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- NSW Federation of Housing Associations
- Community Restorative Centre
- Intellectual Disability Rights Service
- Sydney Women’s Homeless Association
- Shine for Kids
- Guthrie House
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This report offers evidence and recommendations to service providers and funders to assist them to improve their policies, planning and access for women exiting prison.

Critical to the design, analysis and recommendations of this report was the ongoing involvement of women with lived experience of NSW prisons. WIPAN aims to include women who are not generally engaged in the services they rely upon; this underpins WIPAN’s philosophy in advocating with women with lived experience to have a greater say in the issues that affect them.

The philosophy and purpose of WIPAN places those with lived experience at the centre of the service. Mechanisms for consumers to be involved in the organisation are inbuilt into its structure. WIPAN encourages consumers to become involved through membership and invitations to attend an open meeting for members each month. Current WIPAN membership includes women who have been released or serving sentences and participants in the mentoring program. Two women with lived experience are members of the WIPAN Board. At the open meeting, members and the Board are invited to discuss issues of concern and what, if and how WIPAN should progress these issues. The general meeting provides an opportunity for the Board to hear views directly from the membership and encourage their ongoing engagement with the organisation. This has the benefit of keeping the focus on the consumer and helps identify emerging issues.

This report is an example of that process. It came about because WIPAN coordinators of the Mentoring Program were concerned about the circumstances of the consumers who returned to prison. They found preliminary evidence that the failure to find and sustain housing was the basis for women to return to old networks and circumstances, leading them back to prison.

Investigating this further, staff and Board members discussed the issue at the monthly Board meeting to gather views on whether this was a priority issue. This gained support from members to pursue the issue. Staff contacted researchers in the area to determine where WIPAN could best contribute and to ensure there was no duplication of effort. Taking this advice, balancing consumer comments and resource issues, the Board agreed to a project about housing and the support services needed to maintain a tenancy from the perspective of consumers and non-government service providers.

A discussion paper was produced that summarised the issues as defined by the consumers in the Mentoring Program and identified through a literature review. There was a dearth of literature that described the experience of women leaving prison and housing from a consumer perspective. This reinforced the need to undertake a project that included the voice of women with lived experience.

The Discussion Paper was widely distributed through the non-government service sector with an invitation to provide written comments or attend a discussion forum. Researchers attended community sector network meetings and held a WIPAN sponsored forum for post release service providers to discuss the issues raised in the Discussion Paper. The WIPAN mentoring program staff undertook the consultation with consumers, conducting a focus group with women recently released from prison and writing case studies with several participants in the mentoring program.

In writing the final paper, the advice from consumers and service providers was used as the basis for another literature review. A search was made to identify recent literature on the issues raised, in order to form recommendations that were evidence based. Among the findings of this project was the gap between information from consultations and the literature, indicating the need for research to be undertaken with consumers about why tenancies failed, what led to their decision to leave and the manner in which they vacated a property.

In the final stages of writing the paper WIPAN contacted the various government departments that this report’s recommendations are aimed at, inviting them to comment and/or provide feedback. At time of print not all responses had been received from government, which highlighted the need to ensure timely and effective communications between community NGOs and government departments occur.

This paper is structured so that the voice of consumers is clearly identified, using quotes from the consultation to illustrate their priority issues. Ensuring the voice of the consumer was prominent in the project and is reflected in the recommendations. It was important for WIPAN to ensure that consumers led the project and their ideas and views were and are the basis of any ongoing consultation with both...
government and community service providers.

WIPAN hopes that this report adds to the understanding of women with complex needs who are leaving prison. The topic, the issues raised and the recommendations have a particular clarity because they originated from the experience of the consumer, which is critical to understanding the complex issue of recidivism.

The following quote is from a consumer who responded to a question about what would make her leave her home, it demonstrates how past life experiences remain with women long after they settle back into the community and services have ended:

“I would be happy to stay here for a very long time. This year I am starting at TAFE, which is close by too. When my ex-partner gets out of prison in two years, if he found out where I lived then that would be a big problem and I would have to try and move somewhere else, so he didn’t know where I was, but hopefully he won’t find out.”

This project aims to bring light to these issues, initiate discussion and build understanding of the often complex and interrelating issues faced by women exiting NSW prisons. The report is also an example of the importance of including consumers in each stage of project and service delivery.

Kat Armstrong
Director
On behalf of the WIPAN Board
Executive Summary

Key findings

Safe housing

1. Consumers and community workers interviewed for this project said that a priority for consumers was to live in ‘safe’ housing. Their understanding of a safe home was one that was located away from damaging or violent relationships and drug networks while being close to services they needed to support their health, their child’s education and social supports.

2. When consumers who had permanent housing were asked what would make them leave their housing, they responded it would be to escape the threat of violence or known criminal contact.

Communication and coordination

3. Community housing and support service providers wanted to know when their clients were remanded in custody or are sentenced. It was unclear at what point along the path of court processes and prison reception (solicitors, mental health workers, police and prison officials) where the responsibility or option could exist for services to be notified that their client was in custody. Community workers reported that a main source of information about detained women came from messages passed from recently released prisoners.

4. Up to fifty women are received into custody at a time. Each woman is asked 96 questions at reception, an extra question on housing increases interview time by 20-30 minutes. The high number of women entering custody and the limited resources mean that Corrective Services NSW (CSNSW) focus is only on areas that CSNSW will have a direct duty of care in providing, such as the health, mental state and the custody of children of people entering custody.

5. Failure to notify a landlord, when a woman is detained may result in the accumulation of rent arrears, potential damage to the property and a poor tenancy record for the tenant. It was acknowledged that some women taken into custody either did not know the name of their landlord or would not disclose the name, possibly believing they were protecting their tenancy or others living in the property. There was concern about whether this was an informed decision and whether the opportunities to learn of their rights and contact landlords to negotiate tenancy arrangements during the first few weeks in custody were adequate.

6. Housing and support services wanted to receive earlier notification and referrals to their services from women whilst in prison. Services with long waiting lists considered this should occur as soon as women were detained. Services also wanted to meet and develop a rapport with women prior to release to facilitate targeted post release contact. Strongly engaged clients work harder for outcomes, however approximately 50% of prisoners released were on remand without release dates. To facilitate notifications, community workers recommended a central contact point within each prison that had responsibility for planning services post release.

7. Community workers expressed concern that services received from staff of CSNSW often depended on the personality, interpersonal skills and commitment of a particular prison official. They reported that the quality of work undertaken by prison officials varied considerably. Participants would often name an individual CSNSW officer as being ‘good’ and going out of their way to help. They also gave examples where they believed they were prevented from undertaking their work by prison staff without a process to review the decision or
seek further information about denial of access at the time of the incident. Inconsistency and lack of clarification about the role of prison staff created a great deal of frustration for community service workers.

8. Knowledge that consumers had of administration and application processes varied considerably. A few interviewed were fully aware of tenancy laws and the application process and options for post release services. Other consumers described the difficulty of obtaining accurate and up to date information about housing application processes, types of housing options and administration of tenancies. While the Social Housing sector distributes resources and literature through expos at prisons, consumers found some of the information was out of date, or they could not access information because they were on remand. They also described finding out about housing and support services through other prisoners rather than formal channels.

9. Services that work with mothers who have dependent children struggled to find out if there was a plan for returning custody of children to their mother. Services require this information before women were released in order to plan for appropriate housing.

10. Results indicate that some services encourage consumers to actively participate in their planning and service delivery processes and said this should be a standard practice for all government and non-government services.

Housing access

11. Participants recognised the difficulty of funding to meet the demand for housing properties. Services stressed the need for ensuring there is a range of housing types but emphasised that despite changes to housing needs over time, services wanted to be able to assist women retain their tenancy.

12. Consumers believe that the expense and time invested in drug rehabilitation centres should lead to housing priority, otherwise they were vulnerable to returning to the same unsuitable accommodation, unhealthy environments and drug use that led to their initial criminal activity and custody. The state invests in strengthening the capacity and self-determination of the individual without providing an enabled environment for their continuing recovery, or prospects to thrive.

13. Service workers and consumers were supportive of mixed housing developments and a move away from public housing estates.

14. Service workers who case managed or provided assistance to women to find housing stressed the need to take into account, when allocating housing, their advice about the health needs of the client, the location of services they needed and whether public transport was adequate, the location of abusive networks that consumers may be trying to avoid and if they were developing supportive networks in a particular geographic area.

15. Services raised concerns about the value of short-term accommodation provided by Community Offender Support Programs (COSPS) believing that short-term accommodation simply delayed integration into the community. Services supported an independent evaluation to determine that funding for these services was more effectively used than funding holistic services in the community.

