



Did we get this right? Feedback from mothers in prison on a new model of support

Summary findings from Workshop Series 4

Overview

Transforming Corrections to Transform Lives (TCTL) is an innovative collaboration, working to transform the lives of mothers in custody and their children.

Our vision is to co-create a new method of service provision for imprisoned mothers and their children, during custody and after release, that:

1. Creates conditions for families to thrive through a holistic system of practice that supports wellbeing and social inclusion; and
2. Demonstrates more effective, sustainable service provision that can be scaled up by governments.

The 18-month co-creation phase of the project commenced on 1 July 2020. At the conclusion of this phase of the project, funding will be sought for program implementation. The co-creation process included conducting a series of workshops with mothers in prison and various stakeholders across the correctional system, state government and the not-for-profit sector.

The following document reports on the results from our fourth workshop series, held in June 2021 with 43 mothers across four women's correctional centres in Queensland.

Workshop Aims

The purpose of this workshop series was to gain feedback from mothers in prison on our proposed model of service provision. The model was designed to better support mothers during their time in custody and after release, as well as their children, and was developed from the findings from Workshop Series 1 and 2. Workshop Series 1¹ examined the needs of mothers in prison and after release, and the kind of supports and system changes that are required to meet those needs. Workshop Series 2² focused on the needs of children and young people who experience the imprisonment of their mother, and the barriers to accessing support when and where it is needed. Workshop Series 4, the findings of which are reported here, had several aims.

1. Update women on the progress of the project; including findings from Workshop Series 1.
2. Provide an overview of a blueprint of the proposed model.
3. Facilitate a guided discussion to gain mothers' feedback on the proposed model.

¹ Workshop Series 1 conducted in December 2020. For summary report visit <https://www.transformingcorrections.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/TCTL-Fact-Sheet-updated-final.pdf>

² Workshop Series 2 conducted in April 2021. For summary report visit <https://www.transformingcorrections.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/TCTL-Summary-of-Findings-from-Workshop-Electronic-version.pdf>



