

## **Response to Question on Notice from Inquiry into Australia's youth justice and incarceration system.**

### **Comments Attributed to Sophie Stewart, CEO of Social Reinvestment WA**

*Question: 'If you had one thing that you could tell this committee today that would make a difference to the children and their families that you've had contact with—is there a thing that you think would make an immediate practical difference?'*

There isn't one silver bullet to make a difference in the lives of the children and families in our justice systems. We need to do several things at once along a spectrum of intervention that will then make a difference, as outlined in our [Blueprint for a Better Future](#).

#### **But if there was one thing we think would make the most impact:**

**At the point of a child's first contact with the justice system, *diversion must be the first protocol*.** This necessarily entails that diversion spaces and services are adequately resourced and available.

Wherever possible, children and young people should be diverted from the criminal justice system, as involvement in the justice system is criminogenic, and does not appropriately address their needs. **This requires ensuring diversion is the mandated protocol of first responders; That first responders are trained to divert and aware of available diversionary options; And that key around the clock diversions are funded in the communities that need it most.**

Diversion should be to family first, but for many children and young people, challenges and issues begin at home, so there must be investment in key diversions when home might be the primary challenge. We have named the two we see as most critical:

#### **1. Wraparound Family Support Services, to help families and homes better support children and young people**

- Working with the whole family- by social or other appropriately trained workers in a culturally safe way- to help determine and the unique needs of the child and the family
- Connection to the required services and supports
- May include alcohol and other drug support, housing, food security, counselling, cultural engagement and other social and economic supports

By investing in approaches that care for the cultural, social, emotional, and economic wellbeing of young people and their wider families, wraparound support is able to recognise and respond to the unique circumstances of families, providing the right supports such as mental health, family counselling, food security, or other assistance that is needed at the right time. With immediate and underlying needs addressed, families become safer and more positive environments for young people, who see improved wellbeing and are less likely to engage in offending behaviour. Ultimately children and young people will usually return to their families. So unless the needs in families are addressed, the environment in which the young person has committed offending is unlikely to change.

## **2. Alternative Safe Spaces for young people, run by the right people, in every community**

- Funded safe spaces, ensuring 24 hour support across a community, for children and young people to go to when home is not safe
- Alternative first responders, including Aboriginal Elders and leaders, youth workers and programs such as night patrols, to help divert young people to safe spaces
- Police and other First Responders need to know where else they can send children and young people, and these spaces need to exist
- Spaces must be culturally safe and may look like youth centres, night spaces, hostels and bail houses, where children can access care, meals, activities and a safe place to sleep

Punitive responses have limited effectiveness, and many instances of 'offending behaviour' can be linked to unaddressed issues upstream, that sit outside of the justice system, such as experiences of poverty, disengagement with education, housing inequity, or family and domestic violence. By changing the way we currently respond to young people, de-escalating situations, and diverting young people to alternative safe spaces and wrap around family programs, we can ensure these critical first engagements are opportunities to be therapeutic and supportive, instead of entrenching harm through incarceration.

**Diversion and support should be child-centred, diverting children and young people away from the justice system to safe places, and primarily supporting young people and their families so kids can thrive at home.**

**The option for diversion should be taken at the earliest possible opportunity and focus on connection with community-based supports to address unmet needs.**