Planning and ongoing support

16. Housing service workers were frustrated by their experience of housing women post release who could not settle into their new housing, had no support services and would ‘disappear’, leaving the service to bear the costs of the failed tenancy. There was a lack of information about why women left long-term housing without notice. For example: a violent partner finds them and/or threatens them, an officious HNSW letter filled with legal jargon notifying tenant of rental arrears scares the tenant out of their home.

17. All participants in WIPAN consultations identified the Community Restorative Centre’s (CRC) Targeted Housing and Support Service (THaSS) as being the best model for post release services for post release prisoners. The initiative is consistent with NSW Homelessness Action Plan 2009-2014 and provides a wrap around holistic service ensuring women are housed long-term with both consumers and workers expressing satisfaction of the programs outcomes and processes. However, they articulated frustration that CRC funding limited the number of clients that could be taken each year. They were also frustrated by the lack of available housing that made it difficult for CRC to facilitate clients exiting from their programs.

18. Service workers recognised that the NSW Homelessness Action Plan 2009-14 includes policies based on ‘no exit into homelessness’ but there were doubts whether plans supporting the strategies took adequate account of the needs of women with complex needs. While the White Paper on Homelessness in Australia identifies sentenced prisoners of more than 12 months as a priority group, this
overlooks the specific needs of women affected by the criminal justice system, given the high number of women on remand or revolving through short sentences and homelessness.

19. Service workers were frustrated that funding limited the amount of time that support could be provided to women once housed. They recommended that funding should be flexible so that a service could be increased or withdrawn as necessitated by the changing needs of the consumer.

20. Transitional housing was generally not supported by service workers, although others agreed that it might be useful if transitional housing was part of an intensive support program and long term housing was available to exit the consumer. Most service providers thought the Housing First Model was most appropriate, where support services could change over time as the woman settled into a permanent home. However, this model needed to allow for the housing needs of women to change over time, including the possibility of women moving areas or requiring different types of housing as her needs evolve. Consumers were more understanding of the need for short term housing, accepting that shortage of supply of permanent housing made many moves inevitable.

21. Service workers reported that the most significant shortage in support services was in non-acute mental health services in the community. Services almost have to wait for the client to become acutely ill before service provision can be offered.

22. Service workers wanted to be part of an integrated pro-social program of support, in partnership with public and social housing providers, probation and parole, health and disability service providers.

23. Consumers and service workers wanted a range of funded service types including services that assist women to develop new social networks and skills, such as the WIPAN mentoring program.

24. Some service workers recognised that they need capacity building projects for the sector in order to strengthen competencies in working with women with complex needs affected by the criminal justice system.

25. There was consensus among housing and support workers that housing services should be separate from support service providers. This ensures a service is provided by the workers with appropriate experience and training and prevents conflict of interest.

26. There was consensus that women with complex needs (including those on remand) required a case manager in the community who could liaise with a designated officer in each prison to do the following:

- negotiate with services in the community for access pre and post release
- provide a contact point between the prison and community services
- ensure all personal documents prior to release are available, eg Birth Certificate, housing history details, Marriage Certificate etc
- assist women to provide complete information to housing providers and ensure referrals and contact are made with community services in a timeframe that allows the services to engage with the client
- communicate with support service providers that have ongoing contact with women as they move in and out of prison
- work with the client as part of a family unit where appropriate
- address parenting, self-esteem and education needs in ongoing throughcare programs
- organise and participate in case conferences
- establish programs for women with cognitive disabilities
- organise transport from prison to community services
- make referrals to relevant legal agencies to support clients in addressing debt
- make referrals to relevant legal agencies to support clients with child contact, family law and other legal issues
Introduction

What is WIPAN?

WIPAN is an advocacy and service based organisation managed and directed by a group of women dedicated to improving the status, wellbeing and prospects of women in the criminal justice system. WIPAN take a grassroots approach to address the cultural, social, economic and political inequalities experienced by this group of women. WIPAN provides practical support to women, including a voluntary mentoring project that seeks to enhance the wellbeing of women ex-prisoners by supporting their community resettlement, encouraging their autonomy and learning from their lived experience.

Purpose and scope of this project

This project arose from the experience of women participating in the WIPAN mentoring program. Over sixty percent of WIPAN’s mentees had temporary, transient and unsuitable housing as their only housing option. They 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, provide care for their children and maintain their own health and wellbeing. This personal experience is matched by what is known about the factors that support women integrating into the community, that is, without suitable supported housing options, they are at an increased risk of returning to prison.

This project aimed to promote discussion and reach a common understanding within the not-for-profit community housing and support services sector of the needs of women exiting prison. This project aimed to achieve this by:

- taking a holistic view of the concerns and needs of women exiting prison by listening to their stories
- seeking the views of workers from the community housing and support service sector and learning from their experience of working with women exiting prison
- undertaking a review of literature about the resettlement of women post release
- generating discussion about the housing issues facing women exiting prison
- producing a report that reflects the experience of consumers and their support workers that can be used as a tool by services as part of the development of service delivery and advocacy activities

The aims and scope of this project took into account the limited resources available and the reliance on in-kind support. The focus on the community sector was an acknowledgement that the community housing sector was expanding rapidly, post release services relied on the community sector and WIPAN, as part of this sector was in a unique position to undertake this work.

A rights based approach

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 United Nations 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. 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’. \(^3\)

Women also have a right to found a family. The state has obligations to keep families together and reunify them when they have become separated. There is also an obligation to ensure that children are not separated from parents without judicial process. Separating children from their mothers because suitable housing is not available and not through court orders to protect the child, fails to protect the rights of the family and the child. \(^4\) Through this consultation process WIPAN learnt of examples where children were separated from mothers because their child did not meet the age or gender criteria for the mother’s accommodation service or due to lengthy delays in transferring to housing of an appropriate size to accommodate a mother’s children, essentially forcing the separation of family members and denying children and young people parental custody.

### Overview of the consultation process

A Discussion Paper was produced and published on the WIPAN website and linked to various community organisation websites in August and September 2011 and copies were distributed to members attending WIPAN member meetings. Details on how to lodge submissions using Facebook, consultation meetings, mail and fax, were sent out in electronic invitations and described in the body of the Discussion Paper.

Consumers were consulted through a focus group for women recently released from NSW prisons and a coordinator of the Mentoring Program prepared case studies with consumers.

In keeping with the aim of the project, the consultation process targeted key peak community and consumer groups, and service providers. Meetings were held with staff from:

- Shine for Kids
- NSW Federation of Housing Associations
- Post-release services
- Sydney Women’s Homeless Association.

Meetings for the most part were held in the workplaces or offices of peak bodies and an open invitation for post release service workers was held at the NCOSS meeting rooms. At each consultation a facilitator led the discussion based on the issues listed in the Discussion Paper and a volunteer took notes of the discussions.

Consultation was sought with government agencies at a second consultation phase. This was to ensure that the contents of this report reflected the experience and views of consensus and community sector workers and consumers. During the preparation of the Discussion Paper and this Report, Government information was used to describe policies and practices that were current at the time of writing. WIPAN thanks the Commonwealth Department of Human Services (DHS) Prison Servicing Program and Social Work Services for writing to WIPAN describing their role in the provision of services for women exiting prison. In addition, several individuals contacted WIPAN with references to relevant resource material.

### Key definitions

#### Homelessness

This paper adopts the Chamberlain and MacKenzie’s definition of homelessness:

- **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, people staying with other households because they have no accommodation of their own or in boarding houses on a short term basis, defined as 12 weeks or less
- **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.

#### Transitional Housing

Transitional housing is temporary housing intended to get homeless individuals and families off the streets and into a safe living environment. Transitional housing is often offered as part of a wider transitional program.

#### Community Support Services/Workers

Services that are usually not-for-profit services that provide non-residential services such as mentoring programs, counselling, individual advocacy, recreational activities, legal and financial advice.

#### Consumers

Consumers in the context of this report are women who have lived experience of prison and use or are seeking housing and support services to remain in the community.

#### Community Housing Providers/Workers

Not-for-profit organisations that provide affordable and appropriate rental housing.
Women in prison are generally regarded as ‘low risk – high need’ due to the relatively low seriousness of their offences and 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. Typically, women prisoners are characterised by: high levels of historical disadvantage and victimisation, repeat offending, non-violent crime, homelessness and multiple short periods in detention.

In NSW between 1994 and 2004, the female prison population increased by one hundred and one percent. The size of the total prison population (men and women) in NSW peaked in 2009. In 2010 and 2011 the population started to reduce slightly and now appears stable. On 30 June 2011, there were 703 women detained in NSW. Within a year, approximately 1600 women are released from NSW prisons and nearly fifty percent of this group is released from remand. That’s half who were either found not guilty, did not receive a custodial sentence, or the period of the sentence matched the period already spent in custody.

