

Inquiry into Youth Justice Centres

CLAIRE SEPPINGS

Dear Committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Youth Justice Centres in Victoria. I have read the Terms of Reference.

My name is Claire Seppings. My aspiration to bring about reformative change in the criminal justice system is driven by my extensive professional and lived experience. Graduating as a Social Worker from Melbourne's Monash University, in 1984, I began my career with the Department of Social Security. In fact I completed my final Bachelor of Social Work degree placement at the former Winlaton Youth Training Centre in 1983. I became a Naturopath in 1995 and conducted a healthy living program in HMP Bendigo in 1997. In recent years, as a Social Worker with Centrelink I developed extensive relationships with non-/government sectors. My commitment to creating, developing, establishing and evaluating innovative projects to reduce recidivism and community impact gained high-level recognition. In 2008, I received the Minister for Human Services Award for Exemplary Service to Customers and Stakeholders. In 2012, I received the Victorian Custody Reference Group (VCRG) Dennis McMillin Access to Justice Award. On the 31st July 2015, I was honoured to be one of 23 Victorians awarded the 2015 50th Anniversary Churchill Fellowship by the Honourable Linda Dessau AM, Governor of Victoria.

My Churchill Fellowship project studied the rehabilitative role of ex-prisoners/offenders as peer mentors in Reintegration models – in the UK, Republic of Ireland, Sweden and USA. My research report now published on the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust website. My submission incorporates information from my Churchill Fellowship report.

<https://www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellows/detail/4073/Claire+Seppings>

What we know.

Recidivism is the bane of all correctional authorities and professionals. When young people, offenders and prisoners return to prison and youth detention for new offences, they leave behind new victims and return to the same programs that failed to reach them the first time they served their sentences. However, while we have all been calling for urgent changes we still keep offering the same solutions. The Victorian Ombudsman's recent report into the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners stated that Victoria needs to ensure prisoners rehabilitation and reintegration improves public safety and provides better value for the \$1 billion annual spend. The public expects violent offenders to serve time, but offenders must also be better coming out than when they went in if we are going to reduce crime. Re-offending rates are unlikely to improve without urgent action.¹

¹ <https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/getattachment/8a800602-94a5-4e7b-9e7b-5c930bfe7b8f>

What we need.

My lived experience comes from my journey with a former partner and his revolving prison journey, one of four decades of state care and prison experience. One day as we walked around the visit centre courtyard, as we had done many times before, he said as once again ‘the prisoner’, after five years free in the community; *I don’t know how to be straight!* I stopped in my tracks. It hit me. The realisation that no matter what I have given or done personally and professionally or any of us ‘straight agencies’ hoped to achieve through our obvious mainstream and specialised services, it would never be enough. Prisoners like him, had been telling me for years that the prison programs (violent offender, drug and alcohol, clinical sessions exploring the impact of state care on their addictions and offending) do not work and they could run them better themselves. They want to change but have forgotten. Forgotten how to live a straight, drug and crime free life - a normal life.

After that catalyst prison visit, having come across the agency KRIS² in Sweden, I began to discover I was not the only one who thought peers were potentially and quite obviously, a vital aspect of rehabilitation and reintegration. I also felt I was not alone in my experience or my feeling and realisation that we have got it all wrong and will keep getting it wrong until we break down the ‘walls’, the ‘barriers’, the ‘silos’, when I came across *User Voice* in London, talking about the *us versus them*³ culture. So began my drive to study the rehabilitative role of ex-prisoners/offenders as peer mentors in reintegration for the benefit of Australia.

