

V A C R O

Caring For Offenders And Their Families

131st
Annual Report
2003

The Victorian Association for the Care
and Resettlement of Offenders

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PRESIDENT'S REPORT



HIS HONOUR
MR JUSTICE
DAVID HARPER
PRESIDENT.

This is the year in which VACRO reached the venerable age of 130. It has changed beyond recognition in that time, as one must if one is to remain relevant. VACRO is certainly that. As an example, it can point with pride to the publication in September of a substantial booklet entitled **"Getting Out – and how to survive it"**.

Of all the facets of imprisonment, release can pose as many hazards as any other. VACRO is acutely aware of this. In fulfilling its role of caring for offenders and their families, and in giving practical expression to the aspect of 'resettlement' that forms part of its name, VACRO cannot avoid heavy involvement in programmes and other initiatives that are designed to ease the offenders' return to the community and, at the same time, reduce the incidence of recidivism.

The advice and information contained in the newly-released booklet should make an invaluable contribution to the successful reintegration of many former prisoners. Pierz Newton-John and all those at VACRO who assisted in its production are to be congratulated. VACRO itself is in turn grateful for the help of many individuals and organisations: the Victorian Law Enforcement Drug Fund, the Office of the Correctional Services Commissioner, the staff of CORE, Port Phillip Prison and Fulham Correctional Centre, Melbourne City Mission, the Adult Parole Board, Centrelink, the Hepatitis C Council of Victoria, Employment Directions and Moreland Hall and the prisoners of the Melbourne Assessment Prison, Port Phillip Prison and the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre who participated in the focus groups during the research phase of the Project.

This year has also been noteworthy in other ways. For my part, two events are of special significance. The first is the election of John Griffin to the Chairmanship of VACRO. No-one could be better credentialled for this position. He has held many senior positions in the

prison service, culminating in his appointment to head CORE between 1995 and 2001.

During this period, John won universal recognition for his remarkable qualities in that most demanding of vocations. Among these, his gifts of compassion and understanding made him a natural friend and valuable supporter of VACRO. Since his appointment as Executive Director, Courts, John has been free to become directly involved in VACRO'S governance. We are very fortunate that he has been prepared to accept our invitation to assume the mantle of Chairman.

A contrasting note has been struck with the resignation of Noel Curtin as Treasurer. No-one could have given VACRO better service in that position. Noel has been unstinting and selfless in his dedication to VACRO and, in particular, to its financial welfare. He leaves with our most sincere gratitude. Our debt to him is immeasurable.

Fortunately, the Council has been able to cushion the effect of Noel's resignation by the addition of Barbara Worcester to its ranks. Like John Griffin, Barbara brings to the Council a wide range of experience, including that obtained in the prison service. I welcome her very warmly, and thank her for her willingness to serve VACRO by joining its Council.

I also thank Judith Lazarus, and the staff and volunteers at VACRO, together with all the members of Council, for another year of devoted commitment to their vitally important work.

His Honour Mr Justice David Harper
President.

It has taken many years of commitment and hard work for VACRO to develop the high level of credibility that it now enjoys within the correctional system. There are few organisations which can claim, as VACRO can, to enjoy the trust and respect of both the correctional system and prisoners alike. We are proud of this hard-won reputation and strive continually to maintain and improve it.

There is, however, a paradoxical downside to this level of credibility. VACRO's reputation attracts increasing demands on the organisation from a wide range of sources. For example, the court system, the prisons, community correctional services and associated post-release agencies utilise VACRO's services and expertise on a daily basis. This level of demand is steadily increasing.

Community education is a service that VACRO is increasingly called upon to provide. Requests come from universities, service groups, primary schools, government departments and independent welfare providers who wish to utilise our knowledge and expertise of the wider correctional system. We consider this to be a vital role for the organisation, particularly when we note that the broadening of VACRO's role as a community educator was one of our redefined aims when the organisation changed from the Prisoner's Aid Society to VACRO in 1976.

