way to the committee's website and will form part of our report.

We would really welcome some opening statements. I am wondering if, Glen, you would like to lead.

**Mr FAIRWEATHER:** Yes, sure. Thank you, Fiona, and thank you to the committee for the opportunity to share a bit of our work and to be able to introduce Holly and Clarisa to you as well. Prison Fellowship Australia is a chartered member of Prison Fellowship International, and for over 40 years we have been caring for prisoners, ex-offenders and their families. Over 800 trained volunteers from across Australia serve this cohort, inspired by our founder, Charles 'Chuck' Colson, of Watergate infamy, and motivated by their Christian faith. Children with a parent in prison are six times more likely than their peers to end up in prison as adults. They often labelled the 'forgotten victims of crime', and we believe it is critical to step in at a young age and offer tailored support to this unique cohort and the unique challenges that they face. While incarceration has a profound impact on a person's life it has, as has been mentioned many times in this inquiry, a devastating effect on the families and in particular the children. When a father or mother goes to prison the children serve the sentence with them. Prison Fellowship's Extraordinary Lives program delivers a range of services to children with a parent in prison, aiming to prevent intergenerational cycles of crime. The core goal of the program is to build long-term positive peer and mentoring relationships to enhance children's connections with their families, with their communities and with their schools. Extraordinary Lives seeks to reduce children's sense of isolation and to build hope for a brighter future, ideally in which they can thrive. At this point I thought I might just hand over to Richard, who might just detail some of the specifics of the programs which sit underneath that Extraordinary Lives banner.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Glen.

**Mr BOONSTRA:** Thank you. Good morning, everyone. The Extraordinary Lives program cares for children in our care in five important ways. First of all: one-on-one mentoring. In our one-on-one mentoring program children are connected with a long-term, local mentor who will help guide, encourage and support them to more positively connect with their families, with their schools and with their local communities.

Mentors play a critical role in coaching, affirming and also modelling positive behaviour, with a hope that young people will make positive life choices and will steer away from following their parents into prison. Mentors help counteract negative pressures towards unhealthy relationships, drugs and alcohol. Our mentoring program here in Victoria is run in partnership with Temcare—an organisation who specialise in child mentoring and respite care. They train and equip Prison Fellowship volunteers, assist with making suitable matches and monitor mentoring relationships regularly. Our goal this year is to have 20 young people in mentoring relationships by the end of the year.

Another arm of this program is our Camp for Kids program. We find that many children of prisoners do not tell anyone about their parent in prison due to the shame and stigma attached to that. Through Camp for Kids children of prisoners are given the chance to meet with peers and mentors who understand their situation and who have experienced the same thing themselves. While having fun together through games and activities they build resilience and learn some new skills. This safe space allows for honest conversations and connections, helps reduce loneliness and builds, hopefully, long-term relationships and friendships. It is the hope that the leader and the camper interactions will develop into mentoring relationships. Many campers have gone on to become trainee leaders on subsequent camps, which I think is an amazing testimony to the program—that kids who have been on camps end up becoming leaders later on down the track.

The next one is the Angel Tree program, which was mentioned earlier in the introduction. In this program children will receive a Christmas gift at Christmas time on behalf of their parent in prison. This helps maintain the critical parental connection and lets the child know their parent still loves them and is thinking of them. Our catchphrase for this is ‘The children are never forgotten’. The Angel Tree program was originally pioneered by Mary Kay Beard in the US, who was serving an extraordinarily long sentence in prison. She used to watch women in her unit or in her prison gather soap, shampoo or toothpaste that they had received from charity groups. They would gather them up and wrap them as Christmas gifts so that when their kids came to visit them they would give them as a gift so that Mum could still give them a present. She vowed that she would do something for children who have an incarcerated parent once she was released from prison, and Prison Fellowship’s Angel Tree program is among her greatest legacies. How it works is that prisoners advise us of their children’s details via the prison management. They are vetted, and all the appropriate checks are done, and then supporters across Victoria purchase and send gifts to the children, with a parent in prison allocated to them.

Prison Fellowship has had the privilege of helping to facilitate in-prison Christmas parties at which some of the Angel Tree gifts have been distributed. These are always hugely impactful. This past Christmas, 2021, almost 1000 children in Victoria received a gift from their parent in prison. They were not forgotten. Feedback received after this past Christmas overwhelmingly speaks of the way in which this small gesture helps to keep families connected. Children are delighted when they receive a gift, knowing it is from their mum or dad in prison. ‘They didn’t forget about me’, they say.

When parents are in prison, children often experience feelings of abandonment and that they have been forgotten. Angel Tree helps to keep parents and children connected. For those young people who are being mentored through this program, Prison Fellowship also offers educational support and prison visit support where required. They are the final two parts of the Extraordinary Lives program. There for us to use if needed are educational support and prison visit support. Through this range of services, Extraordinary Lives enables children to build resilience, to achieve goals and to increase their community connections, developing a stronger platform for future success. Thank you, and I will hand it back to Glen.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Richard.

