

# POST RELEASE EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

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*During 2000/2001 the Beattie Government trialed a Post Release Employment Assistance Program in Queensland. The program supported prisoners 2 months prior to and upon release to become “work ready” and to secure and maintain post release employment.*

*The pilot resulted from a Cabinet submission jointly developed by the Department of Corrective Services (DCS) and the Department of Employment Training and Industrial Relations (DETIR now DET). DCS was designated the lead agency. The program provided prisoners/ex-prisoners with assistance in the areas of literacy and numeracy, education, living skills, vocational education and training, job search skills, job placement and post placement support.*

*The program delivered by “not for profit” organisations was conducted at Townsville and in southeast Queensland. The key performance outcomes required providers to achieve employment outcomes for 350 ex-prisoners.*

*To determine the effectiveness of the program to assist prisoners to obtain and maintain employment, external consultants were engaged by DCS to conduct an evaluation. Whilst decisions are being made on the long-term future of this service, Cabinet extended the trial until November 2001.*

*This paper will outline the program and will also provide information on the findings and recommendations made by the consultants in their report.*

## Background

The pilot program that was conducted during 2000/01 resulted from a cabinet submission jointly developed by the Department of Corrective Services (DCS) and the Department of Employment Training and Industrial Relations (DETIR now DET). That submission identified the need for the program, documented consultation with the relevant stakeholders and recommended that recurrent funding should be allocated to provide specific assistance to released offenders to access and maintain employment upon release. It was identified that existing government employment programs did not cater for the specific needs of ex offenders.

Offenders frequently have limited vocational skills, and may have very limited skills in accessing employment. Offenders may also be from groups which have been historically disadvantaged in accessing employment, for example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people with low levels of numeracy and literacy. (ABS, 1996). Ex-offenders also suffer from a stigma associated with their criminal history, and face additional disadvantages in accessing employment for this reason. If offenders are not able to successfully find employment, the likelihood of a return to offending is significantly increased. Special needs groups, for example, indigenous groups, which currently comprise 23% of the Queensland offender population, have even less employment options available to them upon release. The 1997/1998 statistics for Queensland published in the Productivity Commission's Report on Government Services 1999, show that 25.8 per cent of prisoners have returned to prison within 2 years of release, while the total of offenders returning to corrections was 32.9 per cent.

The Post Release Employment Assistance Program was structured to commence support for prisoners just prior to release and or immediately upon release. Providers of the pilot were able to register prisoners into the program in the period two months pre release to 2 months post release.

A review of the Vocational Education and Training that was delivered to offenders in Queensland Corrections' correctional centres was conducted in 1999. (Cox, Carlin, 1999). This review also identified the need for support to be provided to ex offenders to assist them to utilise the skills they had or had gained during incarceration, and the need to provide additional assistance to enable them to become "work ready" and to gain and sustain long-term employment.

On 8 November 1999 the Queensland Cabinet approved funding for a pilot program to be conducted in both the Brisbane and Townsville areas. The Department of Corrective Services was appointed the lead agency and worked in co-operation with other relevant government departments to establish a whole of government approach to the project.

This program is included in a whole of government approach to provide a wide range of support and assistance to ex-offenders and embedded as a key action under the Queensland Crime Prevention Strategy.

A reference group, comprising representatives from DCS, DET and the Premier and Cabinet was established to oversee the program.

This program also contributes to the department's strategic plan that promotes a secure and effective corrections system that has a focus on the rehabilitation of prisoners. The department has identified that the implementation of post-release prisoner employment assistance service is an important strategy for the successful integration of ex offenders into the community. Corrective Services are currently developing an offender centred integrated offender management system which will establish rehabilitation as a high departmental priority.