An exciting development of the past year has been the successful publication of the post-release resource book *Getting Out and How to Survive It*, which is now in its second printing. Following on from this is the development of another publication which will be aimed at the families and significant others of people in prison.

A sad event of 2003 was the passing of Fr John Brosnan, OBE, VACRO's Vice-President. Fr Brosnan will be remembered by most Victorians for his role as prison chaplain at Pentridge for many years. He is sadly missed.

Our other Vice-President, Dame Phyllis Frost, AC, DBE, has not been experiencing good health of late and we send her our very sincere best wishes.

This year, with regret, the Council has accepted the resignation, after many years' service, of one of its eminent members, Mr Robert Kerr. Rob has contributed significantly to VACRO during his time on Council. We wish to acknowledge this contribution and thank him sincerely for his time, energy and expertise.

We were very pleased to welcome Mr Roger Dench and Dr Jane Hendtlass to our Council. Both Roger and Jane bring significant talents and expertise to our organisation and we look forward to their contributions over the coming years.

I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the continued support of Ms Penny Armytage, Secretary of the Department of Justice, Mr Kelvin Anderson, Commissioner of Correctional Services and the management of all public prisons, Port Phillip Prison and Fulham Correctional Centre. Their on-going co-operation and support is greatly appreciated.

I would like to thank our President, the Honourable Mr Justice David Harper, Council members, staff members and our Chief Executive Officer Judy Lazarus for their continued support and dedication over the past year. I look forward to working with you and facing the challenges awaiting us in 2004 with enthusiasm.



John Griffin
Chairman.



JOHN GRIFFIN
CHAIRMAN.

EXECUTIVE REPORT



JUDITH LAZARUS
CEO.

The past year has provided VACRO with new challenges and exciting opportunities to establish new projects that empower, support and inform members of our community connected to the criminal justice system. Providing opportunities for new learning and skill development empowers marginalised groups to improve their lives. This premise underpins crime prevention philosophy.

Over the past year Corrections Victoria has developed a transitional support framework, which aims to maximise the integration of transitional support programs. This integration ensures that programs are not implemented in isolation and are effectively co-ordinated. VACRO is very much committed to this model of service delivery, which will ensure the provision of the best possible assistance to our client group.

In the coming year VACRO will establish a Women's Mentoring Program for women exiting the Victorian prison system. The Program was originally established by Carmel Benjamin AO, as a pilot program. Subsequent funding has now been obtained through the R E Ross Trust and the William Buckland Foundation for VACRO to elevate this service to a new level, over a two-year period. In co-operation with Corrections Victoria, the current Program's model has been developed within the new transitional framework and will provide the opportunity for women exiting prison to really connect with the community. I would like to acknowledge the support of the R E Ross Trust and the William Buckland Foundation in funding the project and thereby realising this Program's potential.

A new Good Beginnings Program is currently being implemented at Fulham Correctional Centre. This is a partnership between Fulham Correctional Centre and VACRO. The Program is supported by funding provided by the R.E. Ross Trust and ACM. I would like to acknowledge Mr John Myers, General

Manager of Fulham, for his recognition of the value of this important parenting resource and for the support already provided to VACRO throughout the implementation of this Program.

The VACRO Good Beginnings Program at Fulham provides prisoner fathers with the opportunity to enhance their parenting skills. Given, the profound need for pro-active intervention in this regard, the importance of parenting skills development whilst fathers are living in an education-friendly environment cannot be overstated. To ensure the Program establishes its own unique identity, it is located in a portable building purchased by VACRO and will be known as the VACRO Good Beginnings Parent Resource Centre.

The VACRO Good Beginnings Program at Dhurringile Prison, at Murchison East continues to develop. This Program also has its own designated space and is consequently well established at Dhurringile. The Dame Phyllis Frost Centre and Barwon Prison both currently provide Good Beginnings Programs, under federal crime prevention funding. Since VACRO has implemented our Good Beginnings programs, other prisons around the state have expressed interest in also becoming part of this VACRO initiative. We are currently exploring with prison managements at these sites how these might be funded.

