

**“TO BE INCLUDED, TO BE VALUED, TO BE  
CONSIDERED, TO BELONG”**

**StAMP MENTORING PROGRAM: A COMMUNITY  
STRENGTHENING PROGRAM FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE  
BEEN IN PRISON**

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**“Prisoners and their problems do not fall from the sky.**

**They come from families, they live in neighbourhoods and  
they belong to communities”. Tony Vinson**

To feel a sense of belonging people need to feel safe, valued and a part of the community. For many people who have been in custody though the reintegration back into the community is not a warm and embracing experience. In a CCRTS survey 54% of ex prisoners identified neighbourhood issues which includes acceptance back into the general community as a major barrier to re integration. Therefore to experience a sense of belonging after release many ex prisoners do not have the opportunity to venture outside their ex prisoner community.

Since 2001 Marrickville Council has embarked upon its “Belonging” Program which has involved linking the belonging theme to a range of community events, activities, projects and policies. “Belonging” in Marrickville has been a successful vehicle to promote and encourage the development of social capital in the area with all “Belonging” projects seeking to build community spirit, interaction and trust through democratic processes and active citizen participation.

The Safety in Marrickville Plan adopted by Council in March 2003 linked the Belonging theme to its development. Community safety consultations conducted explored the strength or otherwise of the relationships which exist or do not exist at the neighbourhood level and this has allowed for strategies to be developed which will enhance the social environment of the Marrickville community.

The StAMP Mentoring Program is one of the strategies from the Plan and in July 2004 received funding from NSW Attorney General’s Department to develop a pilot program to assist in making the links to local social support networks and encourage involvement of people who have been in custody in community life. 13 Local Mentors have been trained and linked to local people who have been in custody.

Marrickville is a community where there is a strong spirit of co operation, trust and pride in the rich diversity of peoples and cultures that have contributed to the area. The community is keenly involved in managing local issues and contributing to broader community affairs and to the challenges and opportunities facing Sydney as a whole. Social Justice and the need to address social inequalities are central to the make up of the Marrickville community.

The StAMP Program typifies the true practical meaning of a “Whole of Community” response to addressing local issues and needs. The collaboration shown by the working party members to make a difference is significant. The involvement by the CRC in the project has enabled a range of service providers and government agencies to really look at their own operations and consider how they may make adjustments that would make their services more appropriate and sensitive to the needs of people who have been in custody.

The proposed workshop will actively involve participants from the very beginning. It involves action teaching encourages participation and sets tasks for the workshop participants. It enables participants to take something back to their own communities and adapt a

concept that may be appropriate for some of their community members.

The cumulative disadvantage experienced by people who have been in custody before incarceration and the continuing disadvantage they experience upon their release signifies the multiplicity of challenges they are confronted with. Demonstrating simple humanity by including them to feel valued, welcomed and that they belong to their local community can reduce recidivism and increase social cohesion.

## **Introduction**

“Prisoners and their problems do not fall from the sky. They come from families, they live in neighbourhoods and they belong to communities”. **Tony Vinson**

The StAMP Mentoring Program is a community development initiative with a primary aim to build an ex-prisoners resiliency and the local community’s capacity to respond to issues of social cohesion and reduce factors of social exclusion. The StAMP Mentor Program links local residents who have been trained as mentors to people who have been in prison and are residing in or have connections to the Marrickville Local Government Area.

The Stamp Mentoring Program is an innovative project building community connections for people who have been in prison. Marrickville Council in partnership with the Community Restorative Centre (CRC) have been working collaboratively with a range of government agencies, local community organisations and local residents to develop StAMP’s practice framework to support ex-prisoners with their transition into the community.

Since 1951, the CRC has been working with prisoners, ex prisoners, their children and their families. During this time, the prison population has dramatically risen, however the provision of post release programs has not. CRC is the largest of one of the few organisations working with this target group providing transitional support, family casework and counselling, housing, Jailbreak Radio Program, assessment and referral and transport to rural prisons. Their programs all aim to ensure that the dignity, integrity and the strengths of people affected by the criminal justice system are promoted and enhanced. The StAMP Mentoring Program and its model of delivery compliments the existing CRC services, strengthens collaboration with agencies in the Marrickville Local Government Area and the broader community, and increases options available for people post release.

