

WOMEN IN PRISON

In March 1985, a Task Force appointed by the Minister of Corrective Services in New South Wales submitted its report on the many problems of women in custody.

Two years later, in March 1987, the Australian Crime Prevention Council (NSW Branch) conducted a seminar with a view to exploring the progress that had been made in the time since the report of the Task Force had been presented.

At that seminar, Ms Judy Johnston, the Assistant Director, Custodial Services, Women's Services, delivered a paper in which she undertook a general review of the progress made with the imple-

mentation of the recommendations of the Task Force.

Miss Sandra Willson presented a paper on drug abuse by women detained in the Mulawa Women's Detention Centre. The first part of her paper related some history as to the attitudes of the inmates to the abuse of drugs in the period between 1983 and 1987. The second part of her paper considered the impact of the report of the Task Force.

The matters discussed in these papers are of great general interest and so it is that, with the kind permission of the authors, we publish Ms Johnston's paper and the second part of Miss Willson's paper below.

WOMEN IN PRISON PROGRAMME — IMPLEMENTATION OF TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

by Judy Johnston

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INTRODUCTION

Following the presentation of the Task Force Report to the Minister of Corrective Services in March 1985, an Implementation Committee convened by Mr Frank Hayes, was established in June 1985 to assess, implement and monitor recommendations. After the retirement of Frank Hayes the position of convenor has subsequently become a responsibility of the Assistant Director Women's Custodial Services, as from April 1986. The Committee comprises representatives of the custodial area, Probation and Parole, the Minister and the Women's Co-ordination Unit.

Mid-1986, two other committees were set up by the Minister to facilitate the on-going implementation of specific recommendations. The Design Committee comprises Departmental and Union representatives, staff from the Government Architects Branch, The Women's Co-ordination Unit and community members and is responsible for the design of the four-stage redevelopment of Mulawa.

A Co-ordinating Committee, made up of representatives of other Government Departments and a community representative have been considering those recommendations which impinge upon areas outside the Department of Corrective Services' control. Government Departments represented on this Committee are the Premier's Department, the Attorney-General's Department, Department of Youth and Community Services, Department of Health, TAFE, Ethnic Affairs and the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs.

Generally, within the Department the progress of the implementation of Women in Prison Task Force recommendations has been slow. While there has been significant support from the Minister and individuals and organisations outside the Department of Corrective Services, the same level of commitment from within the Department has not yet been forthcoming. However, with the recent appointment of members of the new Commission, the Implementation Committee is now proceeding with some optimism after what appears to have been a period when little was achieved.

Until there is a commitment to the Women in Prison Programme any implementation will continue to be *ad hoc*. If the full potential of the Task Force is to be realised and the Women in Prison Programme is to have any chance of success it must be regarded as essential. It is my opinion that within the Department, women in prison are still seen by many as a minority group not deserving of the attention which the Task Force has focused on them. To some extent, the endeavours for women by women are seen as tokenism and for that reason should not be taken seriously.

Nearly everything which has been achieved has required considerable persistence on the part of the personnel involved and at times there have been obstructions placed in the way of implementation. In spite of these difficulties many staff in the women's prisons have worked enthusiastically and have actually made some significant gains.

Due to the lack of commitment, mean-

ingful planning has been impossible. For the financial year 1986/87 no Budget allocation was made for the Women in Prison Programme until November 1986 when the Minister directed the Department to allocate half a million dollars to the Programme. Until that time no expenditure was authorised and there was no indication that the money would be available.

Although programmes had been originally supported in the Budget bid by divisions within the Department, the actual implementation of programmes has faced numerous delays for a variety of reasons. Many of the original programme bids were not subsequently responded to because staff had changed and myths abounded about money having been taken from Divisional budgets to fund the Women in Prison Programme.

The resistance, to a large extent, has resulted in a total re-planning for implementation by Divisions, all of which has caused significant delays. What has been achieved so far this financial year is that a comprehensive review of current unco-ordinated programming has taken place with some likelihood that the future planning will be much better organised. While some assurances have been given that the Women in Prison Programme is now established as part of recurrent expenditure only the allocation of an appropriate on-going budget will allay presently-held concerns.

As the Government has now approved a \$23m capital expenditure for the total redevelopment of Mulawa, it is essential that a similar long-term commitment be

made to the Women in Prison Programme to allow for the transition from traditional management practices to the unit living/participatory management and associated programmes and services which were recommended by the Women in Prison Task Force.