A state-wide VACRO Good Beginnings Project would enable prisoners to continue their parenting education at any prison location. Not only would this consolidate the learning and support so needed by prisoner parents, but the long term benefits to prisoners' children cannot be underestimated. The children of prisoners are the silent victims of crime and, sadly, have a much higher chance of becoming imprisoned than those children in the community without a parent in the system.

Judith Lazarus
In addition to the funding government provides, VACRO is able to provide a

Bridging the Gap

Bridging the Gap (BTG) is an intensive pre- and post-release support program for offenders classified as at high risk of reoffending or relapsing into drug use. The Program is based on an integrated support model addressing the range of support needs of released offenders, including building family relationships, accessing drug and alcohol treatment, finding accommodation and employment. Approval for ongoing (4 year) funding for the Bridging the Gap Project was granted earlier this year and the current model of support services among the five provider agencies has been rolled over until June 2004.

To ensure that the practice wisdom that has developed over the life of the Program is not lost, and to foster a co-operative method of program provision, a Providers' Network was established to ensure that best practice learnings can be recorded and shared with others.

This has been a very challenging program, for both staff and clients, as the target group are offenders considered most disadvantaged by poly-drug use and a significant history of offending and imprisonment. BTG clients, due to their histories of institutionalisation and inconsistent family relationships, frequently have difficulty understanding the concept of support, as distinct from supervision and control. Establishing a foundation of trust presents unique challenges for case workers.

The regular and reliable support offered by the BTG Program has enabled these clients to experience, sometimes for the first time in their lives, a relationship with a member of the 'straight' (law-abiding) community who works with them as they attempt to remain in the community. Prior to involvement with this Program, many clients would have assumed that

reoffending would preclude them from re-accessing support from the Program. However, staff have successfully engendered a level of trust and confidence on the part of clients that enables them to return for Program assistance repeatedly, despite setbacks.

Bridging the Gap has highlighted the need for an integrated, whole of government approach to reducing recidivism. It is heartening to observe that in 2003, there is a suite of transitional support programs in Victoria, of which Bridging the Gap has been the flagship.

It is exciting to look to the future of the Program, as it will continue to evolve over time. The development of the Providers' Network has been a significant outcome as it ensures that our collective practice wisdom is recorded and utilised.

VACRO would like to acknowledge the comprehensive and insightful evaluation undertaken by Dr Stuart Ross from the University of Melbourne. The information from this document will provide invaluable directions for future planning. VACRO Bridging the Gap staff Megan Gregory and Leanne Harris continue to deliver a fantastic service to our clients. We recently welcomed Arif Ongu to our team and look forward to maintaining this high quality Program into 2004.

VACRO AOD (Alcohol and Other Drug) Program at HM Prison Won Wron

A major aim of this Program is to reinforce the drug education and treatment program information that prisoners have already received in the prison system. It also offers the opportunity for those serving shorter sentences who have not undertaken drug education to participate in the Program.

The VACRO AOD Program at Won Wron offers prisoners an educative opportunity to learn about the associated health risks, such as HIV and Hepatitis C, safer behaviours if abstinence is not possible, and referral to community agencies for further support upon release. The focus of the Program is release-related harm reduction and sessions are delivered in

groups, as well as individual counselling, when required.

We experienced a change of VACRO staff at Won Wron this year and we were very pleased to welcome Max Edwards to this position. Max has brought a range of skills and interests to the role, which has invigorated our suite of AOD programs and imbued them with his distinctive style.

The next year will provide many challenges as the prison approaches its decommissioning, and we wish management and staff well as they move into the coming year.

Family Liaison at the Melbourne Assessment Prison (MAP)

The Melbourne Assessment Prison is the first contact with the prison system for male offenders. It may also be the first point of contact for their families and visitors. VACRO has long recognised the stress that can be associated with visiting a prison, especially when there has been no other contact with the criminal justice system.

