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**SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO INDIGENOUS JUVENILES IN THE  
CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM**

Centrelink's Multicultural Services Branch and Indigenous Services Branch have provided the following information for submission to the Inquiry regarding the provision of Centrelink's prison services to Indigenous juveniles and young adults in the criminal justice system in line with key points of the Inquiry's terms of reference.

**Any initiatives which would improve the effectiveness of the education system in contributing to reducing the levels of involvement of Indigenous juveniles and young adults in the criminal justice system.**

In line with Closing the Gap initiatives, access to education and further training will be critical in achieving social change.

Abstudy Lawful Custody Allowance is a payment made by Centrelink to Indigenous students and apprentices or trainees to have their essential course costs paid if they are in lawful custody for more than two weeks. There is a low take up rate of this payment. Program responsibility for this payment rests with the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). Centrelink has raised this with DEEWR previously and will continue to work with DEEWR to explore opportunities to improve take up rates.

Minor crime, debts (such as unpaid traffic fines) and probationary breaches can result in short-term incarceration that leads to longer-term recidivism. Further analysis into the cause of short-term incarceration and action to prevent it, is required through the development and testing of programs that offer alternatives to confinement, including programs that address the factors and behaviours that contribute to people entering the justice system. Indigenous communities complain that they have been over-researched and would not welcome further investigations unless it leads to action of a substantive nature that delivers outcomes.

Centrelink's Centrepay program allows customers to pay their fines and bills from their Centrelink payments. Centrepay assists customers to budget, and better manage money and debts, because bills and fines can be paid on a regular basis. The use of Centrepay could be further explored to assist customers to meet other financial commitments and reduce criminal behaviour triggered by financial problems.

Centrelink puts forward proposals for place based trials and projects at appropriate opportunities and there are many opportunities to provide enhanced brokerage and case management services to these customers.

For example, Centrelink's Indigenous Services Officer Network works closely with young people on their release to assist in placing them in appropriate learning environments. We are exploring options with DEEWR to do more within existing funding constraints. An example of work Centrelink currently undertakes is included in **Attachment A**.

Additionally, subject to funding and other requirements, consideration could be given to Centrelink employees taking a wider role in post-release case management. Place-based trials could assist in facilitating this process.

**Best practice examples of programs that support diversion of Indigenous people from juvenile detention centres and crime, and provide support for those returning from such centres**

Centrelink provides visiting services to prisons and juvenile justice centres across Australia.

Centrelink currently has Program Protocol Agreements (PPAs) in place with state and territory corrections and justice agencies allowing Centrelink Prison Liaison Officers (PLOs) to access local prisons to provide pre-release servicing. Similar arrangements are already in place with Juvenile Justice agencies in most states. These services assist Indigenous juveniles and young adults in the criminal justice system by ensuring inmates have access to funds upon release to enable them to return home and to provide for their basic needs.

Centrelink PLOs organise pre-release payments so that funds are available on the day of release. The PLOs work with Centrelink Indigenous Services Officers (ISOs) to provide support to families, ensuring that their Centrelink payments are adjusted and are correct. PLOs work to minimise the debts that prisoners may incur by data matching with state corrective services and also via arrangements with local prison facilities to check admissions and exits.

While Centrelink provides services to most adult prisons, with the focus on providing release payments, there are limited Centrelink PLO services for people who have parents or carers in prison. The groups most at risk of becoming offenders are children with parents in prison, families with family members in prisons and young people released from court, police lock up and remand centres (for which Centrelink does not receive prior notification of releases).

Centrelink, through its ISOs and Indigenous Customer Service Officers (ICSO) network, is well placed to coordinate strategies or act as an advocate for Indigenous customers and communities in prevention and resolution of criminal justice related issues. While current capacity and funding settings do not generally enable ICSOs to adopt a broader brokerage role, we are continuing to explore options to assist the joining up of services around the needs of individual customers and the better coordination and development of services to respond to identified gaps.

**The scope for clearer responsibilities within and between government jurisdictions to achieve better coordinated and targeted service provision for Indigenous juveniles and young adults in the criminal justice system.**

Centrelink is located within the Human Services portfolio, with Medicare Australia and the Child Support Agency. These three agencies are working together to build a coordinated service for offenders and their families to ensure they receive correct Centrelink payments,

have access to Medicare and have an understanding of Child Support issues upon release. Centrelink also works with state and territory agencies to provide services.

Within privacy and customer consent requirements, some information exchange takes place to assist coordinate customer services. This co-ordination would be improved if state and territory agencies and some community organisations could be joined into this information exchange. Centrelink continues to explore opportunities towards more frequent and technically efficient information exchange towards streamlining processes and reducing debts.

**The extent to which current preventative programs across government jurisdictions are aligned against common goals to improve the health and emotional well-being of Indigenous adolescents, any gaps or duplication in effort, and recommendations for their modification or enhancement.**

Indigenous juveniles and young adults in the criminal justice system have medical, education and vocational assessments while in prison. This information is valuable for completing correct assessments for payments and referrals when they are released. A coordinated exchange of this information between Justice Health, health professionals and others would streamline access to services.

Centrelink has agreements in place in some states with Justice Health to access medical and other relevant information for Job Capacity Assessments. Compiling this information could otherwise take months (for example if they have to see specialists), can be expensive, or may never be achieved. If a young person is not receiving their correct and most appropriate Centrelink payment they risk having their payments stopped, putting them at greater risk of re-offending.

In some cases having the ability to conduct a Job Capacity Assessment prior to release would provide the best outcome, particularly when the young inmate has a severe disability and limited capacity to manage their affairs.

**CASE STUDY - Centrelink Youth Service Unit in Western Australia – outcomes of intensive servicing project at Rangeview Remand Centre**

This case study highlights some simple but innovative and effective ideas from prison servicing staff in Western Australia around different approaches to pre-release servicing in Remand Centres and methods to keep in touch with young women after release.

The Rangeview Remand Centre is one of two juvenile detention centres for young people aged between 10 and 18 years in Western Australia (WA). It accommodates young people who have been arrested and are waiting to be bailed, are pending court when bail has been denied, are waiting to be sentenced after conviction, or who have been sentenced to a period of detention.

Centrelink's WA Youth Service Unit (YSU) visits Rangeview once a week to give information and respond to enquiries. Each month, Centrelink employees, including the Indigenous Service Officer, hold information sessions to explain how Centrelink works. The young people are very interested and ask questions and talk about the issues they have faced with Centrelink.

Encouraged by the interest, YSU introduced weekly intensive servicing for some young women aged 16-18 years. Most of these young women are repeat offenders, have literacy issues, drug and alcohol problems, come from broken families, and have experienced family violence and homelessness. They lack confidence, have limited life skills, and have had problems accessing Centrelink and employment or education services. Most have been in and out of prison and have been unable to establish themselves in the community.

Staff in the YSU provided some more information about the service they provide:

“As Rangeview is a remand centre, we don't always know when the young women will be released, so we cannot arrange a pre-release payment for them. Instead, we set everything up for them in readiness for their release.

The results so far have been positive. Since the project commenced we have case managed 14 Indigenous and five non-Indigenous young women. Eleven are currently on Centrelink payments while three have not yet been released. Two are in the process of claiming Youth Allowance. Two have returned to custody and one is unable to be contacted despite our efforts to talk to family and a friend.

The young women are very open and positive about the assistance offered. Their general interactions on our weekly visits to Rangeview are becoming more frequent and less formal. These young women are showing us trust and respect, which definitely goes a long way in being able to offer an effective and purposeful service.”