Aboriginal women accounted for 211 of the 703 women in custody in June 2011. This is statistically disproportionate to the NSW Aboriginal women population of 2.1%. Between 2006 and 2009 the number of Indigenous women prisoners increased by 21.6%. In 2008 NSW had the highest recidivism rate for women in Australia, at 42%, higher than the national average of 38.2%. This percentage remained the same for the women in custody on 30 June 2011, 42% having had a period of previous imprisonment.

To demonstrate the ‘low risk’ description of women prisoners, only seventy-two of the women in prison on 30 June 2011 had offences serious enough to be heard in the Supreme Court and only three were classified as maximum security risks. 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. Between 1999 and 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%).

The ‘high need’ description of women is best demonstrated by the findings in the NSW Inmate Health Survey. Characteristics complicating the lives of women include:

- ninety one percent had serious drug dependencies and many were convicted of a crime committed as a direct result of drug dependence
- ninety two percent had one or more long term health conditions
- thirteen percent have an intellectual disability
- eighty-five percent had been subjected to sexual abuse, while the number of women physically and emotionally abused is thought to be higher.

The current NSW Attorney-General, the Hon. Greg Smith, was elected on a platform to reduce repeat offending and find alternatives to prison for those suffering from drug abuse disorders and mental illness. The NSW Government supported this election pledge in the 2011-2012 budget by announcing the establishment of a second Drug Court in Sydney and the establishment of a 300 bed facility for the treatment of drug-dependent prisoners. It is not known how many women the new services will benefit. NSW Government agencies are also in a tight fiscal environment that has seen the closure of several of the older prisons in NSW and expenditure cuts to most government agencies.

The NSW government has also continued and initiated several Law Reform Commission reviews. These include the review of the NSW Bail Act and review of sentencing laws. The reviews have the potential to change the number of women inappropriately remanded and sentenced in custody. Again it is not known if the current NSW government will implement any of the findings and/or recommendations from the reviews.

### Housing

Women prisoners are more likely than male prisoners to be homeless prior to incarceration and are at a greater risk of homelessness post-release than are men. In the experience of WIPAN coordinators, the private rental market is virtually impossible for women exiting prison to access. Instead, women rely on short-term and often unsuitable accommodation until community or public housing is available.

The case studies in the Discussion Paper and repeated in this Report provide examples of attempts women made to find housing and the adverse effect of unsuitable and/or unsupported housing on their wellbeing.

In March 2011 there were 53,704 applicants, waiting for public housing in NSW. It is estimated that around 11% of families are paying more than 30% of their income on recurrent living costs, that is, they are living in housing stress. In 2011 the median increase for a two-bedroom unit was 7.7%. This pressure on housing stock makes those in the community most at risk of homelessness reliant on social and public housing.

The NSW Homelessness Action Plan 2009-2014, ‘A Way Home: reducing Homelessness in NSW’ includes priorities that are broad enough in scope to include women exiting prison. This includes ‘transitioning and maintaining people exiting correctional facilities into appropriate long-term accommodation’. The list of priorities in the Action Plan to meet the plan’s objectives include providing support, consistent case management planning for exiting facilities, developing the capacity of the workforce, better coordination of services and increasing the supply of housing.

Homelessness is not limited to the cities of NSW but extends into rural and remote regions of the state. The issues related to widespread homelessness across NSW, including 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.

There is a gap in available data to fully understand the experience of women exiting prison, facing homelessness in rural and remote areas of NSW.

Homelessness services and short-term accommodation that are available to women include:

- Services to homeless persons or those at risk of homelessness. Women ex-prisoners are not a stand alone high need group for these services. Two of the specific client groups that are most likely to be denied housing on application are individuals with children (66%) and couples with children (77%). Fifty-five percent of all of those rejected were women and 30% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. This poses a significant barrier for women ex-prisoners who want to reside with their children.

- The Community Offender Support Program (COSP) centres operated by Corrective Services NSW provide some prisoners with temporary housing.
is the only COSP that houses women. In 2009-10, 44% of Boronia’s residents had ‘obtained stable accommodation as per exit and resettlement plan’, and 34% in 2010-11.\(^2\) There is no independent evaluation of COSP facilities reporting whether or not the service has been good value for money in providing temporary accommodation.

- Guthrie House provides nine beds in its residential rehabilitation program for women leaving prison. It provides a structured program aiming to address issues of drug and alcohol use, and related mental health concerns. The service provides a three-month period of accommodation and assists women into housing at the conclusion of the program. Women receive case management services, and can access up to two years of outreach support on completion of the program. There is limited access to accommodation with Greater Western Sydney Housing and Women’s Housing. Guthrie House supports up to 60 women a year.

Post-release and other support services

A woman’s experience of childhood abuse, sexual violence, domestic violence, poverty, health and substance abuse disorders can lead to a need for ongoing support. The case studies in the Discussion Paper provided a typical description of women that will need ongoing health and social supports if they are to remain drug free and out of prison.

Women need services that can assist with:

- knowledge of the housing system
- financial hardship
- unmet legal needs including managing debts from unpaid fines
- victim compensation claims and responsibilities
- accessing health services

Services that provide women with housing assistance and ongoing support are insufficient. The Community Restorative Centre (CRC) is one non-government service that specialises in supporting women in their transition from prison into housing in NSW. CRC’s Targeted Housing and Support Service (THaSS) and Women’s Transition program offer targeted service provision to women upon release and aim to help them locate, secure and sustain long term, stable housing. CRC’s resources do not include housing stock, instead they work to assist ex-prisoners to secure transitional housing (for 12-18 months) and permanent housing-via partnerships with community housing providers. Although the vast majority secure medium term housing, some are successful in securing long term housing, a minority are accommodated in crisis or temporary accommodation upon release until longer term housing is secured. Sourcing long-term accommodation is one of the greatest challenges for CRC transitional programs. One of the greatest challenges for women exiting prison is gaining access to programs like CRC. CRC’s current funding levels enable CRC to provide support to approximately 100 female transitional clients per year. Demand for this service far exceeds resources of CRC.

WIPAN mentees reported that community support services were severely over extended and as a result services were not able to meet their needs at critical times. In the experience of the WIPAN coordinator, it was difficult to find services that provided ongoing support for women to find and maintain a tenancy when they are not part of one of the ongoing programs. Those that do have support find services taper off once they are housed. Few resources and inconsistent eligibility criteria typify the services that are available to women. The services also differ in the scope and type of services they can provide. WIPAN’s own Mentoring Program is an example of this. The program provides support for women to move through the immediate post release period by reducing social isolation, referring to other services, sometimes offering a case worker that acts as a personal advocate to help coordinate and access the complex array of health, housing, and other support services. Yet WIPAN is limited to approximately 45 women at any one time, can only assist for six to nine months and current core funding ceases in November 2012.

Results in supporting women in the WIPAN Mentoring Program have been extremely positive. Unfortunately it may go the way of other successful pilots that establish themselves within the community, build trust with the client group and then end due to the lack of funding.
Experience of consumers – women participating in post release services

Tenancy history

When tenancies were lost, a poor tenancy record results from failure to notify the landlord, or the period in custody exceeds the time period the public or community-housing provider would retain a property for the tenant. Women and their dependent children then move from a short period in custody to homelessness. A service provider gave an example of a 16 year old being evicted because his mother was remanded in custody, did not notify the landlord and he was unable to pay the rent. When the mother was released, the service provided short-term accommodation to both mother and son but in separate accommodation. There was no data on how frequently this occurred or why the information was not provided to the landlord.

Participants suggested the failure to notify could be due to:

- women’s inability to provide information about their tenancy arrangements at reception
- prison authorities not following up with women in the period after reception to either advise women of their options or ask again for the information
- women not providing the information for fear of losing their tenancy, other residents losing their home and/or the belief they would be released in a very short time

It is important that women make informed decisions about consenting to the release and use of information concerning their custody in relation to their tenancies. They should have the right and capacity to control the way in which that information is used. The privacy principle that information gathered should only be used for the purpose for which it was gathered should apply in this situation. The issue remains one of how to develop a process that provides tenancy advice, that is understandable and timely in order for women to then make an informed decision and to assist women to carry out their decision.

Planning for release

There was significant variation in the knowledge women had about housing applications and available services on release. While a few women could quote Housing NSW processes and time periods, other women described the knowledge they received as haphazard and unreliable, and often coming from other prisoners, for example:

“Housing told me there was no need to contact them before I was released because I was coming to rehab but when I got here they said I had no chance [accessing housing on exiting a rehabilitation unit] because I hadn’t contacted them before.”

“My application [for housing] was approved when I was in gaol... I didn’t think I had to do the application all over again [once out of gaol] because it had been done before but then I found I did have to fill in the forms again. They said they won’t even get to look at them until November [three months time] and then it will be at least seven months until anything will happen.”