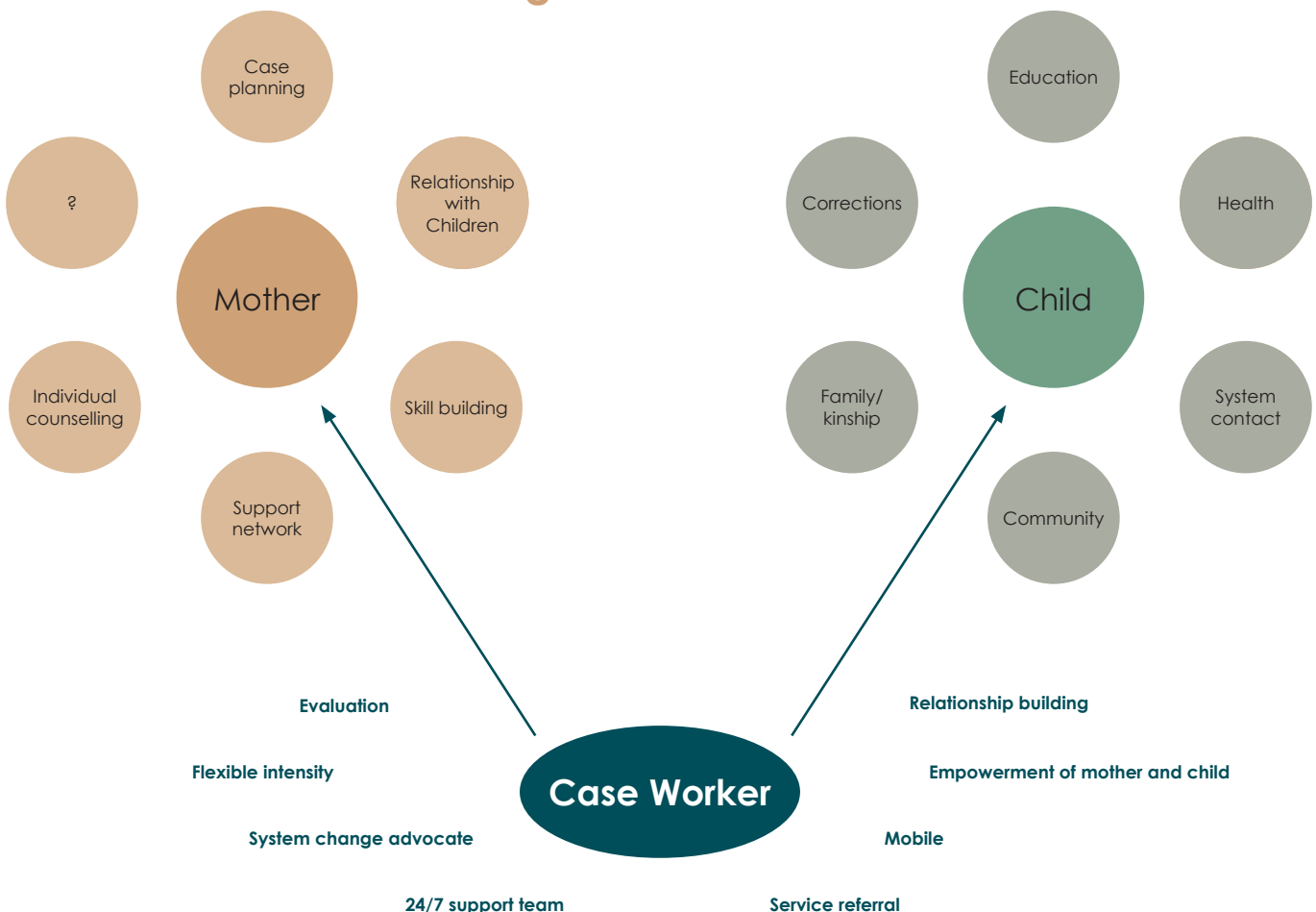
Workshop Method

A blueprint model of service provision was developed to address the multiple and complex needs of imprisoned mothers and their children. This internal development process with members of the TCTL project team (the focus of our third workshop) involved an iterative process that drew on the findings from the previous workshops with mothers in prison and government and not-for-profit agency stakeholders as well as the practice experience and knowledge of the research team. The resulting blueprint illustrated a continuity of care model of support for mothers and children, enabling longer-term transformation, healing, relationship building, skill development and community connectedness. Key mechanisms for change included:

- the development of a strong therapeutic relationship with a caseworker (whom we later termed 'coach') who would collaborate with mothers and their children for up to three years after the mother's release from prison
- developing an individually tailored plan for release and life after prison
- helping families to navigate complex service systems
- helping to build foundations for mothers and their children to succeed

Caseworkers (coaches) would commence with an initial caseload of four mothers and her children, taking on an additional four mothers and her children each year to a maximum of 12 mothers and her children.

Program Overview



Workshops were held across four women's correctional centres in Queensland with a total of 43 mothers, of which 35% identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women. The average age of mothers was 33 years and more than half had been in custody before, whether sentenced or on remand. Mothers had, on average, three children each. Twenty percent of the women's children were under the age of five.

Before seeking feedback from mothers on the proposed model, a verbal summary of findings from Workshop Series 1 and 2 was provided. This offered context for participants, particularly for those who were not aware of the project and had not attended the first series of workshops. We also supplied the findings on posters³ that were left for display in the correctional centres (Poster 2 shown below). Next, the blueprint of the model was presented to mothers.

The main purpose of Workshop Series 4 was to obtain feedback on the section of the model that focused on mothers, but a brief overview of the model of support for children was also presented. A circle in the blueprint was left blank for mothers to tell us whether we had missed an important area or need for support. Mothers were actively engaged in discussion during this portion of the workshop, often agreeing with and confirming their needs in prison and after release. Following this, mothers were asked to break into smaller groups where discussions were facilitated by a member of the TCTL project team. To direct points of discussion, mothers were asked to provide their feedback on the model in relation to the following broad questions:

1. What did we get right?
2. What would you change?
3. Have we missed anything?
4. Do you have any concerns?

With the consent of workshop participants, these discussions were audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed. Overall, the mothers were engaged, responsive and actively contributed to discussions throughout. The following section provides an overview of the key findings stemming from these discussions.

