

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Children Affected by Parental Incarceration

Melbourne—Thursday, 31 March 2022

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Dr Samantha Ratnam

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WITNESSES

Mr Marius Smith, Chief Executive Officer,

Ms Melanie Field-Pimm, Development Manager, and

Ms Romy Same, Parents and Family Counsellor, Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome back. As I am sure you are aware, this is the public hearing for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Children Affected by Parental Incarceration.

We are very pleased to now be joined by VACRO, and with us today we have Marius Smith, the CEO; Melanie Field-Pimm, the Development Manager; and Romy Same, the Parents and Family Counsellor. Thank you all for joining us today, and again thank you for joining us for almost every inquiry that we have done this term.

I know that you have heard this before, but if I can just let you know that all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is provided by our *Constitution Act* but also by the standing orders of our Legislative Council. This means that any information that you provide here 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 thing, you may not have the same protection. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

As you also would be aware, we are live streaming today. This is a public hearing, but we are also transcribing today. You will receive a transcript of this hearing. I would encourage you to have a look at it and make sure that we did not mishear you or misrepresent anything that you said, because ultimately that transcript will form part of our report but will also be on the committee's website for all to read.

We would welcome some opening comments, and then we will open up for a committee discussion.

Mr SMITH: Thank you, Chair. We will split it up. We will all say a few words to open. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today, the people of the Kulin nations, and paying my respects to their elders past, present and emerging and also acknowledging the work done by our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers and the Aboriginal community-based organisations that we work with.

Some members may recall that when we appeared before the same committee for the inquiry into the criminal justice system we did include a participant of ours with lived experience of prison. Given the short time frame, unfortunately we were unable to do the same today, but Romy in particular will be able to speak with great depth about the experiences of many of her clients.

VACRO is celebrating its 150th anniversary this year. We are a specialist criminal justice reintegration service provider, and we are the largest provider in Victoria of services specifically for the children and family of people in prison. The wellbeing of these children and families is one of our most important responsibilities. More than a third of prison entrants and nearly half of Indigenous prison entrants are parents, and most of those parents in prison are men. The imprisonment of a parent can be so traumatic for children that it is categorised as an 'adverse childhood experience' that can lead to future health and social problems and even the child's own offending behaviour. For parents, the pain of separation from family has been described by researchers as a defining feature of prison life, yet maintaining family relationships during imprisonment is critical for children and for their parents. Unfortunately the system does not provide adequate support for these families, and that is why VACRO is currently finalising its vision for how families in contact with the criminal justice system should be supported from the time of appearance and arrest, through the court process and imprisonment and back into the community. We will include this vision as an appendix to our subsequent submission, and Melanie will explain a bit more about it in a second.

One key issue that we have is that no government department has a clear mandate to support the families of incarcerated people, and little or no formal data is collected about them. Our most pressing ask of this inquiry is that you recommend that this issue be resolved, and we believe that the Department of Families, Fairness and

Housing would be the best department to take on this group as a constituency, given its expertise in supporting families with complex needs. Although we are currently drafting our submission, we have already provided the committee with an evaluation of our Family Links program, which previously ran at the Geelong Magistrates Court, and evaluation of our video visits pilot program, which is now funded by Corrections Victoria, and we would be happy to answer questions about those programs. I will pass over to Romy.

Ms SAME: Thank you, Marius, and thank you, committee. I will briefly run you through our family services and VACRO's approach to therapeutic work with families. Since 2009 VACRO has supported Victorian women in prison to connect with their children via video visits technology. Our family visits program currently operates at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre and Tarrengower Prison. VACRO's family workers facilitate these video visits between prisoners and their families and provide socioemotional support, both prior to and after the visits. Strong family connections and positive new identities are important factors that can reduce a person's risk of reoffending and ease the transition from prison back to the community.

