

Domestic violence: Women leaving prison 'need proper housing' to avoid abuse, service providers say

AM By Stephanie Zillman

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PHOTO: A painting at Kungas illustrates the cycle of violence that brings women into the correctional system (ABC News: Stephanie Zillman)

For many Indigenous female offenders in Central Australia, leaving prison means returning to the home where they were previously abused, frontline service providers say.

The Kunga Stopping Violence Program, an initiative of the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service (CAALAS), is the only program in Central Australia that works with women while they are in prison, and then for 12 months after their release to try to break cycles of violence.

"I'd say 100 per cent of our women have had very traumatic experiences in their life," program co-manager Miriam Bevis said.

"And so their crimes have just come out of the environment that they've been exposed to."

She said there was no single policy that would change things, but adequate housing options for women would be a start.

"It's not uncommon for the women that we work with to go back into a house where there are over 20 people living there," Ms Bevis said.

"In that one house ... with one toilet, and our client is not even on that lease ... she has no power in that house.

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So far today police in Australia would have dealt with on average

domestic violence matters

307

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"You can't just say 'Oh well stay away from your partner'. There is no door to lock, there's no safety for her."

Ms Bevis said that the barriers to stopping the cycle of violence were almost innumerable, but it could be done.

"For the women that we've worked with that do manage to get a house — I can say it's like a very small number of women that ... we've managed to get [into] public housing — they are doing really well," she said.

"Those women are testament to the fact that when you get really secure housing, you have some control over your life and you can get your feet on the ground."

248pc increase in women imprisoned: report

The number of women entering the criminal justice system has increased at an unprecedented rate.

A May 2017 report by the Human Rights Law Centre published statistics that revealed in the 25 years since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in custody, the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women being imprisoned grew by 248 per cent.

Northern Territory Minister for Families Dale Wakefield stopped short of describing the issue of female incarceration as a crisis.

But said rehabilitation services in and out of prisons had been focused on men for too long.

"It's something that we are looking at, and something that I know the Corrections Minister is very passionate about, and will continue to do that work," Ms Wakefield said.

"We're seeing many more women enter the justice system, and it is something that we need to respond to."

Ms Wakefield also said an upcoming trial of an Alice Springs-based specialised domestic violence court would be aimed at shifting the power imbalance between men and women in the correctional system.

"Part of this would be having a specialist domestic violence list which would mean matters are dealt with in a more effective and timely way," she said.

"As well as making sure that everyone involved in that court has specialist training to understand the power dynamics of family and domestic violence.

"And also understanding the type of pressure women are put under to not report violence."

'People need to believe in communities'

Acting CEO of the NPY Women's Council Liza Balmer said the council had been working with the Australian Childhood Foundation to develop a comprehensive primary prevention strategy to curtail domestic and family violence.

"For the first time here at women's council it takes us past just the conversation ... we can all sit down and talk about that it's wrong," she said.

"But how do you get past that? How do you get to the behaviour change?"

"And so we're excited about that, and we'll start using it and see how we go."

Ms Balmer said people had to believe in local Aboriginal communities.

"That they do have the capacity and the strength to move beyond this and be better at what they're doing," she said.

"And that government trusts them to make decisions, and that they don't always have the solutions, but they've certainly got ideas and thoughts that currently are not really well listened to."

Topics: domestic-violence, community-and-society, women, prisons-and-punishment, law-crime-and-justice, alice-springs-0870, nt, australia

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