

Bethlehem House submission to the Legislative Council Enquiry

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Legislative Council Government Administration Committee 'B'

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Dear, Mr Scott

RE: Inquiry into Tasmanian Adult Imprisonment and Youth Detention Matters -2023

The St Vincent de Paul Society was founded in Paris, France in 1833 by a 20-year-old Italian student, Frederic Ozanam. The Society, or as it is commonly known, Vinnies, pursues a mission that is dedicated to assisting people in need and combating social injustice. Today, the Society operates in 153 countries and has over 800,000 members, with Australia currently accounting for over 60,000 members. The Society started in Tasmania in 1899 when founders established a Conference in Launceston. From humble beginnings, the Society has grown to 25 Conferences within three Regional Councils across Tasmania. Each Conference undertakes a variety of good works, the most recognised being the traditional Vincentian home visits and the provision of emergency relief to assist those experiencing or vulnerable to circumstances of poverty. Advocacy work and fundraising activities are also a key part of the Society's work which is designed to draw attention to homelessness and seek better outcomes for those we serve.

The St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia (the Society) is recognised as a lay Catholic charitable organisation that enables those who wish to live their faith in action to do so under the internationally recognised principles that guide the Society, The Rule. The network of those involved in the Vinnies 'family' in Tasmania comprises approximately 260 members, 1,200 volunteers and 270 employees. Working together across a range of services, including retail stores, community hubs and special works, those who have chosen to align their support to Vinnies in turn provide support to Australians in need. Our members, volunteers and staff work in their local communities directly with people in need by giving them a 'hand up' and helping them get back on their feet so they can achieve their full potential.

The Vinnies family is a community of people committed to building a more just and compassionate society for all. It is in this light that we make this submission to the Legislative Council's Inquiry into Tasmanian Adult Imprisonment and Youth Detention Matters.

Across the Vinnies family, we deliver emergency relief through home visitation via our conferences, through our community hubs and through our various special works (SW). Each of the five SWs were established by members of Vinnies, in some cases over half a century ago. Three of the SWs provided supported employment to those who would otherwise find it challenging to gain jobs in mainstream environments, while another SW in Launceston provides short term accommodation to those from further afield who must travel when seeking medical support. Another SW, Bethlehem House is perhaps the best known, growing over the past 50 years to become a valuable part of the community in southern Tasmania.

While conference members work regularly with those adults and youths (and their families) who connect with the justice system, this contribution to the Inquiry is made by Vinnies Tas through the lens of Bethlehem House given it is the primary point of contact for many men who have lived experience of the system, including many in their youth. We believe that the perspective of Bethlehem House serves as valuable case point from which to inform the Committee's considerations.

From its Hobart location, currently over two sites, Bethlehem House serves to accommodate and support nearly seventy men who would be experiencing life on the street if it wasn't for our service. Within that number, we currently house up to nine men who are on parole and serving their sentences in the community, offering them a highly supportive and case management driven, therapeutic environment. In addition to these men, we also house several who are currently serving community orders, people who have bail conditions, including those on electronic monitoring.

We know recent reports have highlighted the lack of affordable housing across our State and private rental costs continue to see people on fixed incomes excluded from this market. Housing options for those on fixed and low to middle incomes are almost

non-existent. For those exiting prison the chances of finding appropriate and affordable accommodation are minimal and we see nationally, according to the “Health of Australia’s Prisoners 2018” report, prepared by The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, more than half (54%) of the people released from prison are released into homelessness. Coincidentally or not, it is noted that our recidivism rate in Tasmania has risen from a static rate of 46% to 56% over the past couple of years. Homelessness continues to be one of the most significant drivers of crime in our community.

Bethlehem House strives to fill this gap through a case study model that is tailored to each resident. We aim to provide hope, accommodation and appropriate supports to address criminogenic needs that contribute to the high rates of recidivism and crime.

Our specialist case management approach identifies individual and specific needs of the people exiting prison and then co-designs a plan to address the reasons why these men went to prison in the first place.

Professor Rob White suggests, “If offenders are to help themselves, then they must be convinced of the benefit of ‘walking the walk’ of rehabilitation. In part, this depends upon the programs in which offenders are engaged. Some types of intervention are more likely to foster empowerment and accountability than others. Such projects provide a framework within which offenders can reflect upon and make the changes necessary to forge a new life. They are positive and forward-looking”.

The service provision model at Bethlehem House is focused on enabling skills development. As part of this, we offer life-skills coaching, mentoring and facilitated access to a range of generic and specialist services - our aim is to build capacity through an holistic and strengths-based solution. Related to the Vinnies ethos of ‘a hand up, not a hand out’, the narrative of, “we won’t do anything for you, but we will do everything with you” fosters co-investment from the individual. In many instances, these men have rarely experienced a focused, supportive and multi-faceted investment in their wellbeing. It breaks down the institutionalisation and develops an independence – rather than being told what to do, they begin doing what needs to be done simply because it is the right thing to do.

