



**WIPAN**

WOMEN IN PRISON  
ADVOCACY NETWORK

*No exit into homelessness*  
**STILL A DREAM?**

**The Housing Needs**  
*of*  
**women leaving prison**

**Discussion Paper**

August 2011

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## Executive Summary

This discussion paper is a response to the experience of women participating in the WIPAN Mentoring Program, that matches mentors from the community with women exiting prison. Program participants reported the most difficult issue when trying to reintegrate into the community was the lack of access to suitable, long term housing. This personal experience is matched by what is known about the factors that support women reintegrating into the community – that housing is one of the most important factors. Without suitable supported housing options, women releases are at an increased risk of cycling in and out of prison.

## Women In Prison Advocacy Network (WIPAN)

WIPAN is an advocacy based organisation managed and directed by a group of professional women, dedicated to improving the status, wellbeing and prospects of women in the criminal justice system. WIPAN takes a grassroots approach to addressing the social injustices that exist for women in the criminal justice system (CJS) and campaigns to raise awareness of, and progress the cultural, social, economic and political inequalities that sustain these injustices. WIPAN operates a voluntary mentoring project that seeks to enhance the wellbeing of women releases by increasing their social capital, supporting their community reintegration, encouraging their autonomy and learning from their lived experience.

## Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to promote discussion and reach a common understanding of the housing issues of women exiting prison. This paper describes the barriers women experience when seeking long term suitable housing and accessing support to maintain a tenancy. The paper was inspired by and guided by qualitative and quantitative research conducted by WIPAN as part of the mentoring program, a program that matches women exiting prison with a woman in the community. (See Appendix 1). Over 60% of WIPAN's mentees had temporary, transient and unsuitable housing as their only housing option. Women in the mentoring program found that temporary housing was highly incompatible to their needs and significantly limited their ability to acquire independent living skills, establish a life free from abuse, care for their children and maintain their health and wellbeing.

## Aims

- seek input from the community sector;
- inform and generate discussion about the housing issues facing women exiting prison;
- develop practical solutions that will allow women to access safe and suitable accommodation within the community.

## A Right to Suitable Housing

Australia's ratification of major international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), imposes an obligation on Australia to ensure that the rights within those treaties are protected, promoted and fulfilled in Australia. The right to adequate housing can be found in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the binding right is set out in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Article 11(1) of the ICESCR recognises:

*... the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions.*

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights established that the right to adequate housing is more than just shelter, it is the 'right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity'. As a State Party to the ICESCR, Australia is required to take appropriate steps to ensure the realisation of the right to adequate housing. The steps are required to be 'concrete', 'targeted', 'expeditious' and 'effective' and should include making adequate housing a budgetary priority.<sup>1</sup> Housing is also essential if women are to access other rights such as safety, health and freedom from violence.

Australia's failure to ensure the realisation of the right to affordable and secure housing has been recognised by the United Nations. In 2006, the Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing reported that Australia had failed to implement its legal obligation to progressively realise the human right to adequate housing ... particularly in view of its responsibilities as a rich and prosperous country'.<sup>2</sup>

## **Housing Needs**

Women prisoners are more likely to be homeless prior to incarceration than men and are therefore at a greater risk of homelessness post-release. 60% of WIPAN mentees post-release had insecure housing or were homeless and women with children were one of the three family groups most likely to be turned away when requesting accommodation. Homelessness is not limited to the cities of NSW but also extends into rural and remote regions of the state. There is a research gap in information available on women releasees housing options and homelessness in rural and regional areas.

## **Complex Needs**

Women in prison are generally regarded as 'low risk – high need' due their mental and physical health conditions and histories of abuse. These health issues are directly related to the high level of drug and alcohol dependence among female offenders and the cumulative effects of long standing domestic and sexual violence. The Background of this paper details this summary of the profile of women prisoners in NSW:

- 91% had a serious drug addiction and as many were convicted of a crime committed as a direct result of drug addiction;
- 92% had one or more long term health conditions;
- 13% had an intellectual disability;
- 49% had children;
- 85% had been subjected to sexual abuse, while the number of women physically and emotionally abused is thought to be higher.

## **Community and Public Services**

In NSW, there is a scarcity of affordable housing stock. 60,444 applicants are currently waiting for public housing in NSW. The Community Offender Support Program (COSP) centres that are operated by Corrective Services and provide some prisoners with temporary housing, however suitable housing that supports the complex needs of women exiting prison is scarce.

Boronia is the only COSP that houses women, in the two years since its first intake, 44% of inmates have obtained 'stable accommodation as per exit and resettlement plan'. There is no independent evaluation of the COSP facilities, as to whether the COSPS have been good value for money in providing temporary accommodation. Guthrie House provides a residential rehabilitation program for women leaving prison. The most difficult challenge in rehousing women clients is the severe shortage of housing stock. As a direct result of this shortage, women are frequently released into boarding houses that are highly unsuitable for anyone who has recently completed a rehabilitation program and is in recovery.