“You aren’t aware of what to do. I have been in and out of gaol for the last ten years and I only found out about help last year. You don’t get to expos [community and government services set up information desks for women to ask questions in some of the women’s prisons] unless you are about to be released, it’s specially bad for people on remand.”

Other women understood they had to initiate action to get on the housing lists, one explained to the others during the consumer focus group:

“You have to start it [applications while in gaol], you go to welfare [officers] and put your name down. They will give you the forms and fax them off but you have to chase them up. Nothing can happen while you are in gaol, your application is suspended but when you get out it is back dated.”
The most positive response was from a woman who had become a client of the Community Restorative Centre. She stated:

“CRC saw me for a good three months in prison before release. I was released and got a place straight away because I was with CRC.”

Service providers commented that the model of CRC meeting and working with their clients preceding release was the most supportive and effective model. One limitation of the CRC model was criteria that a prisoner must have a minimum prison term. This means that women are less likely than men to be eligible for CRC services because women’s crime patterns attract frequent but short sentences.

**Post release**

All of the consumers who participated in this project had a history of drug use, which was reflected in their comments about their needs immediately after release. They all wanted support from specialised services, either within a rehabilitation service or an outreach service:

“I would prefer to be on an outreach program because I am a drug user. I would have liked someone in the community to support me, I just felt so alone.”

They also understood that accessing housing was going to require a long wait and they needed support during the period of ongoing instability, one woman explained:

“We need something temporary while we wait, we need a lot more supported accommodation.”

The WIPAN case studies (see Appendix) illustrates the difficulty in finding housing that meets the needs of someone with physical and mental health issues, a history of drug use and is socially isolated.

**Housing needs**

The consumers who took part in these consultations were all in temporary accommodation. They understood the importance of finding and keeping long-term housing. The aim was to have stable housing:

“Housing would give me stability. I could get clean. I have done it before, for four years when I had housing.”

When consumers were asked about their housing needs, they said they wanted ‘safe’ housing. Exploring the idea of ‘safe’ revealed that it was not about locks and physical security so much as location, being away from known drug sources and near support services:

“For me it’s about the area. Even if I wanted to be clean, just going back to the area where there are so many people who use, meant it was available to me if I got upset.”

This matched the views of service providers, for example, one support service provider described a client who elected to leave temporary accommodation after a few minutes because on their arrival they were immediately approached with an offer to buy drugs. The client considered it safer and easier to stay ‘clean’ on the streets than in an environment with drug users.

A consumer described how location played a large part in her re-offending:

“I had been clean for five years but when I was offered a Department of Housing place it was just blocks and blocks of houses with a drug dealer on every corner and so I was using again.”

Another with a similar experience said:

“I thought being clean for five years, I would be ok. I took it (public housing) because it was cheap rent. I had done private rent housing but this was cheaper, (it was) further away from my family and all the good connections I made. I just went back to it (using drugs).”

Women in this consultation wanted to stay healthy and establish healthier relationships. When asked what would improve their situation they offered:

- priority for women leaving rehabilitation centres, to maintain the progress they had made
- housing spread across socio-economic areas
- housing near transport and services
- assistance to access community housing
- access to temporary housing while waiting for long term housing
- their own room and bathroom
- help with furniture and household goods
- reducing the waiting list for public housing
- housing away from abusive relationships
- support to maintain housing
Experience of community housing workers

Workers in the community housing sector and short term emergency accommodation providers were asked what experience they had housing women ex-prisoners. The typical response from service workers was describing a negative experience, either women were housed but could not settle into the community, or more often, women could not be assisted because the service had long waiting lists and the service was contacted only after release from prison, rather than pre-release.

Services that gave examples of failed tenancies, demonstrated that services found it difficult to meet the needs of women with complex needs. Community housing workers were concerned about the cost to the service of failed tenancies when properties were abandoned. The following comments typified the response:

“We’ve had several (women housed post release) and it was a disaster in every case, one just walked out. The shoes were still under the bed. Caused a huge financial burden.”

“She just didn’t feel safe, we couldn’t help her. She was in a security building but she didn’t feel safe.”

“We’ve had one that we housed but she just found it too hard on the outside.”

WIPAN suggests that more knowledge is needed about the experiences of women who vacate community or public housing because it was not suitable or they could not establish themselves in the community. This report and the experience of WIPAN’s clients indicate the nature of some of these issues such as location of housing and social isolation.

Planning pre-release

All community housing and support workers participating in discussions stressed the need for dialogue between prisoners and services to start pre-release and for greater access to either prisoners’ themselves and/or a case manager. Community housing workers suggested the appointment of a designated housing officer position within each prison that could take responsibility for advising services if their client was remanded in custody or sentenced, coordination between prisoners and services and as a liaison point for applications and information about release dates.

The most common complaint from community housing workers was the lack of communication with the prison services. Typical comments included:

“We have a waiting list, so if women are only referred to us at the end of their sentence, when they come out of gaol they have to go at the end of the waiting list, we have no hope of helping them then. If they could be referred while in prison we could begin point of contact much earlier.”

“Clients turn up on the doorstep with no warning, trying to find crisis accommodation. They may be old clients or have heard of us through other clients but we often can’t help them.”

“We get the occasional call from a welfare officer but there doesn’t seem to be any real exit planning.”

“Some clients really want to change their life style but it can be difficult to help them plan if they don’t know what is happening and where they are going.”

Services were aware that the nature of women’s imprisonment was characterised by short sentences and that this affected a woman’s capacity to learn about post release services and/or access needed services:

“Too many services are not available for women when in prison because they have short sentences and therefore not eligible.”

“Support needs to happen pre-release. Prisoners need intensive case management to make plans to manage their housing situation and other aspects of managing their lives on release. The tenancy should depend on a plan being developed. We need a case management approach.”

Housing and support workers often referred to the variability of quality of service from prison staff, finding that quality service depended on the personality, skills and commitment of individual employees rather than reliance on systems and procedures. This inconsistency made assistance and access difficult. The comments workers made about communication with prisons included:

“The key is the communication from the prison, it actually is the responsibility of the prison to initiate that, to prepare prisoners for release. They are the ones who know the date of release, no one outside can do anything if we don’t get the information from them.”

“It depends how good the expos in the prison are, at Berrima there is a really good social/AOD worker who makes sure the women know what to do, but now that prison is closed.”
When asked what would improve the situation, it was suggested:

“You could have a specialist accommodation person within the prison, they could try to deal with the Pathways situation.”

“Mentors and community support people should have similar access to women in prison as legal representatives.”

Losing housing and household goods when entering prison

Service providers had clients that lost housing because the service was not notified when a client entered prison. Emergency and short-term accommodation services also found this a problem as they sought to continue to work and stay in contact with the client as they cycled in and out of prison. The effect of losing a tenancy can also create homelessness for family members, one service gave as an example:

“A mother’s 16 year old son, while she was in prison he was in the rental property. They lost the property because he couldn’t pay the rent.”

They speculated that this occurred for a number of reasons, sometimes because tenants didn’t know the name of the landlord, or were unwilling to provide information or the prison service was slow to follow up with the client or service. Services workers explained that occasionally they would find out a client had returned to prison from other recently released prisoners or a vacancy came to their attention because of rent arrears:

“Notification is a problem, rental arrears may be the first indication that someone has gone to prison. If we are notified then we can make arrangements, especially if it’s up to three months we can do something, if it’s going to be more, we have to make arrangements, talk to families about moving their things out.”

There was general agreement that Corrective Services NSW (CSNSW) could provide a better role in facilitating access to services:

“It’s hard to have that kind of conversation (with a tenant about the rental property) when someone is incarcerated, it isn’t easy to connect with a tenant who is in prison, by the time we find out it’s often too late to have that conversation.”

Maintaining a tenancy post release

The examples of failed tenancies made it clear that it was not just about being a model tenant that determined whether a woman would stay in a property. In the examples given, women left the property because they were isolated and were not connected with their new community. When asked what support their women tenants had before they left the property, one worker said:

“No (they were not receiving any support) and that’s the problem, you just can’t have someone leave prison and just be on their own.”

“If there is any support when they are released, once they’re housed the support is gone.”

“They might have to go to rural areas if they have been on waiting lists for years but then they lose all their local support.”

“They certainly are trying to remove themselves from lifestyles and people and they need support.”

Housing workers understood their clients needed support but were not in a position to provide it:

“Social housing workers are not social workers or counsellors. Tenants need support from people with expertise.”

Housing and support workers supported the position that support services should be provided by specialist services and not the housing provider, although the housing provider had a role in noting problems at an early stage (such as rental arrears or complaints) and making referrals.

“It’s important support services can advocate on behalf of the client and not in conflict with the housing provider, the support should be separated from housing. If the same person has control over the property and is also giving support it can be difficult.”

“The issues are complex and some (housing) services can’t deal with them.”

