

## Youth Justice Reform Select Committee inquiry into youth justice reform in Queensland

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Committee Secretary  
Youth Justice Reform Select Committee

Via email: [youthjustice@parliament.qld.gov.au](mailto:youthjustice@parliament.qld.gov.au)

To the Committee,

We write this submission to directly address the terms of reference noted below. In creating this submission, we aim to highlight the importance of, and need for, adequately funded, skilled and holistic community-based supports in the pursuit of reducing entry and re-entry into the youth justice systems and in working towards a safer community for all.

This submission relates to the inquiry's following terms of reference:

1. *A select committee, known as the Youth Justice Reform Select Committee be established to examine:*
  - a) *Ongoing reforms to the youth justice system.*
2. *In undertaking the inquiry, the Committee consider:*
  - a) *The prevention of entry and diversion of youth offenders from the justice system with specific consideration of risk and protective factors that reduce crime*
  - d) *Systems and processes to provide immediate and ongoing support for victims of crime.*

## **Our Organisation**

Community Living Association Inc. (CLA) is a community organisation based in Nundah that provides various services across the Greater Brisbane, Moreton Bay and Sunshine Coast regions. CLA has been operating since 1987 and over this time we have developed our practices to effectively respond to the needs of our community.

Three of our teams provide direct support services to young people; ARROS, BEROS and Community Connections. These teams were specifically designed with a youth focus and have developed specialised practices to meet the needs of their cohorts. We are staffed by skilled professionals, predominantly social workers, who are supported to develop their knowledge and skills in their specific areas of work. A high proportion of the young people we support have experienced complex trauma; and a number have intellectual or other cognitive disabilities.

## **Our Youth Teams**

*ARROS supports young people aged 15-25 who have a cognitive and/or intellectual disability and exist on society's fringes. We work with young people who have had out of home care experiences or complex upbringings resulting in them living with informal caregivers, often other unsafe adults.*

*BEROS works with young people aged 12-18 years old who are in the care of Child Safety and are self-placing, often sleeping rough and couch surfing. Many BEROS young people are also on Youth Justice orders.*

*Community Connections works alongside 12–18-year-old young people and their families or significant others where there is risk of homelessness and early school leaving. Community Connections' work has an early intervention and prevention focus.*

Across our youth teams we ensure that our work is relationship-based, person-centred and holistic. Our work assists individuals around their goals, whilst also responding to the needs of their families and supports, and larger advocacy when systemic barriers and injustices are encountered. We operate outside of involuntary systems, giving young people choice to engage with us; something not often afforded to young people with offending behaviours. This also allows a level of flexibility that is supportive to meeting young people's goals. We engage in long term work that; allows for periods of disengagement; works with families and support networks; and offers support when young people are engaged with various statutory systems (and any gaps in between), including the criminal justice system.

We hold trauma-informed practice at the core of our work and staff are upskilled in understanding and responding to trauma behaviours. Our knowledge and expertise in this area allows us to better understand young people, support them to better understand themselves and support them to change their behaviours, while also connecting them to resources to improve their outcomes. When we work with young people to intervene early or address these areas, we often see a reduction in offending behaviours and involvement in crime. Most importantly, we see young people wanting to break these cycles of poverty and incarceration, creating long-term change. For the ARROS team, this extends to the intersection of trauma and disability behaviours, and poverty, which can manifest in offending behaviours.

## **Our Responses**

1. *A select committee, known as the Youth Justice Reform Select Committee be established to examine:*
  - a) *Ongoing reforms to the youth justice system*

In examining ongoing reforms to the youth justice system, we ask that the Committee consider the broader social issues impacting on youth crime. We consistently see that young peoples' engagement with the justice system is underpinned by entrenched poverty, systemic injustice, domestic and family violence, intergenerational trauma, substance use, mental health, disability, and other various social issues. Engagement in offending behaviour is one symptom of a much larger social problem. Some of the key social issues that are outlined below.

### *The rising cost of living*

Many of the young people we support are reliant on Centrelink payments, or if they are employed, they earn very little. They often do not have family or peer supports that can provide financial assistance, particularly those connected with Child Safety. Every week is a struggle to make ends meet, which can often be a dehumanising, isolating and exhausting experience. When young people feel like this, they develop beliefs that they cannot overcome poverty; that no one wants to help them or cares about them; and they become unable to trust systems that consistently let them down. We see a clear link between poverty and engagement in the justice system.

## *Housing*

Private rentals are not affordable and are highly competitive. Young people are competing for housing against families and professionals for rentals they can barely afford, with no rental experience and often without caregivers able to be guarantors. Social housing is a slow system and can take years for housing to become available and often provides unsafe and unsuitable accommodation for young people. Transitional housing is also very difficult to obtain as young people are often unable to find suitable housing to move into. Thus, becoming a pipeline with no movement. The last option is for people to stay with family or informal supports who, for young people accessing CLA Inc., are often unsafe and exploitative.

## *Health care (including mental health & disability)*

Young people not able to access appropriate medical professionals. This includes GPs, various therapies, psychology, and psychiatry. Professionals who do bulk bill have extensive waitlists and are often not able to respond effectively to the young people we support. They are often labelled as too complex, difficult, or non-compliant. The fundamental issue is not young people, but services are not able to meet their needs. This also impacts on young people's ability to gain access to the NDIS as assessments and diagnosis are expensive to obtain.