## Administrative Barriers

Some women who have public housing tenancies, enter prison on remand (half do not receive a custodial sentence) or receive a custodial sentence of less than six months. During this period they are at risk of losing their tenancy because the housing service has not been notified or the period a property can be maintained is too short. They then move from a short period in custody to homelessness. It is unclear how frequently this situation occurs, it is an issue that this discussion paper hopes to raise through the consultation process.

Addressing housing needs while on remand or serving a short sentence is difficult because of:

- uncertainty around the release date;
- an inability to deal with accrued debt;
- limited time out of cells;
- lack of knowledge of the prison and housing system;
- financial hardship;
- unmet legal needs including managing debts from unpaid fines;
- victim compensation responsibilities; and
- time and difficulty of locating 100 points of identification for housing applications.



## Discussion Questions

### Planning

1. How can housing suitable for women be arranged before women exits prison, so they do not spend time in unsupported emergency accommodation?
2. How can greater housing stock/options be secured for women exiting prison?
3. What are suitable models for short-term residential programs for women exiting prison? How can the need for these services be estimated?
4. How can the NSW Homelessness Plan change to better support women leaving prison?
5. What models of housing and supports are most suitable for complex need tenants who are also Aboriginal?

### Funding and administration

6. How can the application process for housing be made easier and delays reduced?
7. NSW Pathways should make it easier for applicants and community and public housing providers to manage the complex system of multiple service providers and applications by created a one-door policy. We are interested in your experience of this policy.
8. How can access to housing be managed in a way that supports women to regain custody of their children?
9. How can administrative arrangements be improved to ensure that community and public housing services are notified if a tenant is on remand or sentenced?
10. How should services to support women maintain tenancies be funded?
11. What improvements are required in the communication and protocols between prisons and community and public housing?

### Maintaining a tenancy

12. How should women with complex needs, including substance abuse histories, history of trauma, cognitive disabilities) be supported to maintain a tenancy?
13. What responsibility should Housing NSW take to assist tenants in maintaining tenancies?
14. How should post release housing be evaluated to ensure it is value for money and effective?
15. How can women prisoners' legal needs that prevent access to housing be addressed?
16. How can opportunities for the families of women in prison to maintain housing, be improved?
17. What barriers does a poor tenancy history create to obtaining community or public housing?

### Building capacity in the sector

18. What are the current gaps in training and experience in the sector? How can these be addressed to build capacity in the sector?
19. How can housing and support services improve access to women exiting prison?

### Data and evaluation

20. What information is needed about the population of women exiting prison to make long term plans for suitable housing stock and services?
21. Who should be responsible for collating this data?

## Case Studies

### Betty's story

Betty suffers from drug dependency, mental and physical illnesses and is a victim of sexual assault. Following her release from a women's correctional centre, Betty sought support from Housing NSW to secure long-term suitable accommodation.

Betty submitted a priority application to Housing NSW, providing medical records and support documentation from her doctor, WIPAN mentor, Narcotics Anonymous sponsor, and WIPAN representatives. Recommendations from her doctor and psychologist asked that her history, medical condition and financial situation be taken into account when placing her in accommodation.

Betty was placed in temporary accommodation where, over the course of a three-week stay, she contracted scabies and lice. Housing NSW gave Betty four days-notice to leave the emergency accommodation and recommended a boarding house. After a short stay in the boarding house Betty found it too expensive and the living conditions were affecting her mental health and physical illnesses.

During this time, Betty and her advocates followed the advice of Housing NSW. Her application for priority housing was submitted four times over a one-month period; because Housing NSW claimed to have lost the paper work each time. WIPAN learnt of an alternative not-for-profit community- housing provider who ultimately provided accommodation to Betty for twelve months.

Betty showed perseverance and commitment to changing her life by reaching out to support networks such as WIPAN and it's mentoring project during this stressful time. Her story demonstrates that the quality and suitability of housing must be matched with the needs of the person seeking assistance.

### Cheryl's story

Cheryl came from an abusive family. She had a serious drug addiction before the age of ten, was the ongoing victim of sexual assault throughout her childhood and adolescence and in her late teens she began soliciting to pay for her addiction. Cheryl moved in and out of prison for over a decade committing a series of non-violent crimes, each resulting in a short sentence.

Upon release from prison at age 30 Cheryl admitted herself to a drug rehabilitation program and was drug free for the first time in over two decades. After successfully completing the rehab program, and making real progress for the first time in her life, Cheryl felt determined to succeed.

Nevertheless due to a severe shortage of housing stock, the rehabilitation centre had no alternative but to release Cheryl into a boarding house in Kings Cross where she found herself isolated, disconnected from her children and surrounded by individuals tempting her with drugs. Cheryl became increasingly despondent and after several weeks finally gave in to the temptation and comfort of her addiction and began using drugs again. Cheryl was arrested and reincarcerated for breaching conditions of her parole.

