

**THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL SELECT COMMITTEE ON ASHLEY, YOUTH JUSTICE AND DETENTION IN TASMANIA MET IN COMMITTEE ROOM 2, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, HOBART ON TUESDAY 13 FEBRUARY 2007.**

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**Ms ISLA MARIE MACGREGOR**, WHISTLEBLOWERS TASMANIA, WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED.

**CHAIR** - Thank you, Isla. We do not have any written submission from you so I would ask if you would like to give us some verbal evidence thanks.

**Ms MACGREGOR** - I would like to read my submission if that is all right and then I will give you a couple of references.

The Government's commitment to the Youth Justice Act needs to be seriously questioned in light of recent cutbacks to the community service order placement projects. In the last two weeks, southern regional youth support workers have had their work hours cut by 60 per cent for the foreseeable future. This committee may or may not be aware of that because this information may not have reached you by now. There is a backlog of over 1 000 work-order hours which will result in major delays for participants and partners with the youth justice programs. These actions by government conflict with the youth justice business plan, the departmental FIT program and the Tasmania Together process.

The Government needs to answer whether magistrates have recently been instructed not to give community service orders and whether their plan is to phase out community service orders. The success of community service order projects is undeniable. The mentoring role of the youth support workers and the commitment of community organisations to play a part in the diversionary and re-integration process of young offenders in the community reflects the outcomes of the TasCOSS conference Beyond Imprisonment held in 2000. The Government's actions in cutting back the community service order projects is blatantly criminogenic.

I would like to say that I have had a longstanding interest in issues in relation to rehabilitation of young offenders, in particular in relation to human rights in the prison system. So it really disturbs me that while this select committee is inquiring into this, the Government by stealth is taking these actions behind your back.

I would like to refer you to an article from a book called *Social Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman. It is a case study of a youth who had a terrible life as a young person and how in the State of Missouri they had a very low, 8 per cent, recidivism rate three years after release from youth correction centres. In other States it was up to 30 per cent. The mentoring role of the youth support workers is absolutely essential for these young people, particularly young boys, and for the government to be cutting back on this is absolutely atrocious.

**Mr WILKINSON** - It is a statement which is worth looking into, Isla. I hadn't heard about it. I had known and heard that probation and parole officers were having difficulties keeping up with the caseload, and that has been going on for a while now. But you are saying this is youth justice -

**Ms MACGREGOR** - I have hard evidence of this. I have documentary evidence which I wouldn't particularly like to give to the committee, but I can show you.

**Mr WILKINSON** - Where has that evidence come from?

**Ms MACGREGOR** - A State government department.

**Mr MARTIN** - An internal document?

**Ms MACGREGOR** - Yes.

**Mrs JAMIESON** - With your interest in a mentoring role, would you see it as a combined paid and voluntary role, or are we asking too much of volunteers?

**Ms MACGREGOR** - Intrinsically, the mentoring role for youth offenders should be a paid role. I think the Government has an onus of responsibility, if its intent is to reduce crime, to do as much as it can for rehabilitation, particularly mentoring for young people. People who have been doing this job have been providing an enormous community service. The other side of the coin is that the community organisations that are in partnership with youth justice are also suffering because they took the step, which was talked about in the TasCOSS conference, of stating that the community must take responsibility for crime and its consequences and for the people who commit the crime. When the community takes that responsibility because the Government has sought it and then the Government takes that responsibility away again, there is a lot of hypocrisy going on. It is a great shame for the community, which has very big difficulties in getting involved, certainly in a public arena, with this issue in terms of public debate because it is not there. There are very few community organisations, non-government organisations, that feel as individuals they have the capacity to speak out about this. This is why I am here today, because several people have spoken to me and they are frightened for their jobs.

**Mrs JAMIESON** - It is typical, isn't it? The Government says one thing but doesn't do it, so the volunteers will pick it up and run with it, but they don't have the capacity as a rule to offer a 24-hour service, which is most important in this area.

**Ms MACGREGOR** - With the community groups that are working on the ground with these young people, they are very serious about their commitment to being connected with these young people, to see them through to the other side, maybe doing volunteer work, looking for work, or retraining in some basic literacy skills. So there is that enormous commitment there. These community organisations are extremely disappointed but they feel somewhat thwarted in terms of their capacity to publicly object.

**Mr WILKINSON** - You note here that 60 per cent of work has been cut back for the southern regional youth support workers. Do you have any figures for the north or the north-west?

**Ms MACGREGOR** - No.

**Mr WILKINSON** - A 60 per cent cutback; what does that mean?

**Ms MACGREGOR** - From 12 to five days.

**Mr DEAN** - Is it for budgetary reasons only?

**Ms MACGREGOR** - Budget has been raised with me but when I discovered that there was an intent to possibly phase out community service orders - this is why I posed it as a question - one wonders whether budget is just a guise. The Government needs to be asked, 'What is your plan? Why have you done this by stealth in the first place, while this committee is sitting?'.

**Mr WILKINSON** - With the work orders there is a backlog of 1 000 work-order hours. They have had a problem with work orders now for probably three to four years. Do you know whether the hours have increased or has it remained static for the last three or four years?

**Ms MACGREGOR** - No, I don't but it is going to be very difficult for the individuals because they are going to be held over on these work hours. They are not going to be able to finish their service. For the community organisations that are working with them it is going to be disheartening for all the personal effort that individuals put in to try to help these boys.

**Mr WILKINSON** - It puts more strain on the people that have to complete them, doesn't it? Let us say they get a job. They might have to move somewhere, but they can't move because they've got to complete the work orders. If they don't complete the work orders they can be taken back to court, and there can be alternative sentencing. That is the real issue with it, or one of the issues.

**Ms MACGREGOR** - Absolutely. My view is that we want to keep people out of the correction services as early as possible. Of course our position in whistleblowers is that this also reflects on issues like early intervention, and of course there has been an outcry over that in child protection, so that's integral to your inquiry.

**CHAIR** - Thank you Isla.

**THE WITNESS WITHDREW.**