Mothers want help to:

transforming corrections to transform lives

Maintain and build relationships with their children, through:

- More child-friendly facilities in prisons and opportunities to do enjoyable activities with children of all ages
- Help in maintaining relationships with children through cheaper phone calls and assistance in accessing virtual visits
- Provision of community-based residential units for mothers and babies
- Provision of support in the community for children and families while mothers are in prison

Start healing and changing in prison, by:

- Training staff on trauma-informed principles and woman-centered approaches/needs
- Improving the capacity of staff to deliver individualised care
- Delivering gendered and culturally responsive services
- Ensuring continuity of support and treatment for women who are moved between prisons
- Facilitating access to job providers and training
- Providing access to support from women with lived experiences and hearing about relatable success stories

Stay out of prison, by:

- Arranging a trusted and supportive person to pick the mother up at the gate after release
- Flexible parole conditions that support maternal roles and responsibilities
- Helping mothers to establish and maintain a healthy daily routine after prison
- Providing longer-term transitional housing (safe, furnished, child-friendly) with onsite access to support for parenting and other needs
- Providing woman-centred, culturally responsive, family-focused, and longer-term support in the community
- Providing continuity of support from prison into the community and across service providers (e.g., dedicated case worker) with one access point for each woman

How do we know this information? This is a summary of what mothers told us in a series of workshops we held with 75 mothers from the four correctional centres in Queensland.

Who were the mothers in the workshops? Mothers were aged between 19-55 years. Between them they had 221 children. Of these mothers, 20% identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women. Mothers had sentences ranging from 1 month to more than 5 years.

When was the information collected? December 2020.

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³ Posters for the correctional centres, summarising earlier workshop findings are available here: <https://www.transformingcorrections.com.au/resources-and-publications/#resources>

Key Findings

What did we get right?

“I think you guys have done an amazing job with the plan - the program - and I think you've covered pretty much everything that I could even think of and I've been jail for 12 months...”

- Mother in prison

Overall, mothers expressed strong support for the model. Aspects of the model mothers connected with, or stated we got 'most right', are categorised below:

1. Underpinning features of the proposed model

Mothers listed several defining features of the model they found particularly useful, including flexible case planning; continuity of caseworkers; mediation between them and children/families; low caseloads; long duration; and access to 24/7 support. They believed individual case planning was necessary to provide a service that can address their individual needs but is flexible enough to adapt to their changing needs over time. Mothers from all workshops expressed their preference for a single caseworker who would work with both mother and child. Mothers thought this would reduce the need to repeat information and would improve the flow of communication about their child's circumstances. They anticipated that the proposed support person would act as a mediator between them and their child and families. However, they were informed that while both mothers and children would be supported to stay connected, and improve or rebuild relationships, this would be guided by the consent of all relevant parties. The extent of information sharing would be determined by the urgency of the matter and existing policy and legislative guidelines.

Mothers also agreed that a low caseload would be essential to the model's success to ensure that a high quality of support is offered. They cited previous difficulties with receiving services because of long wait lists and high caseloads among service providers. Mothers were also appreciative that the program would be offered to them from the point of entry into prison up to three years post-release. They believed this continuity of support would enable them to adapt and sustain positive changes, resulting in their successful transition into the community after release from prison. Mothers also agreed they would need the service to be available 24/7 to ensure they would have support when they needed it, particularly in times of crisis.

2. Attitudes and behaviours of the caseworker

During the discussion, mothers mentioned that they wanted the caseworker to be supportive, encouraging, stable (same caseworker), and engaged. One of the most common responses was that the caseworker would need to make them feel supported. Mothers wanted someone who would stand by them, encourage them, and offer support in difficult times. This also extended to the fact that mothers wanted a single caseworker which would eliminate the need to re-tell their stories. Finally, mothers agreed that the caseworker should engage in regular communication and check-ins to provide consistent and meaningful support.

