

# better pathways

an integrated response to women's  
offending and re-offending

a four-year strategy to address the increase in  
women's imprisonment in Victoria 2005 - 2009

Phoenix Rising 2005 – Artwork courtesy Glynis





*Phoenix Rising, 2005*

Oil on canvas board

'This picture was done at a particularly pivotal point of my journey in here. I had reached the halfway point of my sentence, and it was very profound, very real. Everything was magnified, and it was a transitional period for me. The only way I could relate to it was to remember that in 2000 we had really bad fire

storms back home, and after days of burning, these amazing red flowers grew through the ashes. They were very obscure looking, but their beauty was so symbolic of relief, and symbolised my own sense of transition and catharsis.'

*Glynis, South African. Artwork produced as part of Somebody's Daughter Theatre Inc. art classes at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre.*



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## Message from the Minister for Corrections

Reducing disadvantage, strengthening communities and improving opportunities so all Victorians can fully participate in Victoria's economic and social life is a key priority of the Bracks Government.

Women prisoners and offenders represent some of the most disadvantaged Victorians, and therefore the release of *Better Pathways: An Integrated Response to Women's Offending and Re-offending* is an important milestone. Many women who come into contact with the criminal justice system have had difficult lives, often punctuated with episodes of sexual, physical or psychological abuse. Many have problems with gambling, substance abuse or suffer mental illness.

I thank the people who have collaborated to produce *Better Pathways*. The strategy tackles the causes of women's offending, provides a range of initiatives to improve opportunities for women at risk of offending or re-offending, including support for their families, and will improve the lives of individuals and the community as a whole.

In the 2005–06 State Budget, the Government provided \$25.5 million to tackle the growth in Victoria's female prisoner population, including \$18.3 million for programs to support women prisoners and offenders, and \$7.2 million for improvements to women's prison facilities. The range of initiatives to be delivered under *Better Pathways* will focus on diverting women from prison custody and breaking the cycle of women's re-offending.

In addressing these issues, the strategy highlights the importance of a coordinated plan of action across Government and the community, highlighting a range of initiatives to reduce the growth in women's imprisonment. It calls on key criminal justice and human service agencies to become involved to help create change.

The *Better Pathways* focus on reducing women's imprisonment and re-offending is a key initiative of *A Fairer Victoria*, the Government's four-year, \$788.2 million plan to address systemic disadvantage and to improve the lives of all Victorians.

I am proud to present the broad range of initiatives that will be implemented under *Better Pathways* over the next four years. I look forward to seeing the benefits of this innovative approach to a critical social issue come to fruition.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Holding'.

**Tim Holding MP**  
Minister for Corrections

# better pathways

## Contents

Summary	4
<b>PART ONE: An overview</b>	<b>6</b>
Introduction	6
Why has <i>Better Pathways</i> been developed?	6
Why has the number of women in prison in Victoria increased?	7
Why do we need a strategy designed specifically for women?	9
Our approach	10
How has <i>Better Pathways</i> been developed?	10
Who has been involved in the development of <i>Better Pathways</i> ?	10
Aims of the strategy	11
What are the aims of <i>Better Pathways</i> ?	11
How will these aims be achieved?	11
What is the Reducing Women's Imprisonment Action Plan?	12
Delivering the strategy	13
What are the timelines for the delivery of <i>Better Pathways</i> ?	13
Who will oversee <i>Better Pathways</i> ?	13
Evaluating the strategy	13
How will the impact of <i>Better Pathways</i> be measured?	13



<b>PART TWO: The strategy in detail</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Reducing women's offending</b>	<b>14</b>
Aim	14
Objectives	14
Future directions	15
<b>Reducing women's imprisonment</b>	<b>18</b>
Aim	18
Objectives	18
Strategy deliverables	18
Future directions	22
<b>Reducing women's re-offending</b>	<b>24</b>
Aim	24
Objectives	24
Strategy deliverables	24
Future directions	31
<b>Reducing women's victimisation</b>	<b>32</b>
Aim	32
Objectives	32
Strategy deliverables	32
Future directions	34
<b>Further information</b>	<b>35</b>
How can I find out more about <i>Better Pathways</i> ?	35
<b>Appendix A: Summary of <i>Better Pathways</i> strategy deliverables</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Appendix B: Women's Correctional Services Advisory Committee – membership</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Appendix C: Glossary</b>	<b>39</b>

# better pathways

## Summary

This document provides an overview of *Better Pathways: An Integrated Response to Women's Offending and Re-offending*, a four-year strategy developed in response to the significant growth in Victoria's female prisoner population over the past decade.

It consists of two parts:

→ **Part One** provides a broad overview of how and why the *Better Pathways* strategy has been developed.

It describes the causes and impact of the increase in Victoria's female prisoner population, including the many complex issues linked to women's offending and involvement with the criminal justice system. It also explains how this evidence has shaped the strategy's collaborative approach, with coordinated effort by criminal justice and human service agencies. Overall, we suggest that we will be more effective in reducing women's offending, re-offending and subsequent imprisonment by acknowledging women's distinct needs, characteristics and life experiences, and integrating these differences into our response.

Part One also sets out the broad aims and scope of *Better Pathways* and describes how the strategy will be implemented, monitored and evaluated.

→ **Part Two** sets out how *Better Pathways* will work, and details initiatives to reduce women's offending, imprisonment, re-offending and victimisation – the strategy's four themes.

It provides an outline of 37 initiatives, including 28 *strategy deliverables* to be implemented over the next four years and nine *future directions* to address issues over the medium to longer term. These initiatives address a range of needs shared by women at risk of offending or re-offending relating to mental health, substance abuse, children and family ties, physical health, sexual assault, family violence, housing, education and training, employment, debt and gambling, and transport.

Finally, Part Two illustrates the many *Better Pathways* initiatives that involve partnerships across government and with the community and private sectors to address the increase in women's imprisonment in Victoria over the next four years and beyond.





## partOne

### An overview

This section provides a broad overview of the evidence that has shaped the design and development of *Better Pathways*. It also describes the strategy's aims, timelines, governance arrangements and how the strategy's effectiveness will be tested.

### Introduction

#### Why has *Better Pathways* been developed?

The number of women in prison in Victoria has more than doubled over the last decade – the current female prisoner population is around 260 compared with just over 100 in mid-1995.

A major part of the increase occurred between 1998 and 2003 when the number of women sentenced or remanded in prison custody in Victoria increased by an alarming 84 per cent – almost triple the growth in our male prisoner population over the same five-year period. In line with the increase in numbers, the rate of women's imprisonment grew from 8.4 to 14.3 per 100,000 of the Victorian adult female population, while as a proportion of all persons in prison custody in Victoria, women's representation increased from 5.4 to 7.5 per cent.