The issue of maintaining a tenancy and supporting a tenant were closely connected. Descriptions of abandoned properties or rental arrears relate (in the majority of cases) to the chaos in the woman’s life. Services recognised that the needs of this group of clients were complex and required understanding and expertise in working with people with traumatic backgrounds.

Finding suitable housing

Consultations did not discuss in detail the unmet demand for housing stock and how this might be met. The focus of the discussion remained on the systems that supported women exiting prison with complex needs. All participants in the consultation understood and agreed that there was a shortage of public and community housing stock, and there was a need for more public funding and innovative financing of housing. How this should be met was beyond the scope of this consultation and would most likely repeat the well documented studies about housing supply and demand.
It was agreed that a range of housing types need to be available and that the type and size of housing might change as the lives of women changed. The need for support could also relate to the type of accommodation provided, for example, living independently could be challenging for some, for others shared accommodation would be difficult.

There was also a discussion about whether housing services should restrict housing to women who had support services in place. Although some services found this made working with women easier, in general this was discouraged as it would become another extra barrier for a client.

The value of transitional housing was raised with workers and consumers with mixed responses. Consumers were often more supportive than workers. In the experience of the workers, transitional housing also failed women:

“If they have complex needs, even after they have gone through transitional housing, they still need support.”

Finding accommodation following short term housing arrangements was also an obstacle for new clients needing a range of supports:

“There is a problem with transitional housing, where do they go then? We don’t think transitional housing works for many people anymore.”

Community housing workers assumed that transitional housing was provided because of targeted funding:

“Problem is that there is specific funding for transitional housing for specific groups, that allows you to get more funding. The funding is for transitional housing so you are not able to help with long term housing.”

**Children**

Women hoping to reunite with their children require additional services from community housing and support services. Some women may have access to their children but are not able to have contact because they do not have suitable housing. They are waiting on a transfer to a suitable property but do not get priority on a transfer list. Generally community housing workers were sympathetic to the changing needs of women, but were frustrated by the lack of reliable information about the status or likelihood of women gaining access. The responses from workers also reveal the complexity of child-care arrangements to be negotiated:

“At any time, if there is a possibility of them having their children and they can show us documentation which supports that, if we have the documentation then we will try to find appropriate accommodation.”

“We need to be having conversations with children’s services so that we know something about the longer term plan for the family.”

“It’s not very easy to get that information even from DOCS (child protection services). There isn’t enough lead time or that cooperation from other government departments.”

“Depends on whether there are court orders, sometimes there isn’t and its negotiating with grandparents or others.”

“Sometimes it is presented that they need a certain number of bedrooms in order to get access to their kids, it can be a lengthy and unhelpful wait.”
Experience of post release support workers

Post release support workers were employed by not-for-profit community support services to provide support to women post release to find housing and/or organise health, recreational and community services.

Participants described the effects of prison on women to be different than their male clients and that this required a different response from workers and their services. The differences included:

- women often needed to break existing relationships to be safe and therefore could not return to their family home or live with other relatives connected with that abusive relationship
- there are fewer women’s prisons in NSW, so family members experience difficulty having to travel longer distances to visit and maintain relationships
- if distance or placement of children made visits difficult, it was harder to maintain relationships and affected any plans for restoration

As one worker said:

“You need to understand, women leaving prison are less likely to have supports than men. Grandparents might not get to the prison or the distance is too far. There are not always grandparents that can take the children to help maintain the relationship”.

The nature of women’s prison experience

Women are more likely to be sentenced to shorter periods of detention and this affects their access to programs and planning within prison and their participation in community post release services. For example, some services and programs require a three-month pre-release commitment, one worker typified the frustration at this:

“Too many services are not available for women when in prison because they have short sentences and therefore not eligible.”

Pre-release planning

Community housing and support workers held a strong view that planning needed to start pre-release. Workers stressed the need for planning to take a case management approach:

“It’s (prison) a security minded environment, it’s not their job, the service needs someone in a community organisation that can work with them (prisoners) from the start, welfare won’t or can’t do this, demand on their time is too great. ”

Some services attempted to keep in contact with women in prison and assist pre-release but found the women’s prison unresponsive:

“Generally, it seems harder to access women in women’s prisons, than men’s prisons. It seems to take longer to set up access and easier for access to be withdrawn and no recourse to find out why or appeal the decision.”

Post release services also try to find housing for women with poor tenancy histories, sometimes caused by not notifying landlords that the property was vacated. Services were aware that information was not always provided at reception:

“Women don’t pass on information about tenancy, when they come in and they are coming down, they can’t fill out forms, some won’t say because they are going to get out in a couple of weeks, corrections say it’s their role but it’s not their priority.”

In trying to find suitable housing, one manager from a support service said:

“It does her (case managers) head in with the frustration of getting housing, without housing how can you address any other issues, its allowing people to fail, that’s the reality of it.”

Finding suitable housing

Community housing and support service workers had a clear idea about what housing they would like to provide their clients. They spoke in a similar way as the consumers about safe neighbourhoods and properties for women and their children.

“They should be in safe neighbourhoods, close to services like transport and schools, not in entrenched drug use areas.”

“Women returning to the same area will often isolate themselves from the community, that can be problematic.”
Properties also needed to be safe for children, in discussing what properties are needed support workers thought:

“The property needs to be child friendly, no point having a balcony with no restraints, or on a main road, adequate room so a young child can go into the backyard without risk of going through a hole in the fence or out the back gate.”

“It shouldn’t be a crowded house, the mother needs control over who enters the house, it’s not suitable to stay with someone of a friend they knew 20 years ago. A lot of our families have one bedroom where they sleep in mum’s bed, that’s not good, its common sense.”

Location of a property was linked not just to access to services but how a woman could start healthy relationships and stay away from old criminal networks:

“Location can either isolate women or continue social and family relationships that cause drug and alcohol problems.”

Post release service workers that assisted women to find housing thought the ‘Housing First’ model attractive after reading about it in the Discussion Paper but cautioned that any housing for clients with complex needs should accept that housing is only the first step.

One group of support service workers discussed the role of COSPS. They were sceptical about its value, believing that the sooner a woman could be permanently settled the quicker they could try and establish themselves in the community. COSPS, they thought delayed the process or put women at risk of re-offending. Services, it was thought, should revolve around the consumer, not the property:

“It should be like someone in a wheelchair, they go home and someone comes to them and shows them how to live life in a wheelchair.”

“There is no point in transitional housing, support should go into the woman’s home. Transitional housing if it’s a group home maintains that group mentality, like prison, that’s when they fall off the wagon.”

Although they agreed that transitional housing can sometimes make it easier for support services to contact and work with women it was also agreed that like the rest of the population, the lives of women changed, and the type of housing or location may also need to change, for example if a family expands or contracts.

Support services for women exiting prison

Community and support service workers reported that the type of housing women accessed could increase the demand on support services. Short term or inappropriate housing meant ongoing assistance was needed. Community support workers described the immediate post release time for women as one that was hopeful as they lived with a possibility of restoration with their children. This, they said, quickly turned into a struggle, characterised by terror, discriminatory practices, feelings of hopelessness, frustration, and vulnerability.

Short term housing and emergency accommodation also means consumers can move to different regions. This requires support workers to liaise with services in different areas and sometimes transfer or refer to a new service if the existing service has geographic boundaries. That is, if an area has a particular service, which might not always be the case, especially in rural and remote locations.

Support service workers also discussed the need for better communication with prisons so they could remain in contact with their clients as they moved in and out of detention:

“Lot of clients are in and out and we are relying on them to contact us on the phone and it’s not enough time to engage with them.”

“There should be more money for support services and also good integration between services such as Corrections and Housing.”

Support service workers who worked as case managers were still confronted with health and other services that were stretched to capacity and found it difficult to access services for their clients. There was particular concern about mental health services:

“Mental health services are the hardest to find for women, rehab units often exclude women with criminal justice histories and/or mental health issues.”

“There is a lack of mental health services, women’s mental health is marginalised, they have limited access to therapeutic programs, there are too many boundaries between services, just not enough services.”

There was a general agreement that women needed a case manager to work with the whole family, “to walk alongside clients, and to liaise between all services, not provide all services.”

“Women are often traumatised before they go to prison, then after prison they are even more traumatised, they need good health services.”
Another frustration for support service workers was funding conditions that required time limits to be placed on the period a service could be provided to a client:

“Levels of support vary with the each person. Someone can live a chaotic life and in housing are fine, and others their lives disrupt once they have housing. Their needs can change overnight, sometimes complex needs can get settled quickly, even if they appear to have medium to low needs, this can change overnight, they can have a psychotic episode.”

Support service workers reported that when appropriate support, including housing wasn’t provided that women returned to their old networks:

“When support isn’t there they go to other ex-prisoners because there is nowhere else to go.” This puts women back in environments they prefer to leave and understand they need to leave in order to settle with their children and stay out of prison.”