The VACRO Family Liaison role focuses on family relationships, offering support and information to the many visitors to the prison and liaising with other agencies such as the Department of Human Services. It is often a distressing time for families as they struggle to come to terms with the imprisonment of a family member. Some of the issues addressed by the Family Liaison worker include how to tell children of a parent's imprisonment, how to manage other family members' reactions to the situation, addressing care and custody issues impacting on children of prisoners, assistance with the retention of public housing during short-term imprisonment and referrals to a broad range of other crisis-oriented services.

This year VACRO has been involved in the planning and development of the children's visit area, in collaboration with custodial staff at MAP. We have been impressed by the level of enthusiasm and support demonstrated by custodial staff members involved in this project. It is gratifying that prison staff acknowledge the benefits for child visitors in reducing the stress and negative impact which can sometimes result from visiting a parent in prison. This joint endeavour is evidence that we can all work together to improve prison environments and how they impact upon the children of prisoners.

Making the children's area a pleasant and 'kid friendly' space is a fantastic way that VACRO and correctional staff work cooperatively to enhance our service delivery.

Danielle Evans has moved from AOD Programs Facilitator at Won Wron to the role of Family Liaison at the MAP.

VACRO Welfare Service at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre (DPFC)

The welfare service provided at DPFC manages a diverse range of issues relating to the families and children of women in custody. Leonie Poynter, Senior Welfare Worker and Naomi Gulliver, Case Worker, provide a number of services, including crisis counselling, family law issues and liaison, Office of Housing negotiation and advocacy. Liaison with other government departments, particularly the Department of Human Services (DHS), as well as family members and children of the women at DPFC is also an important aspect of the role.

A significant number of interactions centre around the interface between

prisoner mothers and their children in the care of the Department of Human Services (DHS). The volume of DHS related issues and the sensitivity of matters relating to children in DHS care, culminated in VACRO staff meeting with DHS Head Office staff to discuss the possibility of developing protocols to guide DHS staff in accessing and communicating with women prisoners at DPFC.

Increasingly, individual counselling has been provided to prisoners to assist them in such areas as assertiveness and self-esteem, stress and conflict management and communication skills.

VACRO Good Beginnings (VGB) Program for Fathers in Prison

VACRO is very pleased to announce that we are now providing the VACRO Good Beginnings Program across two prison sites, at H.M. Prison Dhurringile, in Murchison East, northern Victoria and at Fulham Correctional Centre, near Sale, in the state's south-east.

The Program aims to assist prisoner fathers to develop their parenting skills and improve their relationships with their children, with the long-term aim of reducing intergenerational patterns of offending. Prisoners who are subject to legal orders restricting access to any family members are not eligible for participation.

The VGB Programs have been tailored to suit the very different needs of each prison site and have a very flexible capacity to meet the respective populations' requirements.

Maureen Quinn commenced her role at Dhurringile in September and has made a fantastic contribution to the Program in a short space of time. Mick Ripon and

Max Edwards, who job-share the position at Fulham in the newly created VGB Parenting Resource Centre, are settling well into their roles. Job-sharing allows for a more streamlined service delivery, which will cover mainstream, protection and Nalu, the new youth unit, which was officially opened in September.

The needs of each of these sites are much determined by the differing stages of imprisonment of the participants. Dhurringile, which is a minimum-security facility, for example, has many short-term prisoners, who are either completing short sentences, or their last, pre-release phase before returning to the community. Fulham, on the other hand, has a more 'stable' prisoner population, as it is a medium-security level site, holding more longer-term prisoners.

Those prisoners serving a longer sentence are able to address issues associated with parenting from prison, whilst those who are soon to be released are assisted by preparatory information relating to

reestablishing family relationships outside in the community.