VACRO has provided child-centred family counselling since the 1990s to the most vulnerable children and currently operates two family counselling programs: the parents and families program, running at the Judy Lazarus Transition Centre and Tarrengower Prison, and the Supporting Kids and Families program, running at the Beechworth Correctional Centre. Both programs are delivered by VACRO's specialist family therapists, including me, using a combination of individual and family-based therapeutic counselling sessions, parent-child interactions and facilitated family meetings. The programs create a space for people to express their fears, work through their problems and build resilience as they prepare for a family member's release from prison. Correctional staff professional development, parent education and school holiday programs are also part of these programs.

At Tarrengower VACRO can provide holistic support to the women enrolled in the family visits, the video visits program and also the family counselling program. The family counsellor can devise strategies for strengthening their family relationships, and then they can practice these strategies during the family visits program. Staff from both programs work closely to ensure a consistent approach, which adapts with the participant's progress over time, and we believe this is a model for family support across the prison system.

Supporting Kids and Families was introduced to Beechworth prison during COVID restrictions and runs via video link with a VACRO counsellor based in Melbourne. This approach enables us to extend the reach of the program, and when participants are transferred to other prisons the program is able to follow them, ensuring that their preparation for release as well as post-release family support can continue uninterrupted.

Since 2003 the Aboriginal family visits program has been available to families of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people imprisoned in all Victorian adult correctional facilities. Many families are impacted by distance and economic circumstances, which can further fray family relationships during imprisonment. Funded by Corrections Victoria, this program provides travel and accommodation assistance to enable families to travel the long distances to see their loved ones to keep that connection alive.

To finish off our opening statement, I will hand over to my colleague Melanie Field-Pimm to talk about our vision for how children and families of people in prison should be supported by government.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: Thanks, Romy. VACRO's vision is for a criminal justice system that supports the families of the people who move through it, as children do not exist in a vacuum. Families and children must be recognised as a valid client group by the Victorian government, and government should adopt again an interdepartmental, systems planning approach to policy and service provision to address the needs and the rights of families in contact with this system. Policy and service intervention should focus on both justice-involved people and their families and use relational models not just parenting models while focusing on protecting and respecting children's rights.

We believe a broad definition of 'family' should be used to recognise all family types. Across the span of arrest, trial, prison and re-entering the community, families should have access to services that strengthen their relationships with each other, should recognise trauma and reduce intergenerational offending. Our vision calls for families to be considered at the point of arrest, with police using family-aware arrest protocols, identifying caring responsibilities and providing justice system information and broader referrals than just child protection, to be identified at the time of trial and provided with local linkage services; during incarceration, a family-

inclusive approach that includes family-centred case work, family connection programs, family therapy and recognising fathers. This will improve family reunification, with families involved in release planning and able to continue reintegration from a family-centred framework. None of this can occur unless families are visible at the systems level. So in addition to the DFFH taking responsibility for this cohort, we are calling for integrated data collection across systems. Again, our submission will present this vision in more detail.

But we want to finish our opening statement with this: international research shows that exposure to family member incarceration found families consistently rated their health and wellbeing lower than others, even when taking into consideration factors such as race, household income, gender and age; the type of interaction children have with the justice system shapes their views, in particular of police; and parental imprisonment is associated with a fivefold increase in exposure to other adverse childhood experiences. So maintaining and strengthening family relationships, especially between incarcerated parents and their children and the carers of their children, can therefore have psychological benefits for families and help recidivism.

So while Corrections Victoria has been investing in family support for women, and we are really pleased to partner in this, there continues to be unmet need, particularly the yawning gap in men's prisons. We would like to see family therapy and family visit services extended to all correctional facilities, recognising their importance to desistance and the wellbeing of the families and children. Thank you very much for your time, and we welcome any questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am pleased from the outset that I do not have to ask for the whole-of-system solution to this, because it sounds like we are going to get that answer in your submission, and you have touched on it, which is terrific. I wonder, Marius, to start with, when we talk about that intergovernmental approach and the absolute requirement, because this is across government, can you think of any other examples where governments have done this and have done this well?

Mr SMITH: I am not aware of it. It might be a question I throw to Mel.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: Take it on notice.

The CHAIR: You can say no.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: No.

The CHAIR: No, no, do not be sorry. It might be that it has not been done well ever.