Professor Joe Graffam, of Deakin University, speaks to the power of reintegration back into the community, growing to become a healthy contributing community participant, when he states,

"What is needed is an integrated system of support that brings together employment, housing, disability services, drug and alcohol treatment, mental and general health care, education, vocational training, and generic social services in a unified effort to support the lifestyle change that is necessary for desistance and successful reintegration. This really is a 'whole of government' issue, not only a Corrections or Criminal Justice issue."

We know the causes of crime are varied and complex. We also know, from our experience at every level of the Vinnies family, that people who come into contact with the criminal justice system are more likely to have experienced multiple social and economic disadvantages, including poverty and inter-generational trauma.

To appropriately address the underlying drivers of crime, as an initial step, we need to identify a justice reinvestment approach where some of the funding which would traditionally have been spent on prisons and incarceration is redirected to community-based initiatives which seek to address the underlying causes of crime. This is a significant and impactful way of reducing recidivism and promoting desistance.

At Bethlehem House, we understand the cohort of men who have no housing, limited employment opportunities, and inadequate health-based support for issues such as mental health and substance abuse. Sometimes, without support, these men turn to crime to make ends meet, to self-medicate with substances to ease their trauma. Sometimes, because prison is an easier option than 'making it' in the outside world, that is the path that they travel. The revolving door of incarceration is a reality for many we see and sadly we see some individuals on our doorstep multiple times.

"This case management approach begins the journey with a focus on the development of independence and an holistic case management approach, personal mentoring and life skills coaching that affords the participant a greater opportunity for successful transition back into the community".

Tasmania's housing situation continues to place pressure on the prison system, as more potential parolees are forced to complete their sentence, instead of applying for early release. We know, by experience and through research, that a more beneficial approach would be to pursue a graduated 'through-care' approach, utilising supervision and compliance from Community Corrections to align with appropriate reintegration supports in the community. This could potentially be supported through a model such as the one Bethlehem House provides. In that regard, it bears noting that Bethlehem House is the only facility of its type to house people exiting prison in Southern Tasmania. Our referrals from the Tasmanian Prison Service and the Courts are increasing way beyond our current capacity to accommodate these people.

Many people in prison have difficulty accessing drug and alcohol support programs, mental health supports, good primary health opportunities, employment and education. At Bethlehem House, we provide a platform where specialist service providers can utilise their skills and networks unimpeded, tailoring these to the men who live here. Visiting specialists are commonplace and the residents are encouraged and supported to take full advantage of these supports in fostering their own personal wellbeing and development.

Prison is a soft option for our community. That said, it's not soft on the individual - it makes them bitter, not better. It's a 'soft option' because it doesn't take time to consider the opportunities for rehabilitation or restorative justice. In delivering an efficient approach, it simply doesn't operate in an environment where people are encouraged to better themselves. The 'hard option' is where people are supported with appropriate investment to learn about themselves as adults, where people can understand the traumas they were exposed to, where they can learn to love themselves and others. This hard approach takes time and a dedicated and highly skilled workforce to walk alongside people who are trying to live in a world that they have been largely estranged from; to find where they fit it, to learn how to give back and to learn how to be part of a community.

The ethos of Bethlehem House is to assist men with a hand-up and to support them in moving forward to finding their 'forever home'. This is undertaken by collaborating

with over fifty diverse service providers, each of whom come on board to assist in developing pathways for those we serve. Prisons do not stop offenders – they do not lead to cessation of criminal activity. Many of these people end up re-offending against new victims. At Bethlehem House, we believe in having the courage to strive for a better future; for the people we serve.

By way of example, at Bethlehem House, we believe in the power of the terminology we use to refer to people we work with. Labelling of individuals can often see others refer to them based on an event – often this can be where they were at the lowest place in their lives. We often hear references to labelled categories of folk - homeless, murderers, paedophiles, criminals and junkies. Instead we should be considering that these are people - first and foremost, they are individuals. To address this issue; to avoid perpetuating the negative perceptions of already seriously disadvantaged individuals and their families, we adopt preferred terms. Those more accurate and appropriate phrases include *Returning Citizens*, *People who have committed murder*, *People with substance addictions*, *People experiencing homelessness* etc.