The additional visit, which occurs periodically throughout the Program, is a key element of the uniqueness of this model, in that it provides otherwise unavailable father-child space for the participants, facilitated without the presence of the primary care giver. This enables the fathers to gain experience in relating appropriately to their children, as modelled by the VACRO staff member, who can process the various interactions with the group, after their families have left the prison.

Significant learnings are achieved through this non-judgemental teaching process. The fathers get an important opportunity to practise their newly acquired parenting skills and communicate with each other about

feelings arising from this process. In the event that there are any negative circumstances, such as an arranged visit falling through, or a child becoming distressed for some reason during the visit, these occurrences can also be addressed by the facilitator, either individually, or within the group. Creating a 'norm' of communication of feelings, either positive or negative, allows for a significantly useful outcome for the prisoner participants. The flow-on effect is obvious and has a broad application in their future interpersonal interactions, not confined only to their family relationships.

Since the VGB Program has been running at Dhurringile, we have had expressions of interest from other prisons, which we hope can materialize into new VGB Programs across Victoria in the foreseeable future.

Travel and Accommodation Services for Prisoners' Families

VACRO continues to provide assistance to families visiting prisoners in rural and metropolitan prisons.

We know from experience that the stresses and financial hardships that impact the families of offenders can be further exacerbated by the inconvenience of having to travel long distances in order to keep family relationships intact.

New Castlemaine Visitors' House

This year, we are happy to announce an additional resource now available to those people visiting H.M. Prison Tarrengower, at Maldon in central Victoria and H.M. Prison Loddon, at nearby Castlemaine.

In partnership with the Sisters of Charity, VACRO has opened Blake Cottage, a house in Castlemaine that provides accommodation for women and children of prisoners at these two prisons.

Based on a hospitality model, visitors to

this house are met by two of the Sisters and welcomed on arrival. Simple meals may also be offered and families are able to relax and prepare for their visits to the prisons, in a caring and non-judgmental atmosphere.

We thank the Sisters of Charity for their community-minded generosity and look forward to a long and happy association with them in the provision of this very important community resource.

Rail Tickets

Our very popular rail tickets are still available and continue to be used regularly by travellers once every six weeks. In the year between 1st September 2002 and 1st September 2003, this program assisted 756 adults and 228 children.

Aboriginal Family Visits Program

Our Department of Justice funded travel program for Aboriginal people provides travel and accommodation assistance for

families visiting relatives in prison. For the same period, 204 adults and 175 children utilised this Program to travel to Victorian prisons and 142 adults and 142 children were assisted with accommodation.

Mulwilla House

VACRO provides a two-bedroom unit for visitors to H.M. Prison Beechworth. As

this prison is soon to be upgraded to a modern correctional facility, we anticipate that the demand for accommodation support for families travelling up to the north-east will continue. The unit has been used constantly over the last twelve months.

Prison Information and Helpline

This vital program services not only our client group, but also those in the wider community who need assistance and information relating to the correctional system in Victoria.

Many country-based welfare associations also use the Helpline to assist ex-prisoners and families needing support after the imprisonment of a family member, especially when the prisoner has been transferred from a country town to the metropolitan system and the family are totally unfamiliar with Melbourne.

The comprehensive range of information pertaining to prisons' locations, regulations and access hours provided by the Helpline is utilised by both city and country agencies needing to negotiate the prison system. Information is provided to community-based welfare staff visiting their clients in prison for the first time, as well as the families of prisoners who may also be struggling with the associated shame and stigma of having a relative in prison. Many callers have expressed

appreciation for the information and the manner in which it is provided.

Prison staff also approach VACRO for information about associated issues such as post-release accommodation, drug treatment in the community and other related issues facing their clients post-release. Inter-agency referral constitutes a major part of the Helpline's service provision.

Many callers express their relief at being able to obtain important information about the system, as well as a non-judgmental response from the VACRO staff offering support. Sometimes, family members just want to hear a friendly voice, as they confront the isolating effects of imprisonment.

