



We build strong **PEOPLE**
strong **FAMILIES** strong **COMMUNITIES**

YMCA Victoria

The Bridge Project –

“helping young offenders get their life on track”

Submission Paper –

Federal Government Employment Services Review

Feb 2008

Context

In Victoria, and throughout Australia, we currently have a rate of re-offending (recidivism) for young people leaving youth training centres of **over 60%**. The highest risk period for re-offending young people is in the first year of their release, when recidivism rates are three to four times higher than during the second year.

Young people with a significant history of involvement in the criminal justice system are often stigmatized as a result of this involvement. **57%** of individuals with a criminal record report having trouble finding employment post-release due to their criminal record. Community support and partnerships between government, not-for-profits, business and the young people is essential to provide support, training and employment opportunities for these disadvantaged young people.

YMCA and Juvenile Justice – A unique opportunity

The Victorian YMCA is the only non-statutory agency to have contact with *every* young person in custody across Victoria on a daily basis through the wide range of programs delivered by our staff teams. This unique collaboration between government and non government agencies has been in operation since 1993 and provides the YMCA with a unique opportunity to build long term, meaningful and trusting relationships with young people during their time in custody and beyond.

The Bridge Project Employment Model

The Bridge Project combines the expertise of the Victorian YMCA in the delivery of programs and services to young people in custody with motivated leaders of the business, corporate and community sectors to provide an initiative approach to juvenile recidivism and the current high rates of unemployment for young people upon release from custody.

The YMCA Employment Support (YES) Model aims to compliment the Federal government's policies on providing employment opportunities for disadvantaged group. The employment model also helps achieves several of the objectives identified in the Government's Social Inclusion and Skills policies;

The YMCA Employment Support Model;

- Based on performance management principles and underpinned by research evidence and best practice. The model has been intentionally designed and based on the experience gained during 13 years of working with the target group seven days a week. It has been reviewed and approved for use at Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre by the Department of Human Services.
- Provides wages subsidies as incentives to employers to provide on the job training and mentoring for the young person during the initial work placement period. This improves the employability of job seekers and meets the employers need to address labour shortages.
- A relevant employment service tailored to the circumstances and needs of the young person through;
 1. Identification of participants while in custody, allowing the employment support team to support and work in partnership with other service agencies to individually tailor a Client Support plan for the young person.

2. Continuity of employment support for the young person by building trust and relationships with the young person whilst they are in custody.
 3. Work placements are tailored to the needs of each individual and match the young person's "passion" with employers in the identified area and location of the young person.
 4. Practical assistance and ongoing case management is offered to the young person, employer and other support agencies during the period of the placement and beyond.
- Tailored to the individual, so young people with higher levels of disadvantage receive intensive assistance, through;
 1. connections and partnerships with other service providers relevant to each case
 2. Provision of work place support person for each work placement that informally mentors them in areas of work place knowledge, skill and provides continuity to the young person.
 3. A individually assigned case worker that can increase or decrease level of support to the young person over the period of the placements, as their needs change.
 - An early intervention employment service, which aims to minimise the number of long-term welfare dependent Australians of working age. By using a primary focus on employment outcomes on young people in detention centres, it aims to reduce the high unemployment rates for this group as well as achieving long term change in the lives of the target group and reducing the risk of re-offending.
 - Consistent with the Government's employment, youth justice policies and complementary to the government's focus on reducing recidivism and rehabilitation through employment opportunities.

The YMCA Employment Support model aims to best utilise the time the young person spends in custody, by incorporating training components which provide a pathway to the work placement. Whilst employment is the ultimate aim of the YMCA Employment Support Model, the components allows the young person to build up confidence, skills and knowledge during participation in programs such as industry appreciation courses, financial skills, work readiness training and work experience.

The in custody components of the WPP are:

- **"Industry Appreciation"** – offered to identified young people on centre
- **"Work Ready"** – offered after needs analysis is completed on young people registered with the WPP program.
- **Financial Skills** – offered to all young people who are offered a work placement
- **"Work Experience"** - offered to selected young people, eligible for the temporary leave program

The community component of the WPP is:

- **“Work Place Placement”** - 16 weeks employment placement – offered to young people registered for the WPP program. Fully supported by a YMCA Employment Support Case worker.

Young people in custody can participate in one, more than one, or all of the (YES) model components. This provides multiple entry points to the program. Each stage is intentionally structured so that it can operate as a stand alone component. This approach allows for the maximum number of young people to access a component of the program and gives the YMCA Employment Support team numerous opportunities to identify client’s skills, interests and work readiness.

The model uses a “work ready” approach which is underpinned by the formation of cross sector partnerships, to provide meaningful opportunities for young people to access employment. This “work ready” approach is achieved through support and training of both young person and employer, before, during and after the work placement. This provision of support, training and employment to young people in custody and upon their release back to community, is the key ingredient to the projects success in providing work ready and enthusiastic young people to business and industries experiencing labour shortages.

However it must be noted that for sustained success, an employment program must provide support and education to potential employers. This time and effort provides the young person access to empathetic employers who are willing to provide 16-week work placements, workplace mentors, training and support with a genuine view to providing on-going employment.

Proof of concept: The success story so far

In 2007, 27 males aged 16-21 were placed into employment after recently completing their custodial sentence. According to NSW Parliament briefing paper 15/2006 *Reducing The Risk of Recidivism*, 57% of offenders considered their criminal record to be the main barrier to gaining employment due to employer perceptions of safety, reliability and productivity.

The Bridge Project commenced in February 2007 and as of 30 December 2007, none of the program participants had re-offended. This is very significant given the current 67% recidivism rate for young men leaving a youth training custodial facility.