**Mr FAIRWEATHER:** I want to give an opportunity for Clarisa and Holly to speak now. As was mentioned at the beginning, they have lived experience, as two women who have grown up with a parent in prison, and they have also both got experience of various Prison Fellowship programs. Perhaps, Clarisa, if you want to go first.

**Ms ALLEN:** Sure. Hello, everyone. Thank you for this opportunity. My name is Clarisa, and my dad went to jail when I was four years old and my brother was five weeks old. I still remember the day that they came and they took him. They barged through the door and they came in running around and pushing us around. It was quite scary. I remember them smashing my guitar, and I remember smelling that wood from them

smashing my guitar. Funnily enough, every time I smell wood now I think of my guitar getting smashed. But I remember it was just really scary—lots of screaming, lots of shouting. My dad was in jail for nine years, and so we grew up going to all the different jails visiting him—maybe every week or every second week.

I remember it was only a couple of years ago, or maybe about five or six years ago, that I found out that it was actually through Prison Fellowship that I was a recipient from the Angel Tree program, and it was only a couple years ago that I found out that it was because of Prison Fellowship that we got presents from my dad. I did not know; I thought it was Dad giving us the presents. I had no idea that it was the Prison Fellowship. I remember receiving presents from Dad. I remember all the different jails and getting presents. I remember feeling like, ‘Wow! Dad didn’t forget about me. He actually thought about me and got me something’, and I still have some of those presents, because I was a little girl and it meant a lot to me—also my brother as well; both my brother and I got presents. It made us feel so loved and like we were not forgotten, because obviously we grew up with only one parent and we never really saw Dad, but getting something like that from Dad meant the world. Feeling like you are not forgotten and feeling like you are an actual person that is loved makes all the difference to a child—and to anyone really. But yes, when I did get the presents from Dad, it helped us feel closer to Dad, I guess, when he was in jail. It really just made a difference in our lives.

Prison Fellowship really supported my family. Along with a lot of other places that supported us as well, Prison Fellowship were a big part of our life and really supported us and came alongside us—my family and me. Prison Fellowship are part of why I am who I am today, and I am very grateful for it. Thank you. I hope I have said the right things.

**The CHAIR:** There was no right answer, but 100 per cent that was fantastic. Thank you, Clarisa.

**Ms ALLEN:** Thank you.

**Mr FAIRWEATHER:** Over to you, Holly.

**Ms NICHOLLS:** Hi, Fiona. Hi, everyone. For me and my experience of having my father in jail it was very multifaceted because my dad went to jail and then he started networking, I guess, with other incarcerated people and then sort of cycled into drug use and heavier crime. There was a lot of recidivism from his end, and when he would come home there was a lot of family violence. My mum had negative coping strategies. She would gamble away all our money when he got back—when he got released—because he was never around. He was always getting high on heroin. He would sell us these dreams and say, ‘We’re going to be a family again’. And my mum, when she was not gambling our money, when he was out, was sending it all to him anyway.

Being on a single income there was that material poverty and income poverty. I literally came from a broken home, in every sense of the word, because there were heaps of holes in our walls—nothing worked. It was just horrible to live there, and I never really felt safe, ever. I was always hypervigilant from all the trauma and watching my mum get really badly beaten all the time, so I had insomnia when I was little. And when I first came into contact with Prison Fellowship I was very antisocial and very aggressive because that was my safety mechanism. I actually ended up getting kicked out of the Prison Fellowship camp because I was very violent, but even when I aged out of the program I asked Glen, ‘Can I please come back?’ and he let me come back, so that was amazing.

But what I got from Prison Fellowship—they actually changed the trajectory of my life. They showed me what normal looked like. Because I thought being a punching bag was normal, I ended up in that whole cycle. My partner was violent as well because that is what I grew up with. But just to see positive coping strategies and going to church—I remember, Glen, I have never told you this before, we used to play this game where all our peers would compliment each other and say something nice. I feel like the whole cohort did not really have self-esteem, because when your parent keeps going to jail the lens becomes inward focused, and you think, ‘Why don’t you love me enough to be good, to not go to jail?’. So when we would play this game called Shooting Stars and we would all say something nice about each other it was amazing, because none of us really had a sense of self-esteem or self-worth. It was just incredible to hear all this strengths-based stuff, and it definitely changed our trajectories and, you know, started to build that self-worth and stuff like that.

I am just going to end now because I am getting a bit emotional. Also, I was an Angel Tree recipient, and I remember getting a Guess bag when I was 10 years old. I just never put that thing down until unfortunately my dad took it and sold it for drugs. Thank you, guys, for listening. I appreciate it.

**The CHAIR:** Oh, my gosh. Holly, thank you so much. That was incredible. You were getting emotional, but I can tell you this whole room is completely emotional after hearing you and Clarisa speak. Thank you. Glen, should I come back to you, or—

**Mr FAIRWEATHER:** I am getting a little bit emotional over here too.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. All right. We will take over now.