Overall, the evidence shows that the rate of women's imprisonment is outstripping that of men, and in line with national and international trends, our female prisoner population is on a sustained growth curve that has no indication of slowing without intervention.

The implications of women's imprisonment are far-reaching. Social and economic costs are incurred not only by the women themselves, but by their families – especially their children – and the community as a whole. The significant growth in the number of women entering prison custody in Victoria has further amplified these costs and has placed the state's women's prison system – consisting of the maximum security Dame Phyllis Frost Centre (DPFC) in Deer Park and the minimum security Tarrengower Prison in Maldon – under unprecedented pressure. Critically, it has led increasing numbers of Victorian children to experience dislocated and disadvantaged lives, thereby increasing the likelihood that they, in turn, will come into contact with the criminal justice system later in life.



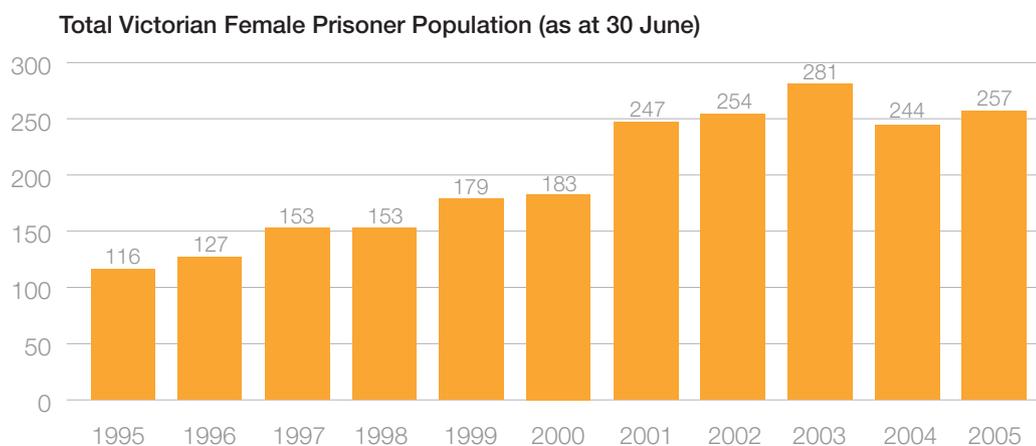
## Why has the number of women in prison in Victoria increased?

Over the last decade in most western countries, broad social and economic factors have led to more women coming into contact with criminal justice systems. In Victoria, specific trends that have driven the increase in our female prisoner population include:

- an increase in the number of women entering prison custody for serious violent offences (ie. robbery offences and offences against the person) and drug-related offending, leading to more women prisoners serving longer sentences;
- an increase in the use of remand, particularly for women with inadequate accommodation and complex treatment and support needs;
- a decline in the use of prison as a ‘last resort’ sentencing option (ie. an increase in the number of women sentenced to their first term of imprisonment who have not previously been sentenced to a community-based order); and
- an increase in the number of women sentenced to a short term of imprisonment (ie. less than one month).

The following factors are also important to understanding why women are entering prison custody in Victoria:

- the proportion of women who are imprisoned for breaching non-custodial orders, particularly suspended sentences (breaches of non-custodial orders account for approximately one tenth of all women received into prison custody annually); and
- the rate of women’s re-offending (approximately one-third of all women released from prison upon completion of their sentence return to prison custody within two years).



## partOne

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In addition to the above factors, we know that women entering prison custody in Victoria share a complex range of unmet treatment and support needs that are linked to their offending, re-offending and subsequent imprisonment. These include:

- substance abuse;
- mental illness, including depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress;
- experiences of sexual assault and/or intimate partner violence;
- poor physical health, including chronic illness and communicable disease;
- limited support networks, including family ties;
- low levels of education and high levels of unemployment;
- inadequate and unstable accommodation; and
- debt/financial difficulties and problem gambling.

To understand the increase in women's imprisonment in Victoria, we also need to recognise the impact of such factors as age, Indigenous status, and cultural and linguistic background.

One of the most notable changes to the profile of Victoria's female prisoner population in recent times has been the significant increase in the number of women prisoners from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, particularly Vietnamese-born women. As at 30 June 2005, there were 25 Vietnamese-born women in prison custody in Victoria, who accounted for approximately one-tenth (9.7 per cent) of the total female prisoner population, compared with just five (3.3 per cent) as at 30 June 1998. The increase in the number of Vietnamese women prisoners has been driven by serious drug offences that are anecdotally believed to be linked to settling debts incurred as a result of problem gambling.

## Why do we need a strategy designed specifically for women?

We know there are many significant differences between women and men who come into contact with the criminal justice system. These include:

- *frequency and seriousness of offending* – women commit fewer and less serious crimes than men and are more likely to be convicted of crimes involving property or drugs that are motivated by poverty, gambling and/or substance abuse;
- *drug influence* – the severity of women’s drug use is more closely related to their offending than it is for men – ie. women are more likely to have committed their offence(s) while under the influence of drugs or to support their drug use;
- *relationships through which offending behaviour develops* – women’s offending often develops through relationships with family members, friends and significant others (eg. partners, support networks and colleagues) rather than the concept of ‘peer associates’ that is commonly cited as a risk factor for men;
- *response to community supervision, incarceration and treatment* – women respond best to relationship-focused and holistic responses that address many of their needs simultaneously;
- *primary carer responsibilities* – women offenders are heavily influenced by their responsibilities and concerns for their dependent children;
- *prevalence of victimisation* – more women than men experience sexual, physical and psychological abuse and these experiences appear to contribute to women’s criminality and shape their patterns of offending; and
- *mental illness, substance abuse and trauma* – the complex impact of mental illness, substance abuse and trauma is integral to women’s offending, and there are higher rates of all three factors for women than men.

Overall, women are a higher need, lower risk offender group than men.

The gender differences outlined above clearly show a need for us to consider alternative ways of addressing women’s offending and re-offending. We need to ensure policies, programs, services and other interventions that address these issues are designed and delivered to reflect the unique needs, characteristics and life experiences of women. Critical considerations include the role of the majority of women offenders as primary caregivers, and the fact that many have also experienced intimate partner violence and sexual assault.

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### **Our approach**

#### **How has *Better Pathways* been developed?**

In developing *Better Pathways*, we have consulted with relevant stakeholders, referred to current research and undertaken extensive data analysis to:

- identify reasons for the increase in Victoria’s female prisoner population and project future growth trends in female prisoner numbers;
- profile the characteristics of Victoria’s female prisoner and offender populations, and compare differences between specific groups of offenders/prisoners including men; and
- review effective correctional responses to women’s offending.