# BACKGROUND

## Women Prisoners in NSW

Typically, women prisoners have experienced high levels of historical disadvantage and victimisation, are repeat offenders, commit non-violent crime and receive multiple short sentences. In 2009-10, the average daily number of women in full time custody was 778 and 2771<sup>3</sup> were being supervised under community based corrections. Each year the prison population is expanding with recent statistics indicating that female incarceration is increasing at a faster rate than males.<sup>4</sup> In NSW between 1994 and 2004, the female prison population increased by 101%.<sup>5</sup>

Over a year, approximately 1600 women are released from NSW prisons and nearly 50% of this group are released from remand. Either they were found not guilty, did not receive a custodial sentence, or the period of the sentence matched the period already spent on remand.<sup>6</sup> In 2010 the average length of time an un-sentenced person spent on remand was 3.1 months.<sup>7</sup> In NSW there has been a 10% increase in the number of women remandees in the past decade,<sup>8</sup> a remand population that is 2.5 times that of the Victorian remand population.<sup>9</sup>

In 2007-8 the average daily number of Indigenous females in custody totalled 220,<sup>10</sup> some 28.8% of all female prisoners in NSW, a figure that is statistically disproportionate to the total NSW Indigenous women population of 2.1%.<sup>11</sup> The number of Indigenous women prisoners increased by 21.6% between 2006 and 2009.<sup>12</sup>

Women are typically imprisoned for less serious offences than men and as a consequence receive relatively shorter prison terms, often serving less than a one-year prison sentence.<sup>5</sup> From 1999 to 2009, shoplifting was the most common offence committed by NSW female offenders (15%), followed by non-domestic assault (9%), fraud (7%), drug use/possession (7%), and retaliatory domestic assault (5%).<sup>13</sup>

In 2008 NSW had the highest recidivism rate for women in Australia, at 42%, higher than the national average of 38.2%.<sup>14</sup> In 2008-09 Corrective Services NSW reported that 41.6% of female prisoners were returning to custody within two years of release, <sup>3</sup> and in 2009, 59.5% of full time female offenders had been previously incarcerated.<sup>15</sup> The first few months post-release are a particularly vulnerable period for women releasees, during which time they are at greater risk of relapsing, offending and breaching parole.<sup>16</sup>

The majority (92%) of women prisoners reported having one or more long term health conditions, compared to 81% of male prisoners and 75% of the general population.<sup>17</sup> These health issues are directly related to the high level of drug and alcohol dependence among female offenders and the cumulative effects of long standing domestic and sexual violence.<sup>17</sup> The prevalence of women with mental health disorders and cognitive disabilities in the criminal justice system has been steadily increasing over the last few decades and is significantly higher among the NSW prison population than the general population.<sup>18</sup> In 2009, 20% of women in prison reported that they had been admitted to a psychiatric unit or hospital.<sup>19</sup> In comparison to their non-Indigenous counterparts Indigenous women experience greater incidents of mental illness, child sexual assault, domestic violence, post traumatic stress, and drug addiction.<sup>20,11</sup>

## Homelessness

In 2009, 27,374 people were homeless in NSW, 11,000 of whom were women.<sup>21</sup> Homelessness can happen to any person and for any number of reasons, however, it is those who are already significantly disadvantaged in society that are most vulnerable to homelessness. Women prisoners are more likely to be homeless prior to incarceration than are men and at a greater risk of homelessness post-release than are men.<sup>23,17</sup>

The evaluation of the WIPAN mentoring project found 60% of mentees upon release from prison had insecure housing or were homeless. The women on the program found support services were severely overextended and as a result services could not meet the demand or the complex needs of these women. Women mentees attempting to secure long-term housing post-release attempted every avenue to find housing but their efforts were usually futile.

## Housing in Rural and Remote Areas

Homelessness is not limited to the cities of NSW but extends into rural and remote regions of the state;<sup>24</sup> the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that 32% of 'rough sleepers' (men and women) live in NSW cities.<sup>25</sup> The issues that are related to widespread homelessness across NSW, such as a lack of affordable housing, a decline in public housing stock, extensive wait lists for public housing and a lack of adequate long term housing options, are particularly salient in rural and remote areas of NSW.<sup>24</sup>

The full extent to which women releasees are experiencing homelessness in rural and remote areas of NSW is difficult to gauge, as there is a gap in available research. It is possible that women releasees make up a 'hidden' homelessness population in these areas. There is reason to believe that women releasees relocating to remote and rural areas would be significantly disadvantaged in securing housing in these areas due to the high population of women releasees being Aboriginal, high recidivism rates and a scarcity of support services.