**Mr FAIRWEATHER:** Yes, that is fine. Look, I did not have anything else to say except again, just to reiterate, thank you to both of these amazing women. Holly reached out to me on LinkedIn a few weeks ago, and to see where she is at now has blown me away. So, yes, it is a real privilege to be able to play a small part in their lives. Happy to throw back to you and answer any questions that the committee might have.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Glen, and really, Holly and Clarisa—you were just superstars today. You really I think managed to encapsulate possibly what we all had been thinking and what we had all understood. But just to hear it straight from you is incredibly impactful and really, for me, just makes this job all the more important, and I feel privileged to have heard from you. Clarisa, could I ask you: in those nine years of travelling around visiting your father is there something that comes to mind that would have made those visits easier for you or easier for your family?

**Ms ALLEN:** Yes, for sure. Dad was moved to different prisons a lot of the time. I cannot remember how many prisons he was in, but he was in a lot of them. I remember sometimes we would be able to go either every week or every fortnight, and I remember being patted down. I was a little girl, and I remember how they would like pat me down and they put a wand on me, the prison officers. I remember being so scared sometimes of the prison guards because they were just so scary looking and really tough looking—just really stern. That was definitely scary. That is something that I remember. Maybe something that could help would be transport. Getting there was incredibly difficult sometimes, getting to the prisons. Sometimes we would not get to see Dad, because the cost of getting there was too expensive or it was too far to get there because he would be out in the country and we lived in Melbourne. Those two things definitely stand out in terms of just the feeling of going into a prison and being stared at and even, maybe it was for me, feeling like there is something wrong with me as well, like, ‘You’ve come here and your dad is in prison, so you’re suss as well’.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. You are treated with suspicion, aren’t you?

**Ms ALLEN:** Yes, exactly. I was little, and I still remember that feeling—feeling that intimidation and that bit of fear. Definitely the transport and being moved around everywhere and going into different places and just that feeling of going into the jail, that uncertain feeling I guess.

**The CHAIR:** I know it is a horrible question, but it must have been really hard doing that every weekend. Did it feel like a chore, or was it something where you had a great connection with your dad so it felt like something that you did want to do each week or each fortnight?

**Ms ALLEN:** Look, my mum is amazing. My mum is the one that would take my brother and I to see my dad, and she is the one that fought for us to have that little bit of a relationship. Our relationship with my dad at this point was not the best—like, all my memories as a kid are just violent and abusive—but even though that was our story, I still remember going to see Dad and loving it and loving getting that opportunity to see him and make the most of every opportunity. I remember sometimes we would be at home alone and Mum would go to work—it was just during school holidays—and I remember Dad would call us and we would be crying on the phone and saying, ‘We want Mum to come back home’. He was stuck in jail and he could not come home, and we would be crying on the phone and saying, ‘We want Mum to come home’. But despite everything we definitely wanted to be there. It did not feel like a chore. We made the most of the time that we did get. Sometimes the travelling there would be longer than the actual time we got to hang out with Dad, and then sometimes we would be separated by glass too. But we definitely wanted to be there and could not wait for it.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic, Clarisa. And to you, Holly, your dad was coming in out of prison. Your mum, as you said, was not coping—or I think you said ‘negatively’—or what she was doing to cope was not actually working. What could we have done to make it easier for you at the beginning? What could we have done to have made that better for your mum and better for you? Are there things that, if you had it again, you would want?

**Ms NICHOLLS:** Yes. I mean, I think, looking on a larger picture, just having more trauma-informed professionals. Like, when I think about going to school, none of my teachers ever asked me, ‘Are you okay?’. They just sort of sort of labelled me as naughty, but I just needed help and I needed someone to just sort of explain to me, ‘Look, this isn’t your fault. This doesn’t mean your dad doesn’t love you’. Like Clarisa was saying, with the guards as well, I think they definitely, because your parent is incarcerated, treat you with—is it malice? They are pretty mean and full on, and you are just a little kid. So just I guess more trauma-informed professionals, really, would have been helpful for me. That is what Glen is for, you know. That is what Prison Fellowship is for, I think.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, I know. And if we could just have a few more Glens in this world, obviously—one for every household. It sounds like that is what is required.

So in the fact that your mum kind of was not coping at home—were there other supports that we should have offered your mum as well so she could feel stronger to parent you and to make sure that you felt safe?

**Ms NICHOLLS:** No. I do not think I can answer that. I have no idea. I think my mum, her values were just—I do not know. They just were not great. That is all. I do not know what help you guys could have provided, to be honest.

**The CHAIR:** Holly and Clarisa, just from the bottom of my heart, thank you so much. You just providing us with the reason for why we are doing this is really tremendous. If I could just quickly ask Glen and Richard: you talk about that you are able to provide gifts, I think, to 1000 children through the Angel Tree; do you know how many children could benefit from your service out there? Do you have a number?

