

## ACSO MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate circulation  
25<sup>th</sup> November 2010

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### Reducing Crime – “Law and Order v’s Re-integration”

As typically occurs at election time, the issue of law and order has hit the headlines with Members of Parliament from all sides of politics weighing into the debate. Both the ALP and Coalition are promising policies that will result in harsher penalties ranging from abolishing suspended sentences and home detention to introducing minimum standards for jail terms for serious crimes.

It is in the interests of community safety to appropriately deal with those who engage in unlawful behaviour but we also need to provide opportunities for rehabilitation to ensure recidivism rates are reduced. The obvious outcome to these policies is that the number of people in Victorian prisons will continue to increase. In fact, according to ABS statistics, this number has been increasing since 1977, from 1,573 to 4,350 on 30 June 2009.

For those that find themselves in Victoria’s prison system, it is often a ‘revolving door’. The vast majority have alcohol and drug addictions compounded by numerous mental health problems, living in poverty and unable to get a job. These highly disadvantaged members of our community deserve better. Whilst government planning and policy for entry into the criminal justice system is resourced significantly via the Sentencing Advisory Council, there is scarce attention and resources applied in trying to develop the solutions to keep people out of prison once they are released.

**ACSO’s Acting Chief Executive Officer, Vaughan Winther argues that a new focus on re-integration with a holistic approach is needed.**

“After spending the last 15 years supporting youth and adults to transition from prison, it appears that the current methods of re-integrating in excess of 5000 prisoners each year needs innovative reform. Workers in the sector continue to report that there is minimal co-ordination and an inconsistent approach across the courts, police cells, prisons and community supports for housing, family support, employment and training, mental health and disability. Government departments, the community, academia and the non-government service sector need to work together to ensure we try and reduce the number of young men and women returning to prison and a subsequent life of chronic harmful behaviour towards our community”.

In Victoria, we can create a benchmark for the other States to follow. We can create an integrated approach to transitioning people back to the community from prison. This integrated approach needs to be driven at Ministerial level, with a ‘whole of government’ investment to ensure that corrections, mental health, housing, employment and training, family support and alcohol and drug services are ‘working from the same page’. The starting point needs to be a consultative research and advisory body that is focused on developing policy and service delivery solutions for successful re-integration from prison. ACSO proposes that the **Sentencing Advisory Council** expands its mandate to include post sentencing and re-integration.

This seems like a pretty rational thing to do as we have a ‘captive audience’ of 4,500 people, with many connected to numerous and multiple government and non-government services. They are all Centrelink clients, and many are also public housing, mental health, disability and also involved in child protection services. This situation provides the foundation for the development of an integrated, holistic approach to connect people back into their communities upon release from prison.

As part of the focus on law and order concerns, ACSO invites the newly elected Victorian government to support an initiative that develops holistic re-integration solutions that promote social inclusion and assist offenders to break the cycle of offending. Please contact Vaughan Winther on 0439 651852 or [vwinther@acso.org.au](mailto:vwinther@acso.org.au) for further information.