FROM JAILS TO JOBS - A QUEENSLAND PRISONER RECOVERY PROGRAM

Background to From Jails to Jobs Program

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander overrepresentation in the criminal justice system within Queensland

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise a relatively small proportion of Queensland’s population but are disproportionately reflected in reported crime statistics. Indigenous people account for 4% (156,517 Indigenous persons) of the Queensland population but make up:

- 22% of offenders
- 12% of all victims of assault
- 11% of all victims of sexual assault.

It is well known that underlying levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage remain unacceptably high in comparison to the non-Indigenous population. This is especially so in remote areas and in the discrete communities. While there are some signs of improvement indicators in education, health, child protection and employment continue to show poor outcomes.

Data on Indigenous people in custody highlights the following:

- Indigenous young people made up 60% of young people in detention in Queensland as at 30 June 2008.
- Indigenous adults made up 29.5% of those in prison in Queensland as at 30 June 2010.
- The rate at which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults are incarcerated in Queensland has increased over time. The age standardised rate was 1160 per 100,000 population in 2000 and 1443 per 100,000 adult population in 2010 (ABS 2010). In contrast, the non-Indigenous imprisonment rate has decreased from 135 per 100,000 in 2000 to 121 per 100,000 in 2010.

While Queensland’s age standardised Indigenous imprisonment rates have increased over time – increasing 24% since 2000.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offending patterns are a key cause of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander over-representation in the criminal justice system. For example, the fact that Indigenous people begin offending at younger ages, re-offend in higher numbers, offend more seriously, and are more likely to
breach their non-custodial sanctions, has been shown to result in higher rates of imprisonment.

In response to this challenge, Queensland has established the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Justice Strategy 2011-2014* which is a three-year program to reduce Indigenous offending and re-offending in Queensland. It recognises that the continued over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the criminal justice system remains a significant barrier to true equality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Queenslanders.

Traditional criminal justice system responses alone will not achieve equality. The underlying causes of offending must also be addressed. These include issues relating to poverty, raising children, education, alcohol and drug use, employment, health and housing. The strategy’s actions focus on long-term and permanent solutions. Each action also includes interim measures to keep it on track and targets to provide more immediate measures of success.

This strategic response will operate within the broader context of the national *Closing the Gap* agenda to reduce the gap in life outcomes and opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Closing the Gap strategy recognise that only when education, health, housing, and employment needs are adequately addressed, will the levels of disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (including the overrepresentation in the justice system) be remedied.

One of the primary strategic actions that is directed to DEEDI, from an employment perspective, is the *From Jail to Jobs* Program which is aimed to build upon and strengthen the current Advance to Work Program, which is a partnership between DEEDI and QCS. This initiative endeavours to create opportunities for 200 Indigenous people leaving jail each year from 2011/12 to 2013/14 who will immediately commence:

- Traineeships
- Apprenticeships
- Employment
- Employment initiatives – SQW

The Post-release program component includes industry placement to create employment linkages with identified Industries such as:

- Construction
- Mining
As the economic situation continues to improve across Queensland, labour and skills shortages are again emerging. Building human capital and increasing the capacity of individuals and families is vital to sustain economic growth in Queensland. DEEDI objective is to lift productivity, increase participation and promote social inclusion – our employment programs help us to do this. The government believes that local people, particularly those who are disadvantaged jobseekers, should be an important part of the solution to labour and skills shortages, which can be achieved through helping employers and industry to source local labour. Under *Skilling Queenslanders for Work*, our regional employment officers work with industry and employers to gauge labour market trends and emerging needs at the local level.

In many cases, industry and employers partner with the government, contributing funds and personnel, to ensure that employment and training assistance is relevant and appropriate to their needs. DEEDI is working with private sector employers to address skills and labour shortages. Some of the projects funded under the *Skilling Queenslanders for Work* initiative can be identified through the following examples:

- **The Gladstone Workforce Skilling Strategy** which is assisting 210 local jobseekers (including 25% Indigenous people) over two years to take up jobs in the Liquefied Natural Gas industry. Funding is also being contributed by the Energy Skills Queensland, Department of Education and Training and the Federal Government.

