

Ending Family Violence Program, Woorabinda

By Annette Hennessy and Carol Willie

Introduction

This paper deals with a program developed specifically for Indigenous Offenders in the area of Domestic and Family Violence related offending. The program is delivered by the Office of Community Corrections (Rockhampton) in Woorabinda and is supported by the Magistrates Court. The aim of the use of the program is to divert offenders in this category away from violent offending through a culturally appropriate offender intervention program. Many of the offenders attending the program might otherwise be in prison. Many studies recently have highlighted the problems indigenous families face when offenders are imprisoned. The aim of this process is to allow offenders to stay in the community whilst working on rehabilitating themselves with a view to an end to violent offending in the future, resulting in a safe environment for the family.

Ending Family Violence Program – Entry to Program

Offenders appearing in Magistrates Court at Woorabinda for offences related to family violence – breach domestic violence order and assaults – may be placed on probation with conditions to attend and satisfactorily complete Ending Offending and Ending Family Violence programs, both of which are delivered by staff of the Office of Community Corrections.

An offender is considered an appropriate candidate to be placed on Probation if they have not breached community based orders in recent years or have not been given the opportunity of a community based order (whether or not they have previously been sentenced to imprisonment); that they are willing to participate in a probation order (they are required to consent to the order being made under the legislation); that it appears to the Court that the offender will benefit from intervention through the programs coupled with domestic violence counseling or otherwise; and that the circumstances of the offence before the Court, taking into account the offender's history means that an order of Probation is legally appropriate. Offenders at risk of a sentence of imprisonment are also targeted.

Probation orders are usually made for a period of 12 months to enable the offender to complete both the Ending Offending (Alcohol related) and Ending Family Violence Programs. There are quite often other conditions such as domestic violence counseling through Helem Yumba Healing Centre, attendance at ATODs for substance abuse, attendance at Mental Health Unit (all available in Woorabinda) and attendance on the Community Justice Group (for monitoring and assistance from community members involved in the justice system). It is a pre-requisite that offenders complete the Ending Offending program first as the vast majority of this offending is alcohol related or the offender has substance abuse problems and the information given in this program is built on in the Family Violence program. Both courses are run as a block twice a year in Woorabinda.

The Ending Family Violence Program is facilitated at present by Carolyn Willie (Department of Community Corrections) and Pastor Barry Mann. It was initiated by the Department of Corrective Services and developed by Murri people for use in prisons with Murri offenders. The program has been delivered in Woorabinda since late 2003 and Woorabinda first place in the State to run program for females.

Offenders on Probation orders with a condition that the programs be completed may also be joined in the program by offenders on other community based orders who the Office of Community Corrections consider will benefit from the program. Conditions of community

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based orders (Probation, Community Service and Intensive Correction Order) provide for referral to programs or services by the supervising Community Corrections Officer.

Both males and females are referred to the program. There has been an increase in “mutual” or “cross” domestic violence orders in recent years, where on application an order is made against each of the parties in a conflict. As a consequence there have been more women who are subject to an order as a respondent and more breach charges against women have been seen in the Courts. All Woorabinda offenders are offered the opportunity by the Court of the intervention through the Ending Family Violence program when it is appropriate, at the earliest stage possible. Anecdotally it has been apparent that generally women are more prepared than men to accept intervention at an early stage in their offending life. Many men coming to court for family and domestic violence offences have the expectation (or desire) that they will receive a fine as penalty and may not be prepared to consider intervention of this nature until they are at risk of a more serious penalty such as imprisonment. Whilst some men have accepted the intervention early on, many men have not. As the offender is required by law to agree to the Probation order being made, the intervention cannot be imposed on them. Consequently, many of the men coming to the programs are entrenched offenders and the task of diverting them from future offending becomes much more difficult.