3. Individual case planning

Individual case planning received the greatest endorsement from mothers in the workshops. The aspects

of case planning mothers considered most important included help with getting relevant information about processes in and outside of prison; support in arranging things outside of prison including facilitating visits from their children, obtaining identification such as birth certificates, and licence renewals for release; and the facilitation of referrals and contact with outside support services. Other aspects of case planning that mothers thought was helpful included support with parole appointments and support in dealing with Child Safety. They expressed apprehension about managing parole requirements after release while resuming childcare and other responsibilities. Mothers also appreciated that case planning would be offered on an ongoing basis throughout the program and would be individualised to meet their own needs. For example, the intensity of support offered as part of the program will be tailored to each woman's needs and their own preference for support.

4. Relationship with children

Across this workshop series, mothers consistently acknowledged the importance of facilitated contact with their children and the opportunity to rebuild relationships with their children. Mothers noted the importance of a caseworker facilitating contact visits and providing assistance to navigate the process of applying for visits or arranging virtual visits. Mothers also acknowledged that coming to prison had impacted their relationships with their children and agreed that they would need support in re-establishing contact and rebuilding trust while in prison and when released. Further, mothers liked that the program would support them to restore contact with their older children (where appropriate) and improve their involvement in the education and social activities of their school-aged children. We acknowledge the requirement that this be guided by the consent of all relevant parties and existing policy and legislative guidelines.

5. Skill building

Mothers stated that skill-building activities would form an important aspect of the proposed model. There was universal agreement that mothers would require assistance and support with a range of basic life skills including financial management and budgeting, banking, cooking skills and obtaining learner permit licences. Beyond practical supports, mothers agreed they would want assistance in undertaking education and training and subsequent support finding employment opportunities. They also expressed the need for support in developing personal skills, specifically around activities like goal setting and communication skills. This includes setting boundaries in relationships and interacting with their children's schools. Finally, mothers liked that partaking in this program would not prevent them from being involved with, or receiving services from, other programs. In fact, it is intended that the current model of service provision would refer women to other programs for services where appropriate, rather than duplicate existing programs or services.

6. Support network

Extending beyond their own children, mothers considered the rebuilding of relationships with their wider family to be important. Mothers agreed they need support in reconnecting with family members and other support networks. They also acknowledged that their families require their own support while they are in prison. This centres around general support for family members, particularly older parents, caring for children and assistance in arranging visits from outside of prison.

7. Individual counselling

Mothers agreed that individual counselling would be necessary to address their multiple and complex needs and provide hard to reach support given the high demand for psychological services in the women's correctional facilities. They acknowledged that support would be needed to address mental health concerns and trauma-related experiences as well as referral to services for substance use issues.

What would you change?

“The basis of it is spot on. I reckon it’s a brilliant concept. It’s exactly what the system needs.”

- Mother in prison

The overwhelming response from mothers, when asked if they would change anything in the model, was that nothing should change. Several mothers made some minor suggestions which they thought could improve the model. They suggested that mothers who had been through the program would be able to return as peer-support workers for other women. They argued that creating this peer-support role would provide work opportunities for mothers who have a history of incarceration.

As the mothers had an overall positive response to the proposed model, many were excited by the potential opportunity of having this service available to them. However, they expressed concern that small caseloads would limit the capacity of the program to engage all mothers who needed the service. To address this, some mothers suggested that the caseworker should not provide direct services but instead actively refer mothers to existing services, allowing for higher caseloads. However, mothers also acknowledged that the low caseloads overcame problems they had experienced with other services. Another suggestion was that each woman could have two caseworkers; one working with them in custody and one when they are released into the community. The final suggestion made by mothers was to make domestic violence support more explicit in the model given the high prevalence and severity of the issue.

Have we missed anything?

Mothers reported wanting a caseworker with appropriate life experience. They believe someone who has children, is familiar with the criminal justice system or is experienced in dealing with complex family relationships would be better able to understand and navigate the needs of mothers and the support they require. Some mothers even expressed a preference for a caseworker with lived experience of incarceration.

Furthermore, while the provision of support to meet various practical needs is included in the model, mothers acknowledged several key areas where they would need specific support. This includes assistance with banking issues and managing online banking, support in obtaining learner permit driver’s licences and assistance in understanding and dealing with legal issues. In line with findings from Workshop 1, mothers also raised the need for the caseworker to address housing issues and expressed the need for assistance to keep their homes while in custody. For example, mothers may need rental assistance, or assistance to switch off electricity, internet services, and gas accounts, and help to secure belongings or place them in storage.