- Thiess is working to increase the number of Indigenous workers, especially in apprenticeships. Working with Thiess and Construction Training Centre, the State Government’s Skilling Queenslanders for Work initiative funded 14 participants’ wages for 20 week paid work placements. With this practical work experience under their belt, these Indigenous jobseekers were all offered an apprenticeship at Thiess.

- **Myuma’s Civil Construction and Mining Skills Prevocational Training Program** which aims to increase Indigenous employment in North West Queensland within the resources and civil construction industries. Myuma continues to develop relationships and work in partnership with Mining and Civil Construction companies to ensure the skills and training delivered produce work-ready employees to meet the skills shortages across these areas. This project will assist 60 Indigenous participants this year through a paid SQW work placement program.
The Queensland Government has a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Queensland Resources Council. The MOU is focused on education and training, employment, enterprise and business development in the resources sector for Indigenous people.

As part of the DEEDI support to the resources sector and to broaden the employment opportunities in regional towns, the Queensland Government is working with the federal Government to develop regional skills.

DEEDI is also working closely with the newly formed Skills Queensland. Skills Queensland is responsible for aligning Queensland's skills system with the needs of employers, individuals, industry, and the community, to alleviate skill shortages and better position Queensland and Queenslanders to address future skill needs.

Skills Queensland’s industry leadership and advice will help target employment programs and training investment on the needs of industry. Skills Queensland has a $50 million Strategic Investment Fund which responds to emerging skills needs. Industry is able to access this fund on a dollar-for-dollar co-investment basis to train workers in priority industries.

Investigations into the specific programs offered within the suite of Skilling Queenslanders for Work assistance, the results become even more impressive. Since 2000, the Office of Economic and Statistical Research, Queensland Treasury, has conducted surveys of Skilling Queenslanders for Work program participants 12 months post project completion. Reports that results show two out of every three Skilling Queenslanders for Work respondents (67%) were either in work and/or training 12 months after exiting their program. This result is similar to previous year’s result of 66%.

The suite of initiatives that constitutes Skilling Queenslanders for Work are as listed:

- **Youth Training Incentive Programs.** This is a subsidies program that is available to private sector employers, local government authorities and Indigenous Councils for taking on school-based apprentices and trainees.

- **Indigenous Employment and Training Support Officers Program** have highlighted the success of providing mentoring support to Indigenous jobseekers. Not only are completion rates for Indigenous apprentices and trainees who have been mentored lifted to that of their non-Indigenous peers,
the survey shows that 79% are employed and/or in training 12 months after receiving assistance.

- **Community Employment Infrastructure Program**. This includes paid work placements, job preparation assistance and accredited training.

- **Get Set for Work** program focuses on assisting early school leavers or disengaged youth aged between 15-19 year old

- **Participate in Prosperity** focuses on participants who are experiencing multiple barriers to employment and are generally not classed as unemployed. So it is highly encouraging that some 43% of participants are in work and/or training 12 months after receiving assistance.

- **First Start Traineeship Program**. This program offers jobseekers with little or no experience, opportunities to obtain a traineeship where they can gain on-the-job experience and training at a registered training organisation and be paid.

These results demonstrate that the types of employment assistance and labour market programs offered by this Government have proven very effective in helping a range of disadvantaged jobseekers into employment. Participants gain recent work experience, new and transferable skills and opportunities to increase self-esteem and involvement in their local communities.

Integral to the delivery of Skilling Queenslander for Work initiatives is the network of over 110 regional employment staff ensuring state-wide coverage from the Gold Coast to Cape York and the Peninsula regions.

Regional employment officers have established links with the community sector, local industry and local employers in an effort to gauge labour market trends and emerging industries at the local level. This is a critical aspect of their role as programs are promoted and developed locally so as to be relevant and appropriate to the local labour market.

The role of regional officers includes:

- working with local organisations and industry to develop local employment and skilling solutions to meet the needs of jobseekers and employers;
- funding organisations through a suit of initiatives such as the Skilling Queenslander for Work initiative and the Indigenous business development grants;
• linking newly retrenched workers across Queensland to employment and other support services;
• supporting Indigenous businesses; and
• providing culturally appropriate mentoring and support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander apprentices and trainees.