Many ex-prisoners call us wanting to know their rights in relation to discrimination against people who have a criminal record, with regard to obtaining employment, for example.

Support Program for Families of People Convicted of Major Crimes, Including Sex Offences

A trend VACRO has observed over the past year is the increasing number of people who come into the prison system after having committed a major crime of violence whilst either under the influence of drugs, or due to a psychiatric condition. This raises several issues. One major difficulty facing families of people who commit offences whilst suffering from drug-induced psychoses is that many mental health services will not provide psychiatric treatment for people under the influence of drugs. This frequently places the burden of managing the psychotic individual onto the shoulders of the family.

Additionally, when major crimes are committed under the influence of psychiatric illness, the offenders and their families are frequently totally unprepared

for the consequent involvement with the criminal justice system. Extremely high levels of trauma, shame and social stigma are experienced in these cases, with families being at a loss as to how to continue with their lives after such an event.

Sex offences, on the other hand, often bring with them a level of denial, in both offenders and their families, which requires a different type of support and educative interventions. This is a highly specialised field and our senior social worker Helen Smart co-facilitates a sex-offender treatment group with Corrections Victoria. Helen also runs a parallel counselling service for family members who need assistance in working through the realities of their family members' offending behaviour patterns.

Support Group for Parents of Offenders

We are constantly welcoming new participants to the Parents' Support Group which has been operating at our Hardware Street premises for four years.

A constant factor over the duration of this Program is the prevalence of drug offence convictions among their imprisoned adult children. This raises group issues concerned with drug treatment possibilities for their children, addictive behaviour patterns, associated property crime (often directed at parents), and the personal boundaries required by parents in their ongoing attempts to cope with their child's drug use.

At any one time, parents are at different stages of acceptance or denial about

their children's responsibility for their actions. As with all VACRO programs, clients are encouraged to make their own choices, and assisted to consider the options and their probable outcomes, rather than given advice.

Many parents have expressed their appreciation for the opportunity that the VACRO Parents' Group provides for them to express their feelings of anger, frustration, shame and grief. Some parents feel unable to express these feelings with other family members, and appreciate the anonymity and confidentiality of the Support Group's space at VACRO. The group meets once a month and enjoys a Christmas break-up party in December.

OPUS Project at H.M. Prison Tarrengower

The OPUS Project for women at Tarrengower continues to provide a range of Alcohol and Other Drug treatment services, through Caraniche Psychological Services and through VACRO's personal and pre-release preparation programs.

On 25 June 2003, a new multi-purpose centre was opened, named after Tarrengowers' late governor, Noel Brooks. The new centre has office and group space for programs staff as well as women participating in programs and a large activities area for use by prisoners and their visitors.

This year, Emma Law, Laura Sorbello and Lynne Ecclestone from the Clinical Services Unit of Corrections Victoria undertook an evaluation of the OPUS Project. OPUS staff, Meredith Hillebrand and Bronwyn Jackson, as well as custodial staff and prisoners participated in questionnaires and interviews addressing the programs and their environment at Tarrengower.

Although the findings were unreleased at the time of going to print, anecdotal

evidence suggests that OPUS continues to deliver well-targeted programs which meet the needs of the prisoner population, within Tarrengower's busy timetable and local community participation commitments. This reflects the general positive feedback from women completing the program evaluations.

An important aspect of the integrated program delivery operating at both DPFC and Tarrengower is the provision of information about Tarrengower to women at DPFC. This is a regular information session delivered by a group of peer prisoners who can answer questions about OPUS from other women who are considering participating in this unique Project.

VACRO has recently welcomed a BRIT Community Services-Welfare Studies student on placement at Tarrengower. In the company of Meredith, Vicki Wilkinson has had some hands-on experience in co-facilitating group programs, which address parenting skills and pre-release issues.

