

Recently we launched a fundraising campaign to **help keep women out of prison**. Thank you to our supporters who have donated already, your generosity is much appreciated, particularly at this challenging time.

This campaign is crucial to WAM's ongoing work. The impact of the health pandemic has caused an increase in social isolation, anxiety, and other mental health concerns. Women who are already vulnerable have experienced exacerbated disadvantage. Their mentors have been critical in providing emotional support, navigating what services are still operating and maintaining a positive connection.

For many women, their mentor has been the only person they have had any meaningful connection with over the past twelve weeks.

Demand for our program continues to increase, yet our capacity to do more is constrained by our financial situation.

Your support for WAM can help us survive so we can assist more women to be connected to a lifeline, keep women out of the justice system and build a pathway to a better future.

Please donate at:

www.givenow.com.au/WAM

Stop. Listen. Act.

We are to be congratulated on how we have tried to minimise the impact of the coronavirus in Australia.

Data and evidence were quickly scoured and interpreted to develop a response. We listened to those who had experience and knowledge. We were advised on how to best respond, and we adopted new behaviours that were appropriate. Most of us transitioned well - not necessarily easily, but we did it - to keep vulnerable communities safe from harm. New laws and policing were quickly introduced to make sure we were doing the right thing because we were all at risk. Well done us!

This week we have seen the rise of another scourge on society. It's always been there, but many of us just didn't notice. Because we were not directly in harm's way.

With racial tensions flaring in the USA, we can see angry responses from a country in distress, railing against inequality. This has sparked scrutiny and comparison of our own backyard.

We know that in Australia rates of incarceration is significantly higher for indigenous people. Although they make up approximately 3% of the general population, they are 30% of the prison population; Indigenous people are patently over-represented in the justice system.

Over 420 Indigenous people have died in custody in Australia since the royal commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody almost 30 years ago. The fastest-growing prison population is Indigenous women.

Closing The Gap is an initiative we are all familiar with, intending to improve the lives of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. We have the evidence and data. But we have not adopted the changes needed to keep our most vulnerable communities safe from harm.

Why has the same resolve and speed we took to preventing the spread of the coronavirus not been applied to the injustice and racism experienced by indigenous people?

This week the Victorian Parliament passed the terms of reference for an inquiry into the justice system. This will examine factors influencing Victoria's growing remand and prison populations; develop an understanding of recidivism and the causes of crime; and consider strategies to reduce rates of reoffending.

We know that pathways to the justice system can be created by social structures – marginalisation, poverty, poor educational outcomes, intergenerational trauma, entrenched behaviours that have had no opportunity to change. If, as the saying goes, prevention is better than cure why do we keep punishing people for the mistakes they make when sometimes they never had a clear choice in the beginning?

Let's listen to the voices of the people who have the experience. Let's adopt behaviours, attitudes and practices that will stop the cycle of inequity and disadvantage. And let's do it now.

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

Remote Mentoring

In March we moved quickly to alter our mentoring program to implement 'Remote Mentoring' literally overnight to keep our mentors and program participants safe, and to do our bit in stopping the spread of the virus.

We requested our volunteer mentors connect and communicate via phone, text, video chat, and other digital apps in order to continue supporting and mentoring our program participants. This request came at a really stressful time, a time when some mentors professional role really ramped up, a time when people were worried about vulnerable family members and their health, a time when parents were asked to supervise and 'home school' their children while completing their own work from home, and at a time of increased anxiety for many simply due to the uncertainty of what was ahead.

Yet through all the chaos and uncertainty, our mentors got on with the job.

There was not a complaint to be heard, and that is not to say it wasn't difficult for some, however there were numerous discussions about how we could do our best here, what resources we could pull together, what support WAM could offer mentors and participants to enable the connection and matches to continue and to be effective in supporting women in the program.

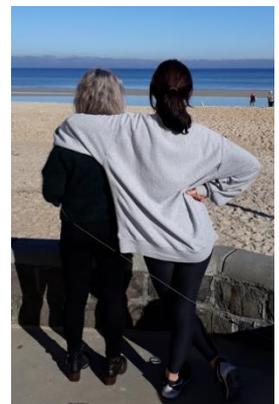
I am in awe of the group of volunteers that we have at WAM. We thank you for the amazing work that you do, for offering up your skills, knowledge, and time, and for allowing our program to continue in such a strange time.

The recent pandemic has highlighted an increase in social isolation and our new model of 'remote mentoring' offered a solution at a time when many women had limited options for support in the community and had been further isolated.

We know that women who are socially isolated have poorer outcomes regarding their physical health, mental health, lack of social relationships and opportunity, and greater chances of experiencing family violence and drug and alcohol misuse. Social isolation has a significant impact on wellbeing and quality of life.

As restrictions are now easing, the new matches that were made online can now meet up for the first time and connect face to face, while maintaining social distancing.

A takeaway coffee and a walk on the beach was on the cards for this new Frankston match. What a pleasure it was to witness their initial face to face meeting. It was evident that they had already established a good connection and had built rapport on the phone and through Facetime, however they were both so happy to meet the other in person and begin a more natural mentoring experience.



Although I am really happy and looking forward to seeing our mentoring matches catching up face to face again, I think it is important to remember that many women experience social isolation that predates Covid-19. For those that will continue to experience isolation, I wonder if remote mentoring has a place, in addition to face-to-face mentoring, to reach and support the most vulnerable women in our community. For some, this may be the preferred model, the connection that allows confidence and trust to be built, which may break down the isolation over time and allow for greater community participation in the future.

-Sarah Nyssen, Frankston Program Coordinator

Rewriting the Narrative - Women in the Justice System podcast

Our colleagues at The Living Free Project in Frankston have used their time during the lockdown to produce a podcast that promotes important discussion around the need to do things differently for vulnerable girls and women in the justice system. The Living Free Project works with girls reported missing and vulnerable women in contact with the justice system supporting them with assertive outreach to engage with appropriate services.

