

Mentoring Program: Frequently Asked Questions

- **What is WIPAN?**

The Women in Prison Advocacy Network (WIPAN) is a grassroots organisation that aims to improve the lives of women affected by the criminal justice system. There are two ways in which WIPAN do this; WIPAN advocate for women who are in custody, and WIPAN runs a Mentoring Program for women who have been recently released from custody. The post-release Mentoring Program operates as a gender responsive model of specialised one-on-one mentoring, all in an attempt to provide social, emotional and practical support to women who have been affected by the system.

- **How did WIPAN start?**

WIPAN was formed in 2008 due to the lack of support available to such women and the increases in the recidivism rates for women in NSW. WIPAN is currently the only community organisation in NSW dedicated solely to mentoring and advocating for women in and exiting the criminal justice system.

- **What exactly is mentoring?**

Mentoring is the one-on-one relationship between a Mentor and a Mentee. Matching a Mentor and Mentee is a specialised process. No two mentoring relationships are the same. WIPAN take a client-centered approach, where by the Mentee is encouraged to voice what she would like to achieve by having a Mentor. Intentions vary from vague to specific; however, they most often include social, emotional and/or practical support. Once WIPAN have familiarised themselves with the Mentee's motivation and the type/level of assistance she will require, an appropriate and fitting Mentor is then selected and the relationship commences.

For both parties (the Mentor and the Mentee) this relationship is voluntarily entered into. It is this initial willingness and motivation that heightens the chances of creating a beneficial relationship resulting in successful outcomes.

The Mentor, assisted by the support of WIPAN, assists the Mentee to gain the necessary skills, confidence and direction to overcome life's obstacles, particularly during the difficult transition period from custody to the community.

Mentoring is in-between that of a friendship and a professional relationship. Mentees often refer to their Mentors as their 'guide', 'role model' and 'go-to person'. Mentoring is not case management or counseling, rather it is empowering a Mentee to find and implement their own solutions whilst enhancing their social supports and networks.

- **What is the role of a Mentor?**

A Mentor supports and guides a woman who has been affected by the criminal justice system. They provide non-judgmental and respectful social support as the Mentee navigates their way back into the community.

Mentors meet weekly with their Mentee in a variety of locations to provide guidance, encouragement and companionship. Mentors will also be available, within reason, to receive any phone calls and/or text messages from the Mentee when spontaneous support is required.

As a Mentor you would provide pro-social role modeling, and increase confidence and self-esteem, which reduces the isolation so commonly experienced by women exiting prison. Isolation and lack of practical support is also a major factor in a woman returning to custody.

A Mentor is also required to report to their Mentoring Coordinator with regular updates regarding the progress of the Mentee, and is encouraged to seek assistance from the agency if the Mentee requires it. This is all in an attempt to implement early intervention techniques that will assist the Mentee if/when she may need it.

- **Who can become Mentor?**

Any woman aged 18 or over, who has a genuine interest in working with women affected by the criminal justice system, can become a Mentor. The Mentoring Program provides their service to women residing in or between the Inner City and Western Sydney.

- **How does mentoring help?**

Often when women are released from prison they have numerous issues to sort through. These can include (but are not limited to) housing/homelessness, child protection, drug, alcohol and gambling recovery, ongoing legal issues, mental and/or physical health conditions. Mentoring provides the women with the coping mechanisms, new skills, confidence, and direction to assist them in overcoming such issues, allowing them to live crime free and become contributing members of the community.

- **Does mentoring work?**

NSW currently has one of the highest recidivism rates in the country.

Through their experience, WIPAN know that providing women in the criminal justice system with gender specific social support through mentoring, women's social and emotional needs can be met. This then contributes to them making and maintaining positive changes in their lives, peeling away from past mentalities and behaviours that would result in criminal activity.

WIPAN's most recent data collection (2014-2015) revealed that 93% of women who were matched to a Mentor did not return to custody. Thus, the recidivism rate of WIPAN's Mentees is 7%. In comparison, as of 2015, the NSW female recidivism rate is 43-7%.

Of the 7% who have returned to custody, all women have maintained contact with their Mentor, via letter writing, and plan to resume the relationship once released. This demonstrates the long lasting rapport and trust built between the Mentor and the Mentee.

- **What skills do I need as a Mentor?**

Mentors are required to be committed to supporting women following their release from prison. A Mentor has an open-mind, are respectful and non-judgmental, with strong boundaries, ensuring confidentiality at all times. A Mentor is always willing to expand her knowledge and skills, and is willing to participate in the ongoing training provided by WIPAN. This training is specific to the needs of a Mentee and will expand the Mentor's skill set in order to deliver a valuable and relevant service.

- **How often would I need to meet up with the Mentee? And how long does the program go for?**

WIPAN requires Mentors and Mentees to meet at least once a week for a minimum of 1 hour. Location and choice of activity is to be decided by the two parties within the realm of WIPAN's Policies and Procedures. Mentors and Mentees are matched for a period of approximately six months, although WIPAN request that a Mentor be available for the year ahead, as occasionally the standard period will need to be extended to cater for the individual needs of the Mentee.

- **What is expected from me as a Mentor?**

WIPAN expects all Mentors to make a genuine commitment to the Mentoring Project and the woman being mentored. This is demonstrated by attendance at the Mentor training, weekly meetings with Mentees, submission of weekly reporting sheets, monthly attendance at Mentor meetings for on-going training and supervision, and adherence to the WIPAN Mentoring Policy and Procedures Manual.

