

THE HALFWAY HOUSE_A PROGRAM FOR CURRENTLY SERVING PRISONERS

**Clive Begg
Hobart
Tasmania**

THIS PAPER WILL ADDRESS THE CREATION OF A SPECIFIC COMMUNITY BASED and managed prison alternative program funded by the Queensland Corrective Services Commission (the Halfway House Program) and the difficulties experienced in the implementation of the project as a consequence of the apparent lack of conviction by the former Queensland Government to fully support the initiatives of its commission.

Background

In a submission to the Committee of Review into Corrective Services in Queensland, this writer and others recommended, amongst other matters, the creation of various community based correctional facilities for currently serving prisoners as alternatives to traditional forms of imprisonment.

The purpose for developing such facilities was proposed as being; the potential reduction in recidivism rates, the inception of proactive community responses (participation by the community in Corrections) and the possible cost efficiencies that community based corrections could theoretically provide.

The methodology to be applied in the realisation of these objectives was to be found in a model of structured interventions and programs created from (and actively involving) the community, utilising projects, either existing or to be designed. This notion actively defies the traditional view of prisons as closed systems.

The general proposal suggested the expansion of available options for the detention of offenders, including a range of community based correctional venues that would have differential levels of security, decreasing as inmates approached a re-integration into the community. It was argued that the various types of community based and managed correctional venues would provide the environment to elicit responsiveness from prisoners to re-integration or rehabilitation programs that would 'break the cycle' of offending behaviour.

The model would utilise modified nursing homes/boarding houses or suburban housing—dependent upon the type of offender housed within each. The model acknowledged that inmates, by virtue of their offence, history, social skills and capacity (or

lack thereof) to adapt to environments would require different forms of incarceration and that inmates could advance from higher levels of containment to the lower levels as a consequence of reasonable performance. The model requires significant interaction between Community Corrections staff and practitioners in the non-government sector.

In effect, the various facilities proposed would operate as a stepped security system involving self-contained accommodation units with prisoners remaining on the premises except when engaged in approved activities (for example, work, medical, special purpose courses). At the same time whilst in the facilities, inmates would be obliged to voluntarily participate in self-management and discipline exercises involving cleaning, cooking, budgeting, education, self-esteem and other such programs of self-development.

The continuum of proposed community based facilities suggested halfway housing at the lowest level of a ladder above fine option programs, community service orders and home detention. The Halfway House would have a caretaker 'presence' from 6.00 pm to 6.00 am which would have no overt security role. On the stepped security ladder and above the Halfway House would be the various hostels (release to work and other forms of release that require more constant supervision of offenders). Further along the continuum or on higher rungs of the notional ladder would be the detention centres which would have a 24-hour security system and where the share living and intensive programming would be exclusively 'inhouse' without the provision for inmates to attend outside activities. Beyond this range of community based correctional systems would be the more formally structured mainstream prison system—prison farms, medium security prisons and ultimately maximum security prisons.

Logically, this system implies that a failure at the lower levels of the program would not lead the prisoner directly into the more secure environment of maximum security prisons (a situation that has inappropriately occurred in the past).

The summary position of the proposal is a system that integrates the following

- a stepped range of security systems for the housing of prisoners in the context of a quasi-normal community setting that recognises the varying risk levels that inmates present to the community;
- prisoners to contribute to their reintegration through participation in house based and community based programs, including the payment of a 'fee for service'.

In the original submission to the Committee of Review (Begg et al. 1988) it was proposed that the non-government sector should be involved in the development and operation of those facilities up to but not including state farms. At a later stage there was to be significant discussion as to whether or not non-government agencies should be involved in the provision of security services within such projects. This notion was rejected by the Prisoner & Family Support Association (Queensland) who proceeded upon the basis of operating Halfway Houses (the lowest rung on the notional ladder) which, whilst providing a 'caretaker presence' at night, had no security responsibility.