Duration and setting of the Program

The Ending Offending Program is of 6 weeks duration and is run 2 days per week for 5 hours. Ending Family Violence Program runs for 10 weeks and is run on Mondays and Tuesdays of each week for 5 hours each day. The program is run at Woorabinda Justice Group Office. The maximum number of offenders in the program at any one time is 6-8. Male and female offenders are handled by male and female conveners as is culturally appropriate. The meeting format varies during the delivery of the program including discussions, information giving, videos, group activities, private discussions and ‘homework’ activities.

Contents of the Program

At the outset of the program delivery, participants introduce themselves by reference to the tribal map and who their people are. Group rules are explained. A video, “*Regenerate the Warrior*” is shown. The video explores the experiences of a Murri man who explains the traditional role of Murri men as Warriors. The facilitators also incorporate the traditional of Women as Nurturers. The video looks at the role of the warrior, looks at where the warriors have gone and the social impacts on the continuation of that role. The dual roles of the Warrior/Nurturer is expressed in the program as being to provide food, shelter and protection for all members of the family. Traditionally Murri people are not violent people and the social disintegration which has occurred over the last 200 years has changed the fabric of the Murri family and broken down traditional roles.

The program promotes a healing circle approach – Identifying the problem, admitting responsibility for the problem, dealing with it, and planning for the future. It is the participant’s responsibility to do this, there are services and people who can assist them but the ultimate responsibility is theirs.

Following an introduction to program, an outline of the feature sections of the program is provided. Those points include: Understanding different types of violence; Understanding the

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impact of violence; Looking at the influence of alcohol; Alcohol and violence in families; Consequences of violence; Empowerment; and Relapse Prevention.

Violence is looked at and discussed in detail, with an exploration of understanding different types of violence. The impact of violence on family, community and offenders is little understood and time is taken to look at those impacts. Often this is the first time that offenders actually consider all of the impacts of their actions on themselves and those around them. A more general examination of the impact of domestic violence, family violence and the cycle of violence in the community is also undertaken. This is an integral section of the program as navigating the hazards of a dysfunctional community in relation to family violence can be very difficult for an offender despite their best intentions efforts to move away from violence. It is not until positive change in the cycle of violence can be effected in the community, starting from individual efforts, that offenders will be living in a situation where violence is not accepted and not tolerated. Definitions of violence are discussed and the broad nature of actions which are included is usually a revelation to offenders (Threats, harassment, intimidation and sexual assault etc).

A Power Exercise (using sets of photo language cards) is conducted early in the program and again later in the program. The exercise involves the display of numerous photos (of landscapes, children, beaches, horses, many different photos) and participants are asked to choose 3 photos that speak to them. They are asked why they choose those photos and to discuss what feelings prompted those choices e.g. loneliness may have prompted the choice of a photo – the facilitator will speak with the participant about the feelings and then talk about the positive aspects of the photograph and the potential that the image can contain, in effect encouraging looking forward in a positive way and not perpetuating the negative feelings that might presently be associated with the participant's life.

A Power and Control Wheel is utilized to look at who in the family or social situation where violence occurs actually has the power and who has the control. The focus is to encourage a realistic acknowledgment of who holds the power in a real sense and encouraging that person to take responsibility for the control of the situation – acknowledging who has control and who is placed to do something about improving the situation.

Equality and Non –Violence is looked at in a similar way and focuses on the equality of all members of the family and respect for those people as well as acknowledging that all members of the family have equal rights and a say in what happens. Myths about Men's Rights are also challenged. Issues discussed include – your wife is your partner not your property, children are individuals and have needs which you need to meet, looking at participant's responsibility for their families.

Alcohol can often be a significant factor in the cycle of family violence in communities. The Ending Offending program is a pre-requisite to the Ending Family Violence program at Woorabinda and the issues from that program are reinforced again. Participants are informed of the facts relating to Alcohol-related Offences amongst Indigenous Australians. The Ending Offending Video is played and the effects of Alcohol on the Community are discussed. Reasons for violence are looked at (Alcohol is never an excuse). A video, "In the Gutter – no Way" is viewed which contains interviews with Murri people who have been 'in the gutter' and worked their way back into the community. Further issues looked at include Physical Effects of Alcohol misuse; Alcohol and Violence in Families; and Impact of Violence on Children and Young People.

