

## Evaluation Overview

2011



# Evaluation of the Prisoner Support Program in Tasmania

In 2011 Red Cross engaged the University of Tasmania to undertake an independent impact evaluation of Red Cross' Prisoner Support Program, a mentoring initiative currently being delivered by inmates to their peers inside various prison facilities within the Tasmania Prison Service.

The Prisoner Support Program was developed in consultation with Tasmanian correctional staff to address high levels of self harm, bullying and attempted suicide within Risdon Prison. Offenders train as Peer Supporters to provide information, advice and support to other inmates – particularly those who are new to the prison or are at risk of suicide or self harm.

The evaluation examined the impact of the program on peer supporters, prisoners, custodial officers and ancillary care service providers working within the prison system in order to inform ongoing service development, and to provide evidence to underpin wider adaption of the model across States and Territories.

### Key Findings

An independent impact evaluation found that Red Cross' Prisoner Support Program provides **timely, confidential, hands-on emotional and practical support for inmates.**

Key findings included that:

- The program works well and effectively – it has benefits for inmates, Peer Supporters, Custodial Officers and therapeutic service staff in the prison.
- It improves the self esteem and coping skills of Peer Supporters (long term inmates themselves)
- It helps to prevent and defuse volatile situations – reduces harm and contributes to general

equilibrium and safety in the prison environment.

- The program boosts overall morale by fostering positive interaction between Peer Supporters, inmates and Custodial Officers.
- It indirectly contributes to the care of families by providing support 'on the inside' – Peer Supporters are an independent sounding board during high stress, help inmates to write letters, read legal letters and assist inmates to stay connected to families.
- The program is unique – no other stakeholder can offer a program which involves inmates supporting inmates on the inside in a way that is collaborative with and complementary to the daily work of other stakeholders.

- Given its modest budget relative to the number of people engaged or affected, the Prisoner Support Program is excellent value for money.

## Recommendations

While the program is working well and benefits all stakeholders, the evaluators identified a number of areas where action could be taken to improve performance.

These include:

- More clearly delineate roles within the program and improve training and skill development for Peer Supporters.
- Consider developing a consolidated training package for delivery to Peer Supporters on a continuing basis and as a refresher

package.

- Strengthen data collection and record keeping procedures.
- Strengthen avenues of communication with Custodial Officers as 'points of contact' for the program specific unit or facility.
- Retain the SCARF (Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness & Fairness) model as a practical tool for managing change, facilitating performance improvement for both staff and clients and informing the training and development process.
- Devise a continuous evaluation tool that reflects the core attributes of the SCARF model.





## **Purpose of the Evaluation**

This impact evaluation was commissioned by Red Cross and funded through a Community Capacity Grant from the Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services.

The evaluation informs ongoing improvement of the Red Cross Prison Support program and its delivery in the Tasmania Prison Service. It is expected that the findings from this evaluation are likely to be of interest more widely within Red Cross as service planning for offenders and their families gains momentum across States and Territories under the Strategy for overcoming social exclusion.

The evaluation strengthens evidence-based practice and generates knowledge to inform future funding submissions, social policy positions and advocacy initiatives within Tasmania and more widely across Red Cross.

## **Methodology**

In addition to a review of key documents and statistics, this report documents the perceptions and experiences of five key stakeholder groups involved in the program, which is delivered to male inmates in the Risdon Prison Complex, the Ron Barwick Minimum Security prison, Hayes Prison Farm and the Hobart Reception Prison.

The interviews were conducted with the Red Cross Project Officer, 2 Integrated Offender Management (IOM) staff, 4 Custodial Officers from the Tasmania Prison Service, 5 inmate Peer Supporters and 7 inmate clients who were the recipients of the service. Data was collected in the period between August 2010 and August 2011.

Different Interview Guideline Questions were developed for each particular stakeholder group. Interviews were designed to be free flowing and open-ended, providing participants

with an environment in which they felt comfortable to express their opinions, thoughts and feelings.

## **Acknowledgments**

The evaluation was conducted by a consultancy team from the Criminology Research Unit at the University of Tasmania, led by Professor Rob White. The evaluation was supported by Tracie Bowes, Program Coordinator of the Prisoner Support Program at Red Cross.

## **More Information**

To find out more about the program, please get in touch with Tracie Bowes, Program Coordinator - Prisoner Support Program at [tbowes@redcross.org.au](mailto:tbowes@redcross.org.au)

For further information about the evaluation, please contact Red Cross' Research Unit at [research@redcross.org.au](mailto:research@redcross.org.au)

## RED CROSS' WORK WITH OFFENDERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Red Cross is committed to an inclusive society where all people are valued, their differences are respected and their basic needs are met. We work to overcome social exclusion by providing bridges for people back into the community.

Offenders and their families are some of the most vulnerable and socially excluded people in Australia. Research highlights that offenders are often impacted by broader patterns of exclusion and disadvantage, with histories of abuse, neglect, inadequate education, unemployment, mental health, drug and alcohol issues, homelessness and intellectual disability. Offenders' families suffer stress from stigma, social isolation, financial difficulties and changes in living arrangements as well as physical and mental health problems.

Australian Red Cross is working to improve the lives of offenders and their families and, through this work, contribute to a stronger, safer and more resilient society.

The **Prisoner Support Program** was developed in consultation with Tasmanian correctional staff to address high levels of self harm, bullying and attempted suicide within Risdon Prison. Offenders train as Peer Supporters to provide information, advice and support to other inmates – particularly those who are new to the prison or are at risk of suicide or self harm.

Peer Supporters are trained in a number of areas including mental health first aid, drug and alcohol issues, blood borne viruses, communication skills, and maintaining confidentiality and advocacy. On completion of training Peer Supporters receive a Certificate II in Community Services, enhancing their employment opportunities following their release.

More information about Red Cross' work with offenders and their families is available at <http://www.redcross.org.au/offenders-and-their-families.aspx>

