



# **Every woman and child**

## **A community response to the issues of children in the criminal justice system**

**Seeds of Affinity, January 2017, Semaphore  
Uniting Church, Semaphore Road, Exeter**

## Acknowledgements

*We acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which the forum took place - the Kurna people. We acknowledge the elders past and present. We acknowledge their custodianship and spiritual connection to this land.*

*We would also like to acknowledge Aboriginal women account for more than 25% of criminalised women. A special thanks to Aboriginal Elder, former Chairperson of Seeds of Affinity and Adelaide Women's Prison Chaplain, **Auntie Pat Waria-Read** for her contribution to the forum. A special acknowledgement to the **mothers with lived prison experience**, who provided brave and essential insights about their experiences and those of their children.*

### **With thanks to our panellists**

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Linda Fisk, Chairperson, Seeds of Affinity

Malcolm Robinson, Director: Bower Place Complex Needs Clinic

Cheryl Axelby, Chief Executive Officer Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement

Bernie McGinnes, Principal Advisor Women Offenders, Department of Correctional Services

**Facilitator:** Andrea Duff, Board Member, Seeds of Affinity

### **Thanks to our group facilitators**

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## Community Participants\*

Note Families SA were invited but not represented

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\*This list represents the individuals and organisations who left their contact details with us on the day.

If you would like to be included in our mailing list, please send an email to [seedsoa@adam.com.au](mailto:seedsoa@adam.com.au)

# 1. Introduction

In April, 2016, Seeds of Affinity - Pathways for Women convened a half day forum - *Every Woman and Child*. The purpose of this forum was to discuss services available for the children of women in prison. The aim of the day was to identify gaps in the provision of services and propose strategies that might address these gaps.

This event was organized, in part, as a response to efforts by the South Australian Department for Correctional Services to recognise the different needs of women in prison.

These needs were presented in their report, *Strong Foundation and Clear Pathways: Women Offender Framework and Action Plan*. The plan 'emphasises the importance of'

*[sic] acknowledging women's gendered and cultural needs in design of correctional environments ; designing and implementing approaches that strengthen the reliability and quality of service pathways to support community reintegration; mandating and planning accountability requirements that reflect women's priorities.* (Department for Correctional Services, 2015, p. 2)

Seeds of Affinity is a relatively young organisation incorporated in 2011 to provide positive pathways for women re-entering mainstream society following the prison experience (Seeds of Affinity, 2016). Since its incorporation, Seeds has identified strongly with the need for a collaborative approach to improving South Australian prison conditions as a means of ensuring better outcomes for women and their children. Given the new Corrections Framework (which included insights from Seeds of Affinity) Seeds was keen to host a day of open discussion between service providers; Seeds members (many with lived experience of the effects of separation of mothers and children), and interested members of the public.

There are two important points to make about the organization of the day. Despite our best efforts and repeated invitations, the voices of the children themselves were largely absent instead vicariously represented by mothers and agencies providing family services. Secondly, a major stakeholder – Families SA – was unrepresented, despite having been invited.

Notwithstanding these important absences, this document does represent the start of a conversation that can be continued at many levels.

Following further consultation through 2016, this report is a summary of the event including key points made by panellists and strategies emerging from group discussions. It is presented in three sections: summaries of the opening Panel discussion; the focused group discussions and recommendations arising from the event.

## 2. Panel insights

The first session was a panel of invited speakers. Some panellists had professional insight into the policies and procedures governing the treatment of children of women in prison. Others had experience to speak to the impact of lived prison experience on babies, children and mothers. This was followed by an open discussion. Speakers' insights and discussion points are summarized below. (See Appendix A for a detailed summary of each speaker's contribution.)