CSEPP

We are now in our second year of this ground-breaking Program, providing employment support to prisoners at H.M. Prisons Dhurringile and Loddon. We are now able to enhance our service delivery to CSEPP clients by utilising the resources of the Bridging the Gap Program to provide integrated support.

The Program, which specifically targets potential employees while they are in prison, utilises case-management and specialised assistance for job-seekers. Our CSEPP staff member, Janine Murray, provides pre-employment training inside both prisons. Clients are then connected with community-based employment consultants who assist them with

employer-liaison and practical support once they are released. Recently we have increased our staff contingent at Loddon and welcome Lisa Natoli to the Program.

Many of those seeking assistance have had little work experience, or an erratic work history. Ironically, sometimes an individual's major 'barrier' to obtaining employment is his perception that he is unemployable. Pre-release training and groupwork addressing self-esteem, motivation and the creation of a resume based on a personalised 'skills-audit' counter the general lack of confidence resulting from their current situation and its attendant feelings of shame, guilt and disappointment.

Over the past year there has been particular satisfaction for VACRO staff, in the observation of a change in participants' attitudes. Prisoners' despair at never being able to secure employment has been gradually diminished and is being replaced by an attitude of pride in their skills-base and a readiness to 'have a go' at working post release.

There are, however, other measures of success resulting from the participants'

learning. Staff have received excited phone-calls from ex-prisoners relating their achievements, such as finishing a landscaping training course, finally getting a driver's licence, or even completing their parole commitments after many previous unsuccessful attempts. It is not only the CSEPP participants themselves who benefit from these successes. The positive flow-on effects for their families and children cannot be underestimated.

VACRO Prisoner Banking and Property

When a person goes to prison, there are a host of practical issues that need to be addressed. Property may need to be stored and financial matters addressed. Families struggle to manage the practical realities of imprisonment while they deal with the emotional effects. VACRO provides direct assistance with the financial and property storage needs of prisoners, assisting the families with these concerns.

This Program is provided within the strict guidelines pertaining to prison security requirements and in collaboration with custodial staff in all prisons.

During the course of the past year, VACRO's Prisoner Property and Banking Service has continued to respond to the increasing demand. In order to continue to manage the high number of requests, VACRO has this year implemented specialised software to automate many procedures and improve overall efficiency. In addition, a guide to services was produced during the year, and is now distributed to all prison sites. This has clarified and improved prisons' and

prisoners' understanding of the service and has achieved a marked reduction in phone enquiries, further streamlining service delivery.

The value of the Banking and Property Service can be gauged by the volume of requests, which this year has exceeded three thousand, resulting in nearly four and a half thousand banking transactions overall, including over 2,500 individual payments to prisoners' canteen accounts. The total amount of funds transacted over the year exceeds \$700,000. Prisoners sign an authority form, which allows VACRO to access their bank accounts and complete these financial transactions.

An extraordinarily diverse range of requests is handled by the service, from the storage of irreplaceable children's photos to assistance with payment of outstanding obligations to rental properties and utilities.

VACRO will ensure that we continue to develop our systems to support the efficient and effective management of this Program.

This has been a big year for projects at VACRO. *Getting Out and How to Survive It*, VACRO's post-release survival guide, has now been out for a year, and has received an extremely positive response. The formal evaluation of the project, conducted by Turning Point, noted that the "guide's content was of a high standard", that it was "well thought-out and structured", that the language was "well pitched to the target group" and that the design was "visually appealing". Many positive comments were also made about the guide's illustrations.

A similar project has now been undertaken by CRC Justice Support in New South Wales, who have requested permission from VACRO to base their publication on VACRO's work. Other states have also expressed interest in producing their own versions of the booklet, and have requested copies of the guide. The demand for the booklet from government and community agencies in Victoria has also been very high, in fact exceeding supply.

