



**Women and Mentoring**  
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## **Women and Mentoring- WAM Limited Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence May 2015**

### **Purpose**

To inform the Royal Commission into Family Violence (the Royal Commission) of the work of Women and Mentoring (WAM) and to outline how we provide support for victims of family violence and measures to address the impacts on victims, particularly on women and children.

### **Background**

WAM is a unique, early intervention, community-based program that supports women charged with a criminal offence. WAM has been operating in the City of Yarra since 2009, and we will soon be expanding into the Western Suburbs to start supporting women at the Broadmeadows and Sunshine Magistrate's Courts. Further, we intend to expand to other metropolitan and regional areas in the future, subject to securing ongoing funding.

WAM matches participants with a female volunteer mentor. WAM trains the mentors to give participants support at court, offering personal and practical assistance, and helping them to find and use community resources.

The program has made a significant positive difference to participants' confidence, coping mechanisms, and their capacity to respond to their legal matters and to address the issues that underlie their alleged offending. Enabling these women to manage their lives better ultimately reduces the resource burden that would otherwise fall to the state and improves community safety.

Thirty seven participants have been helped to date. Of these; 97% have avoided a custodial sentence and 95% have not re-offended. These positive program outcomes lead to significant direct cost savings for the state when compared to the cost of keeping a woman in prison. The Council of Australian Governments reports that average real net annual operating expenditure per prisoner in Victoria in 2012–13 was over \$98,000.<sup>1</sup> The Productivity Commission: Report on Government Services 2013 reports an even higher cost of \$123,370 per annum to accommodate a prisoner in a Victorian prison.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As reported at <http://www.corrections.vic.gov.au/utility/publications+manuals+and+statistics/corrections+statistics+quick+reference> as at 25 May 2015.

<sup>2</sup> As reported at [www.pc.gov.au/research/recurring/report-on-government-services/2014/justice](http://www.pc.gov.au/research/recurring/report-on-government-services/2014/justice) as at 25 May 2015.

WAM mentors assist participants to seek legal advice and representation prior to court appearances. The WAM program reduces 'failures to appear' in court by participants which would otherwise lead to more adjournments, wasting police and court resources. It also reduces breaches of orders by assisting women to complete their court-ordered obligations.

The number of women in Victorian prisons has increased exponentially in the last ten years. It is likely to increase further as the impact of recent policy changes, such as the removal of suspended sentences in the Magistrates' Court, the introduction of baseline sentences, and changes to the parole system, flows through to the corrections system. Early intervention programs like WAM can assist in arresting the growth in the women's prison population and its associated costs.

### **Family Violence issues**

The women we work with are often dealing with multiple issues that contribute to their offending, including family violence, homelessness, mental health issues, and drug and alcohol problems. Just over 71% of WAM program participants have experienced some form of family violence in their lifetime. And over 90% of WAM participants have mental or physical health issues, or drug or alcohol dependence issues.

The women often don't have friends, or family, to help them with these issues. WAM mentors support participants to engage with other social services, such as housing services, medical services, education services and Centrelink. Better engagement with these support services promotes better outcomes within the criminal justice system.

The costs of family violence are considerable, ranging across medical, housing and education services, and affecting the next generation. WAM's mentors provide support for victims to assist them to escape the cycle of violence they have experienced. This extends to the families of the program participants.

A total of 31% of the program participants to date have children living with them. A further 9% have children who do not live with them. Keeping mothers out of prison has a significant flow-on effect for the state. It keeps families together and keeps children out of the care system, and potentially out of the criminal justice system. Further, mentors assist participants engage with child-related support services, such as appointments with the child and maternal health service and assisting with schooling arrangements.

We have been collating real life stories of the relationships between our mentors and the program participants. These stories illustrate, simply and powerfully, what a difference the mentors have made to these women's lives, and where they would have most likely ended up without the intervention of the mentor. Several examples are included at **Attachment A**.

### **Conclusion**

We ask that the Royal Commission consider:

- That family violence can lead to a woman committing a criminal offence.
- That women committing such offences and coming into initial contact with the criminal justice system are often isolated, lack knowledge of the system and lack support to navigate the system. Without assistance, a relatively minor offence can often spiral out of control and result in a custodial sentence.

