

This year marks WAM's 10th anniversary, and we were looking forward to celebrating our milestones – over 130 women engaged in mentoring, a presence in six courts, and many, many women making life-long changes.

However, we started the year facing adversity – overcoming the tragic bushfires to now be dealing with a global pandemic.

Connection is key.

Over the past month our movements have been restricted to stop the spread of coronavirus. This has put many households and families under greater stress.

The flipside of physical distancing and the State's partial shutdown to reduce transmission of this virus is that in some instances vulnerable families may be at risk. There is a higher risk of domestic and sexual violence, greater risk of increased anxiety with strained coping mechanisms, and limited opportunities to access community services.

Most women in the criminal justice system have experienced intimate partner violence and abuse with ongoing traumatic effect often masked by substance misuse. Mental health disorders are highly prevalent in this cohort, with socio-economic disadvantage and backgrounds characterised by poverty and social isolation that also contribute to offending behaviour and prevent desistance from crime.

WAM has responded to the needs of our community. Maintaining connection is critical for vulnerable women to have an outlet, someone to talk things through and sustain a bond outside of the family unit.

Adapting to remote mentoring.

In order to maintain the connection between matches we have shifted our program to remote-mentoring, where we are encouraging the contact between mentor and program participant to be via phone and video chat. This means some matches are having more frequent contact, a couple of phone calls a week to catch up.

Coordinators have successfully assessed new referrals via phone and video calls, and we've even made three new matches via WhatsApp. It is different to what we are used to, but we've successfully adapted our relational model to keep the critical connection women are seeking.

The way we deal with a crisis hasn't changed – providing support to people in need, building resilience and positive coping strategies.

For this too shall pass.

Our first participant to engage in remote mentoring has stated *"having a mentor now I finally feel I have someone to talk to who understands how I feel... to go through the justice system and understand my perspective. She gets it"*. The participant also said she cannot wait to meet her mentor face to face in the future, but she's happy they talk on the phone a few times a week for now.

For many criminalised women we work with, their phone is their lifeline to friends and family, as well as accessing services. With very few women with a home computer, they use their phones for information from community agencies such as the Courts and Centrelink, as well as setting reminders for appointments. It is a tool that they rely on but often what they have is not fit for purpose.

Many of the women we work with don't have a reliable phone, and often don't have the funds for monthly credit often choosing between bills, food and other necessities. We have reports from mentors advising that they are regularly waiting for a response from participants about catching up as they don't have enough credit to reply to texts, let alone additional data to shift to video chats.

If we can support our program participants by providing them with a reliable smart phone and provide financial aid for additional credit top ups, it would make the world of difference for increased connection and communication between our mentoring matches.

If you have an unused, good-working order phone (and charger) that you can donate, please get in touch with WAM today.

Please also consider donating a gift of \$30 or more today to support our remote mentoring initiative and keep vulnerable women connected. [Donate here.](#)

- Tricia Ciampa, Executive Officer
tricia@womenandmentoring.org.au

WAM – A 10 year journey

This month I am celebrating 10 amazing years with WAM.

A simple advertisement recruiting for volunteer women mentors struck a chord and after meeting Toni who was running this pilot program and learning the purpose I was hooked. A small group of volunteers were matched to a mentee each and we commenced our mentor journey.

I have enjoyed the privilege of having sisters, nieces, daughters and lifelong friends and I couldn't imagine the isolation and loneliness that other women experience by not having this support. The chance to "be there" for someone and the opportunity to support them through their "justice journey" was irresistible.

In those early days we received valuable training which reinforced practical ideas plus protocols and boundaries for the relationship. Our peer group meetings were invaluable, mentors mentoring each other. When I met my first match I was nervous, I wanted to make a good impression on "Kate", in fact I hoped she liked me. Her story was quite complex, and she was a bit guarded but definitely saw the positive of having a mentor as her family was not aware of her offending.

The issues of managing a pre-schooler, getting to appointments, waiting at court often for hours, managing anxiety and being worried about money is much easier if there is someone by your side. Our mentor relationship lasted about 18 months until her court issues were resolved. Since then I have had the privilege to work alongside five women, all very different stories, personalities, and situations. One thing they have in common, they are grateful we are there on the end of the phone, sitting at court, offering solutions and alternatives but not being judgemental.

My most recent mentor relationship prior to joining the WAM Board was with a young mother of three. "Maddy" had multiple justice issues, had lost custody of her children due to being on remand and her life was in turmoil. This vulnerable, intelligent, articulate, feisty, volatile but resourceful woman amazed me.

The result of our work together saw the children returned to her care, court issues resolved and a family unit back to where it should be. To be honest it wasn't always easy being her mentor however I developed a great deal of admiration for her. I have observed her to be a devoted mother to her wonderful children and they are her world. After nearly two years our formal mentoring has finished but how do you pull away completely?

"Maddy" and I are still in contact, we meet at Christmas and exchange a small gift, she rings occasionally when she needs another perspective on a situation. She has been studying to enable her to be back in the workforce to improve the future for her children. All this without any family support or close friends.

A case worker, lawyer etc cannot offer the same level of support that our one on one mentor relationship does. We have the flexibility and we have volunteered our time to these women, and we gain from having them in our lives as well. A journey I am very grateful to have taken.

- Sam Payne, Board Chair

Practising Self Care

Unfortunately, no matter where you turn our air waves and newsfeeds are constantly being filled with reports on COVID-19. Our daily routines are changing, and as we all grapple with fewer opportunities to get out of the house self-care is becoming more of a necessity. To truly be at our best, both for ourselves as well as the people around us, we need to make looking after ourselves a priority.

Some helpful resources:

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/counselling-support-services>

<https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/supporting-children-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/>