One of the opportunities for improvement with the reintegration of people exiting the Tasmanian Prison Service is to consider the case management and through-care processes. While there is service provision in prison towards those who are sentenced for longer periods, the people we have seen that those who are serving shorter sentences tend to have a higher recidivism rate and they don't receive the support required. Often the plans made while incarcerated don't come to fruition because of the breakdown in through-care. Too often we see that the prison case management then ceases at the prison gate. On many occasions, despite the intention of coming to stay at Bethlehem House, the released person does not arrive for the available bed.

A well designed through-care approach would see a reversal of the current model by applying case management externally into the prison, ensuring that the case managers are better placed to collaborate and coordinate services with people in the community. This would include collaboration with Parole and Probation personnel, therapeutic professionals, medical and psychosocial supports. The benefit of this approach ensures the planning is at the place where the 'rubber hits the road' and through-care means the person will be more likely to engage with the same person

they have developed the initial relationship with. At Bethlehem House we offer the skills and facilities that are designed to support a through-care model.

If a person returns to the community without support, the chances of them returning to their 'old ways' is high, and this often leads to an increased risk of recidivism. If a person is released with conditions, i.e., parole, then the likelihood of returning to prison is much reduced. This is where the rehabilitative application of collaborative services can best address the drivers of crime and other causative factors that have led to incarceration in the first place.

"Recidivism is reduced or avoided by supporting individual ex-offenders and their families through effective reintegration. The support required to minimise the risk of reoffending would be identified in the assessment and planning process. The needs identified are likely to include accommodation, addiction recovery, vocational training, employment, mental health care, family and, or community reconnection".

Case Studies

Jim is a 49-year-old man who, as a child, suffered significant trauma, both from being a witness and a victim. Jim says, people have said he has PTSD as a result of the things that have happened to him. He was exposed to a murder-suicide at a young age and can still remember parts of this experience. He was placed in an institution as a six-year-old "because of his mental health", and when released, was subjected to physical sexual, physical and emotional abuse from his stepfather. He also witnessed his mother being beaten by this same man on many occasions. Jim never spoke about this time in his life until decades later. By then, his life had been on a trajectory where mistrust of authority figures was entrenched.

Jim first went to prison in 1996 for driving offences and assault. He remembers the first night in prison where other inmates "forced" him to fight another inmate on the landing where there were no cameras, as a kind of initiation test. He remembers, "There was no backing out; it was to test your mettle". After the fight, Jim was locked in solitary confinement and he tried to flood his cell in protest. As a result, he was handcuffed and beaten by correctional officers. He was then left, bloodied and beaten, face down on the floor with the fear of drowning in his cell. There were bashings on a regular basis and he received a lot of bashings from the correctional officers. Jim says, "Prison was terrible back in those days. It was a bloodbath". He says the correctional officers were very hard on people back in those days, and many of them had martial arts training.

Jim went to prison again in 1997 when he was 23. He was charged with the attempted murder of his stepfather and was looking at significant prison time if found guilty. He is not sure about what happened in the following court case, but the charges were reduced to a lesser offence if he plead guilty to Grievous Bodily Harm and didn't mention the mitigation regarding the abuse he had suffered from this man. Jim was confused about this and felt the organisations his stepfather was involved with somehow manipulated this.

While in prison in 1999, there was a rumour of an impending 'Millennium Riot'. Jim said the potential ringleaders were, "rounded up, bashed and thrown into solitary. I was one of them". Again, Jim flooded his cell and again he was subjected to being handcuffed, beaten and left face down in his cell. Jim said this just brought back all the feelings he had as a child when he was subjected to the abuse.

Jim in his own words said he became a fighter he worked as bouncer on the outside, he was involved in organised crime and was often as a result targeted by the police because they saw him as being a dangerous individual in the community.

Jim's experience of the violence in prison was not uncommon. In a perfect world, Jim would have been supported to address his trauma and PTSD, but mental health treatment in prison is rare. Inmates are reluctant to speak up about their mental ill-health because it exposes a perceived weakness in an environment where to survive, you have to be strong, and because the response from the authorities was always to place them in the 'protection units'. In these units they would be housed with child sex offenders, people who had "ratted-up" other inmates and other 'undesirable' inmates; so, nobody spoke up.

Recommendations

- **Greater consideration should be given to finding alternative remedies for people who should not be in jail while prioritising community safety.**
- **Research demonstrates that current investment in incarceration is at odds with justice reinvestment initiatives that are being adopted by other jurisdictions across the world.**
- **There are valuable examples of success that should be considered. In the US state of Texas over the last sixteen years, Gerry Madden has strived to maximise justice reinvestment by tackling the root causes of crime; health, education, housing and employment, and this approach has successfully led to the closure of seven prisons.**
- **We recommend a collaborative approach with Bethlehem House in implementing a service model that supports the current Case Management model, but extends to through-care from the Prison Service**

References

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