**Mr FAIRWEATHER:** In terms of Victoria, no. I do not believe statistics like that are kept in terms of prisoner intake, and I also understand anecdotally from a lot of prisoners that they just do not share that kind of information when they do enter the system, in terms of how many children they might have. Angel Tree is a program that we offer across the whole system in Victoria, and we certainly—and have done for decades—have met every request received. So there is no shortage in terms of the ability to meet that specific need in terms of Angel Tree. So I would think that there would be at least double that in terms of numbers of children of parents in prison. I do not know that there are statistics available on that.

**Mr BOONSTRA:** And I have the feeling that last Christmas—the one that has just gone—that the number I quoted was lower than we have done in the past. I do not have numbers at my fingertips, but I know that it was easily more than 1000 children in previous years that we have given gifts to.

**The CHAIR:** Well, and Guess handbags, they are some excellent gifts. It sounds like it is very thoughtful gift giving. Thank you. I will give the opportunity to my other colleagues. Deputy Chair Tien Kieu.

**Dr KIEU:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Holly and Clarisa, for sharing your personal stories. We much appreciate that, and also that will make a big difference to the inquiry and also to the people—to the children—who have parents incarcerated. I just want to also thank Prison Fellowship Australia for the amazing work you are doing. I have a few questions, but let me start with a simple one first: for Prison Fellowship Australia, how do you get your funding? Is it from some of the levels of government or is it entirely on donation?

**Mr FAIRWEATHER:** It is certainly predominantly donations. About 75 per cent of our funding comes from individual donors. We do apply to a number of philanthropic trusts and foundations, especially in this area. It is an area where there perhaps is more available funding through philanthropics than for our work, say, inside the prison. But yes, it is predominantly donations through individuals with some trusts and foundations supporting it. There is no government money that we receive for the services we provide.

**Dr KIEU:** Thank you. This question is also for you, Glen and Richard, but particularly for Clarisa and Holly. You have touched upon being bullied because your parents were incarcerated. Nowadays also social

media is very widely spread. Is there anything we could or should do to support people or children who have parents incarcerated to cope and to deal with that bullying, either in person or online? You mentioned that in schools you did not get the support that you should have in order to stand up and understand that this was nothing of your own doing, it was just because the circumstance happened for your parents. Particularly with social media—to Glen and Richard too—how could we deal with that to support those children?

**Mr FAIRWEATHER:** Clarisa or Holly, do you want to say anything in that space first?

**Ms NICHOLLS:** Yes. Thank you, Glen. I think we need to destigmatise having a parent in prison. I mean, like someone said earlier, it is not very talked about. I made the mistake of telling someone in primary school and I did get bullied for it, and I did not really understand why. It seems to be very hidden. I feel like we need to start having conversations about it, because I do not really understand where the stigma comes from, and just more trauma-informed care.

**Ms ALLEN:** I 100 per cent agree with what Holly said. I remember being bullied at school from when people were like, ‘You’ve got one parent. You don’t have your dad around. Like, ha-ha’, and also me not understanding, ‘Why are you saying that?’—not understanding why. This was our normal—to have our dad, to have one parent. That was our normal. Even nowadays when people ask me questions about my mum and dad, I will say, ‘I grew up with my dad in jail’, and they will go, ‘What?’, taken aback, shocked. Definitely just take that stigma off that, maybe even with the school. I remember being bullied by teachers in primary school because my dad was not around and just being treated differently. Just more support, more informed—I do not know how you can put it, but just more support and more love, grace, from people. Yes. These days social media puts a whole other spin on it. We did not have social media when we were in primary school. Social media is a whole other game.

**Mr FAIRWEATHER:** Just to pick up on something that was said there, I think these are single-parent families but they are not single-parent families. So there is a really unique dynamic in these families where parents may still be together, technically—the relationship is together—and yet one parent does not live at home. That puts a whole lot of unique pressure on that relationship, and obviously the children feel the impact of that. I would say one of the great benefits of our camping program, as much as it can be an intense environment, which Holly has attested to, when you take a lot of kids in this scenario away together, is to have them come together and not be the one out in their school or their sporting club or in their community. Our camps do not major on the fact that their parents are in prison, that is for sure, but they are aware that every other child who has come away for this five-day camping experience is living in a similar boat. There is a genuine sense of relief and burden lifted in those kinds of environments, because this is not something that needs to be hidden, to feel guilty about or to have all those usual pressures that are there. Holly’s experience is quite typical in that you make the mistake, as she said, of sharing it with one friend once and you learn very quickly that that is not the best thing to be doing, so you then hide it through the rest of your time growing up. To be in an environment where it is not taboo and you are not unique or the one out, that there are other kids in your situation, is incredibly beneficial, I feel.

**Dr KIEU:** Do we have time, or maybe we should come back?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, we will circle back.