To date 70 recommendations have been implemented; 60 which require co-operative response have been referred to the Co-ordinating Committee and 29 were not supported. Some of the highlights of implementation to date, are as follows:

IMPLEMENTATION

Women on Remand

The services offered by the Legal Aid Commission have been significantly upgraded during the last 12 months and a broad range of legal services, including bail matters, are available for women in prison. The Commission is not represented on the Women in Prison Committees but liaison has been maintained.

A Bail Co-ordinator has been working at Mulawa since May 1986. While the position has not yet been secured the achievements to date have been worthwhile. A structured programme is being established through consultation with members of the judiciary and magistracy and considerable gains have already been made. On-going liaison is taking place with Probation and Parole Court duty officers in an attempt to initiate, at an earlier stage, the provision to the court of objective and verified information relating to bail considerations.

In the 10-months period to the beginning of March 1987, nearly 200 formal interviews have taken place with 45 reports being presented at the Supreme Court. In 22 cases, bail has been granted and many of those grants have been directly due to the report or the presence in Court of the Bail Co-ordinator. In the Local Court, seven reports have been presented, with five grants of bail. Additionally, several areas relating to the grant of bail have been followed up when inconsistencies have been noted.

Women and Drugs

A Drug Treatment Unit is about to open at Mulawa, after many delays in obtaining the requisite approval and funding. The unit will be staffed primarily by custodial officers who have received appropriate training in the area. The Unit will be supported by experienced non-custodial staff and a management programme has been developed. As part of a three-part programme, women will be able to detoxify under medical supervision and then move into the Unit to receive intensive drug treatment. Community-based groups have been encouraged to participate in the provision of services for women in prison.

Pre-release Programmes and Post-Sentence Diversion; Changing Sentencing Practices and the Question of Diversion and Alternatives to Imprisonment.

The Implementation and Co-ordinating Committees are in the early stages of exploring programme possibilities in this area and some initial research has been completed. At this time, it is anticipated that a proposal will be developed for court-based pre-release programmes and will be included in the 1987/88 programme. It is also expected that existing structures operating within the Probation and Parole Service will be extended and utilised, particularly in the area of Court Duty programmes and the Day Attendance programme.

An amendment to the Prisons Act relating to leave for prisoners should also permit expansion of the current Mothers and Young Children's Programme which allows for mothers to be responsible for their child, or children, under community supervision. There is little likelihood that a gaol-based Mothers and Babies Unit will operate within the existing Mulawa due to accommodation limitations, as well as unresolved industrial and legal issues. However, a policy is being developed for the redeveloped Mulawa.

Aboriginal and Migrant Women

Initiatives so far undertaken in relation to the implementation of recommendations have included consideration of the special needs of minority groups within the gaol. Further research is being proposed through the Co-ordinating Committee and just a few weeks ago a temporary Aboriginal Welfare Officer was appointed to Mulawa. Concerted efforts are being undertaken to increase Aboriginal representation within the custodial and non-custodial staff areas.

Basic telephone equipment for the use of interpreter services has been purchased. Management and classification decisions have been sensitive to the difficulties faced by women of non-English speaking background and have often allowed women of similar ethnic origin to be accommodated together.

The upgrading of library services has included a consideration for migrant and Aboriginal women with material being especially selected and purchased. It is hoped that a librarian will soon be appointed on a part-time basis to facilitate the utilisation of the improved facilities.

CONDITIONS IN PRISON

Health Services

Members of the Co-ordinating Committee and Departmental management personnel have commenced a process which, hopefully, will result in a co-

ordinated health policy for women in prison. Some improvements have been made and the process of consultation, particularly with the Prison Medical Service and the Health Department, is now seeing some benefits, but there are specific issues which will take time to resolve. Female doctors have been appointed to Mulawa and programmes which address the health needs of women have been introduced. Some of the recommendations relating to health issues also were not supported by the Department.

Visits and Contact

Many of the matters raised in the Task Force Report will not be addressed until the new visiting facilities planned for the redeveloped Mulawa are available at the completion of Stages I and II. However, demountable buildings have been provided at Norma Parker Centre and Bathurst X-Wing to function as visiting facilities. The buildings have been attractively decorated and cots, bassinets and a small selection of toys have been purchased for all visiting areas.