It is widely researched that social connectedness, promoting factors of resilience, improving links to the community and increasing support networks, exposing people to new ideas, promoting pro social behaviours, healthy choices and productive lifestyles are factors that can impact on the reduction of offending behaviours. Marrickville Council's commitment to "improving the quality of people's lives, their health, safety, prosperity, cultural enrichment and access" were the impetus for applying to the NSW Attorney General's Department Crime Prevention Division for funding to address issues of community crime prevention, and are the underpinning tenants of the Community Restorative Centre and the StAMP Mentoring Program.

Further, the community stigmas that too often label the social, economical and psychological lives of people who have experienced incarceration are significant barriers to fully participating in their local community. These social factors coupled with the complex and multiple issues experienced by ex prisoners can impact upon an ex prisoners ability to reside crime free in the community. It is these factors that the StAMP Mentoring Program aims to address and advocate for more supportive environments to support ex prisoners.

## **Background**

Since 2001 Marrickville Council has embarked upon its "Belonging" Program which has involved linking the "Belonging" theme to a range of community events, activities, projects and policies. "Belonging" in Marrickville has been a successful vehicle to promote and encourage the development of social capital in the local area with all "Belonging" projects seeking to build community spirit, interaction and trust through democratic processes and active citizen participation.

The principles of "Belonging" were linked to the development of the Safety in Marrickville Plan which was adopted by Council in March 2003. The Plan was developed with a community development approach involving extensive community consultation and active participation by a range of community stakeholders. The Plan has been characterised by identifying local solutions to problems associated with safety in the local community, and paying particular attention to the underlying causes and risk factors of offending behaviours, such as a lack of connection and acceptance by the local community. The objective of the Community Strengthening Strategy of the Safety Plan was to develop a range of community events, activities, projects and policies, which build and strengthen relationships and influence the development of a safer Marrickville community. This approach to policy development provided the opportunity to further enhance the social environment of the Marrickville community as opposed to other crime prevention plans

that promote the installation of Close Circuit TV cameras which further perpetuates a surveillance society, and ignores the opportunity to harness the communities strengths and resources.

The StAMP Mentoring Program was developed from a recommendation identified in the Community Strengthening Strategy of the Safety in Marrickville Plan. With a large number of Boarding Houses operating in the Marrickville Local Government Area, this type of accommodation is often the only affordable accommodation option available for people who have been in prison. Council's participation as coordinator of the Inner West Boarding House Forum which developed the Licensed Boarding House Work Plan 2002-2004, also informed the development of the Safety in Marrickville Plan.

In May 2003 a working party was established to develop a pilot program to support ex-prisoners with their transition into the community. The pilot program would look at ways of increasing positive support networks, provide assistance on practical issues such as housing, employment, education, health and ultimately social connectedness and promoting a sense of "belonging".

The working party involved representatives from over ten different government agencies and local community organisations including Probation and Parole, Area Health, Petersham TAFE Outreach, Centrelink, Department of Housing, Marrickville Police, Newtown Neighbourhood Centre, Sydney Community College, the Community Restorative Centre (CRC) and Marrickville Council.

The concept of a mentor program was identified by the working party and a framework of delivery was developed. A number of focus groups were held with key stakeholders, such as people who have been in prison in order to gain grassroots knowledge of the possible role a mentor could play to assist and support them to integrate into the community.

To further the achievements of the working party, a most successful partnership was developed between Marrickville Council and the CRC. Together Council and the CRC explored opportunities for funding of a mentor program and worked collaboratively to advance the need for local services to address the issues facing ex prisoners and their families who are connected to the Marrickville Local Government Area.

