

Friday, March 29, 2024

Budget Proposal

Prisoners Aid (ACT) believes that with increased financial support we can play a larger role in the rehabilitation of detainees and former detainees.

The role of Prisoners Aid (ACT)

We have been assisting detainees, former detainees, and their families in the ACT since 1963. Over the years our activities have grown with the establishment of an office in the ACT court building in 1990 and an office at the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC) in 2009. Our court office allows us to offer support to our main clientele and others involved in the courts system, such as victims of crime and witnesses. The AMC office not only assists visitors to the prison, but we also visit detainees.

We are often the first port of call for many of the individuals and families impacted by the justice system. In 2022/23, just over 4,000 contacts were made by clients in person, by phone or by email across our two offices. Many of these individuals were under stress and at a loss as to what to do. Released detainees, in particular, often need help in a range of areas such as, finding accommodation, seeking employment, applying for government benefits, getting onto work-related training courses, obtaining birth certificates, opening bank accounts, managing mobile phones or meeting mandatory reporting requirements. Some are simply hungry, lacking money for food.

We assist all released detainees in need. Our aim is to discourage them from seeing further criminal activity as a way out of their problems. Critically, we are often in contact with released detainees immediately after they have left full-time custody and are partly

or completely without government supervision. We have found that intervention at this point is one of the important factors making for successful rehabilitation. We have won the trust of clients over the years. Most detainees and former detainees are willing to approach our staff and volunteers and to listen to their advice. Another key factor is family support – hence our efforts to support the families of detainees and to maintain family connections, including by helping with visits to the AMC and other prisons. For example, in 2022/23, we paid over \$5,000 in providing travel assistance for people to visit family and friends in prison.

At all times we work closely with the court system, police, Legal Aid (ACT), ACT Corrective Services, Aboriginal Legal Service, the Galambany Court and a range of other government and non-government agencies. We believe that our activities are much appreciated by these organisations as they often approach us for help in dealing with individual cases. We also support around three student interns per semester in a range of study areas from the Canberra Institute of Technology, the Australian National University and the University of Canberra. These students often take up positions in government agencies having learned much about human problems at the coalface.

As ever, much of the support provided does not involve grant expenditure but demands time, skills and patience on the part of our staff, volunteers and interns. The increasing costs of salaries, services we provide and administration together with increased demand from our clients have limited the support we can provide.

Need for a full-time presence at the AMC

Our current ambition is to establish a full-time presence at the AMC using qualified and experienced staff. Whilst volunteers can help to cover gaps and staff absences, they don't always have the requisite knowledge or experience in dealing with vulnerable people. The presence of on-going staff means that clients are more willing to maintain contact with us since they know they will be talking to a familiar person.

At present, our funding permits us to have one full-time and two casual staff members to cover both offices. Our casual workers work 1.5 days a week each at the court and AMC office. Volunteers are sometimes available to conduct visits to the prison on weekends.

Our current funding leaves us unable to provide the level of support required. Our optimal staffing levels would be a full-time staff member at each office to supervise our casual staff. One additional full-time staff member would allow us to provide a more comprehensive service for clients and to keep each office open while a staff member works elsewhere, such as visiting detainees, appearing in court or liaising with other agencies. A full-time staff member at AMC would also be able to liaise proactively with family members of detainees. This staff member would also need to be work weekends, which is a busy and important time for visitors to the prison.

What is critical in our support for released detainees is not so much the money we spend directly on them, but rather the guidance our staff provide and the ability of those staff to refer released detainees to appropriate government and non-government agencies. We have found that what seems most effective in directing former detainees toward rehabilitation is that someone cares about their situation, listens to their grievances, doesn't make judgements and assists them in practical ways and at the time they need help. It also helps that we have no authority or power over the detainees or former detainee.

We believe a modest investment in Prisoners Aid (ACT) would improve the prospects for many released detainees for successful rehabilitation.

While there are many schemes that promise rehabilitation of detainees, most are costly, difficult to organise (because individual needs are different) and don't produce easily measurable results.



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Our experience tells us that experienced and well-trained staff are the best investment. However, paying for staff is our main challenge. In 2022/23 employment-related costs took up 85% of our budget of approximately \$222,000 (from the Community Development Program) plus ad hoc small donations and grants. Direct assistance to clients amounted to 12% of the budget, with administrative costs at 4%. We regularly seek further increases in our grant from the Community Development Fund but with only marginal success. It is apparent that there are many other worthwhile causes competing for a share in this Fund.

Our financial calculations indicate that to fully staff our offices, including the AMC office on weekends, we would require an additional **\$137,000 per annum**.

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