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Participants are asked to draw a Timeline, plotting when they first started offending (including childhood), when they started drinking or smoking yarrdi and what was happening in their life at the time. Quite often it is apparent that a trigger event (death of a significant person, marriage) coincides with the drinking and offending commencing. This enables the participant to see that they are not bad people but there are reasons underlying these difficulties in their lives and perhaps to identify counseling or assistance they need for those underlying issues.

The question - Where do You want to be – is posed to participants and they are encouraged to look back and look forward in order to answer the question. They may come from violent background and have developed a tolerant attitude to violence, for instance. This session looks at where the participant should be (in their view) and asks them to examine other ways they could have changed situations, and ways that they can manage situations in the future to break the cycle in their life. Other sessions include - Thinking about your drinking patterns; What are your feelings (Thinking about your Victim) – victim empathy; Emotional and Physical Effects of Violence; Impact of Violence on your Partner and Family.

A Video of a ‘Sunday’ Program report on a clan of Aboriginal Elder women from Central Australia which tells the story of their move from the mission settlements back onto their land in Central Australia and the traditional lifestyle they now lead. This story illustrates to participants that such a move could be possible if the community works towards it.

Non Violent Ways of Behaving, the consequences of actions for yourself and those around you are explored. Information is given on Learned Social Behaviour with a focus on good memories from learned social behaviour - what makes you feel loved and needed and how to act in that way towards others. The program provides practical information for discussion by participants to arm them with skills to live their lives without needing to resort to violence as a reaction or coping mechanism. They are encouraged to identify Cues and Warning Signs which lead to or prompt their violent behaviour. Methods to bring the role of protector (Warrior) back to the fore are discussed.

An exercise is conducted using a relationship pyramid. Participants are asked to place themselves on the pyramid indicating where see themselves in the extended family (they should be somewhere in the middle). They then give justifications for where they have placed themselves, look at where they think they should be after a rethink.

Discussions include finding reactions which may be an alternative to violence. Participants are strongly informed that the ‘Violence has to Stop’ and it has to “begin with you”. Stress and Relaxation Strategies are discussed. Alternative Strategies are examined – suggestions include walk away, ban alcohol from house, take the children for game of footy, if you know a big booze up is on, then take the children out hunting, spend traditional time with children and extended family – there is a big emphasis on children and what they feel about what they see.

The Building Blocks of Change are put in place. Participants are encouraged to take Baby steps - if you fall down don’t mentally beat yourself up, walk on from there, acknowledge that you are changing a whole lifestyle and the habits of many years and move on in a positive way. Questions to think about are given – look at what changes they want to make and ideas they can use to bring about change themselves – the focus is on self-reliance rather than the welfare approach.

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The program concludes with the participants Clarifying their Values. Preventing a Relapse Back to Violent Behaviour is an important focus and practical methods of self monitoring and self control are reinforced to arm the participants with the skills to move forward in a non-violent way. Participants are encouraged to think about making a Contract with themselves to end violent reactions to situations. A Post program questionnaire is conducted with each participant and the program is brought to a resolution.

Outcomes of the Program

The subject group of offenders is a small group of 25, ordered to the program over a period of 2 ½ years.

Previous Criminal History - Of the 25 offenders, 2 had no previous criminal history, 16 had criminal history with predominantly violent offences and 7 had other criminal history (traffic and minor offences (See Table 1).

