

Dear Committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Victoria's Justice System. I have read the Terms of Reference.

My name is Claire Seppings. I am a Social Worker (BSW 1984) and criminal justice consultant, beginning my social work career with the Department of Social Security. Becoming a qualified Naturopath during my daughter's childhood in 1996 I conducted a healthy living program in Bendigo Prison in 1997 returning to social work in 1998. In 2003 I led the development of Centrelink's Victorian Justice Services Program which I managed for more than 10 years. Throughout this period, I developed substantial relationships with the government and non-government sector. My creation and establishment of many innovative projects to reduce recidivism and community impact gaining high-level recognition. My aspiration to bring about change in the criminal justice system is driven by my extensive professional; and personal experience, which comes from my journey with a former partner's revolving prison life. In 2012, I received the Victorian Custody Reference Group 'Access to Justice Award' and in 2015, a Churchill Fellowship to study the rehabilitative role of ex-prisoners as peer mentors in reintegration models. In 2017 Deakin University received funds to develop and trial an Australian first peer mentoring model based on my fellowship findings and appointed me Project Coordinator. I am Chair of the Victorian Custody Reference Group and Member of the Women's Correctional Services Advisory Committee.

The focus of my submission for this inquiry is to contribute to strategies to reduce offending and rates of criminal recidivism. A successful prison system should not simply contain people who have committed offences; it should also improve their lives by preparing them for release. Reintegration is about more than simply stopping re-offending. It is about adjusting, adapting and transitioning successfully to a straight life on the outside.¹ The criminal justice price-tag in Australia is more than \$17 billion.² And - it is ever increasing! Recidivism is one of our greatest social dilemmas. When prisoners return to prison for new offences and breaches, they leave behind new victims and return to the same programs that failed to reach them the first time. Re-offending creates more victims. Families of prisoners are the invisible victims. Incarceration costs many everything they have.³ 'Experts' and 'advocates' continue to call for urgent action. But the only response to the ongoing question is, how?

I found the answer on my [Churchill Fellowship](#). [Straight talking ex-offenders reduce recidivism](#). Consider the positive impact of this on community safety and the taxpayer. My fellowship mission came from a combination of seeing, in my professional experience, how Australian offender behaviour programs were not reducing recidivism; and learning from my personal experience when, on a prison visit to see a former partner, he said to me, "*I don't know how to be straight*".⁴

¹ Seppings, C. Breaking the Cycle: Straight talking ex-offenders reduce recidivism <https://stories.uq.edu.au/policy-futures/2021/breaking-the-cycle/index.html>

² SCRGSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision), Report on Government Services 2019, Productivity Commission, Canberra, 2019: Table CA.4. 12. Bushnell, A. "Like Trump, Australia Must Focus On Reoffending To Make Communities Safer," Institute of Public Affairs, 9 February 2020, <https://ipa.org.au>.

³ Lewis, N, and Lockwood, B. "The Hidden Cost of Incarceration." The Marshall Project, 17 December 2019. <https://themarshallproject.org>.

⁴ Seppings, C. The rehabilitative role of ex-prisoners/offenders as peer mentors in re-integration models – in the UK, Ireland, Sweden and USA. Churchill Fellowship Report: The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, 2015. <https://www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellow/claire-seppings-vic-2015>.

This led me to discover a number of international initiatives and individuals leading reform including User Voice, which goes by the motto Only Offenders Can Stop Re-offending.⁵ During my Fellowship, I engaged with more than 65 agencies and 100 committed and passionate people working across the criminal justice system in the UK, Ireland, Sweden and the USA. I found the evidence. That peer mentoring can reduce the likelihood that a person will commit further crimes after release and return to prison. Many of the programs developed organically and were led by reformed ex-offenders who wanted to help others break the cycle of crime and incarceration.

In the UK, I met with the organisation Clinks. They have pointed out that when treating people with mental health problems and drug and alcohol dependency, it is commonplace to listen to the views of people with experience in using the services designed to help. Yet, as they also note, *"When it comes to offenders, there is a reluctance to make use of this consumer perspective. It is as if a criminal conviction removes a person's right to have their insights taken seriously or their efforts utilised"*.⁶

A former UK prison governor has said that enabling current offenders lost in the prison system to talk with past offenders who have successfully changed, is one of the most effective and inspiring things he has ever seen.⁷ Yet despite all the evidence that peer mentoring does work; only a handful of such agencies exist in Australia. One of these programs was based on my Churchill Fellowship. This Australia-first trial of prison peer mentoring has been recently trialled in a prison in Geelong, Victoria. I was appointed Project Coordinator. We called it *Straight Talking*. Research led by Professor Joe Graffam, Deakin University into the benefits of *Straight Talking* has shown it to have successfully reduced re-incarceration.⁸ *Straight Talking* is on the threshold of shaping best practice, policy reform and positive system change.

In the words of one prisoner, *"All prisoners, once they leave jail, believe they are alone in the world. They can only relate to other prisoners. This is why other ex-prisoners [as mentors] are fantastic as the tools in changing the way ex-prisoners make decisions - out of fear. I applaud what you guys in the Straight-Talking program are doing! If I knew this stuff before, I never would have come to jail"*.⁹

Straight talking ex-offenders are the only ones who have walked in their shoes and can truly connect with and challenge their destructive behaviours. In spite of this, *Straight Talking* still remains the only 'through-the-gate' peer mentoring trial in Australia. Government funding to enable *Straight Talking's* expansion across Victoria would test its scalability and transportability for a national rollout. Australia needs to incorporate the voice, expertise and role of people with lived experience of prison across the design, delivery, evaluation and reform of the criminal justice system. *"We need to remove the ingrained resistance to the concept of offenders, former offenders and their families as experts—because in this case, that is what they are."*¹⁰

I urge the Legal and Social Issues Committee to embrace my submission, the research findings in my Churchill Fellowship report and recommendations in my [Policy Futures: A Reform Agenda Article](#). To make this conscious policy shift, we could bring Victoria into line with other countries, reduce recidivism and, at the same time, save billions of taxpayer dollars. We have the momentum. The time is now!

I welcome the opportunity to speak further to the Legal and Social Issues Committee to assist the inquiry into Victoria's Justice System.

⁵ User Voice. Accessed August 2021. <https://www.uservoice.org/>

⁶ Clinks. *Unlocking Potential: How offenders, former offenders and their families can contribute to a more effective Criminal Justice System*, York, UK: Clinks, 2008, 3.

⁷ User Voice. Accessed 17 June 2020, <http://www.uservoice.org/our-story/>

⁸ Graffam, J. "Straight Talking": A Peer Mentoring Program For Released Prisoners: Program Delivery and Final Report. Melbourne: Deakin University, In press.

⁹ Graffam, 'Straight Talking,' [pers. comm. during project development], 2017.

¹⁰ Clinks, 'Unlocking Potential', 7.