The Halfway House—A Program for Currently Serving Prisoners

Within an historical context, a 'halfway house' is an aftercare service for people on release from prison. The Halfway House Program suggested from this paper is a community based and managed share housing project for currently serving prisoners approved for release by Community Corrections Boards (formerly known as Parole Boards) and who meet the eligibility criteria for release by the sponsoring agency in the non-government sector.

The project is designed to assist prisoners to make the transition from institution to community living as smooth a process as possible by providing a monitored and structured environment in which residents could gradually accept the responsibility of self-management as members of the normative society through graduated and increasing interaction with its members.

The facility is specifically designed for low security prisoners and provides a range of programs of reintegration and self-management designed within the non-government sector and approved by Community Corrections staff. It forms the lowest rung of a ladder of release above community service orders and fine options orders and below detention centres such as the release to work hostel. In an ideal situation, it would house fine defaulters and home detention applicants who are otherwise homeless. It would also, at a time in the future (following the long awaited review of sentences and penalties in Queensland), provide a venue to which the judiciary could directly sentence offenders without recourse to a prison term in the conventional sense.

The Halfway House provides one of the more innovative possibilities for not only dealing with burgeoning prison populations (with its associated costs) but also for dealing with the apathy of the community in the area of corrections. The proposal lends significant scope for a positive involvement by local residents in the development of the project, as well as integrating a series of pre-existing community programs across a number of non-government agencies in a wholistic approach to the correction of criminal behaviour and the prevention of crime. In Queensland, the provision of services by the non-government sector in this area is funded on a 'fee for service' basis from the Queensland Corrective Services Commission.

The Halfway House is designed for those low to medium risk offenders and others released to the project by Community Corrections Boards who fulfil the following criteria:

- those of adult age ;
- those who have already demonstrated a capacity for self-management (for example, trusted position within the Correctional Centre; attendance and/or completion of study and/or training programs);
- those who have conformed to the good order requirements of the Correctional Centre (for example, no internal charges over the past twelve months);
- those recommended for inclusion in the Program by the Community Corrections Unit at the Correctional Centres;
- those persons who, but for their homelessness, would be eligible for release into the Home Detention Program who fulfil the above conditions.

A statement of intent was drafted by the writer in May of 1989 which formed the basis of initial discussion in the development of the Halfway House project. This statement articulated the nature of the services provided and suggested minimum guidelines for the operation of the Halfway House. These minimum guidelines covered such matters as the classification of those to be housed in the project (who would be eligible), what programs of rehabilitation and support would be advisable, the responsibility for the security of the project (specified as being solely with the Queensland Corrective Services Commission in the case of the Prisoner & Family Support Association, Queensland), operational policy for the house (outlining the aims and objectives for the facility), and the rules, regulations and rights of staff and residents with the clear position to make such organisational charts and

policy statements available to all involved in the house. This statement foreshadowed the applications for funding to the Commission in April of the same year.

Following the development of a program, logic and the acceptance of this logic by the Committee of Review into Corrective Services funds were sought and a seeding grant was made available to the Association for the establishment of two such facilities—one to be situated in the South Queensland region and one to be situated in North Queensland.

The Difficulties

The state's first Halfway House for currently serving prisoners was opened at Paddington (Warmington Street) in Brisbane by the then Minister for Justice and Attorney-General on 2 August 1989 in a highly public manner. The Minister was anxious to be seen to be involved in the commissioning of this house. In his press release at the time, he spoke of the facility as 'an example of the community and government working together to provide necessary welfare services at the best possible price for the taxpayer'. He accentuated that the house is for 'offenders who are eligible to serve the final part of their custodial sentences under home detention but are 'homeless' or 'low risk' offenders—none of whom would be a security risk (such as fine defaulters)'.