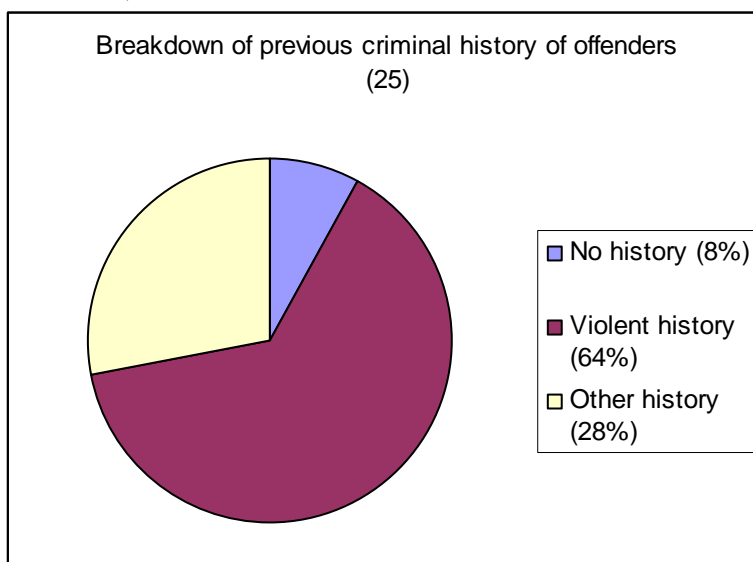


Table 1

Gender Breakdown - 17 of the 25 offenders were male and 8 were female.

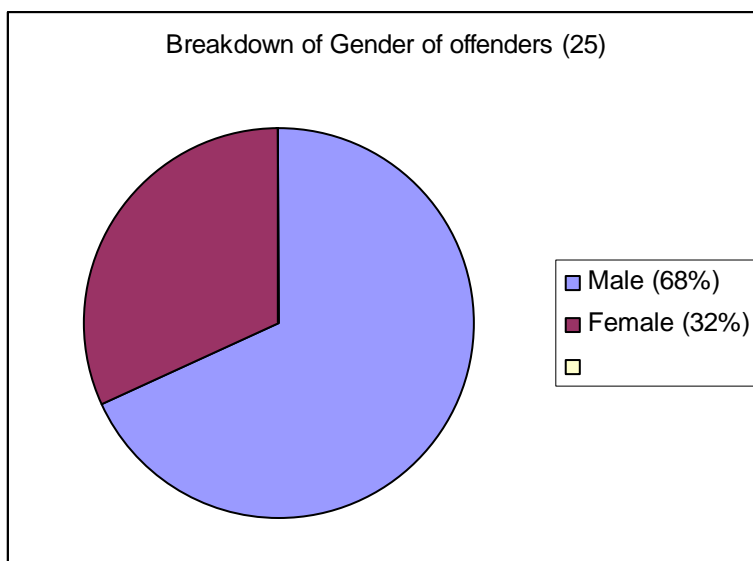


Table 2

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The Male offenders were made up of 3 with minor criminal history and 14 with violent or serious offending (See Table 3). Female offenders consisted of 2 with no criminal history, 4 with minor history and 2 with violent or serious offending (See Table 4).

