



## MENTAL HEALTH AND VICTORIAN PRISONS

Justice and International Mission (JIM) Unit  
Uniting Church (Victoria and Tasmania), June 2009

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### INTRODUCTION

'The increase of people with mental health problems in our prisons ... reflects an increasing prevalence of mental illness, a failure of health services to intervene before the illness causes social harm and inadequate prevention or early intervention within the justice ... sector...' (*Because mental health matters: Victorian Mental Health Reform Strategy 2009 – 2019*).

This information sheet is provided to members of the Uniting Church in Australia Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, other Christians, and members of the general community who have an interest in advocating for justice and support for prisoners who suffer from mental illness. Christians believe *that each person is made in the image of God*. Therefore, each person has inherent and equal dignity. People, including those suffering from mental illness, prisoners (and those who have a previous criminal record) should be afforded due respect. Numerous Scriptural passages suggest that God desires for the release of captives of all kinds so that they may enjoy liberty and light and a purposeful existence. This is particularly important when we consider that some offenders and ex-offenders with a history of mental illness may not have actually offended in the first place if it was not for their condition. This perspective needs to be balanced with the need to protect people in the community from harm. People with mental illness are more likely to be victim of crime than others in the community.

*Here is a story about mental illness and the personal impact.*

[O]ne night [my son] started hallucinating. He was on a trip with a friend in NSW...The hospital called me to let me know what had happened and I was assured he would be OK...The hospital needed to get his patient history from our normal hospital in Echuca [Victoria] but there was a delay in getting this information...The Psychiatric Consultant who examined [my son] phoned me and told me he was going to be discharged as he was only homesick. I pleaded with him not to discharge him as he was really sick and needed help...[My son] was discharged the next morning and on the drive on the way home with his friend he killed his friend because he was still sick and hallucinating. He was sent to jail and had his glasses and hearing aid removed and not returned. He was supposed to be sent to a hospital with a psychiatric ward but instead he was sent to Silver Water jail...That is where he stayed for 2 months...[He was then] moved to Long Bay Jail where he was supposed to undergo a psychiatric assessment prior to his court hearing. On the day of the assessment the doctor never turned up ...and neither did the solicitor who was acting on his behalf. As such the hearing never took place and as a result he became very suicidal...I informed and pleaded with the authorities to make them aware he was sick and suicidal. They informed me he would be put in a cell with another inmate who could watch him but in fact he was placed in a single cell on Friday...and hung himself on the Friday night. I would like to know why he was failed by three government departments? How did this happen?

The 'de-institutionalisation' of mental health facilities in Victoria has possibly resulted in an increase in the number of people in prison identified as suffering from a mental illness. There is uncertainty as to whether increased prevalence, or increasing reporting, is the main cause of this purported swell in cases. Despite this, there remains a desperate need for effective health services for prisoners and ex-prisoners. Current treatment services are very limited and often ineffectual. Government and community support is required to stem recidivism (i.e. repeat offending) of mentally ill offenders. Consultation undertaken by the Justice and International Mission (JIM) Unit with various Victorian prison and mental health stakeholders has highlighted the lack of advocacy work being undertaken in this area to improve the situation.

### Background information

Victorian prisons currently hold approximately 1150 people with a diagnosed mental illness (28 per cent of prisoners). Of these 500 have psychosis and 700 have depressive conditions. Research indicates that the prevalence of psychiatric illnesses is disturbingly higher in the prison population (three to five times more common among prisoners) when compared to sample studies of the general community. These people require assistance. Appropriate rendering of support can enable an offender to contribute to the broader community. Investment in state-funded support programs can also reduce the need for more expensive and intensive services later on.

## Background information (continued)

Post release support programs addressing a prisoner's holistic needs, including their mental health needs, have been found to be highly effective in reducing recidivism (re-offending) rates (up to 70 per cent reduction). A program costing around \$10,000 per person can avoid a cost of \$75,000 per annum, or \$200 per day (this is the total recurrent cost to imprison a Victorian in 2005/06).

The Victorian Government has set itself an ambitious plan to reform the state mental health system. It is called "Because mental health matters: Victorian Mental Health Reform Strategy 2009 – 2019". Positive developments included in the document:

- New medium security forensic mental health places in prison and enhanced capacity of community based clinical and Psychiatric Disability Rehabilitation Support Services (PDRSS) sector services
- Strengthening the capacity of pre and post release transitional programs to address mental health, alcohol and drug, housing and other complex problems that affect the ability of prisoners to re-integrate into the community.

## ACT – WRITE A RESPECTFUL EMAIL OR LETTER TODAY

### Strategies for further consideration

A range of strategies should have been recommended in the *Victorian Mental Health Reform Strategy* for the Victorian Government to consider. The following issues have not been funded, or have only been partially funded, and, are being actively considered now:

- **Provision of enhanced specialist court-based interventions and support programs targeted to offenders with mental health problems to divert this group from the criminal justice system where appropriate, reduce the risk factors associated with re-offending, and improve access to legal advocacy and representation**
- **Expansion of transitional support programs for prisoners offering integrated and holistic support pre- and post-release, as it has been acknowledged in the *Strategy* that demand for services available in the community generally exceeds supply**
- **Strengthening the capacity of the criminal justice system to provide treatment and support to people with a mental illness and co-existing disability while in custody and improve responses to this group in prisoner pre-and post-release support programs.**

Furthermore, *Uniting Church prison chaplains say that there is a need for consideration of more comprehensive ongoing supervised care options in the community.*

The Victorian Government should be congratulated for initiating the "Because mental health matters: Victorian Mental Health Reform Strategy 2009 – 2019". The Government is to be further commended for its strong commitment, outlined in the recent Victorian budget, to assist children and young people. Basing your points on those raised above (in bold), write a respectful email or letter to the Victorian Ministers set out below. In it urge greater provision of resources for the benefit of prisoners who suffer mental health problems. **Particular reference should be made to initiatives proposed directly above. It should be mentioned that these kinds of programs are cost effective.** In order to reduce the burden of mental health issues in Victoria, it is estimated that \$26m is needed for each 1% of burden. The Justice and International Mission Unit are currently undertaking work to estimate the cost of these proposals to Government.

<p><b>Hon. Lisa Neville</b> Minister for Mental Health Level 22, 50 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne 3000 <a href="mailto:lisa.neville@parliament.vic.gov.au">lisa.neville@parliament.vic.gov.au</a></p>	<p><b>Hon. Bob Cameron</b> Minister for Corrections Level 26, 121 Exhibition Street, Melbourne 3000 <a href="mailto:bob.cameron@parliament.vic.gov.au">bob.cameron@parliament.vic.gov.au</a></p>
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**Please copy in the Justice and International Mission Unit**, Level 3, 130 Little Collins Street, Melbourne Victoria 3000 / [jim@victas.uca.org.au](mailto:jim@victas.uca.org.au) and send any replies that you may receive.

## REFERENCES

- Carer, Mother, Victoria, Footscray Forum #8*, Stories of Injustice and Despair, HREOC  
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John Bottomley, *Towards a Renewed Vision for Uniting Church Prison Ministry: A Discussion Paper*, Outreach Ministries, Commission for Mission, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, 2008  
VCOSS Analysis of the 2009-10 State Budget: *Children and families*  
The Hon. Justice Harper, *Vocational education and training for adult prisoners and offenders in Australia: Research readings—Support document*