Mr SMITH: Yes. We are developing for our submission an overview of other family services in other jurisdictions that are good and worth considering. We will probably just expand that out. So I think that is useful for us to think about—to see whether we can identify, you know, good government-wide responses.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: The closest one possibly would be the family violence information-sharing systems and processes.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. I think it is helpful when trying to show governments that this is possible and that this is not something that is just too big and too hard—we can show that they have been able to do it before.

Mr SMITH: Yes. And that is an example of something that required a bit of a paradigm shift, and I think from our point of view as a service provider has been incredibly valuable. We work with perpetrators and survivors of family violence. It just gives you a more nimble response that you can make when you can liaise with other organisations and with the government.

The CHAIR: And just on that, we heard from Shine this morning, and they talked about a number of their services, mainly down in Barwon—down there. They said they do not have much insight into the women's—so Tarrengower or DPFC. Do your services interact with Shine, or do they run parallel? Are they similar?

Mr SMITH: Not so much. I think you have identified the main reason for that—that our family services predominately run at the women's prisons plus the Judy Lazarus Transition Centre, which is for men, and Beechworth via video. But we have not had much interaction.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: No, and I think they suffer—experience similar issues to us, where we develop concepts and ideas. We get the philanthropic funding and implement and pilot them ourselves, which means we are doing bits and pieces of work in various realms. We have been lucky. Two of our family services we ran that way, and they now are funded by Corrections Victoria, which is fantastic, but still very minimally.

The CHAIR: Just for the sake of the hearing could you tell us just briefly a little bit about Family Links, because it has been mentioned to us a couple of times, and what the evaluation found?

Mr SMITH: Yes. Mel, do you want to take that?

Ms FIELD-PIMM: The concept is really around early intervention for the families. We tried to look at what that might look like at the point of arrest for police, but it was a much larger, harder task to do, so we have looked at it at the point of court, because that is picking up those families who are likely to have someone—

The CHAIR: Be sentenced.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: get sentenced to incarceration. Having these institutions that are quite contained means there is this place where there are a whole bunch of processes in there already, and it was about embedding ourselves into that process so that either defendants themselves can self-identify their families, magistrates can identify the families, lawyers can identify them, the Salvation Army who are at all the courts, or the Court Network. So there are a whole range of referral inputs—the mental health workers, the family violence workers, the CISP program. There are lots and lots of referral points that can get to us. It is really short-term intervention because the families are in the community. We are going, ‘What’s going on? What’s likely to fall over?’, which might be the housing if the housing was in that individual’s name. It might be what is happening for the child, because it is so distressing what is going on and school starts falling over—their behaviour. It is getting them referred into the services that that family needs to not fall over at that point, so it stops it so much earlier.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Cathrine.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: I have always got questions. First of all, congratulations on 150 years this year.

Mr SMITH: Thank you.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: Obviously it is a very effective service to have been around for such a long time. You must have a lot of corporate knowledge built up over the years. That brings me to one of the things that I have been thinking about. You are obviously an effective service because you have been around for a long time. But not all services are equal, so how can we evaluate the effectiveness of services provided to support children? That is a big question.

Mr SMITH: I will have a go first. I think that is talked about in relation to the Family Violence Information Sharing Scheme—the requirement that talks of a paradigm shift—and it is a bit the same here. We spoke in the opening statement, and we will certainly address it in our submission, about the lack of data, which is a starting point. If you are not collecting data and you are not making data available, you are not analysing data and you do not really know what the outcomes are. For us, that is an essential change that needs to happen right across the criminal justice system, whether that is family programs or employment programs or general reintegration programs or AOD programs. I do not pretend that it would not be a huge task, but I think it is one that the government absolutely has to set for itself, because that is the way we will start to work out whether things are working. So, for example, just in terms of the people we work with, we might work with them for three or six months post release or we might only work with them pre release. We do not have access to data about them beyond their time with us in a program, so we currently do not know what happens beyond that. Obviously that is a huge lost opportunity for us to learn and improve our services and to work with the government to improve our services and identify other gaps, and obviously potentially there are things that we could be doing differently that would benefit participants.