Our research has highlighted the need for a multi-disciplinary approach to addressing the increase in women’s imprisonment in Victoria with input from a range of criminal justice and human service agencies. We need to work together to target factors that contribute to women’s risk of offending in the first instance, explore options to divert women from prison custody, and reduce the risk of re-offending by women involved in the correctional system. With so many women in prison who have experienced trauma and abuse, it is clear we must also address women’s victimisation as part of our response.

#### **Who has been involved in the development of *Better Pathways*?**

A range of government and non-government stakeholders has offered invaluable advice and feedback on the development of *Better Pathways*.

A Reducing Women’s Offending Inter-departmental Committee (the IDC) was established in July 2003 to guide the development of the *Better Pathways* strategy. The membership of this committee included representatives from the Victorian Government departments of Justice, Human Services, Victorian Communities, Education and Training, Premier and Cabinet, and Treasury and Finance. The IDC was chaired by the Commissioner, Corrections Victoria.

Non-government stakeholder input into the development of *Better Pathways* has been provided primarily by the Women’s Correctional Services Advisory Committee. This committee was established by the Minister for Corrections in 2003 to provide an external source of expert advice on the delivery of correctional services to women. The Advisory Committee is chaired by Jenny Mikakos MP, Parliamentary Secretary for Justice, and consists of 14 non-government members with a wide range of knowledge and experience relevant to women’s corrections. The committee’s membership is provided at Appendix B.

## Aims of the strategy

### What are the aims of *Better Pathways*?

The *Better Pathways* strategy has been developed to address the increasing number of women entering prison custody in Victoria. To do this, we need to ensure policies, programs, services and other interventions that address women's offending and re-offending are sensitive to the distinct needs, characteristics and life experiences of women.

The *Better Pathways* framework is based around four themes with corresponding aims:

Theme	Aim
Reducing women's offending	To reduce the number of women who offend
Reducing women's imprisonment	To reduce the number of women who enter prison custody
Reducing women's re-offending	To reduce the number of women who re-offend
Reducing women's victimisation	To reduce the level of women's victimisation

### How will these aims be achieved?

The *Better Pathways* strategy consists of 37 initiatives to reduce women's offending, imprisonment, re-offending and victimisation. Of these initiatives:

- 28 are targeted *strategy deliverables* to be implemented over the next four years; and
- nine are proposed *future directions* for action over the medium to longer term.

The *Better Pathways* initiatives address a range of needs shared by women at risk of offending or re-offending relating to mental health, substance abuse, children and family ties, physical health, sexual assault, family violence, housing, education and training, employment, debt and gambling, and transport. The proposals include policy development, program and service delivery, infrastructure projects, workforce training and development, and research.

A summary of the 28 *strategy deliverables*, including the lead agencies responsible for their development and delivery, is provided at Appendix A.

## partOne

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Some of the key initiatives to be introduced are:

- additional transitional housing for women on bail, including Indigenous women;
- practical support for women offenders undertaking supervised community-based orders, including assistance with managing childcare responsibilities and accessing transport;
- specialist sexual assault counselling, advocacy and support services for women prisoners;
- a Vietnamese liaison officer to assist the large number of Vietnamese women in prison;
- a new 20-bed flexible intensive support unit to accommodate and provide specialist care to women prisoners with mental health care needs;
- upgrades to women’s prison facilities, including renovations to the medical centre, visits centre, and education and prison industries facilities at DPFC;
- a policy framework to guide the delivery of women’s correctional services;
- improved training and employment opportunities for women offenders and prisoners;
- a pilot to assist women prisoners to manage and minimise debt; and
- an extension of the post-release support period for women exiting prison.

An outline of each of the 37 *Better Pathways* initiatives is provided in Part Two of this policy document, beginning on page 14.

### **What is the Reducing Women’s Imprisonment Action Plan?**

Almost all of the 28 *Better Pathways strategy deliverables* to be implemented over the next four years address the need to reduce women’s imprisonment and re-offending. These initiatives have been grouped together as the Reducing Women’s Imprisonment Action Plan. The 25 initiatives included in the action plan, are highlighted at Appendix A.

As a major component of *Better Pathways*, the action plan will be the focus of the strategy’s evaluation. Further detail on the proposed evaluation is provided on page 13.

## Delivering the strategy

### What are the timelines for the delivery of *Better Pathways*?

The *Better Pathways* strategy will be delivered over a four-year period, commencing from 1 July 2005 and continuing through to 30 June 2009.

### Who will oversee *Better Pathways*?

An Implementation Steering Committee will be established in late 2005 to oversee the roll-out and evaluation of the *Better Pathways* strategy. Members will come from a range of Government departments to ensure a broad focus consistent with the aims of *Better Pathways*.

The Implementation Steering Committee will be responsible for monitoring and reporting regularly to government on the progress and outcomes of the strategy.

## Evaluating the strategy

### How will the impact of *Better Pathways* be measured?

The success of the *Better Pathways* strategy in addressing the increase in women's imprisonment in Victoria will be determined by the following measures:

- reduction in the number of women who enter prison custody; and
- reduction in the number of women who re-offend.

Formal evaluation of the *Better Pathways* strategy will focus on the impact of the 25 initiatives that are included in the Reducing Women's Imprisonment Action Plan (see Appendix A).

Key questions to be addressed by the evaluation will include:

- Is the action plan having an impact on female prisoner numbers?
- What has been learned to improve our effectiveness in working with women offenders?
- To what extent has a multi-disciplinary approach contributed to the outcomes?

Agencies involved in *Better Pathways* will also monitor the impact of the strategy initiatives they are responsible for delivering.

## partTWO

### The strategy in detail

This section sets out what *Better Pathways* will deliver. It provides a brief description of each of the strategy's 37 initiatives that are grouped under the four themes of reducing women's offending, reducing women's imprisonment, reducing women's re-offending and reducing women's victimisation.

The initiatives are divided into '*strategy deliverables*' that are to be implemented over the next four years and '*future directions*' for action over the medium to longer term.

### Reducing women's offending

#### Aim:

To reduce the number of women who offend.

#### Objectives:

To reduce women's offending, we need to:

- ensure responses to antisocial and offending behaviour meet the needs of 'at-risk' young and adolescent girls;
- enhance the delivery of human services to address disadvantage and social exclusion experienced by women;
- improve our understanding of the link between women's victimisation and offending behaviour;
- address the link between problem gambling and offending behaviour among women, particularly culturally and linguistically diverse women; and
- reduce the risk of inter-generational offending.





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## Future directions

There is only limited research on women's offending compared to men's, due largely to women's relatively limited involvement in crime and the criminal justice system. Although the increase in women's imprisonment is beginning to reverse this trend, *Better Pathways* identifies the need to address four key gaps in our understanding of women's offending.