*The exit at the prison gate often appears to be a revolving door with nearly 60 per cent of released prisoners re-offending within two years of their release. Prisons and probation departments have, almost literally, tried everything in efforts to rehabilitate offenders over the past century, but the results have been uniformly bleak, leading many to conclude, ‘nothing works’. In the past ten years, however, a group of criminologists have hit upon what should have been an obvious source of inspiration for prisoner rehabilitation: the other 40%! Iriss – the Road from Crime.*⁴

*Throughout the prison, probation and court services, in government departments and voluntary organisations, thousands of people work hard to do what they can to bring about successful rehabilitation and resettlement of offenders. Yet there is one group of people whose insights, energies and commitment could contribute a great deal more to this task. Arguably, they hold a key to unlocking much of the potential for more effective ways of reintegrating people in conflict with the law. That group is offenders, former offenders, and their families. Rob Allen Chair, Clinks Director of the International Centre for Prison Studies, King’s College London.*⁵

² <http://kris.a.se/>

³ ‘Us versus Them’ – term utilized by User Voice: <http://www.uservice.org/>

⁴ <http://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/road-crime>

⁵ Rob Allen Chair, Clinks Director of the International Centre for Prison Studies, King’s College London

We now have the opportunity to do just that. I have found the missing link in Australia is using the expert experience of those closest to the problem and valuing the reformative success stories to realise real reform.

I consulted broadly prior to embarking on my project and found many organisations across Australia very keen to see the outcomes and with the evidence implement such programs in their service.

Peer mentoring happens in every corner of the world in many forms and has become increasingly popular in the mental health and drug and alcohol fields with peer workers recognised as having a positive impact on client recovery. When treating people with mental health problems and dependency on alcohol and drugs, it is commonplace to listen to the views of individuals and groups with experience of using the services designed to help. In the criminal justice system in Australia, it is very rare.

In Australia, there has been no real engagement with reformed prisoners to understand the barriers people face to crime free reintegration into the community after prison and what a successful transition looks like. 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.

I learnt so much from all the agencies and people I engaged with across all the countries I visited. It was inspirational to learn how these countries have successfully utilized the rehabilitative role of reformed offenders as peer mentors in reintegration models. Not only have all they embraced the benefits of peer mentoring; former 'criminals and drug addicts' now sit at the policy table, working with researchers, civil servants and government ministers to help inform justice, social and health policy reform.

There is emerging evidence that ex-prisoners can and do offer insight into breaking the cycle of crime that is unique and critical to success by helping people learn how to live a straight, drug/crime-free life. Working one-to-one with individuals they can provide hope and practical support. Working within the system they can provide advice and strategies to change the systems that sometimes create insurmountable hurdles for people who already lack many of the basics in life such as a home, a job and a social network.

Those closest to the problem are closest to the solution, but furthest from resources and power.

Glenn Martin, JustLeadershipUSA

The reformed offender / peer mentor can say 'I've walked in your shoes, I know the pitfalls and I can now connect you to a world that I'm living in successfully'. Peer mentors bring lived experience in return to community after imprisonment and can use this to successfully guide newly released prisoners. They bring credibility to their role due to the fact that they have faced and overcome the same barriers of re-entering society with a criminal record.

*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.*⁶

*When we think of formerly incarcerated people, we often focus on their previous actions rather than their humanity. The term "criminal," which tends to be hurled at these people as an insult, brings to mind images of terrifying wrongdoers unworthy of respect or compassion....But what if we thought of these people not as pariahs, but as full human beings with the capacity to use their experiences to change the world.*⁷

Some formerly incarcerated individuals are doing just that, and defying the odds they face in a society where it is difficult to destroy the restrictive stereotypes connected to imprisonment. Using tools like filmmaking, public policy design, mental health advocacy and community organizing, these world-changers are shifting the culture and system of incarceration.⁸ All the agencies I met with, developed by people who have been in prison, had very similar ethos's, and all reached a significant level of recognition, have sustainable funding, often from prison and probation service, and have stakeholder relationships, but the catalyst and drive to pursue reform all started from their own individual personal experiences.

Mark Johnson founded User Voice in 2009. An ex-offender and former drug abuser he went on to become the best-selling author of *Wasted* and a respected social commentator. Mark's story embodies the transformative change, which User Voice strives to achieve. Mark's direct contact with the criminal justice system, and later as an employer of ex-offenders and consultant for government and other charities, left him convinced of the urgent need to create a model of service user engagement that is fair for all involved. His principal aim was to foster dialogue between service providers and service users that is mutually beneficial, aiding rehabilitation and recovery and results in better and more cost-effective services.⁹ On 23 February 2015, Mark Johnson became a MBE *Member of the British Empire, Civil Member* for his services to vulnerable people through User Voice.

