

Introduction

This paper sets out to describe the Driver Education program at Mannus Correctional Centre. The overall aim of the program is to directly reduce the chances of inmates returning to gaol. As well as identifying and describing the overall problem, this paper describes the Mannus Driver Education program and factors such as fines and debt that prevent inmates from benefiting from this initiative. The paper concludes with a number of proposals for overcoming these obstacles and suggests how this program initiative can be exported to other correctional facilities.

The Driver Education program at Mannus

Too many people are gaoled for minor traffic offences or for not having their licenses. This was an issue noted by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Research into the over-representation of indigenous persons in the NSW judicial system indicates that indigenous offenders, with slightly more than half the numbers convicted for Driving offences than non-indigenous offenders, are subsequently more than twice as likely to be sentenced to imprisonment than their non-indigenous counterparts (Joanne Baker, 2001).

At the heart of this is a problem of alienation. Many people do not get their licenses because they have a fear of authority. It is very daunting for them so they often think they will just keep driving the way they always have – without a license. However, not having a license makes them a target for police. Although driving offences are not the major crimes for imprisoning people, such behaviour certainly adds to the list of charges. Being unlicensed also means being stopped by the police is potentially more serious and therefore may increase risk-taking behaviour.

The Driving License Program at Mannus aims to change all that. This is a pre-release program with concrete goals of both immediate and long-term relevance to its participants. The program builds self-esteem, addresses literacy and other learning deficits that interfere with rehabilitation and contributes positively to effective reintegration back into the community by enhancing self-image and employment prospects. Supported by the NSW Roads and Traffic Authority, the program helps inmates get a Learners License, Car Drivers License and even a Truck License. It also addresses Royal Commission recommendation 95, which states that where motor vehicle offences are a significant cause of Aboriginal imprisonment, programs be designed to reduce offending. Though targeted at indigenous over-representation, the program is open to other inmates.

Mannus program staff members deliver all aspects of the program. Inmates practice and complete the driving rules and knowledge component at the gaol's Education Centre using a Driver Knowledge Testing computer, installed and maintained by the RTA. They are encouraged to learn with a friend and at whatever pace suits them. There are no formal classes and everyone is treated individually according to their different needs. They also practice driving on the gaol's grounds in a Department car or truck to prepare for the practical driving tests. Inmates often have a few hurdles to clear that other Driver Education students do not including literacy or language problems and a lack of documented identification papers. All of these the staff work on with patience and skill.

When the participants get their license, they are thrilled because they know they have achieved something worthwhile. One even stated that he looked forward to the police

stopping him again, because this time he would be able to show them a license. Cecil is a good example of what the program means in real life terms. An Aboriginal man in his late thirties, Cecil had never had a Driving License. This had contributed to his previous incarcerations, of which he had a few. He wanted to get his license because he was determined to stay out of gaol this time. He also knew from previous experiences that going back to where he was well known would not make it any easier for him to stay out of trouble. However, he had plans to do some courses when he got out and to get a job. Having a Drivers License would make some of these things a lot easier. Cecil studied hard and learnt the rules. He passed the Knowledge Test easily. No mistakes – a perfect score! He proved to be a capable driver but appeared very worried about the Driving Test. He was worried that because he was Aboriginal, the Driving Instructor might have preconceived ideas about him. I reassured Cecil that this would not happen and let him ring the RTA Aboriginal Liaison Officer based in Wagga, Paul House, who told him to be confident in his abilities and just concentrate on the process. Cecil decided to give it a go and when he returned from his test, I waited to hear the news. At first glance, it did not look good. There was no expression on his face at all. Then the widest smile I have ever seen broke out as he said, “I can’t wait to drive past the cops when I get out.”

Gaining a license is a big step forward for independence, not just for the obvious reason of being able to drive legally either. Having a license is a visible symbol in our community. A person released from gaol needs identification documents to re-establish themselves in the outside world. In our society today you cannot even borrow a video let alone open a bank account, rent a flat or a caravan without them. Inmates however, often do not have recognised identification documents such as a Birth Certificate. For them this can act not only as a barrier to accessing services and resources, it also increases their “invisibility” in our society. Their inability to produce these ‘bits of paper’ leaves them in a very tangible way outside mainstream society.

The Binala Regional Council of ATSIC has recognised the financial difficulties Aboriginal inmates in particular have in paying the various fees involved in the licensing process and have provided a grant for the Indigenous inmates at Mannus specifically for the purpose of covering license and birth certificate fees. This has increased Aboriginal inmates successful participation in the program.

The issue of fines, however, remains a major obstacle. Many inmates cannot attain a Driving license because they have unpaid fines. Many people accumulate large numbers of disqualifications, and frequently cannot remain conviction free sufficiently long to reobtain a driving licence. Thus, the proportion of their driving convictions increases as they progress through their offence history and for some this becomes their predominant mode of offending. Simply imprisoning these people is ineffective and expensive. Denying them access to a licence is equally futile, because they will drive. Who does not drive in our modern society? While the Drivers Education program is an effective intervention for those inmates who are fortunate enough to be clear of fines, for the rest it is of little use.

The introduction of the logbook system for new and under 25 year old license applicants has had particularly harsh ramifications on inmates undertaking the Driver Education program. Many who would previously have attained their license before release now are unable to fulfill the driving experience requirements. Inmates’ access to a vehicle is very restricted compared with “outside” drivers. The Correctional Centre provides a vehicle and

a licensed driver to accompany them for practice driving in the gaol's precincts. However, with an average rate of 1 hour's driving a week per student it now takes nearly a year to meet the logbook requirements. The inmates' chances of attaining the necessary practice on the outside however are probably even worse as many do not have access to a roadworthy vehicle and/or a licensed driver to supervise them and their financial resources to pay for driving school tuition are similarly lacking. For inmates, for whom the Drivers Education program at Mannus has provided their best chance of gaining a driver's license, the goal of a Drivers License is still unattainable for them because of the logbook requirements.

Proposals for overcoming the obstacles

There are two major issues here; the need for inmate access to driver education and the complex issue of fines and debts that prevent inmates gaining licenses.

A number of options may be considered:

- A diversionary program for minor and/or license offences
- Incorporation of programs for inmates to manage debt and repayment of fines to prevent increase in debts while in custody
- Flexibility for inmates serving sentences of a certain length (6 months or more) to work off fines concurrently.

Toolkit for Drivers Education

Handout provided at Conference.

References

Joanne Baker, Contemporary Issues in Criminal Justice, March 2001.

Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.