In July 2004 Marrickville Council was successful in receiving a grant from the NSW Attorney General's Department Safer Community Compact Funding Program to implement the StAMP Program. This is the first time the NSW Attorney General's Department have funded

an ex-offender program through this particular funding program, which is only available to Local Council's in NSW who have a Crime Prevention Plan endorsed by the NSW Attorney General. The funding was provided to implement the program and included employment costs for a part-time project coordinator, 24 hours/week for a period of 12 months and funding towards training and resource needs of the mentors.

StAMP has built upon the community's commitment to their local area and the needs of ex prisoners, collaboration and partnerships, a range of resources have been contributed to make this program exist. These resources include; financial and in-kind support from Petersham TAFE Outreach, as well as a range of other financial resources from Council and the agencies and organisations on the working party. This contribution of resources reinforces and validates the need for a broad holistic approach to addressing the needs of prisoners upon their release, and highlights the responsibility of a range of community of services to work together and share skills, resources and experiences.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The StAMP Mentoring Program is aimed to engage with people who have experienced effects of institutionalisation, experienced long term substance misuse, transience, unemployment, fractured relationships and mental health problems, as opposed to those people who have experienced being in custody however have returned to reside with supportive friends/family and with employment. In a CCRTS<sup>1</sup> survey, 54% of ex prisoners identified neighbourhood issues, this includes acceptance back into the general community, as a major barrier to re integration. Therefore to experience a sense of belonging after release many ex prisoners do not have the opportunity to venture outside their ex prisoner community.

In achieving this aim, the program has a number of broad objectives:

- i To build positive mentor relationships that focus on community connectedness.
- ii To intervene in pathways of offending behaviour through positive role modeling, promote self-discovery and self-determination.

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<sup>1</sup> Archer, V et al (2003) *The Correctional Centre Release Scheme: Evaluation Report*, Justice Health, NSW

- iii To continue to build on the strengths and networks of Marrickville Council and the Steering Committee to enhance their confidence in their ability to make a difference to the issues of collective concern, increase social capital and a sense of Belonging in the local area.
- iv To develop a practice model and training manual for other local government areas to utilise this knowledge for the purpose of advocacy, policy and service development in relation to people who have experienced being in custody.

### **StAMP Mentoring Practice Model**

The StAMP Mentoring framework and practice model was developed and designed from a range of interventions, theories and practices. As a result of extensive literature reviews and research of crime prevention/reduction programs and mentoring programs, it has become apparent that this program is unique, in that mentoring programs have been implemented in a range of contexts, however not with adult ex-prisoners, and developed according to community development practices. Peer mentoring programs have been implemented with the ex prisoner community, and whilst StAMP has not excluded ex prisoners from becoming mentors, the primary aim of the mentoring support is to “normalise” and integrate people into the community, as opposed to supporting existing silos that exist within the community. By supporting silos and therefore not challenging the systemic stigma and fear that exist in what we could refer to as “mainstream community” the values and attitudes towards people who have experienced incarceration will remain and ex prisoners will remain excluded from the community.

The role of mentoring has proven to be an appropriate and effective intervention for people post release. Mentoring roles are an age-old strategy for facilitating an individual’s growth and learning. Mentoring can be defined as “a developmental relationship, and like education and training, the primary objective is learning.”<sup>2</sup> A key difference is that mentoring involves a greater commitment to building a partnership and reducing power imbalances. It is a relationship that is non-directive in its essence, whereby lessons learnt and growth occurs it is a result of what Knapper<sup>3</sup> refers to as “deep learning, that is leaning that emphasises the pursuit of meaning and understanding.” This deep learning in relation to the StAMP Program aims to be achieved through pro social modeling, assisting the mentees to discover their own answers, advocating for

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<sup>2</sup> Linney, B. J. (1999) Characteristics of good mentors, *Physician Executive*, 25(3), pp 70 – 72

<sup>3</sup> Knapper, C (2001) Lifelong Learning in the Workplace (in) Roche, A.M. & McDonald J (Ed), *Systems, Settings, People: Workforce Development Challenges for the Alcohol and Other Drugs Field*, Adelaide: National centre for Education and Training on Addiction, pp 11

themselves as opposed to perpetuating dependency upon community services and ultimately recognising and utilising their own agency to create and sustain change.