The outcome for From Jail to Jobs program will create opportunities for 200 Indigenous people leaving jail each year 2011/12 to 2013/14 (approximately one-quarter of the number of Indigenous prisoners exiting prison) will immediately commence apprenticeships, traineeships or employment through engagement with DEEDI employment initiatives such as Advance 2 Work, Skilling Queenslanders for Work, Remote and Rural Housing Program, or other programs. Additionally From Jail to Jobs initiatives may also include other activities that support the From Jail to Jobs program listed:

1. Increased mentoring exceeding 13 weeks after completion of Advance 2 Work in order to support and sustain employment to reduce recidivism.
2. Continue funding Advance2work to prepare prisoners transition to employment;
3. Participate in DEEDI employment initiatives program;
4. Industry engagement that identifies opportunity for employment with selected priority industries to meet Industry skills and labour shortages;
5. Target communities to maximise employment and economic development opportunities through the roll-out of social housing and other government infrastructure projects as part of prisoner transition to employment upon their release from prison back into communities.

If From Jail to Jobs Program is aimed to build upon and strengthen the current Advance 2 Work Program, then an overview of Advance 2 work program is required. The Advance to Work program is a prisoner intervention program that has been operating in Queensland since July 2000. the program is designed to assist ex-prisoners gain employment after their release from prison. The program is funded by Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation (DEEDI), administered by Queensland Corrective Services (QCS), and delivered by private providers, who provide a case management approach for each prisoner. The program is delivered in all Queensland correctional facilities by 3 contracted service providers:
- Salvation Army Employment Plus (South East Queensland and Rockhampton Regions)
Program provider staff first contact prisoners in correctional centres at “Stage 1-pre release stage”, then contact prisoners again after release to begin job search at “Stage 2- support to attain employment post release” and, when employment is found, provide ongoing support during the prisoner’s initial employment at “stage 3 – retention in employment greater than 13 weeks. Driving the program is the assumption that employment assists ex-prisoners to reintegrate successfully back into society, and so reduce the chance of re-offending and return to prison.

Private providers provide participants with a range of support services that include:

- Skills Audits and training needs analysis;
- Literacy and numeracy assessment and referral;
- Vocational training to meet identifies skills deficit that address employment opportunities in full or part time (25 hours) work for at least 13 weeks continuous work;
- Job search skills;
- Job placement support;
- Post employment placement support;
- Referral to other support agencies;
- Work experience.

Service providers are able to register prisoners into the program who are designated as being in the high risk category of long term unemployment and are within 6 months of release date.

As previously discussed the scope of the From Jail to Jobs Program is to develop a targeted implementation strategy to meet the target of 200 Indigenous people leaving jail each year from 2011/12 to 2013/14 gaining employment through:

- collaborative activities with Queensland Correct Services to build on/and extend the Advance to Work program;
- culturally appropriate mentoring;
- direct linkages to employers and industry to create real jobs;
- linkages and extension of existing Employment and Training initiatives

Key activities that DEEDI will undertake to meet the scope of the project includes:
• leveraging resources/ funding/ opportunities from other government agencies and industry to progress initiatives to meet 200 target;
• identifying and working with three industries/ large employers to create linkages for employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people leaving jail. This will include a Skills Audits and training needs analysis that match Industry skill shortage demand with the prisoner’s skill sets to provide a contribution towards the skills and labour pool required by Industry.
• regular monitoring, reporting and evaluating of the initiative;
• appointment of two dedicated From Jails to Jobs co-ordinators who will identify Indigenous Employment and Training Support Officers (IETSOs) to mentor Indigenous prisoners entering employment in particular from Lotus Glen Correction Centre.
• working with larger Skilling Queenslanders for Work providers to direct a proportion of their SQW effort towards Indigenous ex-prisoners;
• upskilling of Regional staff.

In conclusion the From Jails to Jobs initiative is an important intervention initiative to assist offenders move towards a healthy, non-offending and productive lifestyle through gaining meaningful employment. This in turn will provided former prisoners with a sense of purpose and legitimate source of income, rather than illegal earnings and status achieved from criminal pursuits.

References:

Queensland Government 2011, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander justice Strategy 2011-2014