

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Ms Michelle McDonnell

Organisation Name: VACRO

Your position or role: Policy and Advocacy Advisor

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Drag the statements below to reorder them. In order of priority, please rank the themes you believe are most important for this inquiry into homelessness to consider::

Rough sleeping, Services, Public housing, Indigenous people, Family violence, Housing affordability, Mental health, Employment

What best describes your interest in our Inquiry? (select all that apply) :

Other (please describe)

Working in the post-prison reintegration sector

Are there any additional themes we should consider?

Post prison homelessness

YOUR SUBMISSION

Submission:

Do you have any additional comments or suggestions?:

No

FILE ATTACHMENTS

File1: [5e6ecf01df63a-VACRO Submission to Vic Legal and Social Issues Inquiry Homelessness 2020 FINAL.doc...pdf](#)

File2:

File3:

Signature:

Michelle McDonnell on behalf of VACRO



‘Finding a place to live can be the hardest part of getting out of prison’.

Submission to Parliament of Victoria’s Legal and Social Issues
Committee Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

March 2020

[VACRO](#)

Supporting people caught up in the criminal justice system and their families

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About VACRO

VACRO is Victoria's oldest and only specialist service provider to clients of the correctional system and their families, having provided support to disadvantaged people since 1872.

VACRO has a strong history of working with government and community organisations to develop innovative services. Its programs encompass a broad and holistic approach to assisting those in transition from custody to the community.

We provide support and information for people caught up in the criminal justice system and their families.

For the purposes of this submission, we would particularly like to highlight ReConnect, a support program funded by the Victorian Government and delivered by VACRO in the Western portion of the state (the Barwon South West and Grampians regions). Through ReConnect, VACRO provides targeted, intensive post-prison reintegration outreach and support for people with high level needs. It provides responsive, individual support for the critical period of transitioning into the community. VACRO's ReConnect case managers witness many clients who exit prison into homelessness, or into insecure accommodation which eventually becomes unviable.

1. Andrew's story of post-prison homelessness

Andrew, a ReConnect client in his 30's, has been in prison on a number of occasions for serious violent, drug, and property offences. During his last time in prison, Andrew was antisocial, aggressive, threatening to kill others and to harm himself. He experienced episodes of psychosis and paranoia, anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation. He said he used drugs use to deal with his mental health issues.

Andrew was estranged from his family and subject to an IVO prohibiting contact with his mother and had limited positive social networks, as he had distanced himself from those networks revolving around drug use and illegal activities. Intensive engagement with his VACRO ReConnect case manager revealed that much of his anger and aggression revolved around his fear of having nowhere to live, his belief that no one wanted to help him, and his lack of effective coping strategies.

Despite our efforts, accommodation could not be secured before Andrew was released from jail and he said on numerous occasions: *"I would rather kill myself than be homeless"*.

Securing crisis accommodation was difficult given Andrew's history and potential for antisocial behaviour. Fortunately, Andrew's VACRO case manager found a motel run by former social workers who were willing to accommodate him.

It took ten days of searching by Andrew and his VACRO Case Worker to secure a tenancy for Andrew in a caravan park. At the conclusion of Andrew's ReConnect support package, he was still waitlisted for housing.

We don't know what has happened to Andrew after this period, because publicly available linked data on what happens to people after prison is very limited.

2. The scale and nature of homelessness after prison

As outlined in Andrew's story, publicly available linked data¹ on post-prison homelessness in Victoria is limited, which means that there are few reliable estimates of the number of people leaving prison who experience homelessness.²

One 2019 survey found that 54% of people leaving prison in Australia expected to be homeless (including in short-term and emergency accommodation) when released.³

In 2015, the Victorian Ombudsman estimated that 22% of men and 44% of women were homeless in Victoria even after receiving intensive post-prison support.⁴ It was at this time that VACRO had no practical alternative but to offer camping swags and back packs to some regional clients because our case workers could not find them any suitable housing accommodation.⁵

Although many people are homeless before entering prison, prison exacerbates post release homelessness. The Ombudsman cited a University of Melbourne survey showing that the prevalence of homelessness was about double for those who had contact with the criminal justice system.⁶

Five years after the Ombudsman's investigation, changes to sentencing and bail laws in Victoria have resulted in a sharp increase in the number of people in prison, both on remand and on sentence.⁷

For example, the number of women in prison in 2018 was more than double the number in 2012. This trend is predominately due to the increasing number of women being refused bail in line with changes to the bail laws which have made it difficult to successfully apply for bail while charges are being dealt with through the court system.⁸

The sheer volume of people now requiring post prison housing combined with a lack of both suitable, dedicated housing and transitional housing is likely to have resulted in an increased number of people experiencing homelessness after prison.⁹

¹ Linking data from many different sources provides a much better understanding of post prison homelessness than just relying on one data source.