“I think maybe if there’s something there to help the women keep their houses. Because most of them come in and they still have houses, but then halfway through this time...they lose their house and then where their belongings are going.”

- Mother in prison

Finally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers expressed the need for consideration of specific cultural needs. For example, they want more opportunities for virtual linkups during funerals and sorry business to acknowledge cultural and community grieving processes.



Do you have any concerns?

During the discussion it was evident that mothers had mixed emotions regarding the feasibility and sustainability of the program. While they were concerned that a small caseload would impact how many mothers would benefit from the service, others acknowledged that even a small caseload would present challenges for a caseworker and were worried they might experience burnout. Furthermore, while they were positive that the proposed holistic model would enable them to address their problems and create pathways for successful reunification with their children and transition into the community, they were apprehensive that the program might not be implemented as intended, largely due to a withdrawal or reduction in financial support or by the practicalities of program delivery in a custodial environment.

“If they’re going to promise six months of help, they’ve got to give you six months of help. They can’t just quit after three weeks.”

- Mother in prison

Mothers were also worried the program might not ‘get off the ground’ or that it could be discontinued as they have witnessed programs fail due to excessive caseloads and burnout among service providers. Stemming from these concerns, mothers emphasised that support offered as part of the model would need to be consistent and reliable. Mothers want someone who is going to make promises and keep them, particularly around consistency of contact, given the long-term nature of the program. Some mothers also expressed feelings of unworthiness and considered their attitude toward themselves as a barrier to engaging with the program.

“I think a program like this, the only thing that would stop us from it doing it would be ourselves getting in our own way, not having that confidence and not feeling like we need to and not feeling like we're worthy enough, not feeling like - not seeing our importance in our own family for whatever reason that is.”

- Mother in prison

Mothers were particularly receptive to the idea of having an independent support person work with them who is not employed by Queensland Corrective Services (QCS) or Child Safety. They believed this independence would be critical for uptake of the program among imprisoned mothers; fostering trust, and ensuring its successful implementation. Mothers also expressed concerns over confidentiality, emphasising that to create trust and transparency they would need assurances that the information they shared would not be relayed to other parties. Other mothers were also worried about how correctional staff would view their participation in the program and said they would want staff to be educated that the purpose of the program was to support mothers and not to reflect poorly on them. Finally, mothers wanted to ensure the program would be culturally appropriate.

Reflections

- These workshops provided mothers with an opportunity to be active participants in the design of the program rather than passive recipients or subjects of a research study. Mothers appreciated being involved in the program design and were excited that their opinions and experiences were valued by the research team.
- Mothers agreed that if given the opportunity to be a part of the proposed program, they would without hesitation. Some were disappointed knowing they might be released from prison before the potential program would be implemented, however, they hoped that their input would benefit other mothers if the program was implemented in the future.
- Across this workshop series, 35% of mothers identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women. It was an important component of this workshop series to gain feedback from Indigenous mothers to ensure their needs and types of desired support are included in the model development. Mothers indicated that the individually tailored nature of the program was a key component and would allow for their cultural needs, identity, and kinship and community relationships to be considered. They expressed a desire to have the option of working with an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander caseworker.
- Similar to previous workshops, mothers also used the workshop as an opportunity to share information with each other about prison procedures, facilities and services available both in and outside of prison. There were instances throughout the workshop where mothers were not aware of specific services offered to them by different agencies and were informed of those services by other mothers. Mothers who were experienced in accessing these services offered to assist others with their applications and referrals for those services.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the following groups for their contribution to this series of workshops:

- Mothers in each of the four correctional centres in Queensland who shared their personal stories with us, supported each other through difficult conversations, and gave us their honest feedback on the proposed model of service provision.
- The multitude of staff in Queensland Corrective Services who facilitated our access to the correctional centres, assisted in moving us and the women around the centres, provided spaces and resources for the workshops, and shared their enthusiasm and support for this project.

Contact us:

For more information on the Transforming Corrections to Transform Lives project, and to stay up to date with progress, please visit our website: www.transformingcorrections.com.au

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