### Planning

1. How can housing suitable for women be arranged before women exits prison, so they do not spend time in unsupported emergency accommodation?
2. How can greater housing stock/options be secured for women exiting prison?
3. What are suitable models for short-term residential programs for women exiting prison? How can the need for these services be estimated?
4. How can the NSW Homelessness Plan change to better support women leaving prison?
5. What models of housing and supports are most suitable for complex need tenants who are also Aboriginal?

## Barriers to Long-Term Housing for Women Releasees

### Disadvantage Victimization and Historical Trauma

Women offenders exhibit a variety of complex needs that are different to male offenders as a result of their personal histories and the way they enter into crime.<sup>27</sup> For example, the gender specific adversities women offenders face are typically related to their victimisation, including sexual violence, domestic violence and poverty, all of which can be attributed to inequalities of gender, race and class.<sup>27</sup>

The health and psychological costs of domestic violence and sexual violence are most evident with the number of women victims in prison. 85% of women prisoners were subjected to sexual violence, while the number of women physically and emotionally abused are thought to be higher.<sup>28</sup> Women releasees who experienced greater childhood trauma were at a greater risk of homelessness, early involvement with drugs and crime, higher number of prior arrests, use of psychotropic medications and attempted suicide.<sup>29</sup> This group of women is significantly disadvantaged in their attempts to secure stable and suitable housing.<sup>30</sup> The adverse impact on their capacity to be rehoused and to re-establish themselves in society intensifies the cycle of imprisonment and homelessness.<sup>30</sup>

### Illicit Substance Addiction

91% of WIPAN mentees in 2011 had a serious drug addiction and as many were convicted of a crime committed as a direct result of the drug addiction. Women's substance abuse is more closely associated with their criminality than it is for men and women are inclined to use illicit drugs as a form of self-medication or as a coping strategy for psychological distress and/or historical trauma.<sup>18</sup>

Without suitable housing women releasees are at risk of harm from either continually exposed to drugs on the streets or at an increased risk of substance abuse while living in an environment that gives ready access to drugs.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, suitable housing increases the likelihood that women releasees will gain access to pharmacotherapy and health services, employment services, education and build up healthy relationships.<sup>31</sup>

## **Motherhood and Housing Needs**

The 2009 Justice Health inmate survey found 30% of women had dependent children. Women with children were one of the three family groups most likely to be turned away when requesting accommodation (Baldry et al, 2003; AIHW 2009), however 78% of women releasees who lived with their children post-release did not return to prison compared with 32% who were not living with their children. 30

Usually releasees cannot regain custody of their children until they are able to secure suitable housing. For example mothers attempting to get access into Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) must have the child/ren in her care. This is problematic because she is unable to have custody of her children without first having secure housing.<sup>32</sup> As a result the children remain in out-of-home care.<sup>33</sup> A woman releasee's inability to access secure and stable housing hinders her from re-establishing her family unit.<sup>32</sup> It also has an intergenerational effect on her children, 30% of children in contact with the juvenile justice system having experienced at least one period of out-of-home care.<sup>33</sup> The greater the number of placements in care, the greater the risk of juvenile offending.<sup>33</sup>

## **Frequency and Length of Period in Custody: Remand and Sentencing**

Research has shown that the rate of homelessness for those persons incarcerated upon arrest was 20% and nine months post release the figure almost doubled with 38% of releasees being homeless.<sup>30</sup> In view of these statistics the link between incarceration and homelessness becomes apparent.

The processes within the criminal justice system create additional barriers for prisoners and have some bearing on the likelihood of a person maintaining, accessing or securing housing post-release. Some of these barriers are:

- policing policies;
- changes to the Bail legislation that make it more difficult to apply for bail and remove the discretion of the court in bail decisions;
- periods of remand;
- short sentences; and
- access to resources pre-release all have some bearing on the likelihood of a person maintaining or accessing housing.

Being remanded in custody to await trial can have detrimental consequences for women and their existing housing arrangements. The link between remand and/or short sentences (less than 12 months) and homelessness is evident with many women prisoners losing their tenancies either after being incarcerated, or in custody for a short period (3-6 months) and then released into homelessness. 21,<sup>34</sup>

Women remandees and women serving short sentences form the bulk of the women's prisoner population, with 62.9% spending less than six months in custody.<sup>35</sup> Barriers to addressing their housing needs while incarcerated often originate from systemic causes, such as limited access to programs and health and support services. Women prisoners lack the information or tools they need to address their housing needs whilst in custody, <sup>36</sup> resulting in a reduced capacity to maintain current tenancies or organise housing pre-release.<sup>37</sup>

Abandoning a tenancy as a result of serving a short period in custody is detrimental for those women attempting to be rehoused upon exiting prison. The manner in which the woman's tenancy is vacated can generate rent arrears. In addition, rent arrears can result through damage caused by people who are not on the lease agreement. These factors often lead to a woman being classified as an 'unsatisfactory former tenant' who is unable to be rehoused by public housing.<sup>36</sup>

It is highly probable that women remandees and those serving short sentences will lose their housing, and potentially be released into homelessness. Thus, remand and short sentencing further exacerbate social dislocation and increase a woman's vulnerability to homelessness and increased risk of re-incarceration.