We have just gone through a two-year period of putting together a new theory of change for VACRO—program logics for all our programs and a monitoring and evaluation system and data collection tools. We have gone through all of that to do it. We are really committed to analysing the outcomes of our programs to the greatest extent possible, but there is a point at which we need government to come to the party for us to be able

to do it really well. But also we want to see that culture in government—of collecting the data, analysing the data and thinking about what we should do as a result of it. Mel?

Ms FIELD-PIMM: No, I have nothing to add to that. Thank you.

Mr BARTON: We know there are no protocols for the police to check whether there are kids at the point of arrest. When, let us say, Dad is in court or Dad has just got three years, are there any jurisdictions around in this country that actually then go to Mum and the three kids and say, ‘How are you going to pay the rent next week?’. Is it all left to Mum to find out where she needs to go, what she can do and how she is going to cope? She has lost a partner for the next three years, the kids are—

The CHAIR: There is this terrific program I have heard about—Family Links. Unfortunately, it is not funded.

Mr BARTON: Is there anyone doing anything?

Ms FIELD-PIMM: No. Again, the closest we got was when Victoria Police set up the VPeR digital referral system that I think we have spoken with you about previously, and in that, originally our family services signed up to be a referral point. But the referrals were too much for us because we did not have the funding to deliver the service increase. We kind of need that first before we can. So there is a system there that—

Mr BARTON: That could be developed.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: Yes.

Mr BARTON: I think we got sort of a response—

The CHAIR: Can you just expand on that? I cannot remember that referral system.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: It is the Victoria Police e-Referral system. Essentially, when they make an arrest, they have a range of services—like, they have lot of youth services hooked into it—so that they can go, ‘This is out of my league’, which of course it is. They do not need to, but if they can see some issues, they just put in a referral and that service receives the referral by email and follows up with those individuals. There is nothing like that, but those services need to be funded to respond.

Mr BARTON: Yes, I just think we have got a responsibility. We have just put this bloke in jail for the next three years, and we have just hung the rest of the family out to dry there. I think that is a comment.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: Yes. And I am making an assumption that the VPeR is still in place, because we pulled out, Romy?

Ms SAME: A number of years ago.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: A number of years ago.

The CHAIR: Right. I know the ACT police have got quite a substantial program.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: Yes, it was based on that one.

The CHAIR: Was it?

Ms FIELD-PIMM: Yes.

The CHAIR: Yes. That has been going for some years. Romy, do you think your services would be better placed if you were introduced to the family at the time of arrest or at the time of sentencing?

Ms SAME: I think there needs to be support available, like Mel said, to families at each significant point. Certainly I think families need to have something they can access at the point of arrest—absolutely—and then you will find some families at the point of arrest are not in the headspace for therapeutic counselling. Their needs will be more informational needs or crisis management needs or, like you said, material needs, so then I

think it needs to be available down the line at different junctures as well, so they can come in and out as their needs arise.

Mr SMITH: And we sort of talk about the idea that transition needs to start as soon as someone comes into prison—

The CHAIR: That is when rehabilitation should be starting?

Mr SMITH: Yes, and I know from chatting with Romy about this that something as intensive as counselling may not be needed all the way through, but it may not also be appropriate to wait till the end.

Ms SAME: Absolutely.

Mr SMITH: There might be interventions that start and stop as the situation changes for the family and having that available.

Ms SAME: And like Mel was saying before, the arrest can be a particularly traumatic event for children who witness the arrest. I have had cases of working with children six months into their dad's incarceration, and here I am sort of thinking, 'We're going to talk about how sad they are that Dad's away or some big event'. And finally they build up enough trust in the counselling room to talk about the night the police came and what they witnessed. It feels upsetting because I can picture their face talking about Dad being pulled away and their little sister crying in her dirty nappy and they would not let Mummy change the nappy and the toy box being thrown up—those sorts of images. Unfortunately it is not that uncommon, so having a service that can understand those needs and support the family during that time in age-appropriate ways is really important.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: I have got a question. In regard to parents who are incarcerated, they can maybe miss a lot of the childhood and then reintegration. Are the parenting courses that are offered in prison adequate? Is there any more work that can be done around that to assist with the release and bonding with the children? I am interested to hear about that.