### → Understanding the precursors to young and adolescent girls' offending

Prevention and early intervention programs often focus primarily on young and adolescent males who are more likely to exhibit risk factors associated with antisocial and offending behaviour, such as truancy and early school leaving. The increased involvement of women in the criminal justice system suggests that future prevention and early intervention initiatives should be informed by research on the specific risk factors linked to young and adolescent girls' antisocial and offending behaviour. This evidence could also be used to determine how existing interventions might be tailored to better meet the specific needs of 'at-risk' young and adolescent girls.

### → Understanding the link between women's victimisation and offending

We know there is a strong link between women's experiences of abuse, both in childhood and adulthood, and their subsequent offending behaviour. However, the exact nature of this relationship is not clearly understood. Improving our understanding of the link between these issues is integral to the development of effective prevention and early intervention initiatives for women. An increased research effort in this area could also inform the development of programs and services to address the complex relationship between past victimisation, substance abuse and mental illness.

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## partTWO

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### → **Understanding the link between women's problem gambling and offending**

Problem gambling has been identified as a key factor contributing to women's involvement in property offences, particularly fraud. In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that the recent increase in the number of Vietnamese women in prison in Victoria for serious drug offences is linked to problem gambling, specifically the need to repay illegitimate loans offered by 'loan sharks' to recover gambling-related debts.

The relationship between women's problem gambling and offending, including the apparent vulnerability of Vietnamese women to predatory lending and subsequent involvement in serious drug offences, requires closer examination. Improving our understanding in this area will influence the future development of policies targeting women at risk of developing problem-gambling behaviours, including culturally and linguistically diverse women.

### → **Understanding the impact of women's imprisonment on dependent children**

We currently lack a Victorian perspective on the impact of a mother's incarceration on her children, including the increased risk of inter-generational offending. Examining long-term outcomes for the children of women imprisoned in Victoria would provide insight into the effect of women's imprisonment on their children, and the implications for other family members, caregivers and community support agencies. The findings from this research could inform the development of future prevention and early intervention initiatives targeting young children and adolescents who have experienced, or are continuing to experience, the impact of maternal incarceration.



## partTWO

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### **Reducing women's imprisonment**

#### **Aim:**

To reduce the number of women who enter prison custody.

#### **Objectives:**

To reduce women's imprisonment, we need to:

- ensure court diversion initiatives meet women's gender and cultural needs;
- enhance accommodation options and access to treatment services for women on bail;
- enhance the judiciary's response to gender and cultural issues;
- ensure legal defence and court advice is sensitive to women's gender and cultural needs; and
- enhance confidence in the use of non-custodial sentencing options for women offenders.

#### **Strategy deliverables**

*Better Pathways* will work towards reducing women's imprisonment by:

##### → **Establishing dedicated transitional housing for female CREDIT/Bail Support Program clients**

**Lead agencies: Office of Housing, DHS and Magistrates' Court of Victoria**

Many women, particularly those with inadequate accommodation and complex treatment and support needs, are placed on remand after their arrest and initial court appearance. This has contributed to the increase in women's imprisonment and continues to place pressure on the women's prison system.

The Bail Support Program (now known as the CREDIT/Bail Support Program) was established to improve the chances of eligible defendants being granted bail and successfully completing the bail period. This is achieved by providing a range of support services, including assistance in accessing accommodation and referral to treatment programs. The program is linked to the Transitional Housing Management Bail Support Program Housing Pathways Initiative, established under the Victorian Homelessness Strategy, to provide transitional housing and support to Bail Support Program clients with a history of homelessness. Demand for the transitional housing established under this initiative consistently exceeds supply, and suitable safe and secure alternative accommodation options for female CREDIT/Bail Support Program clients are extremely limited.

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To address the issue of limited housing as a barrier to diverting women from being remanded in prison custody, 10 supported transitional housing properties will be established for dedicated use by female CREDIT/Bail Support Program clients and their children. It is estimated that up to 30 women could be diverted from prison custody each year through their placement in these transitional housing properties.

→ **Establishing dedicated supported transitional housing for Indigenous women on bail**

Lead agencies: Indigenous Issues Unit, DOJ, and Office of Housing, DHS

There is an outstanding need to address bail and remand issues to reduce Indigenous peoples' increasing over-representation in the criminal justice system. In Victoria, Indigenous women are more likely than non-Indigenous women to enter prison custody on remand. They are also more likely to be released from remand to bail without spending any part of that imprisonment under sentence.

To address the issue of housing as a barrier to Indigenous women being granted bail, two dedicated supported transitional housing properties will be established for use by Indigenous women and their children. It is anticipated that at least one of these properties will be located in a rural or regional area of Victoria.

→ **Working with the judiciary to provide information to judges and magistrates on the effectiveness of sentencing orders for women offenders**

Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ

Corrections Victoria will work with key organisations, such as the recently established Sentencing Advisory Council and Judicial College of Victoria, to share information with the judiciary about the effectiveness of various sentencing options for women offenders.

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## partTWO

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### → **Sharing research on women offenders with defence lawyers**

Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ

Throughout the development of the *Better Pathways* strategy, members of the legal profession have expressed an interest in data being collected and analysed to provide them with a clearer picture of the female prisoner population.

Corrections Victoria will work with peak bodies such as the Law Institute of Victoria to identify opportunities to share research findings from Victoria and other jurisdictions, including trends in women's offending and sentencing outcomes.

### → **Developing and delivering training for community corrections officers on court advice and assessment reports sensitive to women offenders' needs**

Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ

The Community Correctional Services (CCS) Court Services Unit provides assessment reports to the Magistrates' and County Courts for defendants who may be eligible for a supervised community-based order. This includes recommendations on appropriate order conditions and suitability for specialist programs. The unit also coordinates advice and access to treatment services for high-risk defendants and defendants with multiple, complex or special needs.

A training module will be developed and delivered to CCS Court Services Unit staff to ensure the specific needs of female defendants are taken into account when preparing assessment reports and court advice. This will include consideration of factors that may impact on a woman's capacity to comply with the conditions of a community-based order including, for example, competing primary carer responsibilities.

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→ **Providing practical support to women offenders on supervised community-based orders**

Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ

Female offenders are more likely to breach supervised community-based orders by failing to comply with order conditions rather than by re-offending. Consultation with CCS staff and research from other jurisdictions indicates that many women experience difficulty complying with the conditions of community-based orders due to competing primary carer responsibilities and transport difficulties. Around 50 per cent of women offenders in Victoria have primary carer responsibilities for a child or other dependent.

To assist women offenders to successfully complete supervised community-based orders, a program will be established to provide practical support to up to 500 women offenders undertaking those orders annually, including assistance with managing childcare responsibilities and accessing transport.

→ **Employing specialist women offender advisors in Community Correctional Services**

Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ

Women currently comprise less than one-fifth of Victoria's total offender population and are located throughout Victoria. This presents a challenge for building the expertise of community corrections staff in managing women offenders.