The StAMP Mentoring Program is a holistic approach to crime prevention and in every component utilises the role and function of education. Educating the community of the factors that ex prisoners face, creating accessible pathways to engage and support these members of the community, gaining meaningful skills, creating accessible pathways to ex prisoners to return to education and breaking down structural factors that exist are the educational objectives of the StAMP Mentoring Program. From a criminal theoretical approach, these structural factors have been referred to as the sociological aspects of crime. For example theories such as labeling theory<sup>4</sup> and structuralism<sup>5</sup> have influenced the development of this program. The StAMP Program acknowledges the importance of addressing systemic barriers, labels assigned to ex prisoners and the subsequent role of stigma discrimination upon re offending behaviours. This program addresses the policies and inequities that inherently exist in our society, the benefits of promoting an individuals resiliency and not perpetuating the concept of an individual responsibility to reduce crime. The StAMP Mentoring Program is very proud of the achievement of successfully educating the community to change their way of understanding and labeling people who have experienced being in prison and encouraging services to work more collaboratively and effectively with these members of our community.

StAMP Mentoring values and supports ongoing education, training and skill development. All mentors completed formal training prior to being eligible to commence a mentoring relationship. Following research and reflection of other mentoring models and approaches to training their mentors, it was identified that there was a need to deliver an initial training of 16 hours, with the option of completing the TAFE Statement of Attainment in Mentoring in the Community following the commencement of the relationships. The rationale for this decision was due to reflections and evaluations completed by other mentoring programs of how much information people retain, and that practice reiterates theory, and without the practice approximately 80% of information is lost<sup>6</sup>. Mentors participate in ongoing education with a section of the Monthly Mentor Network Meetings dedicated to additional training.

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<sup>4</sup> Becker, H.S. (1963) *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: The Free Press

<sup>5</sup> Wyn, J. & White, R. (1997). *Rethinking Youth*, NSW, Allen & Unwin

<sup>6</sup> Rhodes, J. (2004) Stand by Me: Developing and Understanding Mentoring for Young People Conference, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Melbourne

The StAMP Mentoring Program supports ideologies such as Hirschi's sociological approach<sup>7</sup> to crime. His theory highlights when a social bond is compromised an individual is more likely to commit crime. This detachment from society infers that there are a lack of positive supports, and people who care for an individual, and therefore one has less of a vested interest in involving oneself in a meaningful manner. This isolation or exclusion from 'mainstream' society fail to address the role that society has upon an individual's ability to find a meaningful role in the community, have positive attachments and be an active member of their community.

A key component of the program is that it is completely voluntary and a strength-based support program. It is requirement that StAMP mentors spend approximately 2 – 4 hours per week with their mentee providing practical assistance with tasks including accessing appropriate accommodation, attending stressful and overwhelming appointments, such as Court, enrolling and at times attending education and/or training programs. The mentor role is also one to role model positive behaviours and coping skills. This has included parenting skills, recreational activities, increasing health and well-being with physical activities such as walking and assisting to identify free activities in the community. Most importantly, it is to have someone who genuinely cares, listens and does not judge. As one of the mentees stated; "My main problem is not when I'm in jail but upon my release because I have no family and no one to turn to when times are low and I need someone to talk to. The mentoring program has been excellent because we all need someone to open up to."

The role of the mentor and their position as being a volunteer has been incredibly successful in the process of developing trust and engagement. A large proportion of people who have been in jail, have been mandated to agencies such as the Department of Community Services. In many cases, these relationships have assisted in the development of poor help seeking behaviours, dependency on the community service sector and perpetuate the development of relationships that do not promote independence and are strengths focussed. Consistently throughout the program, mentees have articulated their views, opinions and the positive feelings associated with the role of a voluntary support person. Importantly, however, the role of the voluntary mentor does not replace the role of a paid caseworker, possessing the skills and experience to manage people with complex needs.