Community housing and support workers discussed the need for the skills and capacity of persons working with women with complex needs to improve, particularly the need to develop skills and training for working with women with a history of trauma. They also advocated for more consumer involvement:

“A model needs to be collaborative, to involve the women so they are empowered, so they believe they can nurture, provide a home, care for their children, it needs to empower them to believe they can do this, current programs should be reviewed to determine how well they do this.”

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Additional Issues

Issues for women with Intellectual Disability

The prevalence of intellectual disability in the prison population is much greater than the general community; thirty percent of females in custody have an intellectual disability compared with approximately three percent in the general population.

Support services are essential for this group of women. In particular, services including financial management, treatment and counselling and life skills such as home maintenance and budgeting are essential for women with intellectual disability to maintain a tenancy.

Women with intellectual disability face many problems beyond the lack of a safe and suitable home. They are often faced with many social disadvantages including reduced access to private and public services and reduced access to vital necessities such as:

- reduced access to health care and dental services
- limited access to education
- increased risk of suffering from violence and abuse
- general rejection or discrimination from other people
- unemployment
- reduced access to banking services
- reduced access to communications technology

Specific reference should be made in housing and homelessness Action Plans to the importance of responding to the needs of women exiting prison with intellectual disabilities. Housing and support programs, including the mandate of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1994, should ensure that funding is provided to services that are willing and have the expertise to provide services to this group of women.
Discussion

The latest local and international research on housing and post release support for women validates much of the participants’ experience in this study, particularly the need for a planned and coordinated approach to post release. In some areas, such as the pre-release and through-care needed and the type of support and housing models, there is a need for further investigation into the specific needs of women exiting prison.

The evidence linking stable accommodation and better post-release outcomes clearly illustrates that with a lack of stable housing, there is a greater chance of re-entry to prison. Women in the justice system are at a disadvantage because they are a marginalised group, accounting for less than ten percent of the total prison population. Their shorter sentences, higher prevalence of mental illness and co-morbidity, their backgrounds of violence and trauma and separation from their children make homelessness a greater possibility.

As noted in the introduction of this report, Australian governments have taken initiatives to reduce homelessness in response to the 2008 Homelessness White paper. The National Affordable Housing Agreements, National Partnership Agreement of Social Housing and the National Rental Affordability Scheme, funding of the Corrective Services NSW short-term accommodation through COSPS and women focused programs such as Baludd-a, all assist post release prisoners based on the ‘no exit into homelessness’ principle. More evidence is needed as to whether, and to what degree, such programs support women post release in the long term.

Consumer perspectives

Consumers consulted for this report talked about the close connection between their housing needs and their attempts to remain free from drugs and alcohol, to be apart from criminal networks and their desire to desist from offending. They had little to say about the room or building of their home, referring only to very basic needs, wanting their own room and bathroom. Their concern was focussed on their children, their safety and connections with the community and infrastructure of their home.

There are very few studies that include the voices of women with lived experience of prison, however two reports from Australia have similar conclusions as this report. Participants in a study on Brisbane homelessness described their desire for housing space and rules that allowed them to socialise. The social isolation they experienced after moving from the street or emergency accommodation increased as rules in housing did not allow them to have their children or family stay with them. Over half believed ‘location of their home is equally as important as the accommodation itself’. Women did not want to be exposed to domestic violence and child safety was important for those wanting to be reunited with their children. The top of their wish list was a location near a park, public transport, shops and support services. At the bottom of the list was a location near gambling outlets.

This means affordability is not the only reason women leave or take up housing options, which is demonstrated in one of this report’s case studies (see Appendix – case study 3). The woman in this case study described her fear that if her ex-husband found out where she lived she would leave her housing and would likely become homeless again.

In looking at what aspects of housing that consumers value, one study of young single parents found that ‘a safe and secure setting outweighed affordability and size and quality of dwelling’. When women have a choice, they put their understanding of safety, that is, their connection to services and the community on their list of essential aspects of housing.

At the same time, moving away from old networks, particularly without social supports can also be part of the problem. A report from Western Australia described the experience of women living in new neighbourhoods as ‘living like a hermit’, often resulting in returning to abusive relationships, contacting peers and putting themselves at risk of re-offending. This raised the importance of social activities for disadvantaged women, such as peer mentoring.

The renewal, through redesign and rebuilding of existing housing estates could go some way in responding to the concerns of women and their access to safe housing. International results, so far are mixed. Renewal of public housing estates in Britain and Victoria found an improvement in property crimes but not violent crimes against individuals. The American experience has been more encouraging, with redesign of streets and housing reducing the stigma of estates and reduction in crime. A report on a study for housing renewal projects in Washington DC and Milwaukee found that crime disappeared; it did not relocate, either when new or existing tenants were housed in the redeveloped sites.
Coordination

Prison and the community

Service providers consulted in this project reported, as other research has noted, that women leave prison without necessary documentation to access services and a general lack of consistent exit planning. A review of best practice models found that elements of an effective post release model for women included one that identified needs as early as possible, started planning pre-release and continued in the first few months post release, used volunteers, had good community liaison, and engaged with and gained the support of not-for-profit community organisations. US studies show that reintegration services play a critical role in decreasing women’s recidivism and increasing their successful entry into their communities.

Service providers in this project highlighted the importance of developing a relationship pre-release and maintaining the relationship while in prison. Research on post release programs confirms that contact with women in crisis post release is easier when they had ‘established a strong working relationship’ prior to release. Such a model was used in the Victorian Better Pathways initiative and Community Restorative Centre’s THaSS program.

Post release support providers found that women left prison with unresolved legal and debt problems which they believed could have been addressed by accessing programs and legal assistance while in prison. For example, managing debts from unpaid fines and arranging apprehended violence orders (both to protect themselves and others), could be commenced while in prison. A report on a series of legal education sessions about tenancy law found that women did not know where to access assistance or obtain information. The report highlighted ‘the need for prisoners to remain in contact with the outside world; those who are not other inmates or Corrective Services NSW staff. Prisoners need more access to information and legal support while inside prison.’

Post release service providers stated the need to access women prior to release so that assessments could be made for particular services and women could be placed on waiting lists. A submission from a government service reported that they found ‘Most services have their own assessment criteria and prefer to conduct interviews with customers face to face. In most cases this prevents access to the service until after release.’ There was also evidence that greater interaction with the community started to redress the stigma attached to women leaving prison.

Coordinating services within the community

The coordination of services needs to continue within the community setting, between government services and health and community services. A service may have as its core activity to provide accommodation, but as a Victorian employment program found, it is not possible to attend to a single area of a woman’s life without integrating other needs. This particular service needed to address women’s other urgent needs including housing, parenting relationships, trauma recovery, financial management, independent living, legal advice, physical and mental health issues and drug and alcohol counselling before or
at the same time as providing an employment service. NSW is not alone in needing to address this issue. The British ‘Supporting People’ program found that a significant problem in supporting women ex-prisoners was that the program relied on ‘effective inter-agency partnerships at a local level’. The review reported ‘it has in practice been very difficult to secure both the civic leadership and front-line integration required … in practice there have been too few advocates for women ex-offenders’.40

The challenges for Corrective Services NSW and community services are well known. Studies describe the problem of inconsistency in programs between corrections and the community, policies that restrict ex-prisoners accessing services, differing geographical boundaries for service delivery, the lack of a single coordinating point and poor communication between services. Improving the connections and performance requires government and community services to recruit suitable staff, skill staff to work with clients, formalise inter-agency agreements, and establish information systems that keep all partners informed.41

A clear message from service providers and the literature is the need for case managers that who can move between the prison system and community sector. Women exiting prison need help to, ‘navigate …uncommunicative and occasionally alienating organisations, and to ensure continuity between custody and community’.42

Support services

Women’s experience of trauma and chronic homelessness means that support services need to be provided to support women to maintain a tenancy.43 Community housing workers consulted for this project spoke of failed tenancies when women placed in housing were not provided with support.