To address this issue, Corrections Victoria will deploy a number of specialist women offender advisors across the community corrections workforce. The role of these advisors will include providing advice to staff and management, and strengthening relationships with community-based agencies that provide treatment programs and support services for women offenders.

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## partTWO

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### → **Developing and delivering training for community corrections officers on the supervision of women offenders**

Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ

The recently endorsed *Correctional Management Standards for Community Correctional Services (2005)* establish minimum requirements for community corrections in Victoria. The standards specify that CCS will provide comprehensive in-service training programs in offender management, and that staff training and development programs will reflect current correctional research and best practice.

Building on the role of the specialist women offender advisors, a training module on the appropriate supervision and management of women offenders will be developed and delivered to community corrections staff.

### **Future directions**

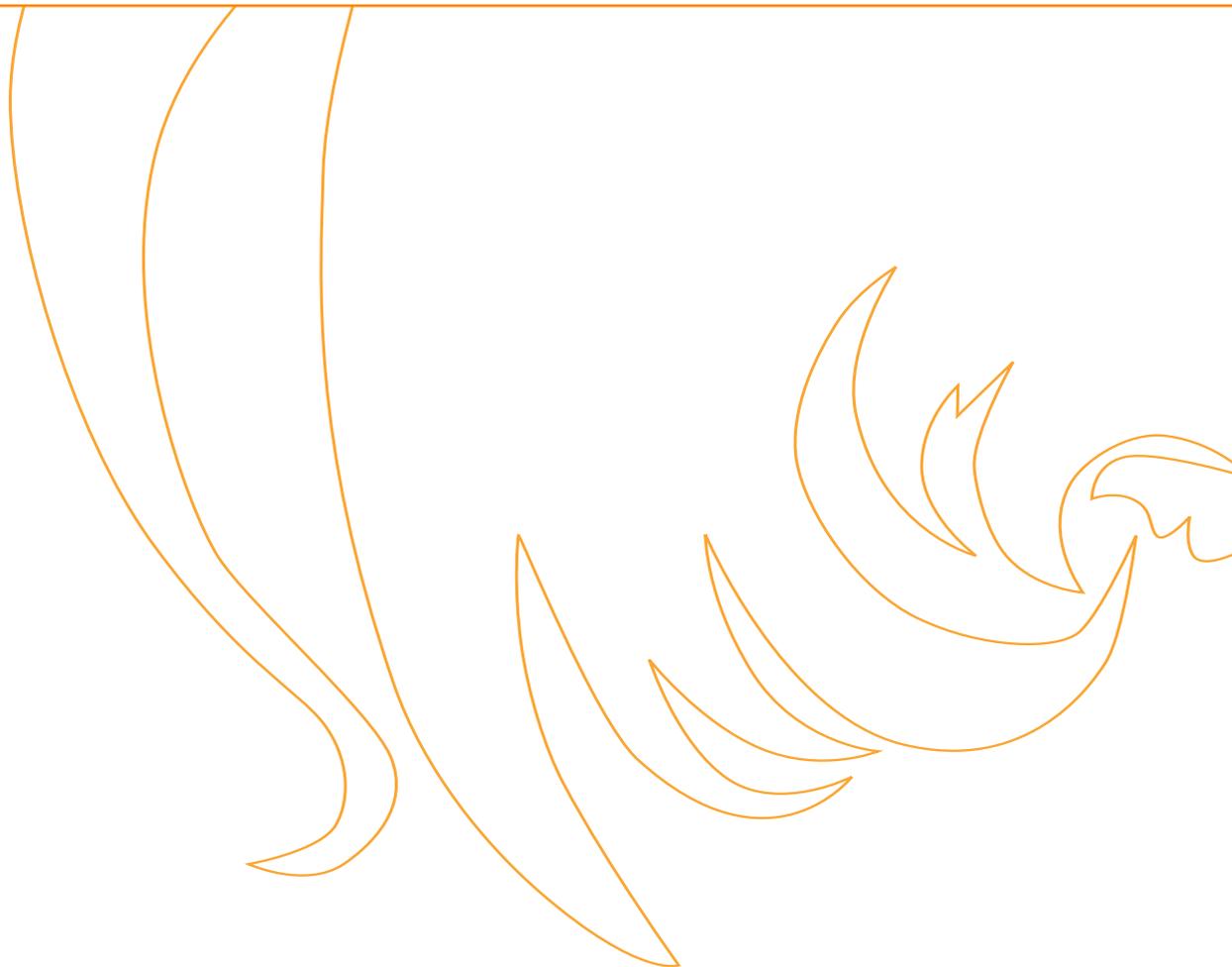
Looking ahead, *Better Pathways* identifies the following initiative to reduce women's imprisonment over the medium to longer term:

### → **Recognising program participation as community work hours for offenders on community-based orders**

Lead agencies: Corrections Victoria, DOJ, and Criminal Law Policy, DOJ

Offenders undertaking supervised community-based orders are currently unable to have their participation in rehabilitation programs recognised as part of the unpaid community work requirements of their order.

We will work to establish whether program attendance hours, including hours undertaken to complete programs such as life skills or financial planning courses, should be credited towards the community work component of a supervised community-based order.



## partTWO

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### Reducing women's re-offending

#### Aim:

To reduce the number of women who re-offend.

#### Objectives:

To reduce women's re-offending, we need to:

- ensure correctional programs and services are sensitive to women offenders' and women prisoners' gender and cultural needs;
- enhance access to community-based services and supports for women offenders;
- enhance mental health and drug treatment services for women offenders, women prisoners and women exiting prison;
- improve prison infrastructure to support the delivery of programs and services for women prisoners;
- enhance access to education, training and employment opportunities for women offenders, women prisoners and women exiting prison; and
- enhance access to community-based services and supports for women exiting prison.

#### Strategy deliverables

*Better Pathways* will work towards reducing women's re-offending by:

##### → **Developing a women's correctional services framework**

Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ

Women offenders share a range of distinct needs, characteristics and life experiences that impact on their responses to programs and services that address issues related to their offending behaviour. To maximise women offenders' rehabilitation outcomes, we need to ensure all aspects of correctional practice are sensitive to women's specific gender and cultural needs.

Some examples of how correctional services have been adapted to better meet women's needs include the establishment of a residential Mothers and Children Program to enable children up to school age to live with their mothers in custody, and a pilot to trial an alternative way of conducting personal searches of women prisoners. Work is also under way to develop a new set of standards for the management of women prisoners.

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To sustain these developments over the longer term, Corrections Victoria will develop a women's correctional services framework. This will include a unifying set of principles to guide the development and delivery of women's correctional services. The framework will also address prisoner classification, prison disciplinary processes and the use of force.

