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CONFIDENTIAL
Youth Detention Review
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INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF YOUTH DETENTION IN QUEENSLAND

Queensland Council of Social Service Ltd (QCROSS) welcomes the independent inquiry into youth detention in Queensland and are pleased to be contributing to the Review's examinations and recommendations regarding youth justice and youth detention – areas of significant community concern.

QCROSS' work in supporting Queenslanders with experience of vulnerability and disadvantage provides perspective on the underlying social causes of youth crime and the impact of youth justice and detention on the health and wellbeing of children, their families, and the wider society.

QCROSS is the peak body representing the interest of individuals experiencing or at risk of experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and organisations working in the social and community service sector. As such, QCROSS has developed expertise in a number of areas including early intervention and prevention. Our recent work has had a clear focus on place based responses to poverty and disadvantage with a strong focus on wellbeing for individuals and communities.

This brief submission provides some general advice in response to the review's focus on the causal issues behind youth offending behaviour and understanding good practice in detention and rehabilitation of young people. This response does not specifically address issues raised in the discussion paper regarding the operations and management of detention centres in Queensland.

The submission highlights three areas which QCROSS hopes will inform the Review's investigations: 1) the social causes of youth crime; 2) the importance of prevention, early intervention, and rehabilitation; and 3) the social and economic cost of youth detention.

These areas have all been raised by other organisations with a focus on working with youth, in particular the Youth Advocacy Centre Inc. submission in 2013 in response to the *Safer Streets* discussion paper.

There is widespread international acknowledgement that youth should have a right to a 'child-oriented' justice system premised on treatment that "promotes a child's sense of dignity and worth" and "aims at his or her reintegration into society" (Child Rights International Network 2000). Such a system must take seriously the importance of listening to children's own views on decisions that affect them, should focus on restorative justice, and should view institutionalisation only as a last resort (UNSG 2006). Nevertheless, between June 2011 and June 2015, Queensland was one of only two states (along with the Northern Territory) to see a persistent rise in the youth detention population (130 to 168) (ACCG 2016).

QCOSS' own experience working with communities across Queensland agrees with research highlighting the importance of a more holistic approach to supporting youth, taking account specifically of the social causes of youth crime. A report by Richmond Jesuit Social Services (2013, cited in Youth Advocacy Centre 2013) emphasises a focus on the wider environment – family, school, community, and society - in which children develop, noting in particular that young people in detention have often been “victims of abuse, trauma and neglect, with high rates of drug and alcohol abuse, child protection involvement, and school exclusion (Richmond Jesuit Social Services, cited in YAC 2013: p7).” Moreover, entrenchment in the justice system often stems in part from experiences of child abuse and neglect; exposure to family and domestic violence; childhood experiences of severe and long term family dysfunction, and homelessness (YAC 2013: p7).”

QCOSS' 2016 *Wellbeing Report* (QCOSS 2016) notes that one quarter of Queensland children are developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), the second highest proportion behind the Northern Territory (QCOSS 2016: p53). At the 2011 Census of Population and Housing, Queensland had the third highest rate of homelessness. Moreover, in 2014-15, 55 per cent of individuals and 45 per cent of families experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness had been homeless for longer than 12 months, with three groups in particular most at risk of long term homelessness: people who had been to prison; people who had been in foster care and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (QCOSS 2016: p63).

Such statistics speak to the importance of prevention, early intervention, and rehabilitation programs, and call into question the logic underlying more punitive measures as a general response to youth crime. Without broad and deep supports and/or opportunities to navigate the difficult social circumstances influencing a child's decisions, the risk of offending/re-offending will remain ever-present. Indeed, as YAC noted in their report, some 30% of those in detention are repeat offenders. Rather than entrenching youth within the criminal justice system, the focus ought to be on supporting families, and the wider community and environment within which youth develop and grow.

Importantly, not only are prisons ineffective, but they are also quite costly (YAC 2013: p9). The Youth Affairs Network of Queensland has noted that it costs nearly \$250,000 to maintain one person in youth detention for one year. Across the country, Australia spent \$438 million on youth detention facilities in 2014-2015 to hold on average 885 youth per night (ACCG 2016). Even so, Queensland saw a significant reduction (from 49 per cent to 35 per cent) in the rate of diversions of young people to alternatives to the criminal justice system between 2009-10 and 2013-14 (QCOSS 2016: p49). Such numbers must give us pause if we as a society are to uphold our responsibilities to provide opportunity and a hopeful future for all youth in Queensland.

From QCOSS' perspective, there is an important need to focus on youth and their wellbeing, and to de-emphasise the role of detention. From this perspective, working to build supportive relationships with youth, their families, and their communities to ensure that all youth have access to a nurturing environment in which to develop is of utmost importance.

Yours sincerely



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