**Dr KIEU:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** I am going to Cathrine, then I am going to Rod.

**Ms BURNETT-WAKE:** Okay, thank you. Holly and Clarisa, thank you so much for sharing your stories. It was—Fiona was right; I had tears in my eyes—so very, very impactful, and it really does help us overall to really understand and hopefully come up with really good insight in our recommendations as well as we move forward. Clarisa, a question for you. You said that you spent quite a lot of time visiting prisons. Some of the evidence that we have heard from other people talked about having spaces specifically for family visiting. Did any of the prisons have that that you visited, and do you think that having a place specifically where children can go so they do not encounter the issues that you talked about, like being patted down and that fear from the guards, would be useful?

**Ms ALLEN:** I think that would make 100 per cent difference to a child's experience when they go into a jail. I remember at one of the jails all the people that were visiting had to walk as a group through the prison to get to the visiting centre, and we had to walk past all the units and the prisoners. They would be in their units. I remember having to walk through the prison to get to the visiting centre. I remember one time we went to visit Dad, and he was beat up and they had shaved his head. All the prisoners, because they were around, were watching to see our reaction, and I remember Dad saying, 'Just chill. Act chill. Don't act like anything has happened. Just act normal, because they're watching to see what your reaction is'. And I remember just being so shocked and completely dumbfounded. I did not know how to react; I just started to cry. It is what it is. But definitely, 100 per cent: if there was a safe area for kids that did not have to be exposed to that, even though they are exposed to so much already, as a young kid having their parent away and living the lives that they are living, to have it that little bit easier on them when they do go to jail would make such a difference. We both have experience of the guards patting us down and intimidating us and walking through prisons and stuff. If those kids did not have to deal with that—and those things bring up the feelings that you not sure about—of course that would make such a difference, and such a positive difference, to a kid, I think.

**Ms BURNETT-WAKE:** Thank you, Clarisa. Richard, I actually have a question for you, if I may. You mentioned that with the mentoring program you are hoping to get 20 more mentors this year. I was just curious: where do you get the mentors from? Where do they come from? How do you find them?

**Mr BOONSTRA:** Okay, so we draw our mentors from volunteers—people that are interested in volunteering with us—and they go through a process, through the relevant checks that we have, and then we partner with, as I said, Temcare. Then they are recommended to Temcare, then Temcare take them on and train them even further and then they go on to mentoring. Often they will start as camp leaders as well. So they will develop a relationship with a young person in the camp and then go on to continue to be long-term—or for however long-term mentors in that relationship. Through our networks of volunteers and within groups of people we know that there may be people who would be interested in mentoring, so we approach them and see if they also want to come and join us as volunteers and become trained to become a mentor.

**Ms BURNETT-WAKE:** Okay. Thank you, Richard.

**The CHAIR:** Rod.

**Mr BARTON:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, ladies. Every one of us here wants to make a difference. We want to make a change. This is a very serious subject for us here. I want to ask you some questions, and I do not want to upset you, because it will upset me, so please, if I am going somewhere—just say, 'I'd rather not', okay? I just want to ask you, maybe, Clarisa, first: do you still have a relationship with your father?

**Ms ALLEN:** Not really. We have had restraining orders and whatnot. Prison changed my dad. My dad was already not a very nice person, but—not really. I have a 'hi and a hello and a goodbye' sort of relationship.

**Mr BARTON:** Okay, and with Mum?

**Ms ALLEN:** Yes, with my mum. Yes—I live with my mum.

**Mr BARTON:** Good. All right, and Holly, do you have a relationship with your father?

**Ms NICHOLLS:** My father is deceased now. He had a heroin overdose.

**Mr BARTON:** I am sorry.

**Ms NICHOLLS:** That is fine—circle of life. But I honestly hated him. I hated him because I feel like he destroyed our family and I just watched my mum, you know, get hurt all the time—not just physically but emotionally. He just drained her, and I hated him. And he was around till the day he died because Mum still loved him for some weird reason, but I could not stand him.

**Mr BARTON:** It is such a challenge when couples are in a relationship where it is just toxic for both of them.

**Ms NICHOLLS:** Yes, that is the word.

**Mr BARTON:** Yes. But what we want to do, and because you two ladies are so brave to help tell this story, is that we want to make some recommendations to the government that are going to change kids' lives. Where we have not been able to intervene when you were little, perhaps we are going to be able to intervene when some other kids are little. Just in terms of how you coped at school, you have said that you would try and keep it a secret. Did you actively go out and say—you would not tell your mates at school that Dad was incarcerated? Either one of you.

**Ms NICHOLLS:** Well, for me, yes, I just made the mistake in primary school of telling people. When I speak to not having self-worth and a lack of identity, I used to tell people, 'Hi, I'm Holly. I don't have a dad'. So I stopped doing that. I did not do that in high school. I did not tell. I did not make that introduction because I was a bit more mature, but yes, I definitely kept it under wraps in different environments. Once it got out at primary school it was a bit late, but, yes, definitely.

**Ms ALLEN:** We would tell people. Like I said, it was normal, I guess. We did not really know anything. We would just tell anyone. I would not necessarily hide it from people. Even though I had bad experiences with telling people, I would still just tell people if they asked and whatnot.

