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Ombudsman report shows women with complex needs need better support: Jesuit Social Services

A report tabled by the Victorian Ombudsman today shows that a better response to women with disabilities and cognitive impairments in the criminal justice system is overdue, says Jesuit Social Services.

The report, *Implementing OPCAT in Victoria: report and inspection of the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre*, contains a range of findings spanning a week-long independent investigation of the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre in July.

“This important report highlights some of the failures, shortcomings and concerning practices of Victoria’s maximum-security female prison. This includes routinely strip searching women before and after contact visits with family and friends and substandard and unhygienic conditions in some of the prison’s older units,” says Jesuit Social Services Acting CEO Sally Parnell.

“It also finds that support for women with disabilities – from the screening of cognitive impairments such as acquired brain injuries (ABI) to staff training expertise around the complex needs of some women – needs to be improved”.

A previous study by Corrections Victoria found that 33 per cent of women in the Victorian prison system had an ABI, compared to just two per cent of the general population.

“It is clear that our entire justice system from police to courts to corrections is failing to meet the needs of women who have ABI and other cognitive impairments. This in turn fails the community because it is not steering women towards positive pathways that lessen the likelihood of re-offending”.

Jesuit Social Services and RMIT University’s Centre for Innovative Justice recently collaborated on the Enabling Justice Project, which aims to address the over-representation of people with ABI in the criminal justice system.

The project’s final report, [published in August](#), contains a range of recommendations including the design of a common screening tool to identify people with suspected ABI until a neuropsychological assessment is available.

“The report also recommends that all people who work in the criminal justice system be educated about the circumstances and needs of people with ABI, in contrast to the Ombudsman’s report which indicates this learning is obtained on the job.

“Today’s report shines a light on serious failings but also provides an opportunity to our Government to improve the system for those who have contact with it and create safer communities for all”.