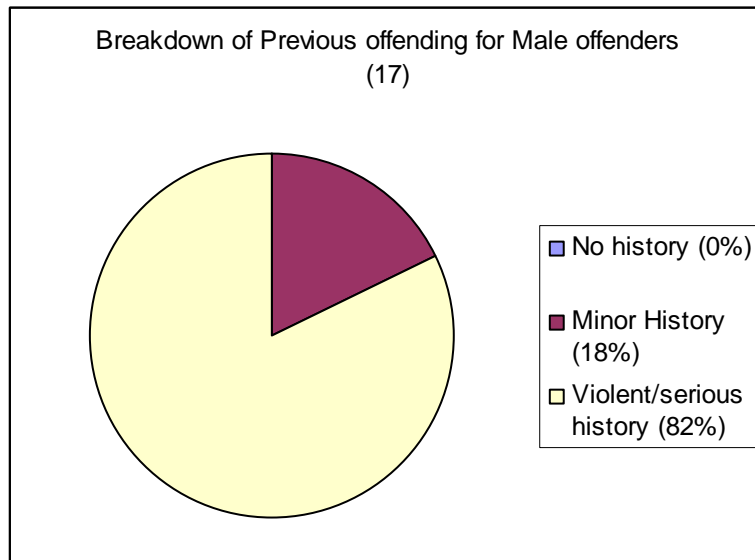


Table 3

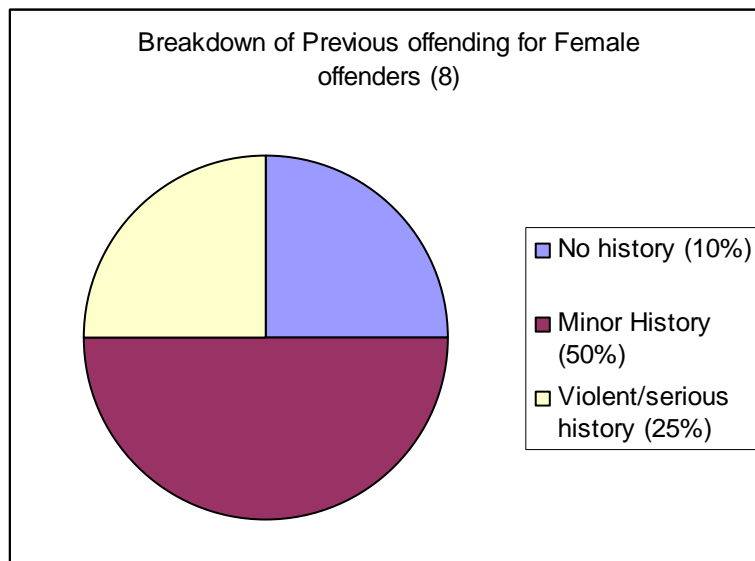


Table 4

Completion Rate - 76% of the offenders completed the Probation Orders (19/25). Offenders were charged with breaching the Orders in 10 cases (8 offenders re-offended during the Probation order – 6 for violent offences - and 2 offenders did not comply with the Order in that they did not attend the program. Of the 10 Orders breached, 6 orders were revoked and the offenders were re-sentenced in relation to the original offences. The other 4 Orders continued. 30% of the offenders committed violent offences during the period of the Probation order.

24% of the offenders ordered to attend the program **completely ceased offending** (6/25). 36% of the offenders ordered to attend the program **ceased violent offending** (9/25).

In total, **60% of the offenders (15/25) were diverted from violence**. Of the 23 offenders who had **previous criminal history**, **64% of them did not commit further offences of violence** (15/23).

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There was a general reduction in the offending rate of the offenders on the Orders after completion of the programs. 6 of the offenders who completed the programs did not re-offend at all (31%) while 13 of the offenders completing the program had some re-offending (69%).

Table of Re-offending DURING the period of the Probation Order

(D = defendant – Total 13)

Type of Offence	Number of Offenders	Offenders
No Re-offending	3	D1 D5 D7
Minor (traffic, simple offences)	6	D2 D3 D8 D9 D10 D11
Violent / Serious offences	4	D4 D6 D12 D13

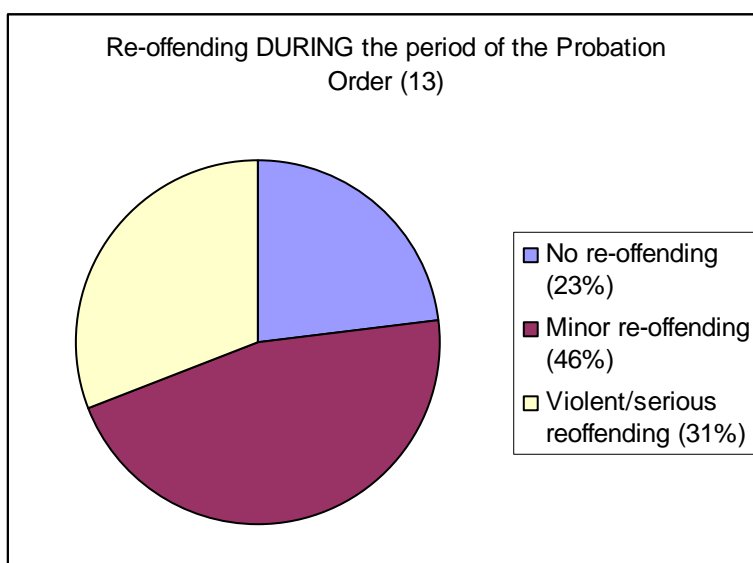


Table 5

Re-offending after completion of program

46% of the offenders completing the program did not re-offend at all.