The more research that is undertaken about the links between women’s experience of trauma and violence the greater the clarity of how the needs of women with complex needs will require support services to maintain their tenancy.44 The UK Social Exclusion Unit review of criminological and social research on the evidence of re-offending, found that service providers reported: ‘housing is a necessary but not sufficient element of resettlement…the levels of disadvantage and vulnerability experienced by many ex-prisoners suggest that without additional support, securing then retaining housing will be extremely difficult’.45

A report on a Queensland study 50 Lives 50 Homes campaign, found women participants had ‘episodic’ homelessness over many years and failed to sustain tenancies on multiple occasions. It was suggested that this was because of the lack of support attached to their housing. The author commented that women are likely to need ‘ongoing and in many instances significant support to sustain that housing….support without housing is just as problematic as housing without support’.46

Type of support

The type of support women needed ranged from practical assistance to obtain clothes, furniture and personal items that were lost each time they moved to social supports to develop new social networks.47 A Queensland report found the most common requests for assistance (a study of women and men) was for financial planning/budgeting, managing addictions, cooking, paying bills, mental health worker support and family reunion.48

This report adds to this list by focusing on the need for assistance that reduces social isolation. The findings of a Victorian project that housed long-term homeless people, mirrored the comments made by consumers in this study about their fear of returning to their criminal networks because they had not developed new healthy relationships. Twelve months into the study, participants’ connections to the community were no better than a control group of homeless people. The reviewers concluded that ‘without ongoing support the long-term homeless often return to their existing social networks that may provide the only sense of belonging they have experienced. The importance of having a long term intensive support worker may lie less in the role of case coordinators and more in their role of supporting the participants through the space that exists between being housed and being homeless’.49

This type of support also contributes to a drop in recidivism. A Victorian study found that those who desisted from crime had a greater sense of personal agency and self-efficacy and the strongest predictors of treatment success target interpersonal needs, victimisation and self-esteem.50 It is acknowledged in the literature that support is available in the community but that it is ‘rare that all needs are able to be met in a timely way, even when there is a range of supporting agencies involved.’51

Support for women was also considered to be more beneficial if it was relationship-focused and addressed their needs simultaneously. Services that included mentoring for example, had a role in substituting social relations and facilitated a pool of
social capital. There was evidence that services for women needed to add the dimension of responding to social isolation, to provide experience of positive relationships and social interactions as women moved away from abusive relationships.

Service workers also stated that how support was provided and the time it was available was critical. The key concept for providers was ‘flexibility’. There is evidence that services need to be able to negotiate what and how a service is provided in order for it to be beneficial. In relation to how and if women could reconnect to communities and families post release, a one size fits all approach was unlikely to be helpful, as a Western Australian study reported ‘women with entrenched problematic lifestyles will require longer and more intensive interventions than currently available’.

Another essential aspect of service delivery was coordination of services. The links between housing and other policies are closely aligned, policies and delivery need to work to the same objectives. However, this did not mean that all services should be provided by the one organisation. There was support by housing and service workers that the two services should be separate. Not only is there a division in terms of skills, but tenants need to feel safe in seeking assistance without fear that it will risk their tenancy and tenants also need a point of contact if they need support regarding compliance with a tenancy rule.

**Housing**

Consumers and service providers acknowledged the core issue with finding accommodation was the lack of affordable accommodation.

Security of tenure allowed better connection to family, community, education, employment, consistent health care, reduced children’s stress, and increased women’s ability to make plans for themselves and children. Consumers know what will be good for their well-being, they prefer to live in houses than units, and preferred affordable private rental as it gave more choice about size, type and quality of housing and its location.

This paper has referred earlier to the consumers concern about the location, type and quality of housing, and how to access housing with a poor tenancy record and the stigma and discrimination associated with an ex-prisoner. The Discussion Paper for this project included a description of the ‘Housing First’ model adopted from the United States, participants in the consultations gave their support for such a model.

In an Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) report, on the adoption of Housing First projects in Australia, they describe the tenets of the model requiring:

- rapid access to permanent housing
- consumer choice
- separation of housing and services
- recovery as an ongoing process
- community integration

Assessing this list against the comments provided for this project, the Housing First model would meet the objectives of consumers and service providers. However, the application in Australia has not always fulfilled each of these tenets plus the management principles that require:

- rent paid automatically from government to the housing organisation
- tenants are moved into other tenancies if problems arise, and retain housing when tenants are temporarily absent
- support services and housing are separate so that support can continue if housing is lost, and housing is not lost if services are not available or rejected

The only requirement for the original model was for tenants to meet the ‘Assertive Community Treatment’ team twice a month. The teams were on call 24 hours a day, support was open ended and there was no expectation that individuals would live independent of the support provided. Reports on the adoption in the United States were impressive – one report from Denver, claimed that in 2006, residents in the program had less visits to emergency rooms, less in-patient nights and days in custody fell by seventy six percent.

The AHURI report highlights the ongoing need for support and limitations of Housing First. ‘Housing First and other supportive housing interventions may end homelessness but do not cure psychiatric disability, addiction or poverty’. The report refers to studies where social isolation becomes a problem, leading to depression and a reduced sense of control. The key to meeting the tenets of the program rely on funding to maintain housing, dedicated staff and resources for those that need long term support.

The NSW evaluation of the Homelessness Intervention Project evaluated the results of a ‘Housing First’ pilot. It was a collaborative project with government and non-government agencies aimed to identify systemic barriers to accessing coordinated services. The evaluation found conditional support for the Housing First model, stating that it could be effective for adults in locations with good access to ‘mainstream services and high
levels of commitment by housing and support providers’.

The significant finding of this project is the systemic issues that support the comments from participants in this report, for example services needed:

• workers to support people applying and inspecting properties after hours
• properties located away from other ex-offenders, close to transport, family, and work opportunities
• Housing NSW staff to be flexible in the interpretation of tenants classified as ‘ineligible for public housing’ or ‘unsatisfactory former tenants’
• community service providers to undertake risk assessments for individuals rather than a blanket ban on ex-prisoners citing risk to staff.62

**COSPS**

Community Offender Support Programs (COSPs) provide temporary accommodation for recently released prisoners. It’s a major initiative of the NSW government in meeting its target to reduce re-offending, and is part of the National Partnership Agreement on homelessness. The Australian and NSW Governments allocated $28.2m under the national partnership plan. The centres are all within the grounds of existing prisons. There has been no publicly available evaluation of the COSPS. Services in the community, emergency services and homelessness services claim they are receiving referrals from COSPS for assistance, suggesting that the service is not successful in transitioning people to permanent housing.63, 64

**Capacity Building**

Service providers described how both their service sector and government services, particularly Corrective Services NSW, need to improve their capacity to work with women with complex needs. A study of US, Irish and Canadian housing and support programs concluded that skilled staff members are vital to the functioning of services: ‘With all the best policy, funding, resources and buildings – things will not work well without the right people doing it. The most effective services have the best staff and a culture of dignity and respect’.65

There was also evidence that both community and government service policies and practices needed to be reviewed and monitored to ensure they are gender-responsive and prevent perverse effects or indirect discrimination. For example, services that have eligibility criteria based on length of sentence that results in women (who are more likely to receive short sentences) never accessing particular services. This is the case even though a woman could spend a large proportion of a year in custody with very short periods of time on release rather than a longer continuous period of time in custody.

There were also suggestions that improving contact between all services and the general community could ‘facilitate access to a significant untapped pool of social capital ... which may ultimately result in reducing re-offending’.66

There is interest in understanding the cost offsets in health and prisons if women are housed and the tenancy sustained. The Victorian study into long term homelessness, at 12 months found that the number charged with criminal offences reduced by ten percent and reduced the use of welfare and health services compared with the control group. At the end of the first 12 months, a few participants were also starting to join the paid workforce.67 The NSW Review of the Homelessness Intervention Project, which considered the cost effectiveness for the Housing First model, determined that supporting a client for each day a client was housed at a maximum of $140.00 for the first six months, then fell to $83 per day following the first six months. This review did not take into account costs to the individual client, in-kind service delivery, donations or volunteer labour costs or savings to other service programs such as health services.68

Costs generally do not include costs to families and communities ‘Incarceration impacts the life of a family in several important ways: it strains them financially, disrupts parental bonds, separates spouses, places severe stress on the remaining caregivers, leads to a loss of discipline in the household and to feelings of shame, stigma and anger’.69

Homelessness makes diversionary options less accessible - accessing drug courts or probation require a home address. This means that people face imprisonment rather than diversion or stay in prison longer.70

The funding for community services to support women post release should be based on numbers moving out of prison. In NSW, this is about half the population of women in prison in a given year, between 1200 and 1600 women. This is a better indication of the need for short and long term assistance that women exiting prison will need in the community.
Recommendations

Government – NSW Department of Attorney-General and Justice

1. The NSW Government should establish an independent evaluation of the outcomes for women accommodated in COSPS. The evaluation should include a cost benefit analysis, a financial analysis and comparison of providing the same service on non-correction properties (eg in the general community), comparison of outcomes such as referral to permanent housing and recidivism with other post release services such as CRC programs.

2. The Government should introduce changes to bail and sentencing legislation that allows courts and administrators of diversion schemes to take into account whether a custodial sentence or bail refusal increases the likelihood of women with public and community housing to lose that housing.

3. The Government should review and map peoples pathways through the NSW criminal justice systems in order to identify services, and address gaps and inconsistencies. Outcomes of the review should aim to establish programs whereby women can obtain access to independent advice on tenancy issues within the first two weeks of their detention, either on remand or in custody. The advice should be:
   a. consistent in its content and is timely
   b. updated when policy or service delivery change
   c. accessible to women with literacy, cognitive or other disabilities

The time period for this service is critical, it must occur before rent arrears accumulate and eviction proceedings commence.