## **Tenancy History**

For women releasees housing problems can arise because of an unsatisfactory tenancy history. As described earlier, if a property has been vacated as a result of a woman being detained in custody, tenancies are in most instances terminated by Housing NSW upon discovery of abandoned premises or rent arrears. In most cases the tenant is formally evicted and added to the tenancy database listing as a 'prior unsatisfactory tenant'. This has the result of excluding them from being considered for future applications.<sup>36</sup> In these circumstances, when a woman reapplies for housing she must request her case to be reviewed by the tribunal. Most women faced with this prospect, particularly those with cognitive disability, low levels of literacy or a limited understanding of the housing system, need support to manage this process.

Upon arrest all women who are detained in custody are taken to Silverwater Women's Correctional Centre, otherwise known as the 'reception' centre, where they are to be assessed and classified. It is during this process that Housing NSW are notified if a tenant has been held in custody, at which point Housing NSW will follow their protocol in addressing the tenancy. Flagging this change in housing circumstances to Housing NSW and the women prisoner involved at this stage of the process can determine whether a woman risks accruing debt and losing a tenancy. WIPAN is concerned by reports from women in the mentoring program that Housing NSW was not informed about their incarceration after the intake process or that Housing NSW did not receive or record this information. WIPAN is interested to learn about whether these are isolated incidences or is this a systemic problem.

## **Unmet Legal Needs**

Unmet legal needs for women prisoners create barriers for securing housing post-release. These include managing debts from unpaid fines, victim compensation and apprehended violence orders (both to protect themselves and others).<sup>37</sup> These legal matters have typically arisen from circumstances pre-incarceration. It is still crucial that they are addressed during incarceration to reduce a prisoner's risk of homelessness post-release.<sup>37</sup> For example, an apprehended violence order may prevent a woman from returning to her family home post release, a victim's compensation debt may impact on a woman's financial resources to secure housing, an outstanding debt with Centrelink and Housing NSW, may inhibit a woman's capacity to receive these services post-release.<sup>37</sup>

Access to information and legal representation while in prison can be restricted by limited time with solicitors, clashes in timing of phone calls, the movement of prisoners, time limited phone calls, issues relating to classification or protection/segregation and lockdowns. Other barriers to access information include the time taken to receive requested information and restricted access to the prison computers that can access the legal portal. Prisoners with limited capacity to understand information and the process required to seek assistance further compounds the likelihood that their legal needs will remain unmet. As a consequence attempting to navigate the legal system while in custody leaves many women prisoners overwhelmed and intimidated.

## **Other Issues**

It has been reported to WIPAN that for women releasees, locating 100 points of identification to provide to Housing NSW can be a very challenging task, even with the support of a case manager. Often upon release it can take up to eight weeks to locate and receive the necessary forms of identification to begin the application process with Housing NSW, at which stage many women, after being in unsuitable housing for so long are either on the brink of relapse or have relapsed. In addition, while women releasees are permitted to get help from Housing NSW to make applications to get housing or tenancy brokerage, rent start and rental bond, many releasees report that they do not receive this level of support, adding further complications to the process.

## Suitability of Housing

### Unsuitable and Transient Housing

The lack of suitable housing options post-release means that many women releasees resort to being housed in boarding houses or similarly unsuitable housing in highly unsafe and transient environments in areas of high unemployment, drug abuse and criminality.<sup>34</sup> Women releasees who resort to these high mobility and unstable housing options are at a greater risk of re-incarceration and are provided with limited opportunity to settle.

Cheryl's case study is a typical example, where in her attempt to recover from an addiction, stay free of crime and regain custody of her children, the crisis, short term, hostel or non-assisted rental housing options set her up to fail. A study conducted over a nine-month period followed 238 prisoners exiting prison (75% male, 25% female) found a significant relationship between unsuitable/transient housing and re-incarceration. Those of greater risk of re-incarceration were either: transient (2 or more moves), homeless, living alone or living in unsuitable housing.<sup>34</sup>

### Funding and administration

6. How can the application process for housing be made easier and delays reduced?
7. NSW Pathways should make it easier for applicants and community and public housing providers to manage the complex system of multiple service providers and applications by created a one-door policy. We are interested in your experience of this policy.
8. How can access to housing be managed in a way that supports women to regain custody of their children?
9. How can administrative arrangements be improved to ensure that community and public housing services are notified if a tenant is on remand or sentenced?
10. How should services to support women maintain tenancies be funded?
11. What improvements are required in the communication and protocols between prisons and community and public housing?