Mr BARTON: I am happy to guess—we can do better.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: I know, but I have got to ask the question to get the evidence.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: I think there is a lot of good stuff happening in the women's prisons, but again for the fathers it is minimal. It is limited to the Triple P parenting program, and that is delivered by correctional staff who have been trained to deliver just that program, which means that they do not have that background knowledge of developmental issues for children, trauma. They just know to deliver by rote, and that is problematic, particularly when you are working with complex, vulnerable et cetera.

There are other issues around having parenting programs in prison, because if you just deliver it in the prison and they are not having contact with their children they might learn something and then it is gone by the time they get out. So whatever is offered to people inside, it has to be consistent and follow that through-care approach. That is why we like programs like our video visits. At the women's prison, that mum might be seeing our family counsellor at Tarrengower or they might be seeing a Bouverie family counsellor at DPFC, and then they might come into our program and go, 'We're working with our children on these things now'. We will get that information about what they are working on, and then that is the focus of those video visits. So it is not just about meet and greet and, 'How are you', but it is actually about the family working and strengthening together instead of leaving it all silent until they are out and then everyone goes—

The CHAIR: And they deal with it.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: Yes.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: If you could put that in your submissions as well, because I think that is a really important thing that we need to touch on too that we have not so much yet.

The CHAIR: Certainly we heard this. You—

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: No, I did not.

The CHAIR: No, Cathrine joined a bit later in the process. But yes, we heard in the criminal justice system as well about that ongoing support. We have heard a couple of times people talking about engaging the department of education, bringing them into the support. Is that something that you have experienced in the work that you have been doing?

Ms SAME: Mel has probably done more with the department in terms of working with schools.

The CHAIR: Yes, working with schools. I guess working with the families and with the children, because I am guessing that sometimes schooling becomes problematic for them.

Ms SAME: Yes. It is funding dependent and the way that the counselling program looks changes with each sort of incarnation, but previously I did a lot of work sometimes using schoolrooms to provide counselling on site in an outreach model and lots of professional development with teachers, with principals, around how they can support a child with a parent in the justice system, because often it is kept quite silent. There is a lot of stigma and a lot of uncertainty about how to manage it, especially when there is media attention as well. So we work quite systemically around engaging the community around how to manage that and then also individually with family members about how they can work with their school and how comfortable they feel about sharing information with the school.

The CHAIR: And I think that goes to that whole intergovernmental information. Is there anywhere, is there any jurisdiction that you know of here in Australia or internationally that is doing this well?

Ms FIELD-PIMM: There is definitely a lot of—

The CHAIR: Good programs.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: good stuff happening in a range of places. Scotland is doing great stuff in lots of different ways.

The CHAIR: Yes, we met with—

Ms FIELD-PIMM: There is an organisation in in the UK called NEPACS, which is worth looking at in terms of the services that they deliver, and there is some great policy and process planning that has happened in both the USA and UK that I could send to you to have a look at.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thanks, Melanie. I mean, I know your programs are doing really well. I did not mean to say that—

Ms FIELD-PIMM: No, no.

Ms SAME: There is so much more.

Mr SMITH: There is more. A lot more, yes.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: And there is the COPE project, which is Europe, which brings together a whole range of organisations, countries—quite amazing to do.

The CHAIR: Yes. Well, they seem to have a very different approach to their correction system over there, don't they?

Ms FIELD-PIMM: They do, and they might talk to each other better than our states talk to each other.

The CHAIR: Yes, interesting. Countries can do it better than we can in the states.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: So just on that point, how do you think the government agencies can actually work better and engage with services like yours? Just interested in your thoughts.

Mr SMITH: I do not know if I can answer how exactly, but one thing you identify as soon as you start working in the prison system is the lack of coordination between agencies. I know there are examples. I know,

pre COVID, justice and housing were working on a joint strategy. But I think there really is this sense that once a person goes into prison, the government department that is responsible for them is justice, and there is a stepping back from other departments in so many different ways. So with families, you know, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, we believe, has a bigger role to play—and other departments for different areas that are not the topic of today's inquiry.