→ **Developing and implementing a risk assessment tool for women offenders**

Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ

Compared with men, women are typically a low-risk and high-need offender group. Women offenders respond best to integrated responses that address multiple areas of need at the same time. We are gradually improving our understanding of the factors that increase the likelihood of women re-offending and know they may be different from those for men.

In response to this evidence, we will develop, test and implement a risk assessment tool specifically for women offenders. It is anticipated that this tool will enable a more accurate prediction of the risk of women's re-offending and will also allow us to deliver programs and services that are appropriate to women offender's individual needs.

→ **Deploying a full-time Vietnamese liaison officer for the women's prison system**

Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ

Vietnamese-born women make up the fastest growing group within Victoria's female prisoner population. Currently, they represent approximately one-tenth of all women in prison. However, cultural factors, including language, present a major barrier to engaging Vietnamese women prisoners in programs and services, including those that are integral to identifying and addressing risk factors linked to their offending.

To ensure correctional services are sensitive to the cultural needs of women offenders, a full-time Vietnamese liaison officer will be employed in the women's prison system. The liaison officer will provide advice on, and raise awareness of, cultural issues among prison staff; help women access programs and services and provide practical assistance, including support to maintain family ties; and deliver or arrange interpreting and translating services as required.

## part TWO

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### → **Ensuring prisoner health care is responsive to the needs of women**

Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ

Standards for the delivery of health care services for prisoners in Victoria have recently been redeveloped. In addition, work is under way to develop a set of standards for the management of women prisoners in Victoria. These standards will incorporate guiding principles relevant to the provision of health care services, including mental health care, across the women's prison system. These policy developments provide an opportunity to ensure prisoner health care services are responsive to women's needs.

### → **Expanding the Aboriginal Women's Mentoring Program**

Lead agencies: Indigenous Issues Unit, DOJ, and Corrections Victoria, DOJ

The Aboriginal Women's Mentoring Program was established in 2002 as an initiative of the Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement (2000). This program offers Indigenous women undertaking supervised community-based orders a flexible model of supervision, and mentoring and support provided by female Indigenous Elders/Respected Persons. The program's dual aims are to improve order completion rates and reduce re-offending.

The Aboriginal Women's Mentoring Program has been praised for its high standard and has achieved positive outcomes. In response, we will expand the program beyond its current operation in northern regional Victoria.

### → **Establishing a new flexible intensive support unit at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre**

Lead agencies: Corrections Victoria, DOJ, and Mental Health Branch, DHS

Compared with male prisoners and women in the general community, female prisoners are more likely to have serious mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder, personality disorders, depression and anxiety disorders. Being in prison can exacerbate mental health issues and, if left unmanaged, this can heighten the risk of self-harm and harm to others. Failure to address mental health issues can also prevent prisoners from accessing the programs, services and supports that are so important to their successful rehabilitation and reintegration following release from custody.

To better meet the mental health needs of women prisoners, a 20-bed flexible intensive support unit will be established at DPFC to provide accommodation and specialist care, including 24-hour nurse staffing. The unit will provide a flexible mix of beds, including acute care beds for women with serious mental illness, sub-acute beds for women in the recovery phase following an acute psychotic episode, psychosocial beds for women with severe personality disorders, crisis care beds for women at risk of suicide or self-harm, and aged care beds for women prisoners with age-related mental illness (eg. dementia).

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→ **Expanding and upgrading the medical centre at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre**

Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ

Women prisoners have a poorer health profile and higher rates of a range of health issues, including chronic illness and communicable disease, than women in the community. The health needs of women prisoners are often made more complex by past experiences of intimate partner violence and sexual assault, as well as mental illness and chronic substance abuse. The increasingly complex drug treatment needs of some require opioid substitution therapies to be provided by skilled practitioners.

The existing medical centre at DPFC will be upgraded to provide a new multi-purpose room for health promotion and education, and consultation rooms for clinics. It will also include a new dispensary system and post-dose supervision area for the Opioid Substitution Therapy Program.

→ **Creating new program space at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre**

Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ

Effective rehabilitation is a critical element in reducing women's re-offending.

Corrections Victoria has recently introduced a new Offender Management System that aims to reduce re-offending by motivating offenders to engage in, and continue with, programs and services.

To support the delivery of the Offender Management System across the women's prison system, additional program delivery space will be established at DPFC. A new dedicated place of worship for women prisoners will also be created to further promote offender wellbeing.

→ **Expanding and upgrading the visits centre at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre**

Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ

Around three-quarters of women prisoners had primary carer responsibilities for children or other family members before going to prison. Unresolved family issues, particularly concerning the care and custody of dependent children, can impede a woman's capacity to address issues related to her offending behaviour. Maintaining family ties, including mother-child relationships, can significantly reduce the risk of re-offending and have a positive impact on a woman's reintegration into the community following her release from custody.

In consideration of this, the visits centre at DPFC will be redeveloped to offer extra indoor and outdoor space and a friendlier environment for women prisoners to meet with their families.

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## partTWO

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### → **Expanding and upgrading education facilities at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre**

Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ

Approximately 80 per cent of women prisoners have not completed secondary school. This highlights the need for appropriately targeted education and training programs, including specialist education services for women with specific learning needs. Participation in prison education can also provide women prisoners with the necessary vocational skills to assist them to find employment once released from custody.

The education facilities at DPFC will be upgraded to add more classroom space and other design improvements. These refurbishments will provide an improved learning environment for women prisoners, and will also support the implementation of recommendations arising from the *Review of Education and Training in Victorian Prisons* (2002).

### → **Expanding and upgrading prison industries facilities at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre**

Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ

Around three-quarters of women prisoners were unemployed prior to imprisonment. Participation in prison-based employment, especially prison industries, gives prisoners a chance of gaining new skills that may assist them to find employment after they are released from custody.

Renovations will be carried out on the prison industries facilities at DPFC and will include expanding the workshop area. These changes will make it easier for prison industry staff to teach and supervise employed women prisoners, and will enhance occupational health and safety. The upgrade to the industries facilities will also support the implementation of recommendations arising from the *Review of Education and Training in Victorian Prisons* (2002).

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→ **Ensuring prison-based education and training meets the needs of women**

Lead agencies: Corrections Victoria, DOJ, and Office of Training and Tertiary Education, DET

In 2002, a *Review of Education and Training in Victorian Prisons* was undertaken to analyse current education and training arrangements in Victorian prisons, and the education and training needs of prisoners. The review made 29 recommendations that set the way forward for corrections education and training in Victoria in the future.

Implementation of the review recommendations provides us with an excellent opportunity to ensure prison-based education, training and employment are responsive to the needs of women prisoners. This will also be supported by the introduction of standards for the management of women prisoners in Victoria, which incorporate guiding principles to oversee the provision of education and training programs and employment options across the women's prison system.

