PROGRAMS FOR OFFENDERS WITH ALCOHOL AND DRUG-RELATED PROBLEMS

“ENDING OFFENDING – OUR MESSAGE”

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Like many other correctional agencies, ‘rehabilitation of offenders’ and ‘reducing repeat offending’ are key strategic directions and indicators for Northern Territory Correctional Services (NTCS). Within NTCS, the ‘Offender Management Branch’ is responsible for purchasing and providing a range of rehabilitation services across NTCS jurisdictions. Services include primary health care, mental health, domestic violence and sex offender programs, education and welfare.

In response to the high proportion of offenders with alcohol and drug related problems (up to 80%), over-representation of Aboriginal people in prison (up to 89%) and high recidivist rates (up to 40%), a dedicated alcohol and other drugs unit (AODU) was established within the Offender Management Branch of NTCS in 1998. With a staffing of five professional and prison officer positions, the unit operates within the two prisons, the juvenile detention centre and community corrections across the Northern Territory. The AODU is responsible for policy formulation, service delivery in the form of screening and assessments, education and treatment programs, counselling, research and evaluation, court reports and staff training. Through its policy and service delivery functions, the AODU strives to develop and implement best practice in the rehabilitation of offenders with drug and alcohol problems consistent with those outlined in numerous strategy and standards documents including the National Drug Strategy and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

The case study described further in this paper explores the issue of best practice in an area of service delivery relevant to interventions in Correctional Services for Indigenous people. The project is entitled ‘Ending Offending – Our Message’. It is a joint initiative between the Prisoner Education Unit and the Alcohol and Other Drugs Unit.

**Health Interventions in Corrections for Indigenous People**

In an Australian-wide context, some programs addressing the health needs of Indigenous prisoners have been integrated into the correctional system, however, such integration has been largely *ad hoc* and uncoordinated. The National Aboriginal Health Strategy (1989) identified that a co-ordinated and measured interaction of many areas or sectors of development was pivotal to the achievement of health. Similarly, the report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (in NT Office of Aboriginal Development, 1996) also pointed to the need for intersectoral collaboration to address the range of issues required to redress the disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. Among its many recommendations, the report recommends the review of prison health services and drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs (recommendation 152, p151), and states that the health care available to persons in correctional institutions should be of an equivalent standard to that available to the general public (recommendation 159, p157).

Prison services for Indigenous people were also highlighted in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report “Bringing them Home” (1997) Recommendation 37 (p43) states:

> That the Council of Australian Governments ensure the provision of adequate funding to relevant Indigenous health and medical services and family well-being programs to establish preventive mental health programs in all prisons and detention centres and to advise prison health services.


It is clear that some progress has been made in ensuring the implementation of such recommendations, however it is equally clear that this particular recommendation has not be universally achieved.

**Alcohol & Drug Related Offending in the Northern Territory**

The Northern Territory does not have a high rate of illicit drug use – people incarcerated for illicit drug offences constitute around six per cent of the total prisoner population. However, based on trends from other jurisdictions, it is only a matter of time before this proportion increases. It is therefore imperative to have in place a strategic response to illicit drug use and treatment. The majority of prisoners in the Northern Territory (approximately 75%) have been incarcerated for alcohol-related offences. Almost half re-offend within two years of release. Most offenders in this group (up to 89%) are Aboriginal people, many (around 60%) come from remote and rural settings in the NT and speak English as a second, third or fourth language. It costs around $170 per day to incarcerate one person. On any given day in the NT, approximately 400 people are incarcerated for alcohol and/or drug related offences, equating to a daily cost of $68 000 and an annual cost of $26 million. If the reoffending rate could be lowered by just 1% a yearly saving of $250 000 would result. Given that the average sentence length is around two years, opportunities arise to address the reoffending rate by concentrating on addressing the offender’s problematic alcohol and/or drug use whilst they are incarcerated.