But we talk about—and Mel was sort of alluding to it there—the concept of 'through care', and we talk about it as a community service provider: the need for a continuum of service, from inside the prison back into the community. And it is challenging in Victoria, where have you got prisons all over the state and people living all over the state post release, but that is the standard you need to get to.

It is the same for government departments: that someone cannot disappear off the radar of a government department for the time they are in prison and then come back out. It does not work, and you have lost an opportunity. What you do have in prison, in all sorts of different ways, is at least while they are there, incarcerated, there are at least opportunities to address issues, to stop things from getting worse and hopefully get things a little bit better.

The example with families is real. I know a lot of parents will talk about coming back out and the challenge of becoming a parent again, because the kid is like, 'Where were you?'. 'Well, I was in prison'. And the thing about the family visits program that we do, that we have talked about, which are the video visits, is it gives those parents those opportunities to remain parents during their time in prison. So that concept of through care, we think about it a lot in our work, and I think it is a useful kind of starting point for government departments to think about how they need to be servicing these people and their families while they are in prison.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: Thanks.

The CHAIR: When we talk about through care—actually Rachael, who was here today, was just talking about the parole period—and parole, and I know you guys provide a lot of that through care as well, comes to an end, and sometimes the counselling, the drug and alcohol services, the other psychosocial services that people have access to during parole end when parole ends. Are there any conversations that we should be having, particularly around, I guess, supporting those families? You know, that this should occur for at least 12 months or should occur for X number of months per year that someone has been separated. Is there a formula, or is there a best practice?

Ms FIELD-PIMM: There has certainly been research that talks about how it takes about two years post release for an individual in and of themselves to discard that feeling of 'I'm out of prison. I'm a criminal. I'm an ex-offender'. So it is two years to kind of find their feet, stabilise, heal, get well and build things before they go, 'I can do this now; I'm a worthy person'.

The CHAIR: 'That's not who I am'.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: Yes, 'That's not who I am'.

Mr SMITH: Exactly. Romy, I know you sort of think about this, particularly in the context of JLTC.

Ms SAME: Yes. I work at the transition centre with a lot of the dads, and absolutely I find a lot of the work and support that they need is in the post-release period. I think one of the benefits of this model, which I would love to see replicated, is that it is not tied in to a time-limited parole system or anything like that. So I have dads who have left prison and gotten on with life, and they might call me two years down the track saying, 'Remember me? At the moment my son's just become a teenager and started to ask me some really difficult questions about what happened when he was younger'. And so it has got that flexibility to say, 'Okay, let's have a couple of sessions—on your own, with your son, with the whole family'. And that might be all they need, but just to be really sort of flexible and individualised I think is the most beneficial way that we can work with people—because they are individuals, and everyone's journey is slightly different as well.

Mr BARTON: Can I just jump in and ask that question from our homelessness inquiry?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Mr BARTON: There were so many people coming out of jail into homelessness. So how are we going to fix something if they have not got a house to go to, a home to go to?

Mr SMITH: That is the starting point. When we talk about the process of desistance, you have got to provide the material things that someone needs. And I think that is what most people think—‘When they get out of prison, they need a house, they need a source of income’. But Mel talked about this process as also going on about developing a different narrative about who you are, building connections back to your family and other loved ones and building connections into the community so that you become that person who is great to have around the footy club or is just, ‘She’s my mum’. There is a whole lot going on, but it all starts with a house. How do you really address your drug addiction, reconnect with your kids, deal with your mental health condition or seek real, responsive support for your disability if you do not have housing locked up? You cannot start that journey if you are not housed.

So how do we fix it? Well—

The CHAIR: And reconnecting with children—

Ms FIELD-PIMM: Yes, getting your kids back.

The CHAIR: If you have not got a safe place to—

Mr SMITH: Yes, and we talk about housing in terms of the needs of people coming out of prison, the housing needs, and I am sure Flat Out would have spoken about this too. Like, a dad might not have custody, but they are going to need a two-bedroom house, otherwise they are not going to get shared custody or visitation rights for their kids, you know? So housing has got to be about families too, for—

Mr BARTON: We are putting them in a boarding house.