All the staff at User Voice who work directly with service users have a history of offending themselves. This is crucial in giving User Voice the insight, credibility and access to do their job and do it well. User Voice will therefore always be majority staffed and led by people who have experienced the criminal justice system, from their executive board to every level of staffing.¹⁰ User Voice's ethos and mission of provide a voice for prisoners and former offenders is active through the User Voice Prison Councils and User Voice Probation Councils This has led to aiding prisons and probation agencies across the country work with other former offenders to reduce re-offending.

⁶ <http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/Unlocking%20Potential%202008.pdf>

⁷ Moore, Darnell L., *11 People Who Used to Be in Jail — But Are Now Changing the World* April 02 2015

⁸ <http://mic.com/articles/114276/11-formerly-incarcerated-people-who-are-now-changing-the-world#.YfIRwFSfM>

⁹ <http://www.uservice.org/our-story/>

¹⁰ <http://www.uservice.org/about-us/our-services/>

User Voice now has regional offices across England and reaches one third of the people involved in the criminal justice system. Since their inception, User Voice has been facilitating the views of young and adult offenders reaching the policy makers in Westminster to help shape government policy.¹¹ In areas where they have both a Prison Council and a Service User Council, User Voice through providing peer support is able to link engagement of prisoners from custody, into the community on release and provide them with meaningful activity by joining the Service User Council in their local area.

*Our work leads us to recognise that offenders like to relate to those who have ‘walked in their shoes’, those who have the lived experience of criminal justice. We believe that the ex-offender community has an important role to play in resettlement and rehabilitation, supporting others at the beginning on of their personal journey. We believe that it is essential for the offender community to develop its capacity to lead itself out of crime and developing and extending peer support networks is a way of doing this.*¹²

*The use of mentors to support offenders in prison and after their releases recognised by advocates as a way of encouraging desistance and reducing reoffending. As a result, the number of mentoring schemes has grown rapidly across the UK, with around 300 schemes now offering mentoring or befriending services to offenders. A number of these schemes provide ‘through the gate’ mentoring, which enables offenders to build a relationship with a mentor who can support them through the transition from prison to community.*¹³

Jonathan Culleton and Fergus Hogan conducted extensive research over two years on the *You’re Equal* mentoring project published in 2008. Cullerton and Hogan found that a ‘typical’ prisoner in Ireland is broadly similar to those in the rest of the Western world - young, urban, undereducated males from the lower socio-economic classes - dependent on alcohol or opiate drugs, with psychiatric problems from disturbed family backgrounds, and that imprisonment does little to re-integrate those who are already marginalised.¹⁴

The reality is that in most Western societies, ex-prisoners are thus restricted and socially excluded, based on the nature of their life histories. Having been incarcerated devalues an actor’s social identity (Goffman, 1963) and prisoners therefore are often disqualified from full social acceptance. Having a mentor to access social capital on the ex-prisoner’s behalf reduces the impact of such stigma and circumvents at least some of the barriers faced by this particular socially excluded group.¹⁵

¹¹ <http://www.uservice.org/news/in-the-media/>

¹² <http://www.uservice.org/about-us/our-services/peer-support/>

¹³ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/448803/informal-mentoring-project.pdf

¹⁴ Culleton, J., & Hogan, F.; *Prison Experiences of Self-Forgiveness*: Page 1, 2012

¹⁵ Culleton, J., & Hogan, F. *Page 22, (2008). Re-integration - Life after prison; An evaluation of the You're Equal Project*: Centre for Social and Family Research, Waterford Institute of Technology.