Recidivism rates are not the only factor providing impetus for change in this environment. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody made numerous recommendations regarding the provision of Aboriginal health and substance use services (NT Office of Aboriginal Development, 1996). Among the many recommendations, the Report noted the following:

- It is inappropriate to focus on any one single explanation of Aboriginal alcohol issues (recommendation 70);
- Corrections and Aboriginal Health Services should review the provision of prison health and alcohol treatment services (recommendation 152);
- Correctional staff should be trained in cross-cultural issues (recommendation 228).

The Royal Commission Report is only one of a number of documents addressing the issue of rehabilitation, health care and drug and alcohol treatment in correctional settings. In the last ten years, a multitude of reports, inquiries and standards have been developed that address, inter alia, these issues and provide benchmarks as to appropriate practice in this area. They include:

- Standard Guidelines for Corrections in Australia (1994)
- National Drugs in Prison Strategy (Draft, 1998)
- Aboriginal Health Strategy (1989)
Each of these reports provides specific guidance as to what constitutes ‘best practice’ in the area of offender rehabilitation. They also provide a clear message that if correctional systems are not operating according to these guidelines and standards, it is time that they changed.

What is ‘Best Practice’?

It is clear that the above documents establish a ‘benchmark’ for performance in the area of rehabilitation for offenders with alcohol and drug related problems. Further, based on the broad characteristics of a best practice organisation as espoused in the Australian Best Practice Demonstration Program (1991), best practice in this field should incorporate the following elements:

- Intra and inter sectoral strategic planning;
- Commitment by the Government to the principles of harm reduction;
- A multi-disciplinary team approach to rehabilitative service delivery;
- Acceptance and support of a harm minimisation paradigm by the Prison Officer Associations;
- A willingness to explore new models of service delivery and implementing progressive drug policy;
- More flexible work environments;
- Respect for clients of services (ie, drug using offenders), victims of crime, disparate cultural groups and taking into account the needs of the broader community;
- Development of closer links and networks with external alcohol and other drug and health service providers;
- Establishment of sound data collection, analysis and benchmarking systems and support of continual research and evaluation.
Case Study in Best Practice – Ending Offending – Our Message Project

Based on these principles, the Ending Offending Our Message project represents best practice in prisoner rehabilitation. The project represents an innovative and collaborative approach to alcohol and drug interventions for Indigenous people in the Correctional setting. Using as primary mediums art and music, and incorporated into nationally accredited training modules, participants are exploring, conceptualising and sharing with others their stories about drinking, offending, culture and community. Through this process of mutual discourse alternative patterns of alcohol use are explored, promoted and reinforced not only within the Correctional Centres but also through consultation and promotion within participants’ home communities. A number of language groups, covering most of the NT are involved including Western Arrernte, Walpiri, Luritja, Kunwinjku, Murrinh-Patha, Gupapungu, Anindilyakwa, Tiwi and Yolgnu.

Over 150 male and female prisoners in Darwin and Alice Springs are involved in this ‘world first’ initiative. Participants are producing a collection of stories, paintings, songs, a music CD and interactive web site addressing the issues of offending and alcohol and drug use. Throughout this process, they receive nationally accredited training in areas such as literacy, music and art industry skills, computing, woodwork and trades.

Overall, the ‘Ending Offending Our Message’ project focuses on the following main themes:

- **Reducing recidivism** by increasing employment prospects on release. The major factors associated with recidivism are poor employment prospects, limited education and the harmful use of alcohol and other drugs.

- **Reducing the negative consequences of alcohol and drug use** through an exploration of the relationship between alcohol and offending and participation in therapeutic alcohol and drug programs. Prisoners involved in this project are also participating in alcohol and drug programs such as the ending Offending Alcohol Education program and the Illicit drug Peer Education Program.

- **Enhancing the process of restitution and reparation** to the community. The process of mutual discourse between the prisoner and the community will encourage further dialogue between the offender and their home community. (One of the fundamental principles of ‘restorative justice’ is to further involve the community in the process of ‘justice’.) Further any profits resulting from the sale of artwork and music will be redirected into community-based projects.

