



Justice
Corrective Services

A Strategy for supporting **Aboriginal offenders** to desist from re-offending



Corrective Services NSW (CSNSW) collaborates with other government and non-government agencies to reduce the incarceration and re-offending rates of Aboriginal people.

CSNSW actively seeks the knowledge and expertise of Aboriginal community members to advise on strategies for enhancing program relevance and effectiveness and to motivate Aboriginal offenders to engage with mainstream and specialist programs and services.

Introduction



Aboriginal offenders continue to be over-represented in custody and on community supervision orders in the NSW correctional system. Despite significant progress with re-offending rates for non-Aboriginal offenders over the last decade, the rates for Aboriginal offenders exiting custody have not declined.

It is not enough to explain away all the differences by pointing to the Aboriginal offender experience of social and economic disadvantage - disadvantages that require a whole-of-government and whole-of-community approach. To provide the best opportunities for Aboriginal offenders to break out of the cycle of re-offending we must re-focus our own efforts. Community safety and confidence in the justice system will continue to be jeopardised if we cannot address this challenge.

There is a paucity of evidence-based research to guide our approach to Aboriginal offender rehabilitation but we have extensive information on the life experiences of Aboriginal offenders highlighting their lower levels of education attainment, higher levels of unemployment and unstable accommodation, greater exposure to violence and higher likelihood of being separated from parents who themselves may have experienced incarceration. Our own data from literally thousands of standardised assessments tells us that education, employment and attitudes should be the focus of our case management and intervention efforts for Aboriginal offenders.

We must pay special attention to the high levels of trauma experienced by Aboriginal women. They have often been victims of sustained violence and are significantly more likely to have experience of mental illness than non-Aboriginal women.

This requires us to move to a skills-based approach that supports Aboriginal offenders in desisting from crime, promotes personal autonomy and encourages individuals to take responsibility for their actions.

There is no reason for us to abandon well established guiding principles for reducing re-offending. These require us to focus on risk and needs and also to have regard to the responsivity issues for individuals and groups. We need an approach to engagement and treatment of Aboriginal offenders that is culturally informed and adapted to the learning styles of the individuals we manage. To work most effectively with Aboriginal offenders we need to listen to Aboriginal community leaders and the offenders themselves because they are best placed to challenge our thinking. Increasing opportunities for Aboriginal offenders to be diverted from custody where appropriate is important because the effectiveness of programs and services is enhanced when they are provided in the community.

Luke Grant
Assistant Commissioner,
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WE RECOGNISE

- that social disadvantage and trauma contribute to the significant over-representation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system
- that Aboriginal women in the criminal justice system often lack social support and are at a higher risk of violence, homelessness and poverty than the general population
- that Aboriginal people with cognitive and hearing impairment are overrepresented in custody
- that Aboriginal communities bring valued knowledge and experience which contribute to achieving justice outcomes
- that incarceration places enormous strain on communities, families and relationships
- that family, kinship, community and culture are of utmost importance to Aboriginal people

WE DELIVER

- programs which are proven to be effective in achieving reduced re-offending
- programs and services across custody and community which are appropriate to Aboriginal offenders taking into account their cultural and geographic backgrounds
- education/vocational training and employment programs with a focus on community integration
- services and programs to Aboriginal women which are trauma-informed and enhance community and family connections
- relevant cultural awareness programs for offenders taking into account local country, language, art and traditional customs

WE IMPROVE

- the capacity and competency of CSNSW staff to interact effectively with Aboriginal offenders and their families
- consideration of the impact on families and communities of Aboriginal offenders when developing and implementing policies and procedures
- the focus on motivation/engagement of Aboriginal offenders so that their participation in evidence-based programs is increased
- the accountability of CSNSW funded organisations regarding evidence that their services and programs meet the needs of Aboriginal offenders and their families and communities
- access to programs and services for Aboriginal women at locations of identified highest need
- the quality of information about CSNSW services available to communities and families of Aboriginal offenders
- the way the NSW community in general receives accurate and current information about contemporary correctional practices related to Aboriginal offenders

WE WILL

- actively seek the formal involvement of Aboriginal community representatives in devising policies and programs as well as CSNSW responses to new legislative initiatives
- explore and apply modern communication technology which allows families to maintain meaningful contact with an Aboriginal offender in custody
- collaborate with regional non-government agencies so that they can deliver rehabilitation and community integration programs and services which complement the work of CSNSW
- provide staff development programs with a focus on the practical application of cultural awareness and appropriateness
- align the duties of Aboriginal identified positions with CSNSW offender management and supervision priorities
- promote the expansion of diversionary programs and facilitate the increased participation of Aboriginal women in all non-custodial sentencing options
- provide post-release referrals for Aboriginal women with a focus on stable accommodation and health
- make available practical resources/guides for all employees who deliver offender programs to enhance the active involvement of all Aboriginal participants
- collaborate with other government and community agencies to meet the complex support needs of Aboriginal offenders leaving custody

WE ARE ON TRACK WHEN

- program participation and completion rates of Aboriginal offenders are increased
- participation and completion rates of young Aboriginal offenders in specialised young adult offenders programs are increased
- number and rate of Aboriginal women in diversionary programs are increased
- re-offending rate for Aboriginal offenders is reduced
- evidence is available that Aboriginal experts have been consulted in the development of new procedural and policy initiatives
- an Aboriginal Advisory Council comprising Aboriginal people with significant standing in the community meets regularly and their assistance and counsel inform policy development and implementation
- cultural awareness and experiential learning programs for Aboriginal offenders are available at Mid North Coast (Gumbainggir), South Coast (Tharawal), Wellington (Wiradjuri), Dillwynia (Dharruk) and Kariiong Juvenile (Awabakal) Correctional Centres
- information for visitors to correctional centres is current, relevant, accurate and in a format which is useful and practical for Aboriginal families and children of offenders
- Aboriginal adults and children visiting an offender in custody receive services which lighten the burden of long distance travel
- acceptance rate of Aboriginal offenders and remandees into disability services is increased