## Housing Options for Women Releasees

### Housing NSW

Often the only long term affordable and stable housing option for women releasees is government subsidised housing through NSW Housing. Waiting lists are long and housing stock is scarce so that access to public housing is likely to only be available if women meet one of the priority housing criteria.<sup>38</sup>

### Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP)

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is a government initiative established in response to homelessness across Australia. The SAAP initiative funded 1,562 organisations nationally to deliver support and/or accommodation to homeless persons or those at risk of homelessness. The initiative targets high need client groups, women releasees are not one of those stand alone groups. Overall, the SAAP program statistics are positive, with 95% of accommodated tenants maintaining their tenancies. However, two of the specific client groups that are most likely to be denied housing after proving to have a valid application are individuals with children (66%) and couples with children (77%). 55% of all of those rejected were women and 30% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.<sup>39</sup> This poses a significant barrier for women releasees who want to reside with their children and re-establish their family life. For many releasee mothers, not having the capacity to live with their children can be devastating and lead to feelings of hopelessness after their continued efforts to find suitable family housing prove futile.<sup>39</sup>

## **Private Rental**

For the majority of women releasees, accessing the private rental market is not an option. The private rental market in NSW is increasingly unaffordable, highly competitive, requires good credit and housing history, stock is scarce and the private rental marketplace has been found to be discriminatory towards welfare recipients.<sup>31</sup>

## **Community Offender Support Program (COSP)**

Community Offender Support Program centres (COSP) are transitional accommodation centres run by Corrective Services NSW. The COSPs offer interim accommodation for up to six months to releasees who do not have housing options post-release.<sup>40</sup> Boronia COSP can accommodate eight women releasees for crisis, reintegration or case management placements and has housed 97 women since October 2008, 44% of these women have found stable accommodation.<sup>41</sup> WIPAN is interested to learn more about these women's experiences and of the community-housing sector.

## **Specialised Housing**

Guthrie House is an example of a targeted supported accommodation service that offers rehabilitation treatment options to women releasees. The program provides a three month period of accommodation and has the additional challenge of rehousing women clients post program.<sup>49</sup> Women are frequently released into boarding houses that are unsuitable for a woman who has just completed a rehabilitation program and is in recovery.<sup>49</sup> Guthrie House supports up to sixty women a year, however only has eight beds available in the community.<sup>49</sup> Two beds are for single women in the inner city area through Women's Housing Company Ltd and the other six beds are available to them in the Greater Western Sydney region through Greater Western Sydney Housing Service.<sup>49</sup>

## **Specialist Services Assisting with Housing**

Specialist homelessness service providers for women releasees in NSW are rare. The Community Restorative Centre (CRC) is the only non-government service that specialises in supporting women transitioning from prison into housing in NSW. CRC's Targetted Housing and Support Service (THaSS) and Women's Transition program offer targeted service provision to women releasees and aims to help them locate, secure and sustain long term, stable housing. <sup>49</sup> CRC's resources do not include housing stock, instead they work to assist releasees to secure transitional housing (for 12-18 months) via partnerships with community housing providers. Although the vast majority do secure medium term housing, and some are successful in securing long term housing, a minority are accommodated in crisis or temporary accommodation. One of the biggest challenges facing CRC staff and clients is being able to source affordable, stable long term housing beyond the end of a transitional lease. <sup>49</sup>

## **Maintaining a tenancy**

12. How should women with complex needs, including substance abuse histories, history of trauma, cognitive disabilities) be supported to maintain a tenancy?
13. What responsibility should Housing NSW take to assist tenants in maintaining tenancies?
14. How should post release housing be evaluated to ensure it is value for money and effective?
15. How can women prisoners' legal needs that prevent access to housing be addressed?
16. How can opportunities for the families of women in prison to maintain housing, be improved?
17. What barriers does a poor tenancy history create to obtaining community or public housing?

## Offender Management into Long-Term Housing

### NSW Homelessness Action Plan 2009-2014

The NSW Homelessness Action Plan 2009-2014 states the NSW Government will address prison populations by providing long term support and accommodation for people exiting prisons to prevent homelessness; creating new positions in Western Sydney remand centres to identify and secure accommodation options for eligible remandees and create new transitional/community support workers to provide case management and support to offenders in transition from custody back into the community.<sup>42</sup> This project will have a focus on Aboriginal people. The NSW government has given the lead responsibility of meeting these targets to Corrective Services NSW, and partner organisations Housing NSW, Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care, Department of Community Services and Justice Health.<sup>42</sup>

### Best Practice Model for Prisoner Reintegration

‘Throughcare’ is a model first adopted in the UK in 1986. It provides a continuity of care from reception throughout the custodial period and continues post-release until such a time that releasees are no longer serving a custodial order.<sup>19</sup> Throughcare is widely used by corrective services internationally and is considered to be the ‘best practice’ model of offender management and for assisting releasees to reduce recidivism and reintegrate successfully into the community.<sup>19</sup>

### Building capacity in the sector

18. What are the current gaps in training and experience in the sector? How can these be addressed to build capacity in the sector?
19. How can housing and support services improve access to women exiting prison?