² Willoughby, Melissa; Biondo, Sam and Young, Jesse T. Improving health and preventing mortality: Homelessness, criminal justice involvement and substance use issues *Parity*, Vol. 32, No. 6, Aug 2019: 17-21.

³ The Health of Australian Prisoners *AIHW* 2019.

⁴ Victorian Ombudsman *Investigation into the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners in Victoria*, 2015, 103-104, citing statistics from Corrections Victoria Intensive Transitional Support Programs, *Quarterly Correctional Reports*, Financial year 2013-14, 102.

⁵ Victorian Ombudsman *Investigation into the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners in Victoria*, 2015, 108.

⁶ Ibid, 104., Citing A. Bevitt, A. Chigavazira, N. Herault, G. Johnson, J. Moschion, R. Scutella, YP. Tseng, M. Wooden, and G. Kalb, *Journeys Home*, Research Report no. 06, May 2015.

⁷ See the latest monthly and annual Corrections Victoria "Prisoner and offender statistics" at <https://www.corrections.vic.gov.au/prisons/prisoner-and-offender-statistics>.

⁸ Characteristics and offending of women in prison in Victoria, 2012-2018, *Crime Statistics Agency (Vic)* 2019.

⁹ See the discussion and statistics cited by Sandra Rabjohns, I Shall be Released: Post-Release and Homelessness Data to Inform a Renewed Approach to Prevent the Exit into Homelessness from Custody *Parity* March 2017 edition Housing and Specialised Services Group, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 6.

Given that the use of imprisonment is a result of government policies,¹⁰ the current rate of post-prison homelessness could be substantially reduced by revising Victoria's current sentencing and bail laws so that fewer people are sentenced or remanded in prison.

3. VACRO's experience in supporting people into housing after prison

Andrew's experience outlined above is common for Reconnect clients, and indicative of Victoria's current housing shortage.

VACRO case managers assist clients in applying for public housing and completing priority-list application forms; and assisting people to access a range of crisis and transitional housing options, community run rooming houses, temporary accommodation (such as motels, caravan parks and privately owned and managed rooming houses) as well as private rental houses.

Many of our clients reside in unstable, short-term, inappropriate or unsafe housing, for at least some time during their support period. Housing is such a key concern that it consumes a vast amount of our case managers' time and resources. This pressure leaves little time to provide support in Corrections Victoria's other recognised critical reintegration domains - employment, education and training, alcohol and other drug support, mental health support, independent living skills and community and family connection.¹¹

Housing instability also affects families of people in the criminal justice system, including their children. When a family member is in prison, housing for the rest of the family frequently becomes unstable or unreliable due to loss of income, change in family structure or altered tenancy arrangements.

VACRO's experience is consistent with the evidence. People leaving prison experience a significant risk of homelessness due to a combination of these factors:

- unemployment,
- poverty,
- discrimination and stigmatisation,
- family breakdown,
- poor literacy, and
- problems accessing information.¹²

Due to a lack of suitable housing options, people leaving prison often have to resort to rough sleeping or staying in unsuitable rooming houses and crisis accommodation where they are exposed to illicit drug dealing and violence, which then puts them at a much higher risk of re-offending. People leaving prison often resort to staying with relatives but this is often an interim measure as it can lead to tension and disagreement and then the need to try to find alternative, suitable accommodation at short notice.

The evidence also illustrates the need for long-term care to fully support clients' needs. Recent research in Victoria by Moschion and Johnson on homelessness and incarceration confirms that prison increases the probability that a person will become homeless, with the

¹⁰ Naylor, The evidence is in: you can't link imprisonment to crime rates *The Conversation* April 23, 2015.

¹¹ Corrections Victoria, *Reintegration Pathway Supporting your transition back into the community* (2016).

¹² Baldry E, McDonnell D, Maplestone P, Peeters M (2002) Ex-prisoners and accommodation: what bearing do different forms of housing have on the social reintegration of ex-prisoners. *Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute*, Melbourne.

risk **increasing further** 6 months after release from prison.¹³ The reason for this is that the 6 month point is when unstable housing arrangements such as couch surfing, staying with relatives and boarding house stays usually come to an end.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of VACRO's ReConnect clients are transitioned out of the program by the six-month mark when their support package and funding end.