**Mr BARTON:** We made some visits to prisons recently, and we met some fathers who actually did not have their kids come and visit them at all. As you were growing up, did you know other kids who did that? And the fathers did it on purpose because they did not want their kids to come to the jail. Have you come across that?

**Ms NICHOLLS:** Yes. I know people that think their dads are in the army and stuff. And I am just like, 'Okay'. I am not going to explain it to them.

**Mr FAIRWEATHER:** We would have families call us semi-regularly who find themselves in this situation. Often wives or partners say, 'Look, how do I navigate this with my kids?'. And often it is dependent on the age of the child as to how up-front they are. Some families make that decision that not visiting is the best. You were talking about longer sentences. Certainly research would suggest that family and community connection are the biggest indicators of whether someone is going to return to the prison system or not, in terms of recidivism. If we look to Scandinavian countries et cetera with quite progressive correctional systems, family engagement is encouraged, to the point, I understand, that in some countries low-risk offenders are returning home on the weekends and then going back to the prison during the week.

So we understand as an organisation that works on both sides of the prison wall, if you like, that security is always the most significant element that a prison has to consider. However, that can lead to some unimaginative thinking, I think, in terms of how we look at rehabilitation and how we look at the families of offenders and how we can best ensure not just the benefit to the family longer term, but if you have got a healthy family, a functioning family, you are much more likely to see positive recidivism rates.

**Mr BARTON:** Exactly.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Nina Taylor.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Thank you so much. Just like my colleagues, I felt incredibly moved and teary from all the sharing that has gone on today. So thank you so much, because it must be very hard to be that candid about things so personal, but it is incredibly powerful. And apologies, I am using my phone because I type notes on there, because then they do not get lost. If I use this, the notes disappear. So I did not want it to look impersonal, but that is why I have been looking at my phone. I just wanted to make that clear.

So you have already answered one of the questions I had about breaking the cycle of intergenerational trauma and recidivism. I know that cannot be oversimplified; there is a lot to that. But really zoning in on this issue of stigma, I was thinking, 'Well, there are many other aspects of human existence where stigma has been trumped or reduced significantly'. Did you have ideas about how that might be tackled?

**The CHAIR:** I wonder, Holly, if you have some thoughts. Certainly you spoke considerably about that stigma.

**Ms NICHOLLS:** I mean, one way to do it would just be like to visually see it. Maybe, you know—

**The CHAIR:** Like what you are doing right now?

**Ms NICHOLLS:** No, I mean like you see at bus stops. Like, advertising and whatever, and you will see a family. I do not know. Is there a way to visualise someone that is incarcerated as well? I guess it just feels so hidden. We just need to see it, if that makes sense. I think that is the easiest way.

**Mr FAIRWEATHER:** I think I have seen one, maybe two little segments of *Sesame Street* that highlight this issue, actually, in the last 15 or so years that I have been at Prison Fellowship. So it can come down to that kind of level where it is being normalised, even two puppets talking to each other—someone, a young puppet, with Dad, who is not around, and they have this conversation at a very preschool kind of level. But building that in to younger audiences I think certainly would help the lived experiences of kids like Holly and Clarisa.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Yes, and I was thinking even just the sharing of the stories and people understanding the pain might be a way of mitigating or reducing some of the judgement, because it is really judgement, isn't it, and almost ignorance or a lack of understanding. I do not want to judge in saying that, but at the risk of being wrong—I am not a psychologist—it seems like it is just not understanding what Holly and Clarisa are going through, really. Maybe it is sometimes that simple. But anyway, thank you so much—incredible, what you are doing.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Nina. I think carrying on from that question about what we as a committee can make as recommendations, what sort of recommendations do you think—and certainly I take your point, Glen, about looking at jurisdictions where incarceration is used as reluctantly as possible and that we look at other ways to ensure that we maintain those family connections, because we know that those family connections keep people out of prison. But are there any really strong recommendations that you think we should make to the government about how we can improve this? Are there legislative reforms that we should make? Are there architectural reforms that we should make around prisons? I am open to any suggestions, and I am opening that to Glen, Richard, Holly and Clarisa.

**Ms NICHOLLS:** If I could just speak to this first really quickly, I just think, based on what I and Clarisa have said, that it is important that guards and even the police—they smashed your guitar, like, how horrible. We had our front door kicked off; anyone could have just walked into our house, and we were just little kids. If they can hold children's safety in their practice—yes, okay, our parents stuffed up, they did the wrong thing. Be mad at them. Focus that attention on them. We were just little kids and we got caught up in it, and I am still paying for it now. So holding our safety in their practice and just keeping Prison Fellowship going, because they have a really good model of care. It is crazy. I am practising as a social worker, and I do not think I have ever met anyone that has the skill base and compassion that the volunteers on those camps have. No-one can match it; it is crazy. So just making sure that they stay up and running and keep extending and extending to help kids like us, because they are changing lives. We need them.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Holly.