**Michael O'Connell**, Commissioner for Victims' Rights South Australia

- Children, whose parents are suspected, accused or convicted of an offence can be seen as victims of crime like other people who suffer harm as a result of that crime. Consequently, they can be as entitled to the support of the Commissioner in his role as victims' advocate as other parties affected by a crime.
- The work of the Commissioner is informed by The International Convention of the Rights of the Child, which states that children have a fundamental right to protection, the means of survival and a full and complete life.
  - The best interests of the child must be recognized and served, above and beyond the rights of a parent at all times.
- Children need a voice. Too often children, caught up in matters over which they have no control, have no voice in determining what is best for them. Various adult voices may override or ignore their perspective.
  - Children's voices must be heard
  - There needs to be processes in place to ensure that children's' interests are fully represented
- When determining what is in the best interests of the child, it is important that the bond between women and their children is acknowledged.

**Linda Fisk**: Founding member and coordinator of Seeds with lived prison experience including the removal of an infant child.

*You can release the body back into the community and them to be with their kids . It's really, really difficult to start that bond again. That relationship needs support from the community; it needs support from Corrections.*

- Both mothers and children suffer from forced separation when mothers are in prison.
- The removal of an infant child breaks the bond between mother and child and once broken it is very difficult to restore.
- Older children feel confused and abandoned by separation from their mother

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- o Children are frequently embarrassed and shamed in public situations e.g. at school, when they have to admit their mother is in prison.
- o They are powerless.
- o Their visitation rights need to include overnight or lengthier visits.
- South Australia is the only state in Australia which does not have a Mothers and Babies Unit
  - o Adelaide Women's Prison needs a Mothers and Babies Unit as a matter of urgency.
- Mothers separated from their children often lack the knowledge and skills to rebuild relationships after reunification
  - o The damage done to families is long term.
- Mothers in prison need a range of programs that develop their child-rearing skills and prepare them for reunification with their children.
- When women are released from prison, it is very difficult to re-establish themselves in the community: the wider community needs to provide ongoing support for these women and their children.

**Malcolm Robinson:** Director of Bower Place Complex Needs Clinic, Psychologist.

- The removal and separation of babies and children from their mothers is a long-standing and accepted practice in Australian society
  - o It is wrong: 'we are messing about with the sacred'
  - o It abuses the rights of the child.
- Its long-term destructive impact is well known especially amongst Aboriginal communities.
- Babies learn about unconditional trust through their instinctive attachment to their mothers. When this is denied through their removal from their mothers the primary bond between mother and baby is broken.
  - o Reunification of mother and child is incredibly difficult.
  - o A cycle of broken trust is established.
- In Malcolm's professional experience it is evident that many children separated from their mothers suffer long-term problems

**Cheryl Axelby:** Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement CEO

All mothers have a basic human right to have a connection with their children whether they have offended or not. For Aboriginal peoples, the state-sanctioned removal of children is a process that has been devastating over a very long period of time and the imprisonment of Aboriginal mothers is another context in which this occurs.

- There needs to be a re-think around the removal of children from their mothers, with more creative solutions explored.
- Removal of babies and separation of children from mothers in prison is wrong.
- Women in prison are often victims of crime themselves: they need culturally sensitive support and opportunities to maintain family bonds.

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- At all levels people working with and on behalf of Aboriginal people need to understand more about Aboriginal culture because assessment always takes place against ‘mainstream’ benchmarks.
- We also need to challenge the ‘deficit’ model in relation to Aboriginal women.
- There needs to be a re-think about how training of prison staff takes place, developing a culture of respect.

**Bernie McGinnes:** Principal Adviser for Women Offenders Department for Correctional Services.

Bernie outlined the Department’s *Strong Foundation and Clear Pathways: Women Offender Framework and Action Plan* that was released in Dec 2015 and is currently open to feedback. The new policy in this framework focusses on ‘centrality of the relationship between mothers and their children’. She expressed the view that too many women are being imprisoned for minor offences when other sanctions are more appropriate.

Bernie described the following measures currently being undertaken by the Department of Correctional Services which include:

- Work being undertaken to bring about a reduction in remand rates and increase in the use of community based orders to enable eligible women to serve home detention or community supervision orders and maintain their ties with their children.
- Ongoing discussions across government around alternative sentencing options to allow more women to serve their sentences in the community.
- A range of ‘Framework’ initiatives to improve conditions inside for women with children through:
  - Increasing the overall number of visits and the length of visits for women with children.
  - Providing new skills-based programs to support mother/child relationships and for women with babies or toddlers and to also prepare women for release
  - Providing women with access to the pre-release precinct of the prison where eligible women can have 6 day a week access to their children and make home visits.

