

May is a busy time for us at WAM with Law Week and National Volunteer Week as two key events on our calendar.

Despite this we have hit some great milestones with our core work of volunteer recruitment, referrals and making matches.

I invite you to read this edition of our newsletter, especially the story of our match, Rose & Lily.

Last week the Andrews' Government handed down their new budget, the first of their further four-year-term. Overall it speaks to the election promises of last November, with a large focus on infrastructure projects, funding for early years through to TAFE education, and health care services.

It was heartening to see an investment of \$20 million to fund programs that work towards reducing the rate of reoffending for women, and a further \$28.8 million for diversion and rehabilitation programs for young people. However, this pales into insignificance next to a figure of \$1.8 billion to build a new prison and increase the number of prison beds available.

We know that many women in contact with the criminal justice system are amongst the most vulnerable people in society; it is often these vulnerabilities that contribute to their offending behaviours and how they engage and respond to interventions.

Recently at our Law Week event we heard from our guest panellists that a significant proportion of women in the justice system commit offences that are low-level. The number of women in Victoria's prisons has increased dramatically over the past five years to 2017. The impact of tightening the Bail Act has also driven the significant increase of unsentenced women being remanded for short periods of time, many of whom are subsequently released on bail or to a non-custodial sentence.

The impact of a short-term custodial sentence can be particularly damaging for women, and their families. In some cases, their offending could have been prevented by addressing their vulnerabilities at an earlier stage. Many experience chaotic lifestyles involving substance misuse, mental health problems,

homelessness and offending behaviour and are often the product of histories of abuse and trauma.

Research tells us that to disrupt the turnstile effect of offending and re-offending we need interventions that build and utilise social capital. Social capital focuses on the way we interact, it promotes cohesion and community involvement to effect change. It builds self-efficacy and agency.

An article* examining desistance for women in the justice system cites the positive impact that mentoring can have as a gender-specific intervention. Mentors activate their own social capital for the benefit of participants through their advocacy, practical support and new ways of thinking for problem-solving.

Criminalised women too often experience a lack of strong, positive social connections in their lives, and mentors fill that gap. It costs WAM only \$3,000 to support a match for a year, fostering genuine connections that enable vulnerable women to achieve improved life outcomes.

You can support WAM's work by making a one-off or regular donation at:

www.womenandmentoring.org.au/donate

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

*Breaking the Cycle: Understanding the needs of women involved in the criminal justice system and the role of mentoring in promoting desistance Singh, S., Cale, J., Armstrong, K. International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 2019 vol. 63.

Rose & Lily

Rose is a 49-year-old woman, referred to WAM in September 2017, and matched to her mentor Lily approximately six weeks later. Rose's legal issues involved unpaid fines or driving-related offences. Rose is a previous drug-user, has escaped an abusive ex-husband, and suffers from mental health issues, including PTSD. Rose has also suffered dental damage from intimate partner violence and has had trouble accessing dental health services due to poverty, and at times she is in pain.

When Rose first met her WAM Coordinator she stated that she felt a bit all over the place; her motivation for seeking a mentor was to have some guidance and support, and was struggling with feelings for her ex-partner. Rose couldn't specify any personal interests, apart from playing the pokies 'waiting for a big win'.

After Rose and Lily's relationship was firmly established, a review meeting helped set some goals for the match. Rose specified that apart from dealing with her upcoming court hearings, she wanted to secure a housing transfer as she found the Richmond flats too confronting, with complaints about a neighbour's inappropriate behaviour ignored, and drugs too accessible. Rose also wanted to find fulfilling and consistent work after being a casual cleaner for several years.

Much has happened for Rose in the 18 months she has been matched to Lily. Rose has undertaken a bricklaying course at TAFE and sought work on the Railway Tunnels project; she has secured a housing transfer to a three-bedroom house where two of her adult children live with her; and she recently attended court to address her charges and commenced drug/alcohol treatment. Through great case coordination involving Rose's Legal Aid lawyer, her mentor and the WAM Coordinator, the Magistrate had a good understanding of Rose's challenges, indicating he was pleased with her progress and supported her ongoing involvement with her mentor, with no further charges to be heard.

We recently asked Rose what she thinks of her mentoring relationship with Lily. Rose said, *"Now that I have moved, I can get my head around addressing other things like my frustration and anger and being impatient. I was just surviving but now I can address some of the emotional stuff I have been suppressing"*.

Lily has not just been an emotional support for Rose, but also helping guide and role model appropriate behaviour, encouraging Rose's aspirations for her future, and being an advocate for Rose's voice to be heard.

Over the past 12 months we provided access to the WAM program across five court precincts.

We have developed strong relationships with many support agencies in the health and justice networks to see a near doubling of referrals.

Our Volunteer recruitment campaigns have increased, with 24 mentors screened and trained so far this year.

Since January, we have created 17 new matches and continue to support 9 existing relationships.

These formal relationships provide practical support and tackle offending-related issues through referrals to specialist services.