→ **Providing employment and training opportunities to women offenders and women exiting prison**

Lead agencies: Corrections Victoria, DOJ, and Employment Programs Branch, DVC

Sustainable, good-quality employment helps to reduce re-offending by women prisoners and offenders. One of the key recommendations from the *Review of Education and Training in Victorian Prisons* (2002) is to strengthen links with appropriate employment assistance for prisoners post-release.

A pilot program will be established to provide women offenders and women leaving prison with employment and training opportunities that will improve their chances of finding ongoing employment. A dedicated case manager will support women who participate in the program.

→ **Increasing the number of suitable worksites and work options for women offenders undertaking unpaid community work hours**

Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ

The *Correctional Management Standards for Community Correctional Services* (2005) specify that women offenders undertaking unpaid community work hours will be offered a wide range of work options and, where possible, these will involve a female supervisor and co-worker.

Corrections Victoria will work to increase the number and range of suitable community worksites and work options, taking into account many women's roles as primary carers.

## partTWO

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### → **Assisting women prisoners to minimise utility-related debt**

**Lead agencies: Corrections Victoria, DOJ, Concessions Unit, DHS, and Energy and Water Ombudsman of Victoria**

The vast majority of women received into prison custody report having some form of debt or financial difficulties. Women are generally more vulnerable than men to the negative effects of debt when they are released from prison, usually as a result of their roles as carers and their related dependence on welfare services.

A pilot will be trialled across the women's prison system to help women prisoners to manage existing debt incurred as a result of unpaid electricity, gas and water bills, and to prevent them from accumulating further utility debt while in prison. The pilot will assist women to cancel direct debit payments, negotiate repayment plans, access information on consumers' rights and responsibilities, and have utilities reconnected.

The pilot is a unique partnership between the public and private sectors and was initiated by Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service with the assistance of the Energy and Water Ombudsman of Victoria. Victoria's electricity and gas retailers, and water companies and authorities are also involved.

### → **Extending post-release support for women exiting prison**

**Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ**

We know that support for women exiting prison is most effective when it is matched to their level of need. Offering intensive support to women with complex needs, including help to access community-based services and treatment programs, can reduce the chances of them re-offending and minimise the risk of them experiencing harm.

To improve outcomes for high-risk and high-need women exiting prison, we will extend the standard post-release support period from six to 12 months for up to 100 women per year.

### → **Improving access to women's health services for women exiting prison**

**Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ**

Women often find it difficult to secure stable long-term accommodation on release from prison, which can result in their frequent relocation throughout Victoria. This presents a significant challenge when attempting to provide consistent post-release support.

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Women's community health services, located throughout Victoria, provide an excellent starting point when linking ex-prisoners to a range of services and supports. These include health, mental health, drug treatment, parenting and family support programs, and sexual assault and family violence counselling. Corrections Victoria will explore with the Department of Human Services the best ways to assist women exiting prison to access women's community health services.

## Future directions

Looking ahead, *Better Pathways* identifies the following initiatives to reduce women's re-offending over the medium to longer term:

### → Addressing the needs of Vietnamese women prisoners

Vietnamese women prisoners have a very different profile to other women prisoners. They are much less likely to have had prior contact with the criminal justice system, yet are more likely to be serving longer sentences (ie. greater than 12 months) due to the serious nature of their offences.

The forthcoming deployment of a Vietnamese liaison officer in the women's prison system will help us to gain greater insight into the specific rehabilitative needs of Vietnamese women prisoners. In turn, this will assist us to develop and offer programs that are responsive to the specific needs of Vietnamese women.

### → Strengthening support for women prisoners with children residing in custody

We recognise the importance of maintaining the bond between mother and child in the early stages of a child's development. In addition to established visits programs, Corrections Victoria's Mothers and Children Program provides for children up to school age to reside with their mother in custody where it is considered to be in the best interests of the child. The program has recently been strengthened by the introduction of a policy to guide its operation, and the deployment of a dedicated program support worker to assist participating mothers and children.

Building on these developments, we will investigate the benefits of purpose-built accommodation for Mothers and Children Program participants following the completion of *Better Pathways* infrastructure enhancements at DPFC.

## partTWO

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### **Reducing women's victimisation**

#### **Aim:**

To reduce the level of women's victimisation.

#### **Objectives:**

To reduce women's victimisation, we need to:

- modify criminal justice system practices and processes that may contribute to or compound women's experiences of victimisation;
- enhance access to legal education, information and advice for women defendants, women offenders and women prisoners;
- enhance access to victim support services for women offenders and women prisoners;
- improve support for the children of women in prison custody; and
- enhance linkages with existing cross-government efforts to reduce family violence and sexual assault.

#### **Strategy deliverables**

*Better Pathways* will work towards reducing women's victimisation by:

→ **Establishing procedures for conducting personal searches across the women's prison system that are sensitive to women's needs**

Lead agency: Corrections Victoria, DOJ

In recognition of the significant number of women prisoners who have experienced sexual and physical abuse, Corrections Victoria commenced a pilot program in 2003 to trial alternative ways of conducting personal searches across the women's prison system. This has involved reducing the number of personal searches conducted at DPFC and using a different method of conducting personal searches at Tarrengower Prison.

Corrections Victoria will continue to monitor, review and refine procedures for conducting personal searches across the women's prison system.

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→ **Providing sexual assault counselling, advocacy and support services to women prisoners**

Lead agencies: Corrections Victoria, DOJ, and Office for Children, DHS

For women prisoners who have experienced trauma and abuse, victim support services, including sexual assault services, are vital to their recovery process and to breaking subsequent cycles of abuse. In turn, providing women prisoners with access to these services can also improve their rehabilitation outcomes.

A program will be established to provide a range of counselling, advocacy and support services for women prisoners who have experienced sexual assault in childhood or adulthood. These services will be provided by a specialist community-based agency and will be available on an ongoing basis at both Victorian women's prisons.

→ **Developing a model of support for the children of women in prison custody**

Lead agencies: Corrections Victoria, DOJ, and Office for Children, DHS

Separation from children is a constant cause of anxiety and stress for women prisoners who carry ongoing concerns about their wellbeing. For dependent children, the impact of their mother's imprisonment can affect development and lead to a prolonged period of instability, dislocation and emotional distress.

A range of programs operate across the women's prison system to encourage contact between mothers and their children. Corrections Victoria will work with the Department of Human Services to explore ways of strengthening assistance for the children of women in prison. This will include matching the level and type of support to the individual needs and circumstances of each child.

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## partTWO

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### **Future directions**

Looking ahead, *Better Pathways* identifies the following initiatives to reduce women's victimisation over the medium to longer term:

#### **→ Enhancing women's access to legal information and advice**

The majority of women who come into contact with the criminal justice system come from a background of profound socio-economic disadvantage and marginalisation. They often lack the resources, skills or opportunities to access legal information, advice and assistance. As a result, these women may have a range of outstanding legal issues including, for example, family law matters. We need to strengthen women's access to legal information, advice and assistance.