The opening of the house should have provided a conspicuous endorsement for the initiative by the government and should have signalled the beginning of a service that would be in great demand. However, this was not to be the case. It was always a concern that community reaction to the proposal was going to be negative; however this concern was not justified. Following reasonable visual and print media coverage of the opening, a public expression of interest and support was forthcoming from a local community support collective (this included an offer to assist in the operation of the house).

During September, October and November of 1989, meetings were convened between the representatives of the Commission and the Prisoner & Family Support Association (Queensland) to discuss the use of Warmington Street. The Association had concerns that no resident applicants had been referred to the house, and that there were ongoing delays in considering and executing a contract between the parties in the operation of the service. It was becoming apparent at this stage that, whilst the Commission had taken on board the concept of community based correctional facilities (specifically in the funding of the Association's Halfway Houses), they had either given little thought as to how this project was to work in practice from their viewpoint, were making decisions 'on the run' or were overwhelmed by the myriad of other matters before them.

The argument was consistently put to the Association that 'eligible' people could not be 'identified' for inclusion in the program. The present Queensland Minister for Justice and Corrective Services recently stated that some 22 per cent of the Queensland prisoner population were identified as fine defaulters. This statement tends to contradict the view of the Commission that eligible prisoners to the project cannot be identified. The reality is that the Halfway House project was positioned on the notional continuum as a structured accommodation environment specifically for a number of potentially eligible classes, including both fine defaulters presently serving time in Queensland prisons and those subject to community service orders for whom a default would involve immediate imprisonment.

The horrific circumstances of Bradley Engelmann's death in Queensland (a community service defaulter who was imprisoned and died as a result of drinking a 'brew' at the prison hospital), the assault on Jamie Partic in New South Wales, and the allegations by a Victorian fine defaulter that he contracted AIDS as a result of a prison rape, crystalised the view of the Association that alternatives to imprisonment for minor offenders was a priority issue.

The Association's Executive Committee became increasingly concerned about the delays in referring appropriate candidates to the program and there was a genuine concern that the under-utilisation of the project could present auditing difficulties for the project, the Commission and the Association. The argument that community based halfway houses (and community based detention centres) were cost efficient and effective became more spurious with each passing day without occupancy. As a result of the failure to operationalise the project at Warmington Street, the Executive Committee of the Association had no option but to place in abeyance its plans to develop a similar project in North Queensland pending a resolution of the problems in Brisbane.

During the period 2 August 1989 to 31 January 1990, the house had only one person referred to it and this person resided within the project for a two-week period. The matter of the under-utilisation of the facility which was consistently raised with the Commission as a matter of concern always elicited the same response—'eligible prisoners cannot be identified'. The Commission insisted that it had made appropriate personnel aware of the scheme.

The apparent failure to find 'eligible' applicants was raised as an argument for the Association to have the project accommodate an 'overflow' from the release to work hostel operated by the Commission. The range of offender types housed at this hostel was clearly outside the Halfway House project parameters set by the Association in the first instance and the Association consequently rejected the proposal. It appeared as if the attempts to 'kick start' the Halfway House project in its original form was a secondary consideration to an apparent 'need' by the Commission to find accommodation for prisoners housed at this hostel.

Whilst the project provides a degree of flexibility, the housing (without a security consideration) of prisoners whose offences are far from minor in community based and managed facilities suggested an unacceptable imposition on the non-government sector. In these circumstances, the project becomes an adjunct to the government sector rather than a separate project 'owned' by the community which augments services provided by government. The independence of the non-government sector in this situation is potentially compromised.

Solution

A resolution of the difficulties confronting the program was effected through direct communication with the 'decision makers' in the field at a 'grass roots' level.

A questionnaire was forwarded to all Correctional Centres in Queensland to ascertain why Warmington Street was not being offered as an option to prisoners by 'decision making' personnel. At the same time, staff were asked to indicate if they felt that eligible prisoners were available in the system. The response was highly significant in that not only were these 'operators' unaware of the project, but they also had eligible prisoners that they wanted to refer to the Association immediately.