- **What kind of things do you do with the mentee?**

Activities between a Mentor and Mentee vary depending on interests and needs of the Mentee. Past activities have included catching up for coffee/lunch, going for walks, shopping, cooking, attending libraries/museums, working on a resume and preparing for potential study or employment ventures, participating in

sporting or other activities of leisure, support in group or counseling situations, attending court or other legal meetings.

- **How long does it take to be matched with a Mentee?**

This varies depending on the Mentee being selected as the most “fitting” woman for a particular Mentee. Common interests, personality traits, and the skill set of a Mentor are taken into consideration before making the match.

Some Mentors are matched to a Mentee immediately after their initial training, whilst some will wait months.

- **What training would I need to do?**

WIPAN holds accredited training for Mentors in conjunction with TAFE NSW. This usually occurs twice a year. After the initial training, Mentors are required to attend meetings once a month.

- **How do WIPAN support me?**

You will have regular contact with the WIPAN Mentoring Coordinator, in addition to monthly Mentor training and supervision.

- **Why would someone want to volunteer for WIPAN?**

There are many reasons why women choose to volunteer for WIPAN. One common factor is the volunteer’s strong belief in social justice. Supporting another woman who might not have been as fortunate in life, creating positive change in that woman’s life and seeing the effects of that change can be a very rewarding experience.

- **What have other Mentors have said about volunteering for the Mentoring Project?**

Quote from WIPAN Mentor - “From day one I genuinely liked my Mentee & I wanted to help her. I didn’t feel sorry for her or pity her. I actually found her quite inspiring & felt I could learn a lot from her. I really had no idea then what a journey she had in store for me”.
2013.

Quote from WIPAN Mentor- “I realised just how much of an impact I have made when my Mentee told me that this is the first time in her life she has an Emergency Contact to write down when she is filling out forms.”
2014.

Quote from WIPAN Mentor- “I always feel support by WIPAN. If ever I have a problem or I am unsure what I should do regarding my Mentee, my Mentoring

Coordinator helps me through it and gives me great advice and constant reassurance that what I am doing is the best way to do it.”
2015.

- **I would like to volunteer for WIPAN. What can I do?**

Please contact WIPAN if you have a particular skill or interest that you would like to offer WIPAN. You can become a Mentor for WIPAN or volunteer in another way. It all assists women affected by the criminal justice system.

- **What are the Mentees like?**

Mentees are women originally from the community whose lives for some reason have been intertwined with the criminal justice system. Most are women who have been released from prison who would like to make a change in their life and require social support to do so. We accept all women, including women who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, culturally and linguistically diverse, women with disabilities, lesbian and transgender, mothers and expectant mothers, women with AOD and/or mental health issues.

- **How can I sign up to be a Mentor?**

Please submit a Mentor Expression of Interest form to the Mentoring Coordinator, either online, by email or post and you will be contacted within 7 days.

Please note, WIPAN recruit and train Mentors in periods, usually twice a year. You are encouraged to submit your Expression of Interest at any time, however the next round of recruitment may not be immediate.

- **How can I become a Mentee and be matched with a Mentor?**

If you are a woman requiring support please phone the WIPAN office on 02 8011 0699 or the WIPAN mobile on 0415 454 770 between 9am-5pm.

- **How can I stay in touch with WIPAN?**

You can join our Facebook group and follow us on Twitter. You can register for our online forum, and sign up for our e-newsletter.

- **How are Mentors selected?**

A woman applying to be a WIPAN Mentor submits an Expression of Interest form, has an interview with WIPAN and then if assessed as being suitable is signed up for the accredited training. Mentors are selected by their genuine commitment to assisting women in the criminal justice system and their ability to commit to the requirements of the mentoring project.

- **How do I become a member of WIPAN?**

WIPAN has a membership base that is open to anyone who is interested in positive social change for women caught up in the criminal justice system. Please see the 'Membership' page on our website. Membership includes the monthly e-bulletin, a platform to contribute to positive social change, attendance at monthly meetings and the option to become a volunteer and/or Mentor.

- **Where can I get more information about women in prison?**

WIPAN's website contains information and fact sheets regarding the issues that affect women in the criminal justice system. There are also various publications and reports on the WIPAN websites publications page.

- **How is WIPAN funded?**

WIPAN is funded by two separate grants from the NSW state government. WIPAN also heavily rely on donations and in-kind contributions from other community organisations.

- **How can I sponsor to mentor a woman?**

WIPAN have recently launched a campaign to enable any person that would like to assist and support the mentoring work of WIPAN to directly sponsor a WIPAN Mentee for one year.

Regular reports would be provided to the sponsor on the Mentee's progress.

We accept and encourage sponsorship from corporate bodies, philanthropists, community NGO's and individuals. For further information on how to sponsor a WIPAN Mentee, please contact WIPAN on 02 8011 0699 or email admin@wipan.net.au.

- **How can I make a donation?**

Yes, please see the 'Donation' page located on the WIPAN website.

- **What else is WIPAN doing?**

WIPAN is often requested to speak on radio, attend university lectures and various forums and conferences. As part of our community development project, WIPAN researches and writes policy papers relating to the needs and issues of women in the criminal justice system.