**Mr BOONSTRA:** I would just add probably being more creative. As Glen mentioned before, we have a more punitive system in terms of treating people in prison—but being more creative around sentencing so that perhaps not every offender needs to go to prison. We would look at ways to keep families together, look at home detention ideas or other creative ways of keeping families together, perhaps conjugal visits while they are in prison, or family visits—whatever; looking more creatively at that and keeping more people out of prison rather than putting more people in prison. I think it is scary to think that they are thinking of building another prison. I think it should be the other way; we should be closing prisons down if we can.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Thank you.

**Mr FAIRWEATHER:** I think I would suggest that some of my best experiences in the prison have been when we have helped prisons facilitate those Christmas parties. Those program managers did an amazing job inside prison in the way that they basically, within whatever budgets they were given, were able to bring in petting zoos, fairy floss machines, jumping castles and things like that for kids to have a fantastic experience with Dad for that couple of hours and for us to be able to provide some volunteers and some face painters and Angel Tree gifts et cetera into that environment. But I know that there were several prisons in the system, when I was Victorian state manager, that wanted to do something or would have loved to have done something like that but literally did not have the space. Fiona, you mentioned the architecture of the prisons. I mean, they are

not built with families in mind. Certainly the historic buildings that we have, ones that were built 20 or 30-plus years ago, were not built with that in mind. Now, I think some of the newer prisons have done a much better job in that space. If I think about Marnongoneet or if I think about the new Hopkins facility et cetera, there are much better spaces that are more family friendly than perhaps at Port Phillip Prison, for example, which is much older. Obviously some thought has gone into that, but there could be some more thinking around that. Perhaps there are ways that visits can happen on the outside of the prison or in a purpose-built facility, which could mean that families are not having to go through the gatehouse.

I mean, I speak about the joy of those Christmas parties, but to get into some of those Christmas parties I, together with my volunteers and together with the families who were waiting to get in, had to stand in a line and have the sniffer dogs come up and down. Some of the sniffer dogs were larger than the children they were sniffing, so that can be a pretty intimidating experience for a toddler to have a dog in their face. Again, I appreciate the balance between security needs and trying to create a positive environment, so none of this is in criticism of the system. But I think, yes, some more imaginative ideas around how we can create facilities that are able to facilitate those engagements so that children's experiences are more positive and families' experiences are more positive could be some great things.

The one other thing I would say in terms of a recommendation is around longevity in this space. We have deliberately taken a decision as an organisation not just to offer the Angel Tree presents and the camp experience, which is what we have done for 20-plus years, but to build in that mentoring and to work more intensely over a longer period of time with young people in this situation, because this is a day in, day out thing for them, and so to provide a consistent adult for them who is able to walk a longer journey and help them make more positive life decisions.

It is an amazing credit to Holly. She had some mentors through Prison Fellowship in her life, but the way that she has been able to go down a path of education and find herself now as a practising youth worker and social worker is just incredible. I think we could see many more examples like Holly if we had more volunteers working with these young people over the longer journey, and that would mean that volunteers are engaging with the families as well. I often say to our volunteers working in this space that they are really family mentors, they are not just child mentors, because there is a lot of work that often needs to be done with Mum or whoever else is in the family as well. But with that longevity the challenge is the funding opportunities are often short term, whereas the needs are long term.

Just last week we made a decision not to apply for some government funding in another jurisdiction, because they were looking to fund one-off, short-term projects in this space, and we just thought, 'Well, that's just going to set us up'. If we establish 10 mentoring relationships between kids and young people over the course of 12 months—and explicit in that state government application process was that this was to fund a one-off or a short-term project—how do we continue that on unless we lean further and more onto our donors? They are some of the challenges, but in terms of a recommendation I would say: see this as a long-term thing. Clarisa talked about the fact that her dad went to prison when was four, so how do we walk a decade-long, at least, journey with her and others?

**The CHAIR:** Glen, I think there is a whole inquiry, there is a whole body of work, to be done on short-term funding and government short-term contracts and the impacts—generally negative—that they have. Clarisa, did you have any brilliant ideas for us? I mean, you have already given me numerous brilliant ideas.

**Ms ALLEN:** Everyone that said something was brilliant. I was just, while they were talking, trying to think through something positive when we went to the jail, when we visited Dad. The only two positives that I can come up with are: yes, we got to spend time with Dad together; and the other one was getting the presents via Angel Tree. Those are the moments that I remember leaving the jail feeling different. It hits differently. I definitely agree with Holly: please keep Prison Fellowship. They were the only initiative that helped families. If there were other initiatives for families that are stuck—like, there were so many times when my mum and I were stuck for, I do not know, groceries or something, because of single income. It was tough, and we would struggle. I do not know if there would be initiatives for families in that situation that could reach out, especially if you include families that have someone in jail, and for the kids to reach out. I know Prison Fellowship, they do an incredible job, but yes, if Prison Fellowship could be around forever and keep making the impact that they are making, because they impacted my life and I would not be who I am today, honestly, if it was not for the love that I received via them. Feeling loved is a very important story.