The CHAIR: That is right.

Mr BARTON: It is not going to work.

Mr SMITH: Yes.

Mr BARTON: There are some challenges, aren’t there?

Mr SMITH: Yes.

The CHAIR: I just had a question. I have just lost it. Thank you. There was something that just bubbled up for me but it has left my grasp. Look, thank you so much for today.

Mr Barton interjected.

The CHAIR: That was not the question I was going to ask, but thank you. It is another good question. It is to all of you: we would love to hear from the children in this. I do not know if you can think about how we might be able to hear their voices, whether it is via you or whether there are opportunities for children to tell their stories to us on paper, on video, on voice recording—

Ms SAME: That is something we could talk about with our clients.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: Yes.

The CHAIR: because I think it is really crucial to hear them. So if you can help us in any way—

Mr SMITH: Yes, we will talk about that.

Ms SAME: We will talk to our clients and—

The CHAIR: that would be great. So just one other thing, and it is not the question that is in the back of my head that I will remember at 3 o’clock this afternoon: we have been hearing consistently that women receive less visits than men, and we understand why that is. But can you give us some considerations? I think it is

generally because the child is in out-of-home care and there is not a primary carer, but I am wondering what we should be doing to improve that and ensure that women are getting to see their children.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: I think one of our understandings from our practice is that that is also due to gender. For a lot of our clients the kids are still with family and kinship, but it is the dad, and the dad is simply not as good at facilitating and doing it. Dads in the community need help to kind of call this up, whereas for the men the women are out there going, 'Yep, you need to go out and see Dad; I want to see Dad'.

Mr BARTON: I was surprised at the size of the difference. It is quite huge, isn't it?

Ms SAME: My guess would be that with the video visits program and in terms of looking at solutions, supporting the family members on the outside to understand the prison experience I find can be really useful in bridging that gap a bit more, whether it is an extra phone call, an extra Zoom or being more reliable. I find that sometimes people who have no experience themselves of being incarcerated do not understand that all week long that is the one thing that the family member is looking forward to, whereas on the outside they are juggling a million different balls and, 'Oh, if we miss a phone call or a visit, it's not a big deal'.

The CHAIR: It is just a call.

Ms SAME: Yes. So I think somehow bridging that gap, whether it is with a family therapy program or the video visits or having people facilitate those conversations, can be really powerful.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: Yes, and supporting them to deal with their resentment. They are living the hard life on the outside, and having services that actually acknowledge that and go, 'Yep, you are, and here's what we're going to do for you'—

Ms SAME: And centring the child's experience.

The CHAIR: I do not know how we do it. I mean, we do it in out-of-home care when parents are not in prison and they have visitation rights and access rights, and there are repercussions when those rights are not met. But it does not seem to be the same when a parent is incarcerated. If the department does not get their act together to drive the child over to the prison: 'Well, you know'.

Mr SMITH: That pilot, video visits, is now funded by CV and is called 'family visits'. In the pilot we worked with the mums. Now we are able to work with the mums and the families. The family on the outside might be a partner, but it might be Grandmum who has got custody, or whoever it is. And what we are seeing is that this program is building that connection between the parent and the child, but also often we are negotiating issues between the parent and maybe their mum, for example, who is looking after the kids. And an outcome of that—

The CHAIR: They have got some resentment at the fact that their retirement is not looking as planned.

Mr SMITH: Yes. Well, that is right. But what we are finding in some cases is that by working through those issues you get to a point of understanding. You are breaking down those resentments, and then you can start to get maybe an agreement for more in-person visits, more of an understanding of what is going inside. Once you can get past that hostile relationship and get an understanding from both sides of what is going on and what is being sacrificed and what is hard, then the person on the outside can say, 'Okay, I see the need for us to get in a bit more'. So that is a factor.

The CHAIR: And obviously if you are living in Frankston and you are having to get out to Deer Park—

Mr SMITH: Yes, it is really hard.

The CHAIR: Yes. Even if you have got a car it is a bloody all-day trip.