- That sentencing a woman to prison can also affect her family, potentially resulting in her children entering the care system, and potentially themselves entering the criminal justice system.
- That a prison sentence for a woman in these circumstances is not appropriate and will lead to a greater ongoing burden on the state.
- That there is currently a gap in the response of the system to family violence, as there are no Government-funded programs assisting women who have experienced family violence and subsequently commit a criminal offence.
- That the Women and Mentoring program addresses this current gap.

For further information, contact:

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## Attachment A: Mentoring stories

██████ and ██████

██████ was facing court on minor shoplifting charges, dealing with the Department of Human Services in relation to her ██████-year-old son and coping with Family Court appearances in relation to domestic violence charges against her ex-partner when she was referred to the mentoring program.

██████

“I was in a violent relationship for ██████ years. I just didn’t know where to go, who to turn to. They always say you have to leave but they don’t understand it’s not always an option when you don’t have anywhere to go. I didn’t know anything about any of the support networks at all. I had no one I could ask for help. I had a very minor shoplifting charge, which was the result of the family dramas.

I got involved in the mentoring program with ██████ and a month into it my partner tried to cut my throat in front of my son and beat me up in front of him and that brought things to a head. ██████’s like a friend, a big sister, but there’s no blood relation there and that’s made it easier. I couldn’t tell my family any of this. She makes me feel mentally more equipped to deal with everything. I’m a lot more positive about it. I think everything will work out.”

██████

“I see my role as filling a gap in ██████’s life. She doesn’t seem to have friends who haven’t fallen into the same traps that she has, so I go to court with her and I’m the only person there supporting her. So I think that’s my role. Just to let her know that she’s not alone going through all these dreadful things she has to go through. The court can impose so many conditions on an individual woman without actually seeing what that does to the rest of her life. She’s made a mistake. She got herself a bad guy for a boyfriend, discovered heroin, got pregnant and her life has spiralled out of control. But I admire her. She’s smart, she just needs a couple of breaks and her life will be totally back on track.”

██████ and ██████

██████ referred herself to WAM after having spoken to a criminal lawyer. She has ██████ children; ██████ are adults and ██████ are in permanent foster care. She has regular contact only with the youngest. She is currently on three assault charges, she has been raped and held at gunpoint, and her eldest son is violent towards her. She has been in three violent relationships and has an acquired brain injury as the result of a car accident. Her current partner is abusive and in prison.

██████

“My childhood was violent and abusive and I left home early. That’s the only way I know. All I want is a normal life without living in fear.”

██████

“██████ has been one of the most traumatised women in the program. When she first came to WAM she always wore hoodies and caps so that no one could see her and earphones to keep out the world. She was anxious and never made eye contact. She had no conversation and constantly apologised for not understanding. Now, she goes out for

coffee when once she only wanted to stay inside. In fact she has even suggested to me places where we might go to meet. Her confidence is way up. She's taking small steps, but steps they are. She is acknowledging things about herself and trying to be assertive and self-analytic. The difference is phenomenal."

██████████ and ██████████

██████████ had worked as a medical receptionist for ██████ years when a change of management forced her out of her job. A nervous breakdown and health problems followed. She began abusing alcohol and was facing court on serious drinking and driving related charges when she became involved in the mentoring program. She was facing the likelihood of a custodial sentence.

██████████

"My Legal Aid lawyer advised me to get a mentor because at the time I was having quite a few problems and having trouble getting to my appointments. It's had a huge impact on me. I don't think I could have walked through the whole court process without her help. Without having that support, I would have probably breached the court order a few times and maybe have ended up in a worse situation. I've been fine for the last couple of months. The last time I went to court even the magistrate himself said, "I can see a remarkable change...you have really made a big turnaround and I'm very impressed". And therefore, he's given me a Community-Based Order. ██████'s there for me. She will often just contact me and take me for a coffee. You know, it's just a good thing."

██████████

"I had always done volunteer work in my local community but I was keen to work with the broader community. When I saw the ad for the mentoring program I thought it was something I could do.

I thought if ██████████ did some voluntary work, it would be good to show the judge that she's willing to give back to the community, but it would also be very good for her to be doing something for other people, as she sees other people doing for her. She followed up completely independently and went to the voluntary work on a regular basis, which was amazing. When I first met her she could hardly get out of the house and at the end of six months she was going out and helping other people."