#### **→ Enhancing women's access to victim support services**

Experiences of sexual, physical or psychological abuse are extremely common among women who come into contact with the criminal justice system, particularly the adult correctional system. However, many women offenders have not previously been assisted to address their past or ongoing victimisation.

Women's access to victim support services should be enhanced at all points of contact with the criminal justice system, including at the time of court appearance. The imminent delivery of sexual assault counselling, advocacy and support services across the women's prison system will certainly have an impact, but women prisoners also require access to programs and services to address family violence issues.

## **Further information**

### **How can I find out more about the *Better Pathways* strategy?**

Further information on the *Better Pathways* strategy may be obtained by emailing a request to Corrections Victoria:

**[corrections@justice.vic.gov.au](mailto:corrections@justice.vic.gov.au)**

Additional copies of this policy document may be downloaded from the Department of Justice website: **[www.justice.vic.gov.au](http://www.justice.vic.gov.au)**

## appendix *a*

### Summary of *Better Pathways* strategy deliverables

Initiative	Lead agencies	Page
1 Establish dedicated transitional housing for female CREDIT/Bail Support Program clients	OOH (DHS) & MCV	18
2 Establish dedicated supported transitional housing for Indigenous women on bail	IU (DOJ) & OOH (DHS)	19
3 Work with the judiciary to provide information to judges and magistrates on the effectiveness of sentencing orders for women offenders	CV (DOJ)	19
4 Share research on women offenders with defence lawyers	CV (DOJ)	20
5 Develop and deliver training for community corrections officers on court advice and assessment reports sensitive to women offenders' needs	CV (DOJ)	20
6 Provide practical support to women offenders on supervised community-based orders	CV (DOJ)	21
7 Employ specialist women offender advisors in Community Correctional Services	CV (DOJ)	21
8 Develop and deliver training for community corrections officers on the supervision of women offenders	CV (DOJ)	22
9 Develop a women's correctional services framework	CV (DOJ)	24
10 Develop and implement a risk assessment tool for women offenders	CV (DOJ)	25
11 Deploy a full-time Vietnamese liaison officer for the women's prison system	CV (DOJ)	25
12 Ensure prisoner health care is responsive to the needs of women	CV (DOJ)	26
13 Expand the Aboriginal Women's Mentoring Program	IU (DOJ) & CV (DOJ)	26
14 Establish a new flexible intensive support unit at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre	CV (DOJ) & MHB (DHS)	26

Initiative	Lead agencies	Page
15 Expand and upgrade the medical centre at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre	CV (DOJ)	27
16 Create new program space at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre	CV (DOJ)	27
17 Expand and upgrade the visits centre at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre	CV (DOJ)	27
18 Expand and upgrade education facilities at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre	CV (DOJ)	28
19 Expand and upgrade prison industries facilities at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre	CV (DOJ)	28
20 Ensure prison-based education and training meets the needs of women	CV (DOJ) & OTTE (DET)	29
21 Provide employment and training opportunities to women offenders and women exiting prison	CV (DOJ) & EPB (DVC)	29
22 Increase the number of suitable worksites and work options for women offenders undertaking unpaid community work hours	CV (DOJ)	29
23 Assist women prisoners to minimise utility-related debt	CV (DOJ), CU (DHS) & EWOV	30
24 Extend post-release support for women exiting prison	CV (DOJ)	30
25 Improve access to women's health services for women exiting prison	CV (DOJ)	30
26 Establish procedures for conducting personal searches across the women's prison system that are sensitive to women's needs	CV (DOJ)	32
27 Provide sexual assault counselling, advocacy and support services to women prisoners	CV (DOJ) & OFC (DHS)	33
28 Develop a model of support for the children of women in prison custody	CV (DOJ) & OFC (DHS)	33

Note: Initiatives 1-25 comprise the Reducing Women's Imprisonment Action Plan

## appendix**b**

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### **Women's Correctional Services Advisory Committee – membership**

#### **Chair**

- **Jenny Mikakos MP**, Parliamentary Secretary for Justice

#### **Government members**

- **Kelvin Anderson**, Commissioner, Corrections Victoria
- **Brendan Money**, General Manager, Women's Prisons Region, Corrections Victoria

#### **Non-government members**

- **Marilyn Beaumont**, Women's Health Victoria
- **Carmel Benjamin AM**, Chair of the former Victorian Women's Prison Council
- **Jocelyn Bignold**, Melbourne Citymission
- **Maud Clark**, Somebody's Daughter Theatre Inc.
- **Liz Hogan**, Prisoner advocate
- **Alina Jonas<sup>^</sup>**, Caraniche
- **Sandra Kahan<sup>†</sup>**, Caraniche
- **Judy Lazarus**, formerly CEO, Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders
- **Andrea Lott**, Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders
- **Stephen Myall**, Law Institute of Victoria
- **Cam Nguyen**, Australian Vietnamese Women's Welfare Association
- **Liz Thomas\***, Flat Out Inc.
- **Arati Vidyasagar**, Federation of Community Legal Centres (Victoria) Inc.
- **Lisa Ward**, Lisa Ward Consulting
- **Daphne Yarram\***, Chair of the former Binjirru Regional Council, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission

\* Former Women's Correctional Services Advisory Committee member

<sup>^</sup> To February 2005

<sup>†</sup> From April 2005

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## appendix C

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### Glossary

CCS	Community Correctional Services
CLP	Criminal Law Policy (Department of Justice)
CREDIT	Court Referral and Evaluation for Drug Intervention and Treatment
CU	Concessions Unit (Department of Human Services)
CV	Corrections Victoria
DET	Department of Education and Training
DHS	Department of Human Services
DOJ	Department of Justice
DPC	Department of Premier and Cabinet
DPFC	Dame Phyllis Frost Centre
DTF	Department of Treasury and Finance
DVC	Department for Victorian Communities
EPB	Employment Programs Branch (Department for Victorian Communities)
EWOV	Energy and Water Ombudsman of Victoria
IDC	Inter-departmental Committee
IIU	Indigenous Issues Unit (Department of Justice)
MCV	Magistrates' Court of Victoria
MHB	Mental Health Branch (Department of Human Services)
OFC	Office for Children (Department of Human Services)
OOH	Office of Housing (Department of Human Services)
OTTE	Office of Training and Tertiary Education (Department of Education and Training)



## **Further information**

[corrections@justice.vic.gov.au](mailto:corrections@justice.vic.gov.au)

[www.justice.vic.gov.au](http://www.justice.vic.gov.au)

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