## Successful National and International Housing Models

### Victoria

The Victorian Government and Women’s Housing Ltd provide a gendered and specific approach via the Transitional Housing Management – Corrections Housing Pathways Initiative (THM-CHPI).<sup>43</sup> The main goal is to reduce recidivism linked to homelessness. The understanding upon which the program was built was that a unitary approach to homelessness was ineffective and that flexible, multi modal services that offer continuity of care obtain superior results.<sup>43</sup> The Victorian Government acknowledges the direct link between housing and reoffending and therefore created the THM-CHPI intervention based on the prisoners criminogenic needs and building their resources, supports, coping mechanisms, all of which were found to hold the greatest opportunity for reducing recidivism.<sup>43</sup>

Evaluation of the Victorian program found that 27.1% of participants had reoffended, compared to NSW non-participants of 45.9% over a three-month period.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, over a nine month period only 16.7% of Victorian participants with stable housing were re-incarcerated versus 61.5% of NSW non participants with stable housing.<sup>43</sup>

### United States

In 1992, Dr Sam Tsemberis founded the Pathways to Housing program, which utilised a ‘Housing First’ model approach and was established to address homelessness in New York. It has had exceptional results and become sanctioned as the ‘best practice’ model in the United States.<sup>44</sup> Evaluations showed that the Pathways program sustained a 77-85% retention rate, a reduction of 77% in incarceration days and costs, reduced health costs of 66% and a reduction of 42% in chronic homelessness.<sup>44</sup> The Pathways to Housing Program has received three prestigious federal stimulus grants, including two signed by President Obama in 2009 and has since been replicated across the United States, Canada, Japan, Netherlands, Spain, Denmark and Portugal.<sup>44</sup>

The Pathways to Housing 'Housing First' model, offers housing first, before any other treatment, including mental health and addiction issues. The Housing First model has proved to be highly successful in addressing chronic homelessness. Otherwise known as 'rapid rehousing', the Housing First Model replaces the system of moving homeless individuals through emergency housing or supported transitional housing and houses them immediately into their own housing. 44 The basis for this model is based on research that affirms a homeless persons primary need, above and beyond, psychiatric or substance issues, is housing. It eliminates the notion of an individual needing to be 'housing ready'. 44 The Pathways to Housing Program does not provide housing per se but works to house individuals in the community while offering a high level of case management that promotes stability, accountability and self-sufficiency.44 Furthermore, tenants who were supported through the Pathways to Housing program had their housing held for them while they were hospitalised, imprisoned or went into rehab and continued to have positive results.44