## **Program Delivery**

Invitation to submit offers to provide the service in the two locations were made public and following the selection process, three service providers were awarded contracts to deliver the program in the two locations. In the Brisbane region, Second Chance Foundation and Career Employment Australia have shared the delivery of the program and in Townsville, HTC Vocational Institute was the successful provider. The key performance outcome requires service providers to achieve employment outcomes for 350 post-release prisoners, distributed on the following basis:

- 125 - Career Employment Australia (Brisbane region)
- 125 - Second Chance Foundation (Brisbane Region)
- 100 - HTC Vocational Institute (Townsville)

For the purpose of this service employment has been defined as paid, full or part time, work involving a minimum of 20 hour per week and which has been on going for more than 13 continuous weeks. Any vocational training provided was to come from nationally accredited vocational education and training, training packages/courses.

Service providers provided program participants with a range of support services that included:

- Skills audit and training needs analysis
- Literacy and numeracy assessment and referral
- Vocational training to meet identified skills deficits
- Job search skills
- Job placement support
- Post employment placement support
- Referral to other support agencies
- Work experience

The service providers were able to register prisoners/ex-prisoners into the program who were designated as being in the high risk category of long term unemployment and were either within 2 months of their release date or up to 2 months post release. The purpose for accessing prisoners prior to release was to enable service providers to deliver a pre-release component to prepare participants for employment. As it was not a condition of the contract that service providers were to provide participants with pre release support not all providers took up that option.

## **Target group**

To ensure that the program supported all prisoners regardless of their background, providers of the service were to ensure that program participation was in proportion to the prison population. In particular the proportion of women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the program was required to reflect their representation in the correctional centres. At the Townsville Correctional Centre the indigenous prisoner population is approximately 60%. The service provider in Townsville was to ensure that 60% of program participants were indigenous.

Although contracts for the service delivery were signed in June 2000 and the program commenced in July 2000, employment outcomes did not become significant until November/December 2000. The reason for the slow start resulted from the fact that providers:

- Needed to establish the necessary infrastructure. This included establishing their program staff and delivery model;
- Had to create the necessary business networks. Links with other support agencies, the establishment of a database of employers willing to employ ex-prisoners etc;
- Had to establish credibility in the eyes of the prisoners. Prisoners needed to be assured that the program and the facilitators would provide the assistance and support they required to find employment; and
- Needed suitable lead-time to provide participants with the pre-employment skills and confidence to seek and participate in employment.

## **Reporting**

Providers were required to submit status reports on a regular basis to the Department of Corrective Services (DCS). Each month a report listing all prisoners/ex-prisoners registering in the program was provided along with more detailed reports, which included employment obtained, length of time in employment, employment type etc, being provided every 3 months.

## **Evaluation**

Callen Consulting Group Pty Ltd in a joint venture with Neva Banks and Associates are currently completing their evaluating of the pilot program. The final report on the evaluation of the original pilot was received in September 2001 and is being considered by the Queensland Department of Corrective Services and the Queensland Government. On 31 May 2001 the Ministers office after discussion with the Premier agreed that a Cabinet Budget Review Committee (CBRC) submission be prepared on the continuation of funding for the Program for the first five months of the 2001/02 financial year. Approval was given to extend the pilot program until the end of November 2001 to allow the Department and the Government time to consider the future of the program based on the outcomes of the evaluation. The same consultants are currently undertaking a final review of the extended program with a final report to be provided in early November.

The terms of reference for the evaluation of the pilot program were.

- How effective is each of the three service providers in assisting offenders to find employment?
- How effective are the procedures and processes established for the implementation of the post-prison Employment Assistance Service?

- What has been the impact of the program on offenders?
- What have been the outcomes for offenders who participated in both vocational education and training programs provided by the Department pre-release and the Employment Assistance Service post-release?

In conducting the evaluation the consultants interviewed 124 stakeholders either face to face, by phone or through the use of written surveys. Those interviewed were:

- 61 offenders
- 18 service provider employees (All 3 service providers and their staff were interviewed)
- 36 members of the Department of Corrective Services (These included contact people from the correctional centres and head office staff)
- 8 employers
- a member of a community organisation providing services to ex-offenders.

### **Outcome of the evaluation**

721 ex-prisoners/prisoners participated in the pilot of which 225 were placed into employment with post employment support. 168 employers were responsible for employing the 225 ex-prisoners.