19% committed further violent offences after the program (compare with 64% of offenders who had previous violent or serious history).

Of the 30% who committed offences of violence during the Probation order, ½ of them committed no further offences of violence.

Of the 4 offenders who committed violent offences during the Order, 1 re-offended violently twice, 1 re-offended after a significant period of time and **2 did not re-offend at all** after they completed the Order (See Table 6).

Of the 6 offenders who committed minor offences during the order, only 1 committed a violent offence after the Order more than a year later. Therefore 5 offenders who committed minor offences during the Order **DID NOT commit a violent offence** after the completion of the Order (See Table 6).

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The majority of re-offending was for non-violent offences (12 of 20 instances).

Violent re-offending occurred shortly after the program completion and 12 or more months after the program completion. It would seem overall that the effect of the program wanes as time progresses for some offenders with 5 offenders re-offending after the 9month mark.

Table of Re-offending AFTER the period of the Probation Order

No re-offending	6	D3 D9 D10 D11	D12 D13			
Type of Offence	No.	0-3 months after program	3-6 months after program	6-9 months after program	9-12 months after program	12 +mths after program
Minor	7	D5	D4 D4 D5 D2 D2	D7 D8	D2 D7	D1 D4
Violent/serious	4	D7 D7	D6 D7 D7		D6	D2 D4

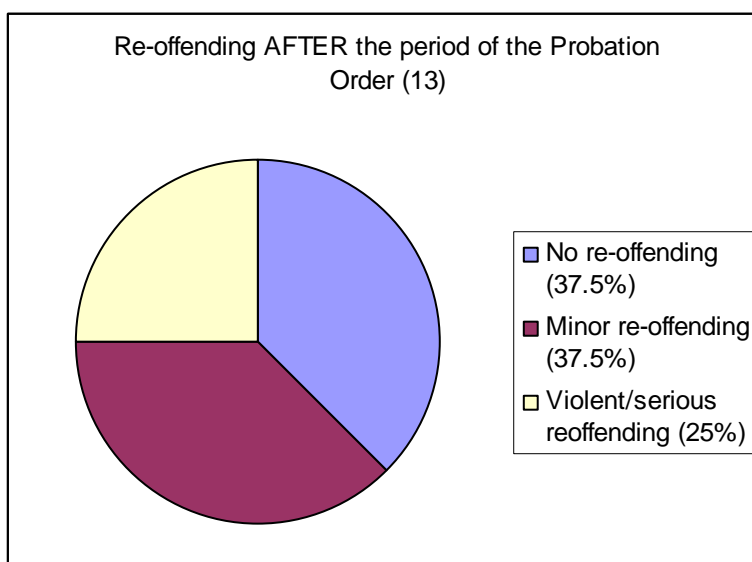


Table 6

NOTE: Some offenders committed both minor and violent offences after the Probation Order.

Re-sentenced Offenders

4 offenders were re-sentenced for the original offence after breaching the Probation order. 2 of them committed further offences of violence (compare that 50% with only 19% of those completing the Order committing further offences of violence indicating a trend towards the reduction of violent offending after the program).