Planning starts for the re-establishment of a Mothers and Babies Unit after July 2016.

## ***2.1 Open Discussion with Panel members***

Panel Speakers responded to a number of questions from the floor. These mainly supported points already made by the speakers or elaborated on them:

- If the Women’s Prison is to be more family friendly and the current initiatives to work, prison staff need retraining to transform their approach from one that is basically punitive, to a trauma informed and culturally sensitive approach to working with mothers and their children, especially those from minority groups.
- Women’s access to their children should not be subject to negotiation or denied as a form of punishment. This harms children.
- Some women in prison have such issues gaining or sustaining their children’s visitation rights that leads them to lose hope. This increases the likelihood of re-offending.

- The Aboriginal community in particular are deeply affected by high rates of imprisonment. Over 27% of Australians in prison identify as Aboriginal but that community represents about 3% of the population (ABS, 2015). This is an inter-generational issue that must be resolved.
  - Aboriginal women in custody need every encouragement to maintain/grow their bonds with their children and community
  - Members of the Aboriginal community including mothers and their children who are caught up in the justice system suffer from poor, uncoordinated service delivery. Better collaboration and communication is needed e.g. accommodation services on release, long term housing, access to information when there are system changes that affect them. This aggravates the negative impact of incarceration
- Women in prison and their children from ethnic minorities need culturally sensitive treatment
- Changes to the justice system need to place less emphasis on imprisoning and shaming women and their families, and more emphasis on providing safe places; maintaining mother-child relationships and offering kindness.

### 3. Key findings – Facilitated Community Groups

Facilitated small group discussions on 5 nominated themes were a major element of the program after lunch. The themes were:

- What is available in prison and what should be available?
- Interrupting the cycle and addressing intergenerational ‘offending’
- Ways to encourage pride, hope and opportunity
- Trauma reduction for children
- Cross institutional collaboration.

This section presents a summary of the key points from those discussions and a focus on identifying ‘what are the issues’; ‘what needs to happen’ and ‘what can I do’?

*\*Not all issues raised on the day have been linked to areas of responsibility and as such are represented as blank spaces in the tables that follow. If you or your organisation are able to contribute in some way to achieving any of these outcomes, you are welcome to use this report to inform your actions. If you would like to seek further consultation, do not hesitate to contact Seeds of Affinity for guidance or collaboration.\**

#### 3.1 What is available in prison to assist children/mothers and what should be available?

Three very strong themes emerged from this discussion group:

1. The need to develop a stronger understanding of the special needs of children and maternal/infant relationships among prison staff
2. The need to create opportunities for increased pleasant contact between parents, infants, children and families.
3. The need to develop clear guidelines for families including family friendly information about prison visits.

Identified issues:

- The degree of service provision for children (including infants) and mother
- Meaningful education and transition to work programs which will ultimately mean more quality of life for families
- Prison induction for families (in particular around the rules for visits)
- Opportunities for communication with children, such as video calls
- Prison management awareness and sensitivity about the complex needs of children and women
- Information for children about the prison experience

| Actions  | Responsibility |
|--|----------------|
| Investigate ways to keep mothers with their children after birth |                |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Scope and identify what programs are available for women children  |  |
| Understand the role of the Prisoner Families Program   |  |
| Develop and deliver meaningful education programs for women in prison around personal and professional development | Department of Correctional Services;   |
| Increase the opportunity for therapeutic (eg psychological) help for mothers, funded over a longer term            |  |
| Foster more open links with prison management; educate prison staff about mothers and children                     | Department of Correctional Services, advocacy groups (eg Seeds of Affinity?) |
| Develop more opportunities for women to communicate with children by making most of technology.                    | Department of Correctional Services  |
| Advertise family visits within the prison  | Prison staff   |

### **3.2 Interrupting the cycle - Intergenerational ‘offending’**

*Sometimes women replicate what they know - almost as a rite of passage. When the system is viewed by children as the enemy, it can't be seen as part of the solution.*

Three very strong themes emerged from this discussion group:

1. Increased opportunities for parent/child contact is very important to improving outcomes for children and prevent inter-generational offending
2. Proactive inter-agency collaboration is required to curtail inter-generational offending
3. Tapping into the ‘lived prison experience’ of women through community education programs emerged strongly as a resource to deter inter-generational offending.