The evaluation of the program has identified that all stakeholders considered that the service has been successful in supporting prisoners/ex-prisoners to become work ready and in the achievement of acceptable employment outcomes.

The consultants also identified that there is considerable cost benefit achieved through

the employment outcomes of the program. The cost benefit of having the 225 ex-prisoners employed and not in custody has been calculated to be in the vicinity of \$38 000 per day.

The consultants made some 15 recommendations. At the time of writing this paper the government was considering the final report and as yet none of the recommendations have been endorsed. The content and intent of some of the recommendations made by the consultants are discussed below.

### **Discussion - Report recommendations**

1. The evaluation consultants made a recommendation to change the reporting process to one based on an electronic process utilising a database developed and provided by DCS. Participant activity will be provided to DCS through this process on a monthly basis and will provide DCS and the Government with the necessary outcome data. This process, which is currently being trialed in the extended program, will also standardise the information received from all providers.
2. Although the participation of women and indigenous offenders in the program did conform to the participation requirement, the evaluation consultants identified that women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were less successful than participating male offenders in the 20 to 39 age group. (Callen, Banks, 2001).
3. The consultants made a strong recommendation to extend the registration period for prisoners/ex-prisoners. It was recommended that both the pre-release and the

post-release period be extended to 6 months. The increase in the post release period will allow additional ex-prisoners, in particular women who have been identified as requiring more time to address personal issues prior to seeking post-release work, to be eligible to register in the program once they are “ready” to undertake employment. This recommendation has also been included in the conditions for the delivery of the extended program.

4. The need to have only one service provider delivering the program in the Brisbane region was also a recommendation. There was some confusion in regard to which provider was responsible for assisting some participants to obtain employment. Both service providers were “allocated” centres to access participants but due to the fact prisoners/ex-prisoners move from centre to centre, some difficulty was created in allocating credit for employment placement.
5. Callan and Banks strongly recommended that DCS should develop and implement a standardised pre-release program. Currently pre-release programs operating in Queensland correctional centres have been developed locally by those centres. The consultants also recommended that the pre-release program should be integrated into any future employment assistance program and that components of this program should have accredited VET outcomes e.g., components from the Certificate 1 in Workplace Preparation and Practice.
6. The consultants were asked to determine if there was any correlation between prisoners who undertook VET whilst in custody and their success in gaining employment in the Post Release Employment Assistance Program. Callan and

Banks believed that there was a link but recommended that DCS and DET commission research to determine the degree of effect that VET undertaken in custody has on prisoners obtaining employment post-release.

7. The consultants also considered that if prisoners were able to access traineeships and/or apprenticeships whilst in custody, their chances of obtaining worthwhile employment upon release would be enhanced. A recommendation was made to have apprenticeships/traineeships introduced into correctional centres to enable prisoners employed in correctional industries to undertake training leading to the attainment of apprenticeship and/or traineeship qualifications.
8. Callan and Banks also recommended that additional resources should be made available to providers of any future program to ensure that sufficient employment support is provided to women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants. It was stated in their report that the Program was not as successful for women and indigenous prisoners/ex-prisoners as it was for the other participants.

## **Program Future**

All stakeholders who participated in the evaluation process believed that the Program did achieve the outcomes for which the Program was developed. They also voiced support for the continuation of the service subject to some modifications that were suggested or identified during the evaluation of the pilot program.

The Cabinet Budget Review committee are currently examining the report of the evaluation and it is expected that a decision on the future of the program will be made in

the near future. The deferment of the continuation of funding for the program would have a detrimental effect on the outcomes the pilot program has achieved. The Program has gathered momentum, providers have established the necessary infrastructures and support procedures, offenders have become aware of the available support and how to access that support and ex-offenders are being placed into worthwhile employment.

## References

Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997, *Aspects of Literacy, Assessed Skill Levels Australia 1996*, ABS Publication 4228.0.

Cox R., Carlin A., 1999, *Review into the Delivery of Vocational Education and Training in Queensland Corrections*, Queensland Department of Corrective Services

Callan V, Banks N., 2001, *Evaluation of an Employment Assistance Service for Prisoners Post Release*,