Responses to the questionnaire disclosed the following facts:

- there are prisoners who immediately meet the eligibility criteria for the project regardless of the view of 'head office';
- prisoners had not been made aware of the project and were therefore not making application for inclusion in the program;
- Assessment and Programs staff were under the mistaken impression that a day-time support system was not available to prisoners at the house;

- the option to use 'Warmington Street' went 'cold' as no feedback was received from prisoners who had completed a stay within the facility;
- one Correctional Centre programs manager first heard of Warmington Street on 2 February 1990 (six months after the House was officially opened);
- Correctional Centre Assessment Staff seemed unsure about eligibility criteria.

As a result of the information disclosed by workers through this questionnaire, the Association has committed resources to the development of an integrated information package that not only provides facts on the Halfway House project aimed at both assessment team member/professional level and prisoner level, but also provides advice on the range of service options offered from within the non-government sector that could augment the project. This questionnaire was followed up by personal visits by the Manager (Housing) to all Correctional Centres in South Queensland.

During the past few weeks, the following number of applicants for residency have been reviewed and approved by the Association for inclusion in the Halfway House project as a direct result of the interventions outlined above :

- home detention (eligible for program but homeless);
- home detention (breakdown in home arrangements with a return to prison as an outcome in the absence of the Warmington Street facility);
- parolees (who have no fixed or suitable address and who otherwise would remain in prison);
- bail applicant.

At the moment, Warmington Street is housing four residents (two below capacity), three of whom are approved for and involved in activities during the day—one employed worker, one voluntary worker and one resident attending college (undertaking studies at Grade 11 level and as a trainee cook).

The success of this approach is not to be discounted, particularly given the situation where previously only one eligible person could be identified as suitable for inclusion in the project over a five-month period.

As a further consequence of the success of the recent interventions, the Association will be proceeding with the establishment of a Halfway House facility in North Queensland, at Cairns. Provided the impetus can be maintained and the community can be stimulated into action to support the initiative, it may well be that Halfway House style facilities will proliferate and the concept of correcting behaviour will proceed beyond an academic proposition or a government responsibility.

Summary

There can be no doubt that the winds of political change have blown across Queensland. The implications of this change may only become apparent in the long term as the questionable ad hoc structures of the former government are slowly replaced through legislation by more formal and accountable structures which will reflect the present government's philosophical position.

In the case of Corrections, a series of inquiries were forced upon the former government. The establishment of the Queensland Corrective Services Commission from

the latest Inquiry has, de facto, provided the mechanism for positive achievement. The Commission is now strategically placed within the milieu of political change to effect long-term and meaningful reform within the correctional system in Queensland. Part of its strategy will be to support and develop community based initiatives that address the issue of correcting behaviour whilst having regard for the needs of crime victims and a concern for the prevention of crime.

A proposal suggesting a range of community based and managed corrections, from this writer and others, which implied a notional ladder of community based 'correctional centres' has been supported. This paper has attempted to present the position that, whilst the conviction of the Corrective Services Commission to explore the potential for community based and managed housing as alternative prison venues was apparent, the constraints upon the Commission from the former government in a broad sense (during the Commission's first year) precluded the reasonable development of such strategies.

A Halfway House proposal for currently serving prisoners is _being operated by the Prisoner Family Support Association (Queensland). Significant difficulties in having eligible people referred to the house appear to have been overcome in recent weeks through 'grassroots' intervention and also as a consequence of resolution of the beforementioned matters.

A second Halfway House will open in Cairns, operated by a regional branch of the Association, in the coming months. It is anticipated that 'profit' derived from the operation of these two facilities will be applied in the creation of a third.

Such community based alternatives to imprisonment provide the potential for correcting offending behaviour and for reducing the rates of reoffence. These facilities not only provide alternative prison accommodation, but an entree for offenders into more normal communities and more acceptable behaviours.