4. The Government should ensure that each woman leaving prison has a pre-release plan that facilitates contact with community housing and support services prior to release in an appropriate time frame. This service should not be subject to the length of the sentence or period on remand.

5. The Government should ensure that Corrective Services NSW staff, in partnership with the client:
   a. negotiate access to post release services
   b. obtain personal documents prior to release, eg Birth Certificate, housing history details, Marriage Certificate etc.
   c. assist women to provide information to housing providers
   d. refer clients to community services in a timeframe that allows the services to engage with the client prior to exiting prison
   e. work with the client as part of a family unit where appropriate
   f. address parenting, self-esteem and education needs, living and financial skills
   g. organise and participate in case conferences with post release services
   h. organise transport from prison to community services

6. The Government should introduce an independent quality assurance program (continuous improvement model) to improve and create greater consistency in service delivery by Corrective Services NSW staff. The improvement process should include consultation with stakeholders, including community sector services providing support to prisoners post release and consumers (pre and post release).
7. The proportion of funding provided has not increased in proportion to the increased number of people who are incarcerated or on community orders. While there has been a dramatic increase in the prison population, and therefore an increasing demand on the social support services needed by this population, there has been no increase in funding. The Government should increase the proportion of justice budget for community support services for women exiting prison in line with the increasing criminalisation of women in NSW.

8. The Government should provide guidelines and opportunity for Housing NSW to use discretionary powers when discerning evictions of tenants who are serving custodial sentences of more than three months (the maximum length of time a property can be vacant before eviction is enforced). This should be based on length of sentence, dependent children, complex needs and other mitigating circumstances. This will lessen government costs and community burdens.

9. Women affected by the criminal justice system should be included in all aspects of policy and program development and delivery. Women should be invited to participate in strategy development, service planning and review.

Government – NSW Department of Family and Community Services

1. The Government should ensure that policy and planning for new housing estates and redevelopment of existing estates take into account the specific needs of women leaving prison, so that safe housing is available, is accessible to public transport and women have the option of a location that is near their health and other support services and networks. Women should also be in a position to refuse housing, without penalty if they believe the housing puts themselves or their children in danger.

2. The Government should ensure that the adoption and plans to fulfil the NSW Homelessness Action Plan 2009-14 meets the needs of women with complex needs in the criminal justice system. This should be done by working in partnership with women affected by the criminal justice system and their representing organisations to ensure that principles and processes do not indirectly or directly discriminate against women in these circumstances. Targets should be implemented over time that will ensure all women leaving prison are housed in long term and suitable accommodation.

3. The Government should allow women leaving drug and alcohol services to be listed as a priority for permanent housing.

4. The Government and community housing providers should ensure that housing offered to women supports and is not detrimental to the woman’s mental and physical health and safety.

5. The Government and community child protection services should ensure post-release support and housing services are aware of the status and are part of the plans to restore children to their mothers exiting prison.

6. The Government should establish and fund a program that targets not-for-profit community services so that the services can build capacity to provide best practice services to women exiting prison.

7. Women affected by the criminal justice system should be included in all aspects of policy and program development and delivery. Women should be invited to participate in strategy development, service planning and review.

Non-government community/service sector

Non-government service sector/providers should improve their access and service delivery to women exiting prison by:

1. Reviewing their criteria for access to services to ensure they do not discriminate against women with criminal histories, either directly or indirectly

2. including consumer input in planning and service delivery processes

3. advocate for improvements in the quality and scope of services that assist women to maintain a tenancy

4. ensuring services that support women to maintain a tenancy are separate in the management and ownership from community housing services and support services

5. advocate for projects that build on the outcomes of the trials under the Housing and Human Services Accord to improve access to housing by clients with complex needs and put in place the support needed to sustain their tenancies.
Appendix A – Case Studies

Case Study 1: Betty’s story

Betty has complex needs rising from a history of substance dependency, mental and physical illnesses and sexual assaults. 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 medical doctor, psychologist, WIPAN mentor, Narcotics Anonymous sponsor, and WIPAN advocates. Recommendations from her doctor and psychologist asked that her history, medical condition and financial situation be considered when placing her in accommodation.

Betty was placed in emergency 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. Soon after arriving at the boarding house, Betty realised the rent was beyond her means and more significantly, that the living conditions and other occupants were adversely affecting her sobriety, mental health and physical illnesses.

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

Case Study 2: Cheryl’s story

Cheryl started using illicit drugs before the age of ten and was a survivor of childhood sexual assault. In her late teens she began sex work to pay for her drug use. Cheryl moved in and out of prison for over a decade, committing a series of non-violent crimes, each resulting in a short sentence.

When released from prison at age 30, Cheryl admitted herself to a drug rehabilitation program, successfully completed the program and was drug free for the first time in over two decades.

The rehabilitation centre released Cheryl into a boarding house in Kings Cross where she found herself isolated, disconnected from her children and surrounded by people using illicit drugs. Cheryl became increasingly despondent and after several weeks she eventually relapsed. Cheryl was arrested for possession of an illicit substance and re-incarcerated for breaching conditions of her parole.

When asked what would cause her to leave, Gerry said:

“When my ex-partner gets out of prison in two years, if he found out where I lived then that would be a big problem and I would have to try and move somewhere else, so he didn’t know where I was, but hopefully he won’t find out.”

To stay in her housing Gerry said she would need to know that her ex-partner doesn’t know where she lives and to keep using the local health services.

Case Study 3: Gerry’s story

Gerry is 38 years old and lives with her two children. She was homeless for the first seven months following her release from prison, before she was housed by a community housing provider. Gerry was provided with permanent public housing after a wait of two years and two months. She believes that her time with the community housing provider helped her get ready for permanent housing, it taught her “how to regularly pay my rent, get my furniture and household items etc. So when I got my permanent housing I had most of everything I needed instead of starting from scratch.”

She also received support to find housing from a mentor from WIPAN, who she says “helped me with all the forms, appointments and ringing up the team leaders” she also “got support letters from a health centre that I go to that helped with my application for housing. I attend a health centre and a local neighbourhood centre and this gives me support.”

Gerry enjoys her new housing, it is near shops, it’s close to public transport and it is big enough for herself and her two children. She said: “I would be happy to stay here for a very long time. This year I am starting at TAFE, which is close by too.”

When asked what would cause her to leave, Gerry said:

“‘When my ex-partner gets out of prison in two years, if he found out where I lived then that would be a big problem and I would have to try and move somewhere else, so he didn’t know where I was, but hopefully he won’t find out.”

To stay in her housing Gerry said she would need to know that her ex-partner doesn’t know where she lives and to keep using the local health services.
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 and Western Sydney regions. The purpose of the program was to increase levels of social support and social inclusion and reduce rates of recidivism. 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. Referrals were received from Justice Health, Probation and Parole, the Community Restorative Centre, rehabilitation centres and self-referrals. Eighty two percent of participants remained out of prison.

1 Women In Prison Advocacy Network Mentoring Program

2 CESCR, General Comment 3: The Nature of States Parties’ Obligations, [2], [9].


International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) provides in article 10: The widest possible protection and assistance should be accorded to the family, which is the natural and fundamental group unit of society, particularly for its establishment and while it is responsible for the care and education of dependent children. Article 17 paragraph 1 prescribes that: no one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his…family, while Article 23 paragraph 1 of ICCPR, adds that: the family … is entitled to protection by society and the State. The above rights are to be enjoyed by all individuals ‘without distinction of any kind’ (Article 2 paragraph 1 ICCPR).


6 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4517.0 Prisoners in Australia, released 8 December 2011.


11 Holmes, J (2010), ‘Female offending: has there been an increase?’ Bureau Brief, Issue paper 46, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.


23 Australian Institute of Criminology (2005), Interventions for Prisoners Returning to the community.


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29 Hulse K et al, 2011 at n 23.
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52 Bartels L and Gaffney A, 2011 at n 22.
54 NSW Homelessness Community Alliance, Policy statement, Homelessness and the justice system, July 2011 and FAHCSIA, Australian Government, Consultations concerning a National Quality Framework for the Provision of services to people who are homeless or at risk, 2009 and Interventions for Prisoners Returning to the community, Australian Institute of Criminology, 2005
57 Johnson et al, 2011 at n 47.
58 Mallett S et al, (2011) at n 53.
61 Johnson et al, 2011 at n 47.
62 ARTD Consultants, 2010 at n 29.
63 NSW Homelessness Community Alliance, 2011.
65 Reynolds, 2011 at n 44.
67 Johnson et al, 2011 at n 47.
68 ARTD Consultants, 2010 at n 29.
70 Willis M, Makkai T, 2008 at n 40.