4. Our vision for our clients: achieving a stable home after prison

Our vision is to achieve and maintain successful post release housing for our clients and their families, so that they feel physically and emotionally safe and are able to reconnect and bond as a family. This vision requires:

- **Safe and individually appropriate housing**
- **Successful reintegration, including family connection:** An extensive program of case-managed support that begins before a person leaves prison and only ends when that individual no longer requires it is essential to successful reintegration. These services effectively form an additional layer of support and security around an individual and their immediate family, which increases the likelihood of maintaining housing.

This vision is based on the available evidence: First, secure housing for people returning to community after prison is recognised as one of the most important components of successful reintegration.¹⁴ Second, aftercare support, along with stable housing, can be seen to have the most positive effects in terms of supporting successful reintegration.¹⁵

The Moschion and Johnson study cited above demonstrates the importance of having longer post-release programs to break the link between prison and homelessness and it recommended increasing the length of the Reconnect program.

In our experience, for the majority of our clients, the current length of the ReConnect program is too short to achieve effective and successful reintegration which is measured through attaining the seven critical domains.

Given that the evidence shows that 6 months post-release is the critical point where support is needed to ensure a person does not become homeless, the ReConnect program should be made available for a minimum of one year post release to a maximum of two years for high need clients (who may need help to address all of the seven critical domains).

Finally, we note that a key to achieving better housing outcomes is for more public housing to be made available to those leaving the criminal justice system. The evidence shows that post prison housing support programs have the potential to contribute to reducing reoffending, thereby increasing community safety. A UK study has flagged potential cost

¹³ Moschion and Johnson Homelessness and Incarceration: A Reciprocal Relationship? *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* Dec 2019, Vol 35, Issue 4, 855–887.

¹⁴ Monash University Criminal Justice Research Consortium for Corrections Victoria, 2016, *Women exiting prison in Victoria*, Department of Justice and Regulation – Corrections Victoria, Melbourne, 10; Williams K, Poyser, J and Hopkins K 2012. Accommodation, homelessness and reoffending of prisoners: Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) survey. United Kingdom: Ministry of Justice, London; Willis M, Corrections Victoria, 2016, Supported Housing for Prisoners Returning to the Community: a review of the literature, *Australian Institute of Criminology*, 4, 11.

¹⁵ Wright et al, 2013, Prisoner re-entry research from 2000-2010, *Criminal Justice Review* 39(1): 37-57, cited in Willis (2018) Supported housing for prisoners returning to the community: A review of the literature, 7.

savings, finding that every £1 spent on housing-related support for people after prison had the potential to save the taxpayer £23.¹⁶

This impact can only be achieved by a coordinated cross government response between Corrections Victoria, the Department of Housing and Health Services and the NDIS that offers a range of fully-funded options including:

- The purchase of additional transitional housing properties.
- Providing clients with housing subsidies such as subsidised private rent assistance that incrementally reduces when the client secures paid employment.

5. Recommendations

In light of the evidence cited in this submission, we recommend the following:

Recommendation 1: Reform Victoria's current sentencing and bail laws

VACRO recommends that the State Government reform Victoria's current sentencing and bail laws so that fewer people are sentenced or remanded in prison, thereby reducing the number of people experiencing post-prison homelessness.

Recommendation 2: Increase the length of Reconnect program

VACRO recommends that the State Government increase funding for ReConnect service providers so that service providers can extend post release support for a minimum of one year and a maximum of two years (for high needs clients) to break the link between prison and post-prison homelessness by providing solutions to personal housing crises that often occur after the six month release date from prison.

Recommendation 3: Increase the scope of Reconnect to support families and children

VACRO recommends that the State Government increase funding for ReConnect service providers to include service provision that specifically engage and support families of people released from prison. At present, VACRO and the other ReConnect providers are not contracted to directly support families, but with extended funding this would be possible.

Recommendation 4: Increase the amount of housing stock and housing subsidies available to people leaving the criminal justice system

VACRO recommends that the State Government purchase additional transitional housing properties and provide clients with housing subsidies such as subsidised private rent assistance that incrementally reduces when the client secures paid employment.

¹⁶ Donath R 2013. Housing can eliminate the hidden costs of reoffending. *The Guardian* 5 April 2013.