Table of re-offending by offenders who DID NOT complete the program (4)

Type of Offence	No. of Offenders	0-3 months after breach	3-6 months after breach	6-9 months after breach	9-12 mths after breach	12 + mths after breach
Nil	1 D16					
Minor	3	D15			D17	D14
Violent	2		D15	D17		

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Positive Social Benefits of the Program

Many offenders have become very engaged with the process during the program and facilitators have seen offenders who give deep thought to the issues, discuss topics with their partners and families, ask questions and even present themselves to the facilitators requesting to do the program a second time. Members of the community are gradually becoming more inclined to access and use resources and services on a regular basis to address issues that they have – they know where the help is for them, even though it might be different for everyone. As people become aware of the services and programs being offered in the community, other members of the community have also indicated a desire to participate in the program even though they are not on a Probation Order. The facilitators have made themselves readily available to go to Woorabinda at other times if needed, arrangements are easily made for them to assist offenders to put something in place for them to move forward in a positive.

Case Studies

The following Case Studies are brief outlines of the situations of two offenders, both with similar criminal histories and coming before the Court for the same charge, Breach of Domestic Violence Order.

Offender 1 was aged 41 when he came before the Court. He had a previous conviction for Grievous Bodily Harm (a more serious offence than the subject offence which involved his partner) and had three convictions for assaults and other offences in the previous 10 years. He came before the Court for an assault on his partner (which act breached the domestic violence order) in a situation where they were both drinking and argued. He assaulted her by ripping off clothing and dragging her along the ground, also inflicting blows. He had a good job at the time of appearing in Court and was prepared to participate in the program. He was ordered to serve 12 months on Probation with conditions to attend and satisfactorily complete the Ending Offending and Ending Family Violence Programs. He completed the Probation order without incident, in the manner in which it was required and has not committed any further offences 18 months on from his appearance in Court.

Offender 2 was aged 24 years when he appeared before the Court. He had numerous previous convictions for assaults and other offences of violence which had previously resulted in terms of imprisonment. He was ordered to serve 12 months on Probation with conditions to attend and satisfactorily complete the Ending Offending and Ending Family Violence Programs. He breached the Probation Order 5 months after being placed on it, for failing to report to undertake the Ending Offending Program and responding poorly to supervision under the Order. The order was breached and he was re-sentenced for the original offence to 2 months imprisonment suspended for 12 months. He committed further offences 5 months on – Breach Domestic Violence Order x 2, Wilful Damage x 2, Breach Bail, Escape from Lawful Custody, and Assault Police – and was sentenced to imprisonment terms to be served.

Whilst both offenders had violent criminal histories, Offender 1 took advantage of the assistance offered to him through the program and has moved away from offending to live his life. Offender 2, on the other hand, did not comply with the requirement to attend at the program and was otherwise unco-operative with the conditions of the Probation Order. He was given a further opportunity through a suspended sentence which required him not to commit an offence during the period of suspension (12 months) but only 5 months on, he committed similar and more serious offences and was sentenced to imprisonment. One might have expected that the

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older man might have been harder to divert from his previous offending but it seems his maturity may have played a part in the decisions he took. Offender 1's employment may have also played a significant role in his turnaround.

Conclusion

Whilst the subject group is a small one and there was no control group, the early indications are that there are some benefits in the program for most offenders. The program provides assistance to the offender and the community as a means to divert offenders from violent offending. Most of the offenders in this group would have been at risk of a term of imprisonment due to their criminal history and/or the seriousness of the offence/s before the Court.

60% of offenders in this group were diverted from violent offending with 24% committing no further offences at all. Given that only 8% of offenders had no previous history at the outset, it could be argued that there was a **16% improvement** in that area.

64% of offenders had violent criminal histories but only 40% of offenders committed violent offences after going through this process, a **reduction of 24%**.

The offenders who completed the program were more successful than those who did not in reducing violent recidivism (19% compared to 50% committed further violent offences, a **reduction of 31%**).

It would seem that the program's positive benefits would be improved if there was follow up and support for offenders available 9-12 months after the completion of the program, and perhaps a refresher course to extend the effectiveness of the program.

Considering these objective outcomes and the social benefits for the offenders and consequently their families and community, the early indicators show that the program can assist offenders to reclaim their futures and move from violence and upheaval to calm and safe lives.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Department of Corrections Power Point Presentation on Ending Family Violence Program

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