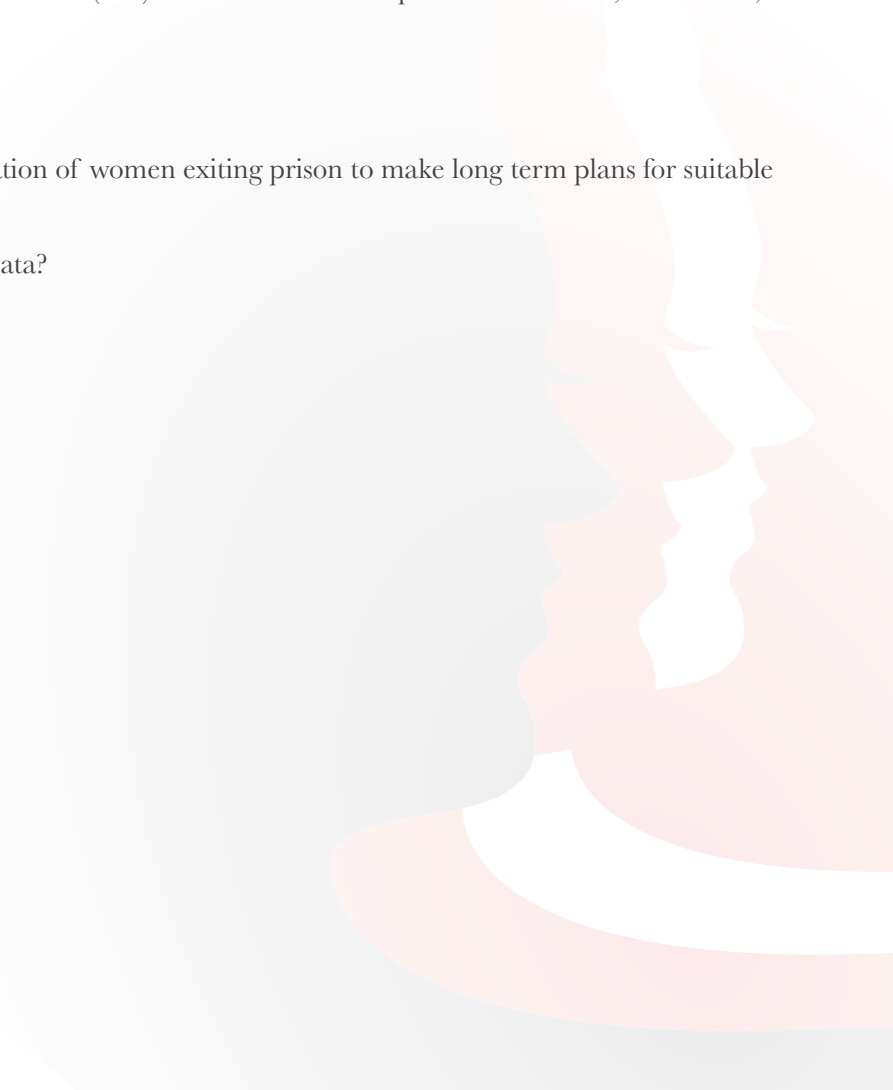
## **United Kingdom**

In response to the increasing number of homeless persons living on the streets during the 1980-90's the United Kingdom introduced policies to address homelessness with the Rough Sleepers Initiative, a coordinated agency approach.45

Partnership between custodial and community services were formed in an attempt to take advantage of local community services and inject funding into supported tenancies in 'ordinary housing'. 46 The policy acknowledged the importance of releasees receiving timely, tailored and culturally appropriate 'ordinary' housing whilst being granted individualised ongoing support that served to promote and sustain independent living. 47 The policy sought to address issues that incorporated pre-release planning, post-release care. This UK research lends evidence to the policy position of the US Housing First Initiative, in that housing releasees in hostel type accommodation was counterproductive to successful reintegration, created an unnatural environment, maintained social isolation and preserved the stigmatising views of the public.46 The evaluation found 58% (4,700) of clients secured accommodation, 27% (2,200) of clients accessed health, social care and support services and 10% (825) of clients showed improved self-esteem, social skills, emotional literacy and social support.48

## **Data and evaluation**

20. What information is needed about the population of women exiting prison to make long term plans for suitable housing stock and services?
21. Who should be responsible for collating this data?



## How to make your voice heard?

The questions at the front of this paper are a guide only. You can answer the questions that interest you. We are also interested in your personal stories about how you found housing or stayed homeless.

**Deadline for submissions or comments:** 25 November 2011

## Talk to Us

We can talk to you over the phone or let you know of meetings we are organising to discuss these questions.

Contact Samantha Bamforth, WIPAN Projects Coordinator (02) 8011 0699, 02 8011 0692 or 0415 454 770.

Access WIPAN's Facebook Page and write your comments.



<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Women-in-Prison-Advocacy-Network-WIPAN/208155342574800>

## Write to Us

Write about what you think about housing or your personal experience.

Email: [info@wipan.net.au](mailto:info@wipan.net.au)

Website: <http://www.wipan.net.au>

Postal Address: PO Box 345 Broadway, NSW, 2007

## Meet us

Arrange for your organisation or group to meet us and discuss your experiences:

Call (02) 8011 0699 or Email: [info@wipan.net.au](mailto:info@wipan.net.au)

## Glossary

CSNSW          Corrective Services New South Wales

CRC             Community Restorative Centre

## Defining Homelessness

This paper adopts the Chris Chamberlain and David MacKenzie definition of homelessness used in: Counting the homeless 2006: Australia, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Census Analytic Program, cat. no. 2050.0, 4 September 2008:

**Primary Homelessness** - people without conventional accommodation, such as people sleeping in parks and using cars for temporary shelter;

**Secondary Homelessness** - people who move frequently from one form of shelter to another, such as those in emergency or transitional accommodation provided under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program, people staying with other households because they have no accommodation of their own and people staying in boarding houses on a short term basis, defined as 12 weeks or less; and;

**Tertiary Homelessness** - people living in boarding houses on a medium to long term basis, defined as 13 weeks or longer – that is, they are staying in accommodation which is below the minimum community standard of a small self-contained flat.

## Appendix 1

### Women In Prison Advocacy Network Mentoring Program

In 2010 the Women in Prison Advocacy Network (WIPAN) initiated a mentoring program aimed at providing social support to women transitioning out of prison into the Inner Sydney region. The purpose of the program is to increase levels of social support, increase social inclusion and reduce rates of recidivism and reimprisonment. The mentoring program is built upon a rehabilitative and gender responsive theoretical framework that acknowledges the needs of women in the criminal justice system and works to address these needs through an intensive one-on-one long term relationship. WIPAN operates on the premise that by providing women with gender responsive social support, recidivism rates will be reduced and the burgeoning women's prison population will be minimised. Since its conception, the mentoring program has gone from strength to strength and we are now receiving referrals from reputable organisations including Justice Health, Correctional Centres across NSW, Probation and Parole, the Community Restorative Centre, and Rehabilitation Centres.<sup>49</sup> We have recently expanded our mentoring program enabling us to service women in the Western Sydney region.

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