Identified issues:

- A reactive approach (as distinct from proactive risk management) by Government agencies and others
- Programs specific to Indigenous youth developed with culturally appropriate stakeholders
- Young women emulating the role model of their mothers
- Coordination between agencies
- Clarification of the ‘role’ of prison officers
- Community education
- Giving voice to children.

| <b>Actions</b>   | <b>Responsibility</b>   |
|--|---|
| Devise strategies to curtail intergenerational offending in a proactive way  |   |
| Develop and offer culturally appropriate programs for Aboriginal children.   | These must be devised by Aboriginal organisations in collaboration with their service users and be fully funded to allow organisations to focus on their work |
| Recognise the role models parents present.   |   |
| Provide consolidated programs and interagency collaboration  | All social services, government and NGO   |
| Provide meaningful life-skills programs for women [to assist with their role as parents]   | Department of Correctional Services   |
| Increase the potential for prison employees to play an active role in curbing intergenerational offending (positive programs for parents and children) | Department of Correctional Services   |
| Value the 'lived prison experience' as a way to deter young people from crime, coupled with linking children with qualified educators and programs.    | SA Department of Correctional Services, must value the knowledge and expertise that people with lived experience have to inform evidence based practices      |
| Run community education programs with women with 'lived prison experience'.  | Seeds of Affinity currently do this at a grassroots level   |
| Give children of parents in prison a voice and work in ways which develop their self-esteem.   |   |

### ***3.3 Encourage pride, hope and opportunity for children***

*A kinder society needs to be cultivated*

This discussion group tended to focus on mothers first. Through addressing the essential needs of mothers, the outcomes for their children are likely to be better.

Themes in this section emphasized the women's role, rather than their children. The overarching theme is by assisting women and meeting their economic, social and educational needs, their children will be better off in the long run.

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Identified issues:

- Life impacts on mothers during and post prison (access to appropriate housing; access to meaningful education programs)
- The effect of low self-esteem on mothers is its impact on families
- Opportunities are needed to provide meaningful programs in prison.

| <b>Actions</b>   | <b>Responsibility</b>  |
|--|--|
| Consolidate services to create more opportunities for housing and essential life needs                                   | All social services, government and NGO  |
| Look at ways to build the self-esteem of women through meaningful employment, education pathways and other opportunities | The Zonta Club of Noarlunga Southern Vales have contributed \$500 towards the cost of sending two of our women to attend a conference later this year. |
| Remove or reduce the red tape for services attempting to provide services in prison                                      | SA Department of Correctional Services   |
| Encourage mentoring programs   | The skills and knowledge gained by women attending the conference will be valuable in them being able to effectively mentor each other                 |
| Develop community education programs to foster greater awareness, kindness and compassion                                | This must be undertaken with the collaboration of women with lived experience  |
| Services must take into account the 'whole' woman (as mother and family member)  | All social services, government and NGO  |
| Interagency collaboration  | All social services, government and NGO  |

### **3.4 How can the trauma for children be reduced?**

This discussion group developed a wide range of strategies that need to be implemented across various stakeholder groups to better support children.