Mr SMITH: And these days it is two bucks a litre—you know, it is expensive. The program Romy mentioned, Aboriginal family visits, is a very basic service that we provide for CV, where we book Aboriginal families to come down and visit their loved one in prison. They are usually living outside of metro Melbourne, and we pay the cost of it. That is actually facilitating visits that otherwise just would not happen.

The CHAIR: Yes. And that is really terrific. Yes.

Mr BARTON: Can I just ask how you actually do that? Is it that you are paying volunteers? How does it actually work? Are they members of the community, volunteer-type people?

Ms FIELD-PIMM: It is literally just a booking service, where the families can either ring us, contact us directly, or the Aboriginal liaison officers in the prisons will contact us and set it up. And families just let us know when they want to come, where they are coming from and to, do they need to stay overnight, and we book it all and send them—

Mr BARTON: But what service would you use for the car? What I am getting at is: why aren't we giving cab charges to these families?

The CHAIR: Take that hat off.

Mr BARTON: Oh, sorry.

Mr SMITH: It is for people who are outside metro Melbourne coming in. I think it has to be 100 k's—

Mr BARTON: We need to keep the taxi industry going in country Victoria. It is collapsing around our ears.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: Yes. So it is train tickets, V/Line.

Mr BARTON: First and last mile, though?

Ms FIELD-PIMM: There are buses from the train stations to the prisons.

Mr BARTON: You are putting my blokes out of work.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: I think that contract's up at the end of the year, Rod, so you could end up working at—

The CHAIR: That is right. Now, the question I have goes back to our spent convictions and it goes back to what you were saying about two years—when people are starting to breathe and feel like they are their own person and they do not have that label. But I am guessing that still when we look at things like getting involved with the local football club, getting involved with the school as a volunteer and things like that, that criminal history is still going to be a barrier to that. It should not be. You know, it should not be an excluder. I am sure people might become aware of it, but it should not be an excluder. Have you found any programs that are not excluding parents because of their criminal convictions?

Ms FIELD-PIMM: I think for our post-release program, because we deliver it in regional areas, what our staff have talked about—for example, if we look at Barwon—is that they are more successful in getting people integrated in their community in the small towns than, for example, in Geelong.

The CHAIR: Where everybody knows anyway.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: Yes. So it is already known; it is on the table. If they are putting in and giving back, 'We'll have you'. How you do that in the cities is still a learning.

The CHAIR: Where it is just used as a tick and flick in some cases, you know.

Mr SMITH: Or it can just be very big. I mean, part of the thing about our case managers is knowing their communities. So it can be a case of, you know, you might be in a bigger town like Wang and you know if a guy wants to play footy, you are going to direct him to that club there, because you know there is a coach there who has got a really positive attitude and will be really good. So it is kind of getting to know that community and knowing not just the organisations. A lot of our post-release work is developing relationships with organisations where we build a relationship of trust but we lean on each other. We will step in to the extent they need us to, and we will step back to the extent that they have got it covered, if you know what I mean.

Ms FIELD-PIMM: And what we have started to do is have a capacity-building approach to go to other services, family services et cetera, who do not know the justice system, do not know the experiences and are fearful of taking on people who have a criminal record because they have got other vulnerable people and

families and children, and to go, ‘Actually, most of these are myths’, and we can talk them through the myths and introduce them to people and then it is much easier.

Mr SMITH: And taking that co-case management, as I say, where we are happy to come in to the extent you need us while you are getting comfortable—that is a key for us, because there are so many services where their reticence is just that they do not have the experience. It is not what they do. And you know, they are pretty easy. Most organisations are pretty willing to be coached through and brought into the fold.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: Wow. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. We have really learned a lot, as usual, from talking to you. We look forward to your submission. Again, on behalf of the committee, thank you for all the work that you do. We have certainly been a recipient of that work, so we are incredibly grateful.

This ends today’s public hearing. Thank you to everyone who has been watching online. Please follow our website; there will be more information about the progress of this incredibly important inquiry.

Thanks again, and thanks to everyone who has been watching.

Committee adjourned.