Further, 20 of the 27 participants completed sixteen weeks of full time employment, with 75% currently remaining in full time employment.

The industries of employment for participants in The Bridge Project included:

- Bricklaying
- Forklift/Warehouse
- Motor Industry
- Trade
- Health & Fitness
- Retail/Recreation
- Landscaping
- Apprenticeship
- Retail
- Fitter & Turner

When compared against Victoria's current skills shortage a direct correlation between the employments provided and industries experiencing labour shortages can be drawn, contributing 20 workers to the labour market in which current shortages exist.

The Bridge project has not only provided increased employment opportunities to a group facing high disadvantage, it has also contributed significant cost avoidance benefits to the Victoria community. The Bridge Project – Cost Benefit Analysis, conducted by the KPMG & the YMCA, predicts 30 jobs per year for young offenders would provide a cost avoidance potential of \$7.9 million per annum to the state of Victoria thereafter. This does not include significant associated reductions in the cost effects to Victorian communities associated with motor vehicle theft, home burglary, vandalism and shoplifting or increased contributions from individuals gaining employment through tax, reduced burden on health systems, additional workforce productivity.

The trial has been regarded as a success by the program participants, employment partners, and the YMCA. The Bridge Project employment model has provided an unprecedented opportunity for members of the community not involved in any way with youth justice to offer insight and solutions for these disadvantaged young offenders.

It is with the support of community, business, and government that meaningful work outcomes have been achieved for young offenders. The consequent impact is a reduction in juvenile re-offending and high unemployment rates for these disadvantaged young people. This results improved community safety and reduction in crime rates

Learnings of the Bridge Project Employment Service provision

The YMCA Bridge Project submits the following recommendations to the current review of employment services being conducted by the Federal Government.

We believe they will lead to more effective ways of finding work for disadvantage groups and to help these people break out of either long-term unemployment or the cycle of short-term jobs.

1. Job Seekers with higher level of disadvantage receive intensive assistance.

This requires long term funding approach. Short term funding leads to a "work first" attitude and discourages employment providers adequately training the disadvantaged job seeker to rejoin the workforce in a long term capacity. Short term funding also discourages partnering between agencies to provide a coordinated approach to the needs of the job seeker and fosters a "competitive" environment where employers and job seeker needs are placed second to the need to make a "match"

2. Early Interventions minimize long-term welfare dependent of Australians of working age.

It is important that young offenders receive appropriate coordinated training whilst in custody. This training needs to focus on preparing the young person for work and providing financial and lifeskills which will help ensure long term employment success. This coordinated work readiness pathway provides support, training and employment opportunities allow the young offender to take on sustainable work instead of being pushed from one casual job to another. Sustainable full time work allows the young offender to form working relationships and good work habits and practices, which encourages community engagement and discourages re-offending behaviours.

3. Minimisation of time and money spent on administration through cross-sector partnerships

Employment service provision has traditionally been between two sectors, ie government and the employment service provider (private or not-for-profit). However when trying to provide employment to the disadvantaged or long term unemployed, support is needed from multiple sectors. This can take the form of, subsidies from government, identification, assessment, training & support from the NFP and support and work place mentoring from the employer.

To create successful cross-sector partnerships it is important to generate more connections between these sectors. It is important to note that successful cross-sector partnerships take time to cultivate and flourish and long term funding is required, to set up good partnerships that can provide meaningful long term employment options

4. Incentives for on job training to improve employability of the job seekers and address labour market needs

There is a substantial need for financial subsidies to encourage employers to employ young offenders. Currently the Bridge Project uses State Government funding to provide wage subsidies, to encourage employers to offer young offenders a work placement. Surveys of employers indicated this subsidy was a major contributing factor for the employer “to take a chance”. Even in periods of high labour shortages all employers said they would not have employed a young offender if the financial responsibility wasn’t eased during the normal trial period of three months. Financial subsidies encourage the employer to provide on the job training and work place mentors.

5. Employment Services are relevant to the circumstances and needs of both the job seeker and the employer.

In this current period of low unemployment, employers are looking at alternative sources of labour. Many employers would like to employ “disadvantaged” job seekers, however feel ill equipped to do so. The employment service provider has a major role to play providing education, tools and support for not only the young person but the employer as well.

The employment service provider needs to be a resource and a support mechanism for the employer to help equip them to deal with the unique problems that can occur when providing jobs to young offenders. This changes the focus from sympathetic employers to empathetic employers who understand the needs and the issues the young person.

6. Performance management Principles-

Importance of Work Place Mentors - Employers have expressed their frustration and concerns around recruiting young people through traditional recruiting strategies and job networks. The work mentor component of the Bridge Project employment model, which incorporates review meetings, work plans and job goals, has been so successful; many employers are looking at adopting this component in their normal human resource management.

7. Need for Economic viability of Apprenticeships:

Although many young people are interested in obtaining formal qualifications through the apprenticeships, the lower wage has not been viable for many of the young offenders. Large proportions of the Bridge Projects participants do not live at home and don’t have family support to subsidise the low apprenticeship wage. Once rent, transport and living expenses are calculated, an apprenticeship does not make viable economic sense to a nineteen or twenty year old. However the adult apprenticeships option however has been more attractive to the 21 year old young person due the increase in the hourly rate.

8. Need for funding to provide longitudinal evaluation:

The current employment funding does not resource the collection of long-term data. This data is crucial to provide longitudinal evidence of the success and effectiveness of transitional employment programs such as The Bridge Project in providing long term employment opportunities and its effects on recidivism