The three strong themes emerging from this section included:

1. Enabling the Department of Correctional Services staff recognising their responsibility as stakeholders in the emotional well-being of the children of prisoners
2. Demystifying the experience to make visiting prison less scary

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3. Increasing opportunities for children to spend meaningful time with their children

Identified issues:

- The impact of separation of mothers and children
- The provision of therapies
- The prison environment and facilities
- Clarity around the rules in the prison
- Support programs
- An increased role for prison officers

| Actions   | Responsibility   |
|---|--|
| Look at resources to demystify the prison experience (for example a story book)                     | Discussions have begun with panel representatives to secure funding and support to create age appropriate resources. In the meantime, agencies can direct service users to this resource <a href="http://inccip.org/kids-korner-2/">http://inccip.org/kids-korner-2/</a> |
| Provide access to the rules around visits to ensure understanding                                   | Department of Correctional Services (especially for current prisoners). Information for visitors could be disseminated by most agencies represented on the day.  |
| Look at the prison environment – is it nurturing and non-threatening for children?                  | Department of Correctional Services in concert with correctional officers (for example training and professional development)  |
| Provide opportunities for mothers and children to share meals                                       | While taking place inside the prison, this could be in the form of a program where workers from outside of Corrections be present to assist mothers and their children during visits   |
| Offer age-appropriate activities  | Again, this must be a collaborative effort between the Department of Correctional Services and agencies outside of Corrections to provide activities, and an appropriate space to do so.   |
| Provide accommodation for the women and their babies in prison, if they choose that option          | SA Government; Department of Correctional Services   |
| Accessible and regular therapeutic and psychological help, not dictated by short term funding model | A sustained long term funding model that ensures longevity of programs   |
| Regular phone and video calls between mothers and their children, without cost                      |  |
| Case management in prison that recognizes and nurtures the mother child relationship                |  |

### 3.5 Cross Institutional Collaboration

This discussion group identified a lack of cross-institutional collaboration as a key issue and then developed a range of strategies that will strengthen and possibly streamline support systems for children and mothers impacted by the prison experience.

The three themes from this discussion were:

1. Whole of woman and child case management prior to, during and post the prison experience
2. Public education
3. Visibility.

Identified issues were:

- Little or no encouragement for women to build on mothering skills
- Currently a siloed approach, with little communication between agencies
- The piecemeal approach to service provision is problematic.

| Actions   | Responsibility  |
|---|---|
| Identify organizations that can support women to avoid criminalization  | For example, Women Lawyers Association of SA Inc  |
| Identify key organizations that can support women while they are in prison  |   |
| Identify key organizations that can support women post release  | Seeds of Affinity   |
| Revisit/reinvent past strategies that worked but were shelved due to short term funding                                 | All social services that work with women in conflict with the law                         |
| Consciousness raising and public education about the facts surrounding women in prison and how this impacts on children | Seeds of Affinity and similar groups lobbying and advocacy                                |
| Keep the issue of criminalized women and their children on agenda   | All social service providers that come into contact with women at risk of criminalization |

## 4. Recommendations and Conclusion

The overarching recommendation is to investigate ways forward around the main themes emerging from the day. These are to:

- Explore ways of changing current processes that damage relationships between mothers and children during and after prison.
- Produce resources and information to improve and demystify the prison experience for children and families.
- Seek ways to influence attitudes and behaviours within Correctional Services with regard to mothers, children and families.
- Identify community education opportunities to reduce intergenerational offending
- Form a coalition of community stakeholders to lead and lobby for these initiatives.

This event provided stakeholders in South Australia with a rare opportunity to discuss issues affecting children and mothers during and after a mother's incarceration. It brought together mothers with a lived experience of prison, women who as children were affected by imprisonment of a parent, women and men involved in supporting family and community members through and after their experience with representatives from key service and support areas. Discussions were rich and stimulated a wide range of suggestions that will help South Australian children and their mothers *now*. Already, as a result of this event, workers from various organisations have connected with each other and some groups have contributed in tangible ways improve the outcomes for criminalised women and their children. We must continue to build on these initial successes.

The insights from both the panel and facilitated groups, align with the extensive work of Flynn and Field-Pimm (2014) which point to the seriousness of the invisibility of the children of prisoners. The authors stress the need to view imprisonment as a family issue and underline the importance of rallying the community for a coordinated effort.