**The CHAIR:** You guys are just so amazing.

**Ms ALLEN:** Sorry, my puppy just came in here.

**The CHAIR:** You can show us your puppy if you like, Clarisa.

**Ms ALLEN:** Would you like to see her?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, we would.

**Ms ALLEN:** She is right here.

**The CHAIR:** Hello. Just play with the ball.

**Ms ALLEN:** She is focusing on the ball.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. More puppies for all. Tien.

**Dr KIEU:** I have a quick question. Thank you very much for the amazing and incredible work you are doing for Prison Fellowship. Not just for the people in prison but also for the children in particular, do you have any projects or programs to follow up and provide some support for post release, particularly for family reconciliation, or is it too difficult because of the lack of long-term funding, as you have just mentioned?

**Mr FAIRWEATHER:** Specifically for family reconciliation we do not, but we do have a program we call T24 specifically working in that transition period. Because we have in-prison volunteers as well, they often work with prisoners pre release and then offer that follow-up support post release where that is requested from the inmate. We acknowledge that we are not professionals in this space. In fact in our MOU with Corrections Victoria we talk about 'professional friendship'. We are not case managers, we are not seeking to offer therapeutic services in that sense, but what we do have is well-trained community volunteers who offer those ongoing friendships, which can just be the pressure release valve that is needed either inside or once an inmate is released where they can vent or where they can find someone who is not going to judge them for where they have been or what they have done, to be able to unpack what the issues are of that week in a safe space so that they can perhaps be a better dad or, yes, a better parent. So that is a program we did have. It offers transport, where that cannot be found by the prison system, to accommodation on the day of release. It was briefly funded by Corrections Victoria through the Pip Wisdom funding, and it was determined that that was not going to continue. So we have continued it—probably a slightly scaled-down version of it now, but there are still prisons that call on us regularly to offer that kind of transitional support.

**Mr BOONSTRA:** And we do have groups of our volunteers who have had relationships with people in prison, and once they have been released they have maintained that relationship, as Glen mentioned, on the outside. But it has been a more organic thing, so it has come as the need arises—as people desire that connection. Often people coming out of prison would not like to see the volunteers anymore because it reminds them of prison; they want to be finished with that part of their life. We understand that, and we do not push that on them, but it is there for our volunteers. If a person coming out wants contact, wants to have some support, we do look to see what we can do on a more as-the-need-arises or case-by-case basis.

But it is lovely to see. There is one person that comes to mind. When he got out, the volunteers followed him up for coffees and they took him out for lunch. They found that he had got a job and that he was well situated in terms of accommodation, so they kept reporting to us and saying how they had good contact with him throughout the weeks and months following his release. It is great to see that happening in a natural kind of way.

**Dr KIEU:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Rod.

**Mr BARTON:** Thank you, Chair. I just wanted to say, about the funding, I have a sneaking suspicion that for either one or two of us, whoever gets back in next term, there may be an inquiry into short-term funding for 12 months a time. We may be looking at something like that. We think it is a huge issue. You need to have funding which is appropriate. If we look at how we actually deal with people in incarceration and if we can

reduce the amount of people that we are putting in incarceration, that will actually start saving the government some money there, and we need to spend that other money on supporting the families.

But I just want to say to the girls: this is a step in Victoria. We are having an inquiry here. There is a conversation going on, and this is something that has been close to me for 40 years. What we see here now is a conversation. The Victorian Parliament is going to get a set of recommendations. We can tell you that New South Wales is also moving along with their set of recommendations. There is a conversation in this country that is going to change people's lives, and you have been part of it, so thank you very much.

**Ms NICHOLLS:** Thank you.

**Ms ALLEN:** Thanks.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Rod. Nina, did you have a final question or comment?

**Ms TAYLOR:** Oh, just gratitude for the incredible work of Fellowship but also to Clarisa and Holly. That was incredibly moving but also very constructive—really helpful—because it is really practical stuff that we can take on board. I appreciate that and their having the courage to share with us. You know, I really do not know, but today must be really, really hard, so thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Nina. I think we all echo that. You know, this is not a game of compliments. We truly, truly are just blown away by your clarity and your passion and, as Nina said, the constructive ideas that you have given us to consider. That concludes this session. I would just like to thank all of you so much for spending time with us today. We have really appreciated it. I think it has given us a significant insight as well, and I put that to you, Holly and Clarisa. You have provided us with not being able to walk in your shoes but certainly a much greater understanding about what it means to be someone who has a parent in prison. Thank you both. Thank you, Richard and Glen. Again, thank you for the work you do but also the time that you have given us today and your insights.

As I mentioned at the outset, you will receive a transcript of today. Please do have a look at it and just make sure that we did not mishear you or misrepresent anything that you said today. Again, thanks very much. The committee will return at 1 o'clock.

**Witnesses withdrew.**