Find it here: <https://lnns.co/rUWSgjel0LD>



The art of conversation

WAM has continued mentoring women during the COVID-19 pandemic in new, but somewhat old-fashioned ways! We have gone back to good old phone conversations, that I feel, have had some positive results and learnings.

The positivity of phone chats for mentoring is that it offers a pure mode of communication in matches where each can only 'speak' or 'listen'. Mentors have been using their active listening skills to build the relationships they have with program participants by purely focusing on the one skill that is best at building rapport: 'listening'.

Two key learnings during these times have been:

1. The assumption that in today's world everyone has access to data, and
2. Everyone is comfortable with communicating virtually.

For some participants WhatsApp and Facetime can be quite a confronting form of communication. For others phone conversations have also been challenging as often opportunities to reflect and articulate what is needed from mentoring, is not a natural or inherent skill.

However these moments have all been opportunities for growth, and it is encouraging and satisfying to hear how 'the art of conversation' between mentor and mentee can provide opportunities for reflection, expression and personal growth in participants articulating, what they want, need and what is helpful in their lives.

For myself I believe that this is validating of the service we provide at WAM, and the potential it has to support women to engage in ways that are self-determining and rehabilitating.

In saying all this we are pleased to be easing out of lockdown and back in the community, as we also know how difficult social isolation can feel for many of the program participants, and how important it is for the mental health and well-being of our community to physically connect.

-Sharlene Farrugia, Mentor Program Coordinator

Supporting women with fine debt

Several referrals this year have come by of Fines Victoria, where eligible women can apply for a Work Development Permit (WDP) to reduce their fine debt. As WAM is an approved WDP organisation, women productively engaged with their mentor can apply to use their time on the program to pay off outstanding fines.

Tania was referred to WAM by Fines Victoria as this was the first time she had come into contact with the Justice System, and was experiencing homelessness, unemployment, and significant fine debt. Tania is in her 50s, and migrated to Australia more than 20 years ago, living in regional Victoria. She is highly educated with two degrees and was consistently working until the end of her 20-year marriage, five years ago.

Family violence, physical and psychological abuse were present in the marriage. She moved to Melbourne for her children's education and to escape her ex-husband. Last year she obtained a 12-month Intervention Order. Since the order, her ex-husband has slashed all of her tyres, but she has no way of proving this. Tania has no contact with him, and her two adult children live independently with no other family in Australia.

Tania never thought she would be out of work for five years and unable to find an affordable home to live in. She has been relying on friends for a safe place to stay. She knows there is a long wait for social housing. While she has been moving around, she has received a substantial number of fines, for parking and traffic offences. These have become overwhelming to manage and recently a warrant was out for her arrest and she became too scared to go out and shop for food.

Tania is now matched with a mentor and is benefitting from regular and supportive social connection. Although, so far the mentoring pair have been speaking over the phone, they have plans to meet up face-to-face, and progressively work on helping Tania achieve her goals of finding work, applying for housing, developing more social connections and building up her confidence again.

-Susan Orr, Intake & Assessment Coordinator

Board changes

We were sad to farewell Trieu Huynh from the WAM Board in February. Trieu was a great contributor to the Board, bringing valuable experience as a criminal lawyer. But we're so pleased that Trieu has been appointed to the Magistrates' Court of Victoria and we wish him all the best in that new role. And we also farewelled Sally Dobell in February, after nearly four years of valuable contribution. Sally brought so much to WAM with her expertise in brand and marketing. She steered us through our re-branding in 2016 and her design agency contributed many thousands of dollars of pro-bono work.

Replacing Trieu and Sally, we are pleased to welcome Tamsin Mildenhall and Su Robertson.

Su is a social justice lawyer, academic and community radio broadcaster. She has previously worked as a community legal centre lawyer and university law lecturer and is currently completing her PhD at the Australian National University. She has researched, published, and presented on a variety of issues associated with poverty law, clinical legal education, feminism and the legal system, and her work has been tabled in Parliament.



"It's an absolute honour to have the chance to contribute to this inspiring organisation. I look forward to working with everyone in the WAM family, helping to make a difference in the lives of women in our community who really need support".

Tamsin is an experienced criminal defence lawyer having worked in both the private and Government sectors. Currently, she is the Manager of the Summary Crime team at Victoria Legal Aid, working with sector partners to ensure the delivery of high-quality legal services as well as a fair and efficient justice system. She is a Law Institute of Victoria (LIV) Accredited Criminal Law and Children's Law Specialist and a member of the LIV Children's Law Specialisation Advisory Committee. She is also currently undertaking a Master of Business Administration (Executive) at RMIT.

"I am excited to be part of the WAM team and to contribute to the important work which WAM undertakes with some of our most vulnerable community members. I have seen firsthand how life-changing this kind of intervention can be so am looking forward to assisting the organisation moving forward."



- Mary Latham, Operations Manager

Thank you to our supporters

A donation of \$10,000 from Igniting Change has enabled us to provide additional support and material aid to our mentoring participants.

One participant has been able to have her two children stay over on the weekends. With a shopping voucher, she was able to buy new bed linen and extra clothes, as well as purchase more food to ensure her two children could enjoy this special occasion of staying over with their mum.



WOMEN AND MENTORING
PO Box 8081, North Road LPO, VIC 3187
Telephone 0422 608 391

Volunteer Info Session

As we experience an increase in demand for our service, we are seeking to recruit more mentors from the North and Western suburbs of Melbourne.

Our next Volunteer Information Session will be held on Tuesday 23rd June at 11am.

For further details or to register your interest, please contact – admin@womenandmentoring.org.au.