A recurring theme in all of the discussions is the key role prison staff can play in providing a better environment for children.

The report will be tabled at a Seeds of Affinity Board Meeting and presented to the Seeds of Affinity women for endorsement and follow-up suggestions. The report will be also be posted on the Seeds website and a link sent to all registrants who attended the event.

A recurring aspiration is the need to cultivate a 'kinder environment' for mothers and children - giving recognition to the importance of the bonds which will play a major influence on a child's potential to prosper.

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The challenge is to lift the veil of invisibility of this vulnerable group and begin to reconcile the harshness of the prison environment with the needs of the children. This is imperative for a safer, stronger community.

## References

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## Appendix A: Extended summary of Panel Session

### **Michael O'Connell, Commissioner for Victims' Rights South Australia**

Michael located the issues associated with children's separation from their mothers in the context of their human rights and legal entitlements. He emphasized the need for children to have a true voice.

As Commissioner for Victims' Rights, Michael defined a victim of crime 'as anyone who suffers harm as a result of the offence except the person suspected, accused or convicted of that offence'. This means the Commissioner can at times be acting as an advocate for two parties: the people who are direct victims of a crime and the people who are the family of the accused e.g. the children of the accused.

He explained that The International Convention of the Rights of the Child emphasizes that 'the protection and best interests of the child must be recognized, above and beyond the rights of the parent in some circumstances'. According to the Convention all children have a fundamental right to protection, the means of survival and a full and complete life.

Problems occur when the child's voice is lost and adults prescribe their own remedies, and this is common. Too often children affected by adults' decisions do not have a true voice in determining what is in their interests. At the same time he emphasized the importance of acknowledging the bond between women and their children when determining what is in the best interests of the child. a grievance affecting a child there needs to be a process in place to ensure that both parties, the child and the parent, can have their point of view heard.

Where there is a violation of a child's right, that right has to be restored and a remedy put in place that is in the child's interest.

### **Linda Fisk: Founding member and coordinator of Seeds with lived prison experience.**

Linda spoke from her own experiences as a mother of four, whose infant was removed during her incarceration. She emphasised the urgent need for a Mother and Babies Unit in the Adelaide Women's Prison.

Linda recounted her experience of separation from her children during her imprisonment and the difficulties of reunification afterwards. She described the impact of those experiences on her four children, especially the baby removed at the age of 6 months. She described her sons' feeling confused and abandoned and then the challenges they faced after her release. She explained that rebuilding one's life and the mother-child bond is extremely difficult and requires skills and insights that most women in prison cannot anticipate:

*You can release the body back into the community and them to be with their kids . It's really really difficult to start that bond again. That relationship needs support from the community; it needs support from Corrections*

The sense of isolation and severe loss of self-confidence that women experience in prison continues after release and many women do not know how to cope with moving back into normal life. Community support is essential in re-establishing family life but even with that support the damage done to children and mothers can be long-standing.

Linda referred to the problems created by community attitudes to families caught up in the justice system and said they need to change. For example, children experience shame and embarrassment if forced to admit that a parent is in prison, a common experience at school. She finds that even 20 years post-release “the trauma and damage ... done to her and her children will always remain”.

Linda’s experience of having her infant of 6 months removed from her was a complete blow: “I dropped to my knees....When you remove a child from a woman because she’s a criminal, you cannot take away her identity as a mother” Later she found her child had particular difficulties reconnecting. This illustrates the importance of allowing babies to develop their bonds with their mothers through continuing access to those mothers. However, this is not available to babies and mothers in South Australia because the Women’s Prison no longer has a Mothers and Babies Unit. Here, babies are removed from their mothers at birth. Linda said “not having [such] facilities in a women’s prison is just archaic, and [represents] a cruel and unusual punishment” for children and mothers.

She made three personal recommendations:

1. The SA Women’s Prison must establish dedicated facilities including a Mothers and Babies Unit as well as better access arrangements that allow children and their mothers to maintain their relationships while mothers are incarcerated
2. The Women’s Prison needs specialist programs such as the discontinued Anglicare Reunification Program to teach mothers the wide range of practical and emotional skills needed post-release. This will help women to re-establish their own lives and foster strong ongoing relationships with their children
3. Women and children need ongoing community-based services to re-establish their families post-release.