VACRO has now published the second edition of the guide, which, in addition to an updated and expanded list of services, incorporates new information about women's health, acquired brain injury and mental health issues, as well as a more detailed section on Centrelink. Corrections Victoria has generously funded the printing of an expanded print run of 8,000, allowing the guide to be supplied in quantity to Community Correctional Officers, the Adult Parole Board and other agencies. VACRO is also pleased to note that a recent report to Corrections Victoria, detailing the recommended model for transitional support services in Victoria, suggests incorporating the guide as a core component of Victoria's future transitional service system, thus making it likely that *Getting Out* will become a long-term fixture in Victoria's prison system.

VACRO was also delighted to receive news that it was successful in applying for funding for a project to create a video 'version' of *Getting Out*. The video project, funded by the Victorian Law Enforcement Drug Fund (VLEDF), will aim to give prisoners with low literacy levels access to similar information as is provided in *Getting Out*. It will also support and encourage the use of the guide by prisoners, especially post-release, and reinforce the core messages of the booklet. VACRO has engaged the services of a video production house to produce the video, and we are confident on the basis of the company's previous work that the final product will be entertaining, informative and motivational. We are very grateful to the VLEDF for its continuing support.

Another project that VACRO has been keen to undertake for some time is a booklet providing information to the families of prisoners. There is an enormous range of issues confronting these families, from the practical to the emotional, and currently very few comprehensive sources of reliable information. VACRO has received funding from the Collier Foundation to produce a booklet to be provided free of charge to these families. It will cover issues such as dealing with prison visits, the trauma of witnessing the arrest and incarceration of a loved one, what to tell children, and how to negotiate with the prison system. The booklet, which, like *Getting Out*, will be of a professional production standard, will be an exciting opportunity for VACRO to document much of the implicit knowledge and practice wisdom the organisation has accrued about many of the issues faced by this hidden population of secondary victims of crime. We would like to express our appreciation to the Collier Foundation for its support of this project.

VACRO PROJECTS FOR 2002/03

Another new project, generously funded by an anonymous private donor, is a monthly newsletter for prisoners and their families. The newsletter will provide information about current programs being offered within the system, as well as other educational material, such as information about dealing with children's visits, pre- and post-release issues, and so on. This project will have considerable scope for imaginatively addressing a range of important issues. It will also improve access to information for prisoners and families, who are frequently forced to rely on the notoriously inaccurate 'prison grapevine' for information about programs and events within the system. VACRO greatly appreciates the generosity of the donor who has offered to fund this project. Due

to the difficulty in attracting funding from the community, donations such as this are very gratefully received, as they make possible projects which we would otherwise be unable to implement.

The rapid expansion of VACRO's projects this year has made it necessary to take on a new full-time staff member to assist Pierz Newton-John, the senior project worker. VACRO welcomes Debbie Zaks, who will be responsible for contributing to the new projects, as well as writing funding submissions. The latter role is particularly vital since the departure of Ann Cunningham, whose contributions over the years, especially in a fund-raising capacity, have been of inestimable value. Thank you Ann!

TREASURER'S REPORT

VACRO has enjoyed another excellent year in terms of its expansion and development of programs and services.

Programs are now fully-funded and continue to address the myriad needs of our client group in a range of innovative programs.

We are pleased to announce an operating surplus of \$110,631, a significant improvement on last year's deficit of \$23,179. Approximately 50% of the year's operating surplus derived from a one-off return resulting from the profit on sale of VACRO's Sale property. Council has approved monies from this sale to remain in the Sale area and to finance a facility for use within Fulham prison.

The improvement in VACRO's financial situation reflects the ongoing dedication, commitment and financial skills of our Chief Executive Officer, our Accountant,

Jey Jeyakumaran, and the co-operation of other VACRO staff. They are to be commended for their endeavours in this regard.

Again we express our gratitude to the Department of Justice, the Philanthropic Trusts and individual benefactors who continue to remember and value our work.

Thank you to VACRO management and staff for their assistance throughout the year. I am sure the year ahead will bring more rewards and challenges and I look forward to my future involvement.



Barbara Worcester
Acting Treasurer.

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