Your generous support over the past year has enabled us to expand to Frankston Magistrates' Court; provide food vouchers and material aid to our participants,

and host events that play a role in raising awareness and breaking down myths about criminalised women.

In the next six months we intend to bring our program to women presenting at Broadmeadows Magistrates Court, recruit a further 35 mentors, and increase our capacity to support more vulnerable women through mentoring.

We need your help to make sure this happens.

WAM relies on grants from philanthropic trusts and foundations and your donations to keep us going. By providing a donation of \$30 or more, you will assist in bringing our program to more women in need.

Every donation over \$2 is tax deductible — donate by June 30 to have your donation included in the 2018-19 financial year.

Donate today at:
www.womenandmentoring.org.au/donate

LAW WEEK – Justice for all, just not women

How exciting was Law Week?

Women and Mentoring (WAM) went all out this year hosting 2 events at Federation Square with a Information Pop Up and then followed up with a Volunteer Info Session. As per the past five years we also coordinated a topical panel discussion, this year titled, '*Justice for all, just not for women*'. The panel discussion involved key guest speakers; Jill Prior (Law and Advocacy Centre for Women), Bronwyn Naylor (RMIT- Professor in Law), and Magistrate Pauline Spencer (Dandenong Magistrates Court) and specifically looked at changes to the bail and remand laws that are proving to have unfavourable outcomes for women.

Key understandings taken from the discussion were the 'complexity' of women's presentation in the justice system. It evidenced the disproportionate rates of violence, poverty, homelessness and mental health issues they experience, and how trauma is compounded when early interventions are not offered or available for women to access.

The correlates of women's offending - poverty, mental health, victims of violence, primary and sole carers of children - often result in women committing low level offences (shop theft, drug use, breach of CCO). However, they can be sentenced more seriously if the woman repeatedly offends (eg. steals food) whilst on bail, is awaiting trial or is undertaking a community corrections order.

This largely speaks to the rise in the prison population of female inmates in recent times and begs to question the appropriateness of sentences designed to address community safety, however reflect circumstances of disadvantage and vulnerability. Arguments made by the audience suggested that in a lot of cases IF women had; housing, an adequate income and access to health and rehabilitative services, the cause of the criminal activity could be dealt with well before a justice intervention became necessary.

The success of WAM's law week event each year is largely marked by the increased level of attendance, the diversity of representation within the room, the lively discussions that the event creates and the positive feedback WAM receives afterwards. An added benefit is the community awareness raising of women's experiences within the criminal justice system and how as a community we could better respond to some of the most vulnerable people in our community.

Thank you to all those involved and if you want to support women in your community in a proactive positive way, we always welcome and appreciate the generosity of our supporter's time, skills and financial donations.

- Sharlene Farrugia, Mentor Coordinator
volunteer@womenandmentoring.org.au



NATIONAL VOLUNTEER WEEK – A time to thank and acknowledge all our WAM volunteers

WAM's strength has always come from our volunteer mentors. These amazing women are what our program is all about, and they make a massive difference in our participants' lives. But we also have another team of equally amazing skilled volunteers who generously give their time to keep WAM going in other important ways.

Our Board of Directors are all volunteers, bringing a huge range of skills and experience across so many areas. You can read more about them here: <http://womenandmentoring.org.au/about-us/>

Then there's Mandy, a human resource professional who helps us with position descriptions, job interviews, training and other HR matters.

We have Tracy, who has been quietly updating our website for us for years. And Bianca, who posts regularly on our Facebook page. And who, with her friend Sam, took photos for us at our recent Law Week event.

There's also Annie, who brings extensive experience in fundraising and assists with funding applications and fundraising events. Actually, there's a whole working group of people who have assisted with our fundraising events (Ann, Judy, Emma, Isobel, Bernadette).

And there's Adam, who has now been helping us with our IT for over four and a half years. I recently asked Adam to share some thoughts with me on his volunteer experience with WAM:

"I started volunteering for WAM when I was working at National Australia Bank, through NAB's skilled volunteer program. My first task was to migrate WAM's old file server and emails on to something more modern and supportable. I quickly found my place at WAM, helping with all things IT-related. And it was also a nice escape from the hectic pace at work.

When I left NAB, I joined a tech start-up called WalkMe. While there wasn't a formal volunteering policy or program, WalkMe were happy to support my

volunteering efforts at WAM and have been infinitely flexible with my ongoing commitment. Due to the nature of IT, you never know when something is going to go wrong!

I've personally learnt a lot and formed great relationships with the WAM family; and I now have a much greater appreciation of the struggles that women can face and the many important initiatives running to support women when they most need it.

I would encourage anyone to volunteer in any capacity that they can because every bit counts, and every skillset is needed at one point or another.

Remember too, that volunteering extends beyond any formal program your employer might have. If you have something to offer - go out there and offer it!"

And here's Adam in a familiar pose, juggling multiple devices and sorting out various issues for us, all with a smile on his face!



A huge thanks to all our volunteers for your dedicated ongoing commitment to WAM. We really appreciate it.

– Mary Latham, Operations Manager
Mary@womenandmentoring.org.au