**Malcolm Robinson: Director of Bower Place Complex Needs Clinic, Psychologist.**

Malcolm spoke directly to the problems of ‘a society that has an increasing taste for removing children’ from parental care. He reminded the audience in particular to the longstanding and grievous experience of child removal amongst Aboriginal people, his people. While acknowledging that a case can be argued for state intervention in some cases, he argued that in all cases the rights and needs of the child must be paramount.

The removal of babies from their mother’s care in the prison system is a major problem in South Australia: “we are messing about with the sacred”. Babies have the right of attachment to their mothers. Moreover, in his professional experience, interference in mother-child bonding at the beginning of life makes reunification of mother and child incredibly difficult. Children learn unconditional trust through their relationship with their mothers. Once that is lost ‘it is a tragedy’ for the child and the community.

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**Cheryl Axelby: Chief Executive Officer, Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement.**

Cheryl (who has had two years of experience as a manager of a district centre in child protection) also spoke against the removal of babies from mothers. She reiterated the point that State sanctioned removal of children from Aboriginal families is a process that has proven to be devastating in Aboriginal communities over a very long period of time. Breaking the bond between mothers and children particularly has long term negative effects. She added that 'many women who go into the prison system ... are victims of crime themselves' and depriving them of their connection with their children is very wrong-headed. It perpetuates cycles of disadvantage.

She referred to the intergenerational nature of offending and emphasised children of women in prison needed to be healed in culturally appropriate ways - not clinically.

Cheryl emphasised the 'coming and going' of policies in relation to women which have led, ultimately, to an imbalance of services between men and women. Further, she emphasised the importance of recognising the fact that as mothers, 'we deserve to have that connection with our children, no matter if we have offended against our community or not'.

**Bernie McGiness: Principal Adviser for Women Offenders Department for Correctional Services.**

Bernie outlined the Department's *Strong Foundation and Clear Pathways: Women Offender Framework and Action Plan* that was released in Dec 2015 and is currently open to feedback. The new policy in this framework focusses on 'centrality of the relationship between mothers and their children'.

She strongly supports the move to reduce the remand rates by increasing the proportion of community based orders, pointing out that there are now more women on home detention allowing them to maintain their ties with their children. The Department is in active discussion with the government around alternative sentencing whereby more women can serve their sentences in the community rather than in the prison system.

There are a range of initiatives in progress to improve conditions inside for women with children:

- increasing the overall number of visits and the length of visits for women with children
- implementing two new skills-based programs to foster better mother-child relationships for women with babies or toddlers and prepare women for release
- further expanding the pre-release section and provide 7 day a week access to children, home visits etc

The re-establishment of a Mothers and Babies Unit will enter the planning stage in the second half of 2016.

## Open Discussion

The following additional points were raised from the floor:

- Current mainstream community attitudes towards women in prison need to change: they spill over onto innocent children
  - We need a caring and compassionate community: early prevention, safe places for women, caring rather than judgemental attitudes
- Prison rules about visitation rights can prevent mothers from seeing their children if someone in Corrections considers visits unnecessary. Children value time with their mothers.
  - One mother with lived prison experience, said: “My daughter said ...that when they were visiting me nothing mattered, where they were, who was around, because they were with their mum and that’s where they wanted to be”
  - Several points were made in relation to the experience of members of the Aboriginal community: “Aboriginal community and women in particular are always going to be at the bottom of the barrel in regards to our needs being met”
  - poor communication from services areas such as Courts and service groups such as Housing increase women’s disadvantage: “There are lots of changes going on in the Courts that we don’t know about in the community and our women, Aboriginal women, are suffering because of it.” All services need to communicate and collaborate.
  - differentials in power and between mainstream and minority values continuously disadvantage minority groups like Aboriginal women e.g. decision makers often have no insight into Aboriginal culture or community