

Voices of Aboriginal Male Prisoners at the Metropolitan Remand Centre

Group #2

The following is a submission from a group of 12 men within the Metropolitan Remand Centre. The following notes are what the men wished to be shared. The session was held on 7th October 2024.

“We’re locked in the yard and forgotten about” – anonymous prisoner

Appeal Process:

- We need more support in the appeals process
- Legal Aid support is not good
- Hard to get any support once a jury or judge finds you guilty
- When we try to get help every door gets slammed

Health and Mental Health:

ConnectCare were the health provider here. They were kicked out after an inquiry years ago. There is a new provider now called GIO – but they do exactly the same as the last provider. IT doesn't feel different. It's the same people, even lots of the staff are the same people. They're just wearing a different tshirt logo.

Our mental health is getting worse and worse. They need much more mental health supports programs.

Health – Methadone program / Lack of diagnosis

- This is another big problem that leads to unintended problems.
- To get on the methadone program is takes up to 8 weeks.
- If you don't get access to methadone in a timely way you end up trying to finding your own substances to fix your problem. Once you do that you typically end up finding yourself with a debt some someone you can't pay. Then it leads to violence and fear. All because we can't wait 8 weeks to get on a health program we desperately need.

Health – seeing a GP

- IT takes way too long to get access to a GO in here. It's also too complicated and difficult for most of us to navigate.
- About once a month my correct meds aren't on the trolley and its impossible to fight for the right ones.
- Also once you're script runs our it's a nightmare to sort it out. You're in hell.

Resources:

The protection area where we are is highly disadvantaged within MRC. Because there is not enough numbers, it means that there is no budget and no staff to support us.

- We can't access the employment programs
- We can't access any general support programs
- There are no mental health supports programs

Employment:

Most of us want to take part in the employment programs within the prison. There are about 200 prisoners and less than 50 jobs. Everyone is fighting for a job and usually the work is just not there.

No job means no pay. And no pay means no phone calls to loved ones, no toiletries, and no family connections.

Banking

The banking process in here is stuffed. IF you want to get your bank to send you money it takes 3 – 8 weeks. It's disgusting. The banking is terrible.

It's a huge problem. We're all complaining but nothing is happening about it. It leads to people fighting over food. It creates safety issues for us, to staff and to health providers.

You're in here. You're on remand. You're not even guilty yet, You can't get your own money, it's not fair on us or on our family.

Phone calls

This is one of the biggest issues across the prison. WE have been asking for it to be fixed for a long time. The cost of phone calls remains too high. So if we can't work we just end up taking our family names off the phone call list.

Speaking to our families helps us. It's important and keeps us sane and connected. When we have to rush like crazy we feel rude cutting them off. IT's not a loving phone call anymore. It creates stressful urgency. The biggest impact is on our connection to family.

Family connection helps us so much. Something so little makes a big impact on us. It's something less for us to stress about. And it hurts our families as well. They're doing the time with us as well. They need to know we're safe and okay. The phone calls give us something positive to look forward to and to share with each other.

There are options for Zoom calls now but there are always tech issues. And to arrange a zoom call with family it could take up to three phone calls which would be all the money someone has for a week. The staff don't help and the tech is always an issue. Also our zoom calls are only 30 minutes max. At other prisons we get much longer.

Solutions:

1. One idea for a solution I wanted to share. Bring back free envelopes. During COVID we got free envelopes, but it's stopped now. We should bring it back.
2. Drug Court – I've been part of a drug court program through the Melbourne Magistrates. I had to fight hard to get on it but it's been the best thing for me ever. And I'm the only blackfella on it. There should be more. Please make a recommendation to increase access to drug court for Aboriginal men. Thanks to the drug court, It's now the first time in 10 years that I've been clen and straight. Every other time I've been through a program I've been back on the gear within an hour release from prison. Drug Court has a huge support team which includes case worker, phycologist, aboriginal specific supports, group supports and its all flexible. It's been a life saver for me. There should be a recommendation to make compulsory spots for Aboriginal people in Drug Court program.
3. BAILS SAFE – While some services have access to rehabs and detox programs in reality only people with money and resources get access. Please recommend an Aboriginal specific version of BailSafe.

Koori Court

- Koori Court is good but the main issue is you have to plead guilty to access it. That's not fair. I have to agree to all my charges to access it and that's not right, It's not justice. There is no grounds for appeal.

Supports outside of Prisons

- We need more support when we leave prison.
- Health support and housing supports.
- WE also need more to do when we leave – like cultural and community activities.
- The biggest issue for me is boredom. It's leads to drugs and trouble.