Funding has also been allocated to facilitate visits to women in Bathurst Gaol and to provide a service for escorting the children of prisoners to visit their mothers in gaol.

Programmes

Approval has been given for further development of the "total programme package" concept of service delivery relating to educational, vocational and recreational activities. TAFE will be working with the Department on this project which has the potential to offer some new and innovative programmes providing women in prison with a more meaningful occupation of time.

Already computer hardware and software have been installed at three locations and computers are being used in the teaching of basic literacy and numeracy skills. Lessons in computer and word-processor operations are provided by qualified teachers. It is envisaged that the skills obtained will assist women to acquire a broader range of employment than previously available to them on release. There is also the possibility of developing an industry in this direction and more research will be carried out at correctional facilities during an imminent visit to the USA, UK, Holland and Hong Kong.

A pre-release programme for women is also developing on an on-going basis and actual physical conditions for Work Releases are being significantly upgraded. For the first time in eight years, the female work-release centre has facilities, furniture and fittings which have been especially chosen, rather than goods which were obtained second-hand from anyone who was willing to pass them on.

Classification

With the co-operation of the Director of Prisoner Classification some of the problems relating to the classification of women have been resolved. The Implementation Committee, consistent with Task Force recommendations, also prepared a report on the issues relating to classification for women in prison. This proposal has gained support in principle and will be considered in the review of the total classification system which is presently under way.

Staffing

A comprehensive staff development programme has been implemented at Mulawa for all staff involved in the management of women in prison. The programme has been developed as a major step towards preparing the staff for the opening of Stage I of the Mulawa redevelopment, in line with recommendations of the Task Force. These programmes for this financial year include a Primary Training Extension Programme, a Team Building/Participatory Management Programme, a five-day Drug Treatment Unit-Staff Training Seminar and 10 one-day Skills Workshops.

Unit Living/Management Systems; Accommodation

The design and management of the redeveloped Mulawa is consistent with the relevant Task Force recommendations. Prisoners will be housed in cottage accommodation with the opportunity to participate in the management of the units. Already several accommodation areas of Mulawa have adopted a management style which is in-line with the recommendations and it is anticipated that the transitional process, from traditional management practices to participatory management, will be part of an ongoing process until the accommodation areas of the redeveloped Mulawa are available.

However, many of the accommodation problems identified by the Task Force remain, but within existing facilities attention has been paid, wherever pos-

sible, to the careful management of staff and inmates in an effort to reduce the problems which, in part, can be attributed to the poor physical conditions evident in some parts of Mulawa.

No major renovations are likely to take place between now and the completion of the redevelopment but many superficial improvements, such as providing areas with a cheerful coat of paint, maintaining gardens and generally keeping the gaol neat and tidy, have also improved the environment.

Staff have been able to participate in the planning process for the new gaol and have made some worthwhile contributions through an established system of on-going negotiation and consultation.

SUMMARY

While in some ways the achievements to date may not seem particularly significant, many people working with women in prison or visiting the gaols where women are accommodated, have perceived that important changes are actually taking place. In spite of the obstacles, delays and set-backs, there is a growing enthusiasm for the implementation of the recommendations and in many instances, custodial and non-custodial staff, actually working in the area, have made a substantial commitment to the Women in Prison Programme.

Among those people involved in the Women in Prison Programme the problems encountered have actually generated

a sense of unity and a determination not to be defeated by the overt and covert opposition which has sometimes been apparent. The process of implementation is dynamic and the energy exerted already has meant that initiatives to address many of the issues have begun.

While not everyone agrees on all issues there is a determination to reach consensus in most areas and to create an environment for women in prison which is humane and dignified. If this can be achieved then staff are also going to be provided with a more positive working environment. While the walls and the buildings can enhance the atmosphere, the fundamental well-being of the gaol is really dependent upon the success of human relations within.

Additionally, it is hoped that initiatives which divert women from prison either before or towards the end of their sentence can also be implemented with the support of people within the criminal justice system and the community.

There is still much to be done to implement the Task Force recommendations and it will take considerable time. It is proposed that Stage I of the Mulawa redevelopment will be ready for occupation in about August 1988 with Stage II following about 15 months later. Many of the recommendations will not be fully implemented until the redevelopment is completed a few years after that, but the endeavours will continue. If we can achieve the implementation of the majority of Task Force recommendations then significant gains will have been made.

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