In their abstract paper, *Prison Experiences of Self-Forgiveness*, Fergus Hogan and Jonathan Culleton, reference Hagell *et al* (1995):

*...release from prison is likely to be a traumatic event...and it will also be a time of dramatic change - leaving the prison environment, living circumstances on the outside may have changed, family structures may have changed, prisoners themselves may have undergone a range of different experiences that may affect them and their relationships with others.*¹⁶

Viewing professional staff as authority figures offenders like to relate to those who have 'walked in their shoes', those who have the lived experience of criminal justice. The use of ex-offenders in visible roles within criminal justice supports offenders to see and touch the possibility of change, inspires, and motivates those who are in the change process. Peer mentors show a clear understanding and appreciation of the struggles, both practical and psychological, that prisoners face when they are released from prison. Peer mentors demonstrate a commitment to leading a law-abiding life and of being able to navigate the community with a desire to help others along their specific paths. There is evidence that acting as a peer mentor reinforces the commitment to lead a positive lifestyle, reminds the peer mentor of his or her own success, and that the path towards crime is not one they wish to take again.

In 2014-15, Merseyside Offender Mentoring Project in the UK engaged 867 offenders' pre and post release. They recruited and trained 59 mentors, around 40 per cent of whom are ex-offenders to provide one to-one support and signpost to the mentoring service and successfully matched 112 offenders with a mentor. Just 17.9% of offenders who had engaged with the project returned to prison, less than a third of the national average of 60%.

Whenever, we hear of issues with young troubled and hard to manage offenders we can't go past St Giles Trust. St Giles Trust in the UK has been working across London and South East for over 50 years. In 2002, they started their award winning Peer Advisor Program, established in the community and prisons. St. Giles Trust's award-winning SOS Project helps young Londoners break free from gangs and serious youth violence. Founded by Junior Smart in October 2006, this project is ex-offender led.

By believing in rehabilitation, restoration, reformation, desistance and recovery, we have the opportunity to improve the lives of many people, their families and community. Moreover and more significantly, to demonstrate that our prison system believes in the outcomes funded to achieve. It is time Australia. To recognise, celebrate and promote the success stories. Time to value the expertise and the commitment of those who have succeeded in desisting and recovering to help others find their personal success. To help inform policy that will make a difference. A real personal and community difference.

¹⁶ Culleton, J., & Hogan, F.; *Prison Experiences of Self-Forgiveness*: Page 3, 2012

My research report provides the evidence for any jurisdiction in Australia to incorporate the voice, expertise and role of people with convictions throughout the criminal justice system. The report provides concrete examples of policy frameworks; government and philanthropic funded programs; established leadership positions, organisations and programs; and research and evaluation findings. My project provides all Australian criminal justice authorities with evidence that similar jurisdictions have embraced and actively support the role of reformed offenders in much needed criminal justice reform.

I trust that my research will not only bring positive criminal justice reform to Australia but also provide a valuable resource for all the agencies and people I met and for everyone else with interest. My research project has enabled me to build a wide network of contacts. Reformative change proposed by my research will result in significant returns on investment and public safety for the Australian community. I have been invited to speak to Parkville and Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre management staff about my research and recommended, suggested and encouraged them to introduce peer mentoring within the centres with current clients, 'through-the gate' by former clients and ex-prisoners and current prisoners based in the Judy Lazarus Transition Centre. I also spoke about the benefits of introducing 'prison council's' occurring in UK prisons via User Voice as these could prove very beneficial in addressing issues with the youth justice centre community.

I urge the Legal and Social Issues Committee, government and non-government agencies to embrace the research findings in my report, endorse and implement my recommendations. I welcome the opportunity to speak further to the Legal and Social Issues Committee to assist the inquiry into Youth Justice Centres in Victoria.

Further coverage of my research can be found at the following media sites.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-24/reformed-offenders-missing-link-to-slashing-prisoner-numbers/7772478>

<http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2016/s4525466.htm>

<http://www.elliottmidnews.com.au/story/3542703/real-reform/>

<http://www.elliottmidnews.com.au/story/3177378/stopping-the-revolving-door/>

<http://www.elliottmidnews.com.au/story/1213533/prestigious-award-to-local/>

Ms. Claire Seppings

Churchill Fellow 2015

Bachelor of Social Work (Monash University, 1984)

Victorian Custody Reference Group 'Dennis Mc Millin Access to Justice Award' (2012)

Minister for Human Services Award for Exemplary Service to Customers and Stakeholders (2008)

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Blog: www.claireseppings.com

[Churchill Fellowship](#)

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