

Supporting Young Offenders' Rehabilitation

How Port Phillip Prison's
Youth Unit is Driving Successful
Re-Integration for Juvenile Inmates

FUTURE PRISONS 2019



Young offenders are in a crucial stage of their lives as they are more impressionable to their environments than adults – with external factors such as substance abuse and mental illness often having a deeper impact upon their behaviours.

With this in mind, young offenders are more likely to break criminal patterns and therefore less likely to reoffend if assisted with specialised techniques and processes during rehabilitation. Providing a safe and secure environment for juvenile inmates to rehabilitate and gain practical skills for use upon release is key to ensuring their effective re-integration into the community.

Anne Hooker, Youth Development Officer at Port Phillip Prison co-ordinates the youth unit which facilitates 18 – 25 year old males who have been placed in adult custody for the first time.

The unit implements educational and occupational programmes to equip inmates with the ability to engage in meaningful and practical activities both inside prison and post- release.

Fostering a supportive community environment within the unit has been integral to its successful outcomes. Ahead of **Future Prisons 2019**, Anne takes us through the specialised unit which she delivered from scratch 20 years ago.

Supporting Young Offenders

“I was asked to design and facilitate a young offenders’ unit 20 years ago. Using research, I developed a unit that is unique in that it works with young offenders who have lost their way by helping them get back into society as purposeful individuals.

I currently coordinate the unit, which includes managing all the programmes, counselling the boys, and networking to involve more people from the community to get involved with the programmes. I’m always on the lookout for new, innovative measure to undertake.

When a young person comes into prison, they are incredibly vulnerable as generally they are easily led, easily manipulated, and often feel threatened and intimidated. Combining these factors with low self-esteem due to feeling guilt, remorse, depression, and anxiety, can have extremely negative consequences. Being incarcerated is a recognised risk factor, because young men, in particular, tend to have the attitude that this is rock bottom for them and they can go no further.

We’ve aimed to prevent this mindset through the establishment of this unit where young people who are high risk are in it together and supporting each other. We’ve created a community environment in the unit where they’re kept occupied in supportive programmes and work,” says Anne Hooker, Youth Development Officer at Port Phillip Prison.

Understanding Youth Needs

In order to uphold safety and security, each new inmate must be assessed for their suitability within the youth unit before being admitted. Individual needs and factors must also be taken into account to ensure each inmate's requirements are fulfilled. Ongoing care and support practices ensure the youth are able to remain on track and that they have a trusting relationship with prison staff.

"When a young person is admitted into our prison the first thing we do is check whether or not they're suitable for the youth unit. If they are a first timer to the unit, they will be given a chance even if they've been incarcerated elsewhere previously. If there's no space, we'll put them in a holding unit where they're offered ongoing support from the unit staff, including me. Every prisoner that comes in is checked medically and psychologically and a local plan is put together for them.

Working with young people requires careful evaluation, for example, it's important to check whether or not the person has an intellectual disability because if so they may be better suited to the intellectual disability unit.

Once an inmate enters the youth unit, we have a lot of processes in place to ensure their safety. We have what we call prison mentors – older prisoners who receive ten weeks of training, which covers communication skills, supporting anxiety and depression, conflict resolution, and what to watch for in terms of changes of behaviour. Their role is to support the young men, and also support staff and the unit, as a whole.

As they're role models, the youth tend to copy them, so it's important that they are positive and are working hard to demonstrate good values, commitment, strength, and all the other elements that represent strong leadership.

I also I train our staff on how to work with young people. In the youth unit, inmates are put to work right from the start which means we must immediately instil a routine into their daily activities. It's about keeping them busy, and incorporating discipline and self-discipline into their lives," says Anne.

Paving the Way for Re-Integration

Operating over the past two decades, Port Phillip Prison's youth unit has been shaped over the years by tried and tested methods and initiatives. Whilst there was initially some apprehension towards the unit's unique approach, the justification is in the results – with inmates who enter the unit becoming less likely to reoffend. The major determining factor has been the practice of rehabilitative measures throughout the course of inmates' sentences and keeping their plan upon release front of mind. Constant engagement with the wider community and outside influences drives this process.

"We do a lot of work on responsibility, consequences, and caring. Partnering this with a focus on connectivity with the community, we've distinguished ourselves from other units. For example, if someone does the wrong thing in this unit, they have to come into my office and tell me exactly what they've done, why they did it, how could they have done it differently, what should have happened, and what the consequences are.

Reintegration must start whilst offenders are in custody; if you lock up a group of young people, and you keep them completely separate from the community, they are going to see themselves as prisoners and criminals. This means they will continue to see themselves that way when they get out. I call it connectivity – you have to keep the group connected to the community.

Our leadership programme highlights this, as we have community leaders come and visit for either a half or full day and the boys are able to break into smaller groups and have real conversations with real people. Without this opportunity, these guys will just continue to see themselves as criminals. It's not like a normal unit inside a maximum security prison.

All the guys are smiling and happy, and not scared, frustrated, or disrespectful to staff. It's quite relaxed and completely different to other units in the prison. After 20 years, we can say this unit is crucial to the prison and most importantly, that is effective and actually works," says Anne.



Interested in Learning More?

If you're interested in learning more about catering for young offenders' needs and developing therapeutic rehabilitation environments that foster re-integration techniques, the join us at **Future Prisons 2019**.

You'll hear from our expert panel of over 12 speakers, including sessions from: **G4S, Ravenhall Correctional Facility, Tjillari Justice Aboriginal Corporation, Department of Human Services SA, John Holland Group, and more.**

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