Evaluations completed to date have also strongly demonstrated that the mentor relationship, the growth, learning and positive change is

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<sup>7</sup> Hirschi, T (1967) in Akers, R.L. (1994). *Criminal Theories: Introduction and Evaluation*, California, Roxbury Publishing

by no means confined to the mentees. As aforementioned the StAMP Program supports the need to change the structures that exist in our community, the stigma and understanding the myriad of causes that underlie criminal behaviour. Interestingly, the positive snowballing effect of training community members upon their immediate social networks has increased knowledge, understanding and acceptance of people who have experienced incarceration.

A component of the StAMP Mentoring Program was the development of a workplace development program, to build the capacity of local services to gain a greater understanding of the issues facing ex prisoners, their children and their families. Subsequently, local services are identifying service approaches to increase their accessibility of their service, as well as the development of skills of their staff to engage appropriately with people who have experienced being in prison. Further, local interagencies are also providing feedback that the needs for this target group are becoming more visible. There appears to be a strong commitment from a range of agencies and community organisations to develop further collaborative opportunities for partnerships to address these emerging issues and develop training and forums to better provide services to ex prisoners, their children and their families in the Marrickville Local Government area.

The StAMP Mentoring Program also acknowledges that despite prisoners receiving and engaging in learning whilst incarcerated, this information can also be lost and a role of the mentor is to assist the mentee to put this learning into practice upon release. Evaluations have demonstrated that mentors have assisted people to work through “*real life*” problem solving. For example, relapse prevention program provide important information, however having someone to assist with the recovery process of addiction is a daily challenge and the role of the mentor has been instrumental in assisting someone to avoid high risk situations and in the building of positive support networks.

## **Conclusion**

StAMP Mentoring Program is an initiative that was developed according to widely researched issues such as social connectedness, the promotion of factors of resilience and community development principles. The StAMP Mentoring Program demonstrates how the Marrickville community, characterised by its strong spirit of cooperation, trust and pride in the rich diversity of peoples and cultures that reside in the in community is fostered. This program further supports the communities’ active involvement in managing local issues and their commitment to address social inequalities.

The role of education in the program has been fundamental, and in essence has created the positive change that people working with the program have experienced. However, this program and other post release programs have all experienced that despite people completing educational certificates and other work experience, significant barriers continue to exist for individuals to gain meaningful employment. The reasons for this is many and complex, however it can be highlighted that a lack of positive supports in the community has the potential to impact upon an individuals ability to integrate into the community, and utilise skills and knowledge.

Whilst the program is still in its initial pilot phase, and is not yet able to be accurately measured, a range of positive outcomes for both mentees and mentors has been achieved. The most significant being the longest period out of prison in over 10 years, staying in TAFE longer, longest period being substance free, coping better with day-to-day life and its hurdles, talking life more seriously, looking to the future and not swearing as much.

Lastly, the words of the mentees and mentors who have engaged on the program demonstrate how simple humanity by including ex prisoners, promoting a sense of feeling valued, welcomed and that they belong to their local community impact upon their lives and the broader community;

*“Being around someone from a different background is good therapy”*

*“I initially thought that it was about helping with problems, now it means more or less about getting back with life”*

*“When you got someone good in your life you don’t want to look back, just forward”*

*“I feel like my involvement with people affected by the criminal justice system has “humanised” (the mentees) and demystified it for my friends and family”*

*“I wanted to share my experience of connecting with my community as a profoundly restoring and life-saving experience”*

*“She is a willing participant in her own change, (and) is open to new ideas and ways of doing things”*

*“The program has benefited me in many ways, ... the obvious one is helping an area of society that seriously needs some attention, (which) makes me feel more connected to society”*

*“My mentee was ready for change when I met him, although nervous about how to achieve it” (this is the longest time he has been substance free)*

*“She’s doing it cause she wants to do it (mentoring), and wants nothing from me, just to see me do good”*

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