



## Hearing the voices of young people

*Victoria's Independent Visitor Program is providing independent 'eyes and ears' on the experiences of young people in custody in the state. Victoria's Children and Young People's Commissioner Bernie Geary describes its growing role, and moves to develop a charter for young people in youth justice custody that could be a national model.*

The Victorian Ombudsman's 2010 report into the conditions at the Parkville Youth Justice Centre identified the need for more independent oversight of youth justice centres; similar to that which exists in prisons, disability services and mental health facilities.

In response to the report, the Hon. Mary Wooldridge, MP, Minister for Community Services, requested an Independent Visitor Program be developed and managed by the Office of the Child Safety Commissioner, now the Commission for Children and Young People.

In April 2012 our office established the Independent Visitor Program (IVP) at the Parkville Youth Justice Precinct. We are now broadening the program to the Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre, a facility for youth justice clients aged up to 21 years.

The aim of the IVP is to improve the experiences of young people in custody, by providing a mechanism through which matters impacting on young people's day-to-day lives at the centre can be identified and acted on.

At the Parkville Centre on a designated day of each month, Independent Visitors visit all of the units to provide young people with an opportunity to talk about their experiences of being in custody and to raise issues of concern. The Visitors then seek to assist the young people to resolve their issues in a timely matter with staff and management at the centre. Exit interviews are also conducted with young people prior to their release from custody using Exit Interview Questionnaires. These provide young people with an opportunity to provide anonymous feedback about their experiences of being in custody.

Independent Visitors are volunteers with a range of professional and personal backgrounds. They have been selected, trained, appointed and supported by the Commission. The Visitors bring 'fresh eyes and ears' and a community perspective to their visits to the centre, without having any pre-conceived or expert opinions. While the Visitors find the role extremely rewarding, for those who have never previously entered a custodial environment, a visit can sometimes be a little confronting.

Young people have responded well to the program during its first year of operation. Their interaction with the Visitors has improved over time with many young people acknowledging and being able to identify them at the centre. This progress has been assisted by the consistency of the Visitors, who over time have got to know the young people and been able to slowly build a level of trust. Many young people have become more familiar with the role and functions of the Visitors, as word has spread about the outcome



of issues raised by the Visitors. These outcomes have given young people more confidence to seek out the support offered by the Visitors.

Most issues raised by young people relate to their day-to-day living in the centre. For example, since the inception of the program, they have always talked about `food`, be it the quality or the quantity. This issue has always been at the `top of the list` of issues raised each month, except during summer when the issue of air conditioning moved up. These issues and many others continue to be worked through in a timely manner with management and staff at the youth justice centres.

The IVP has provided the Commission with direct insight into the experiences of young people detained in youth justice centres in Victoria. It has given us the opportunity to see and speak to some of Victoria's most vulnerable children and young people; and provide them with an independent person able to express any concerns they may have during this time. It has also provided us with an opportunity to work closely with the Department of Human Services, through adding value to the work undertaken at the centre.

### CHARTER FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN CUSTODY

Understandably, young people are not always sure about their rights and entitlements while incarcerated. To assist with this challenge, the Commission is now considering the development of a charter for young people in youth justice custody, similar to a charter in place for children and young people in all forms of out-of-home care. We hope to undertake this project in

collaboration with young people in custody and other key stakeholders. It is then proposed to take a draft charter to the national forum of Australian Commissioners and Guardians in late 2013, for discussion and consideration of a model that other states and territories may wish to emulate.

In the near future a Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People will be appointed. It is envisaged that the new Commissioner will provide assistance with the development of a culturally appropriate component of the IVP that specifically assists Aboriginal young people in custody at the Parkville and Malmsbury facilities.

While the IVP has been in place for only 14 months, we believe that its independent oversight, engagement of the community in a closed custodial setting and the provision of supported access to issue resolution has contributed to the enhanced safety and wellbeing of vulnerable young people in custody.

As part of the Commission's broader mandate to monitor the lives of vulnerable children and young people, we are interested in promoting the development of an Independent Visitor program for children and young people living specifically in residential care out-of-home settings.

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*Bernie Geary OAM is Principal Commissioner at the Commission for Children and Young People.*