- **Fostering Partnerships in Aboriginal Development.** The project provides Aboriginal inmates with the opportunity to:
  - Achieve greater ownership of issues affecting their lives;
  - Experience an increase in employment and enterprise on release from prison - the Aboriginal presence in the art and music industries far exceeds the Aboriginal proportion of Australia’s population. In 1998, 68% of Australian art sold overseas was of Aboriginal origin (Australia Council, 1999). Despite being only 1% of Australia’s population, 23% of contemporary music sales in the same period were of Aboriginal origin. This represents a substantial resource in terms of industrial opportunities available to inmates; and
  - Enjoy improved health and education outcomes.

The project is being evaluated in regard to its process, impact and outcomes.
Northern Territory Correctional Services – A ‘Best Practice’ Organisation?

Whilst the project described above reflects ‘best practice’, the achievement of best practice in NTCS as a whole is constrained by many factors, including a lack of commitment by Government to pursue a harm minimisation framework in relation to drug related offenders. If it can be assumed that ‘harm minimisation’ is a best practice benchmark by which to assess current service delivery, the organisation must contend with a range of constraining factors including, but not limited to, the following:

- Reoffending of alcohol and drug related offenders is contingent upon a number of factors including employment status and education. NTCS is limited in its ability to address underlying social and economic factors.

- There is a lack of a ‘whole of government approach’ to alcohol and drug issues – innovative harm reduction policies are apparent in the health services area (eg the introduction of a tax on alcohol to support treatment and rehabilitation), but lacking in the correctional services area.

- There is a basic philosophical rift between what is considered to be the primary purpose of incarceration, ie, punishment versus rehabilitation.

- The very nature of prisons makes it difficult to address drug use from a harm minimisation perspective in that prisons are there to prevent and deter illicit drug use.

- Offender and drug user rehabilitation issues do not ‘win votes’. Politicians are not particularly interested in corrections issues, provided there are no escapes. Further, the community is generally apathetic toward prisoner rehabilitation measures.

The Northern Territory is a fine example of a truly multi-cultural and culturally rich environment. In order to capitalise on its inherent wealth and value, NTCS is in a position to become world leaders in the area of culturally appropriate and meaningful offender rehabilitation strategies. The way forward may be perceived as contrary to the status quo, it may challenge and question the way in which we do our business, yet it will reflect a more humanistic and inclusive way of ‘doing business’. Northern Territory Correctional Services not only has a duty to strive towards ‘A Safer Community’ but to do so in a way that is sensitive to differing cultures and maintains the balance between care and coercion. It is with these basic principles in mind that the following recommendations are made.

Recommendations For Change

It is beyond the scope of any organisation to significantly change the attitudes and values of the Government of the day. It is also beyond its scope to change the social and economic structure of society. It is therefore incumbent upon any organisation, and individual employees to actively pursue ‘best practice’ in their particular field, within a framework of social justice and basic humanitarianism. To better align NTCS within this ‘best practice’ framework, the following recommendations are made:

- Intra and inter sectoral strategic planning processes that involve Aboriginal health and welfare organisations.

- The establishment and agreement across NTCS about drug policy and treatment objectives.

• Implementation of holistic sentence planning processes that focus on drug and alcohol intervention needs.
• Equitable and defined budget allocation between ‘custodial’ and ‘rehabilitation’ areas.
• Supportive and consistent policies across all areas of Government.
• Sound and appropriate research and evaluation processes across NTCS.
• Recognition of the need to identify gaps in offender rehabilitation service delivery, and who is best placed to deliver those services (ie, allocation of resources, contracting out services etc).

Northern Territory Correctional Services is in a prime position to become a world leader in offender rehabilitation. Indeed, projects such as ‘Ending Offending – Our Message’ reflect world best practice in Indigenous interventions. The offender population is relatively small, access to Government officials is direct and the human resources required to achieve best practice are generally committed and motivated. With a good deal of perseverance, preparedness to take ‘one step forward and two steps back’ and an innate belief in and respect for humanity, NTCS is well positioned to become a best practice organisation.
References

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United Nations Principles For the Protection of Persons Deprived of their Liberty

United Nations Principles for the Protection of Persons With a Mental Illness