### *2. In undertaking the inquiry, the Committee consider:*

#### *a) The prevention of entry and diversion of youth offenders from the justice system with specific consideration of risk and protective factors that reduce crime*

Across our youth team we engage in early intervention and prevention work. This can look different between our teams and different individual young people, as there is flexibility in our practice to meet individual need. Some examples of what this can look include:

- Building effective working relationships with young people and their support networks to model safe adult relationships built on trust and respect.
- Responding to crisis/circumstances that put young people at risk of criminalisation. This is overwhelmingly impacted by the poverty experienced by young people we support, and the work can include responding to trauma behaviours, mental health issues and suicidality, accessing emergency relief and other financial support, seeking and advocating for housing, and therapeutic intervention.
- Psychoeducation & building young peoples' understanding of their needs, behaviours, risks, and potential outcomes.
- Therapeutic support to meet the emotional needs of young people.
- Supporting young people to engage in schooling, employment, and community.
- Supporting young people to build their knowledge and understanding of their rights.
- Connecting young people with disabilities to access diagnosis, the NDIS or other supports to ensure they are effectively connected and supported to reduce disability behaviours that can be perceived as offending behaviours. Specifically, around cognitive, intellectual disabilities and neurodivergence which are often invisible disabilities.
- Building capacity within local systems to link up support systems to better collaborate for young people's goals.
- Engaging with other stakeholders to work collaboratively to achieve the young person's goals.

These are just some examples of what this work can look like. But key to providing support in this way is having a skilled workforce with knowledge of trauma and disability and a holistic focus to respond to a large range of issues, being a voluntary service that sits outside of statutory systems, and holding long term relationships with young people that are maintained across engagement with other systems.

The benefit of this approach, while being aimed at early intervention and prevention, is that we can continue working with these same young people if they do become involved with the justice system. This work can look like:

- Supporting young people to process risks and outcomes of offending behaviours and to make informed decisions.
- Supporting young people to attend court and understand processes and proceedings.
- Connecting young people with appropriate legal supports and where appropriate support them to process and understand legal advice.
- Maintaining connection with young people throughout incarceration to support them to reengage in community upon release.
- Supporting young people to process and understand legal requirements, orders, bail conditions, etc., to ensure they have a clear understanding of what is required of them.
- Collaborating with young peoples' support networks to effectively respond to the needs and utilise the skill sets and resources that are available.

We are also able to continue working with people after their engagement with the justice system and are wanting to make changes. This can look like:

- Supporting young people to re-enter the community and get their essential needs met, including housing.
- Working alongside young people in finding purpose and seeking changes to support positive life outcomes.
- Working with young people to address and work through their trauma experiences.
- Working to address poverty experienced by young people on individual and systems levels.
- Supporting young people with behaviour change aimed at reducing recidivism.

Early intervention and prevention are of high importance to CLA. However, we note the importance of long-term holistic intervention. The ability to work alongside young people as they move through these systems is key to long term behaviour change and positive outcomes for young people. Over the course of our work, we often see a reduction in offending behaviours and involvement in crime. Most importantly, we see young people wanting to break these cycles of poverty and incarceration, creating long-term change.

*2. In undertaking the inquiry, the Committee consider:*

*d) Systems and processes to provide immediate and ongoing support for victims of crime.*

When examining the efficacy of current victims of crime processes, it is important to view consider those who are both victims and perpetrators of violence. In our work there is a clear overrepresentation of young people with offending behaviours who are also victims of crimes themselves. There are often barriers to young people reporting

crimes committed against them to police and to accessing financial compensation and therapeutic intervention to support their recovery. When working towards a safer community for all, we must not ignore our most vulnerable populations.

## Our Recommendations

1. Policy change aimed at improving the lives of young people at risk of or currently engaging in offending behaviour.
  - a) Policy to address the cost-of-living crisis specifically for youths.
  - b) Policy to address youth housing including access to suitable and long-term accommodation.
  - c) Policy to address accessible and appropriate health care including access to mental health and disability related support.
2. Funding for community-based youth focused support aimed at holistic intervention.
  - a) Funding for long term support for young people aged 12-25. Working across this age range within one service allows for seamless ongoing support across other services and jurisdictions that are confined to age limited supports.
  - b) Funding for community-based services aimed at holistic intervention. This approach allows for workers to effectively respond to the risk factors contributing to engagement in criminal behaviour, as well as any directly involvement with the justice system.
  - c) Funding for skilled workers with knowledge and skill of working with trauma, and disability. Trauma and disability behaviours are often criminalised. When they are identified, rarely are they effectively responded to in meaningful ways that support positive outcomes for young people. Trauma work requires skilled and gentle intervention to achieve meaningful healing. Disability work requires a comprehensive understanding of disability behaviours and needs and connection to adequate supports. Without meaningful intervention, young people continue to engage in behaviours that are criminalised and become entrenched in the justice system.
  - d) Ongoing and recurrent funding in community-based organisations. Funding is over aimed at short-term or project-based intervention that does not adequately respond to the long-term needs of young people.
3. Increased cultural competence in justice systems aimed at the intersection of intergenerational trauma, poverty, social disadvantage and
  - a) Increased connection with First Nations communities to develop strategies that are informed by culture and identity.
  - b) Upskilling all staff engaged in all youth justice spaces, from policy level to direct contact, to better understand the complexities for young First Nations people and ensure all work in this space is culturally competent and underpinned by empathy.

We thank you for the opportunity to provide this written submission to share our knowledge and experience working in and around the area of youth justice.

Kind regards,

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