

Inquiry into Victoria's Criminal Justice System by the Legislative Council's Legal and Social Issues Committee (the Inquiry)

Dr Karen Hart Response to the Inquiry

I am a long-standing member of Smart Justice for Young People (SJ4YP) which is a coalition of leading social services, health, legal and youth advocacy organisations, calling for evidenced-based and effective responses to justice involved children and young people.

They have made a timely submission to the justice inquiry, of which I am fully aware and supportive.

I am heavily involved in our work to:

1. Commit to community-led, place-based initiatives to tackle child and adolescent offending;
2. Reduce the disproportionate representation of vulnerable groups of young people – including those of culturally and linguistically diverse, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, or out-of-home-care backgrounds – in the criminal justice system; and
3. Raise the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14.

These are important initiatives backed by substantial evidence and I hope the Committee will consider them in the detail, as set out in the SJ4YP submission.

My current role at Victoria University is Senior Lecturer and Researcher in Youth Work, Criminal Justice and Community Development. My work focusses on justice-involved young people and more specifically on young adults aged between 18 – 25 years.

Prior to commencing at VU in 2019, I had conceptualised, developed, sustained and led very successful place-based initiatives and large government funded crime prevention projects in Melbourne's western region for 14 years at the Visy Cares Hub in Sunshine. Some of those well-known projects include the Youth, Community and Law Program (YCLP), Prevent Alcohol and Risk-Related Trauma in Youth (P.A.R.T.Y) Program, Youth Umbrella Project and most recently the Youth Learning Pathways Program, which combined over the years is an investment of approximately \$8MIL by various government departments including DET, DoJCS, and DPC.

They were collaborative projects with key providers in AOD, housing, mental health, legal, education and employment services all combining efforts to deter young people from further reoffending and they were highly effective. A number of evaluation reports have been produced by myself, NERA economists, PWC that attest to their efficacy and impact.

That is a small investment for literally thousands of young people at risk or currently involved in the justice system, and is due directly to the collaborative and collective response to youth offending from a well-connected network of not-for-profit organisations in Melbourne's western region.

The Visy Cares Hub is an exemplar of place-based, essential and timely services and the concept of co-location and integration of wraparound services within communities is an obvious solution to youth crime. It has an amplified impact and should be explored and invested in, as a viable and effective response within disadvantaged communities, to anti-social and criminal activity and as an alternative to the overuse of remand (est. 60-80%) for young people.

Unsurprisingly, as much as others have tried to duplicate the Visy Cares Hub model, they have not succeeded, as such centres can take many years of voluntary effort by influential drivers within our communities for example senior police members, magistrates, academics, lawyers, accountants, all

who have a determination to address youth crime from a community based perspective, as the evidence that 'jailing is failing' can no longer be ignored by them.

In conclusion, there is abundant research evidence and program exemplars of what works and what does not work for young people involved in the systems that have been set up to respond to their out-of-home care, justice and educational needs. There are many groups, advocates and campaigners working to change the criminogenic impact of our system on young people in Victoria from outside the walls of the detention centres. However, this valuable resource of expert and specialist services and their enormous potential as a collective to create change at a significant level, if well-funded, has gone largely unnoticed.

This criminal justice inquiry in Victoria is critical and beyond timely and I would like to offer my support to the government in its consideration of community based alternatives to remand and prison for young people, and to effectively address the issue of overrepresentation of our most vulnerable young people in Victoria.

Please contact me at [REDACTED] if you would like further information.

Sincerely

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Dr Karen Hart