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IBAC report highlights need for urgent changes to state’s prison system

A new report by the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission has revealed a string of serious systemic issues within the Victorian prison system and must be the catalyst for reform, says Jesuit Social Services.

The report investigates allegations of prison staff covering the lens of their body worn cameras while treating prisoners with force, assault against prisoners including a person with an intellectual disability and systemic issues relating to strip searches.

“The primary goal of any effective prison system should be rehabilitation and ensuring that people exit the prison system ready to make a positive contribution to the community,” says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards. “Staff in our prisons are central to this goal and with the right skills and resources can be positive agents of change.

“Unfortunately, the system is clearly not delivering these outcomes given more than 40 per cent of people who exit the prison system return within two years. On top of these damning statistics, we now have a report highlighting extremely serious issues which undoubtedly threaten not only the safety and welfare of vulnerable people in prison, but also their ability to successfully turn their lives around when they return to the community.”

Leaders from Jesuit Social Services have previously visited effective youth and adult justice systems across parts of the US, Europe and New Zealand. They found that effective systems share an emphasis on attracting and retaining skilled and experienced staff.

“For example, in Norway, prison officers require a minimum of two years of paid study. In Norway’s youth detention facilities, half of the staff are social workers. This focus has supported Norway to have extremely low incarceration and recidivism rates in comparison to Australia, showing that the success of this approach ultimately results in less crime and fewer victims,” says Ms Edwards.

Jesuit Social Services has long advocated that prison only ever be used as a last resort.

“While Victoria’s adult prisoner numbers have reduced over the last 12 months, there are still more than 7,200 people in our prison system. More than 40 per cent of these people are on remand, meaning they are yet to be convicted of a crime. This IBAC report has highlighted the urgent priority we need to place on keeping people out of prison in the first place. It’s shone a light on the need to ensure that rehabilitation, supported by skilled staff trained in trauma-informed practice, becomes the focus of attention in relation to the small number of people remaining.

“With the right leadership and determination we can reduce the number of people in prison. This is a highly attainable goal. The evidence is clear about what needs to happen. We need to set specific targets to reduce offending, recidivism and incarceration. We need to re-introduce alternative sentencing options such as suspended sentences, especially for those on short sentences or convicted of non-violent crimes. We need to invest in disadvantaged communities, harness their strengths, and work with them to prevent crime.”