

Wednesday, 19 September, 2001

**Speech by the Hon K Trevor Griffin, MLC
Attorney General, Minister for Justice,
Minister for Consumer Affairs**

**OPEN THE PROBATION AND COMMUNITY
CORRECTIONS OFFICERS ASSOCIATION
ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2001**

Jeff Andrews, President

Interstate visitors, ladies and gentlemen,

For those of you visiting South Australia, I welcome you and express the hope that you will enjoy your stay and I'm sure you will experience the warmth of South Australians welcome. I hope, too, that you'll have some time to visit some of the major features we have to offer.

The best place to start when considering the effort that should be put into the rehabilitation of offenders is the recognition that 98% of offenders are going to be released from detention at some point. Most of these are incarcerated for relatively short periods although regardless of the length of imprisonment I am sure that the experience of imprisonment is not one to be repeated. It also has severe impacts upon what an offender can do when released.

In our State, our sentencing law provides that imprisonment as a penalty should be the last resort, yet there are calls for tougher and tougher penalties that ignore reality and look for the quick fix. I have a view that penalties have to be fair and firm and that victims must be supported but we must also put significant energy into preventing persons from becoming victims in the first place or being re-victimised. Good work is happening right across our justice system to overcome the problems of crime and its consequences. There is innovation and reform, much more than there may at first seem.

As probation and community corrections officers you will understand the importance of your role in the justice system so today I want to touch upon some other areas of our justice system which may add to your perspective.

In South Australia we have a Justice Portfolio, which in so far as it relates to the justice system, includes the Attorney-General's Department, Police, Corrections, Courts and the Director of Public Prosecutions. It also includes the emergency services and other agencies.

We recognise that there is a flow-on effect from one agency right across the justice system and even in related agencies such as Human Services.

We also try to look for ways to work with other portfolios, especially Human Services, in areas such as drug treatment and Education and Children's Services for programs involving young people and schools.

Key elements to our approach to offenders are the use of diversionary programs, restorative justice and the involvement and support of victims, wherever practical.

Aboriginal Court Days or the 'Nunga Court' started at the Port Adelaide Magistrates Court. The Magistrate moves down to sit at the bar table with the parties in criminal matters involving Aboriginal defendants. Aboriginal community representatives are present and the emphasis is on finding a means to show the serious way in which our communities view criminal behaviour and to ensure the penalty is complied with. The program has been extended to the regional cities of Murray Bridge and Port Augusta. The result of this initiative is an increased level of attendance at Court hearings by defendants and a much higher level of compliance with the obligations imposed by the Court.

The Mental Impairment Court is an innovative program which I notice New South Wales is starting to pick up. The Court undertakes incredibly important work in identifying offenders with mental health problems, working with them on treatment options and providing on-going follow-up and personal services.

Crime was an almost daily event for many participants in the program before they were involved in the Mental Impairment Court. An evaluation found that 88 percent of

participants who finished the Mental Impairment Court program did not re-offend. The long term well-being of people with a mental impairment is also being improved with the acceptance by participants of their need for medical support and the importance of them taking their medication. That is a win-win for all involved.

Another diversionary court is the Drug Court operated in South Australia from the Adelaide Magistrates Court. Like all drug courts it took a while to settle down, but it is now starting to show some good outcomes. There is no doubt the use of a court environment to promote treatment and rehabilitation, even where the offender is not the most willing participant, does work in some cases. The link between an offender's drug taking and his or her criminal behaviour must be addressed as a necessary pre-condition to preventing long term re-offending.

We have established a domestic violence court as part of the Violence Intervention Program, an initiative that is the subject of a workshop this afternoon. VIP works with families where domestic violence is occurring to make sure the perpetrators, almost always men, who have committed acts of domestic violence against their partners are given, in no uncertain terms, an understanding of the criminality of their actions. They are also given help to address things such as parenting skills, anger management, cognitive and language skills, anything that may be required to assist in addressing the particular issues arising in each complex domestic situation.

I have a passion for crime prevention initiatives. If we can prevent crime before it occurs we can significantly reduce the overall level of crime and victimisation in our community. There have been good positive outcomes from some programmes. Repeat victimisation is a major target of our crime prevention initiatives. We know that a good deal of crime occurs as repeat instances. Through the Local Crime Prevention Program we target repeat crimes such as break and enters. We use volunteers to educate people who have been the victim of a crime about the ways to improve the security on their property.

We also target repeat domestic violence through the 'NDV' or end domestic violence project - that program places increasing levels of pressure on offenders and increased support for victims at each police call-out to the same scene. That is operating in two police local service areas and is showing good results. The number of recorded call-outs jumped significantly in

the early stages because the true level of reporting started to be known, but the number of those going on to become repeat reports has been low. It is generally thought that 40-50% of domestic violence is a repeat incident so reducing repeat domestic violence reduces the overall amount.

The State is due to commence its Police Drug Diversion Scheme for adults in about two weeks. That scheme targets people identified as having a drug problem, both young people and adults who have committed a minor offence, with assessment of their drug treatment needs being a priority. We know that the sooner a person is able to access drug treatment the greater the chance of being successfully able to get that person away from drug use. The old systems based on assessment panels didn't have enough flexibility and could not meet quickly enough and, so, the new system was specifically designed to address this problem. Offenders in all instances will be assessed within five or six days, rather than up to sixteen weeks as happened in the past, and then referred to appropriate treatment.

Drug use by offenders is a serious problem and our corrections system does put a lot of work into reducing the use of drugs by offenders, because it is commonly known that a large number of offenders have serious drug use problems. One recent study showed that 60% of young offenders admitted to secure detention used drugs at the time of their most recent offence, yet only a quarter said they thought they had what they would personally describe as a problem with drugs or alcohol. Just as disturbingly about 43% of young offenders in the same study said people in their family had a problem. It is clear that in treating offenders we need to start to cast the net more widely and target the whole family environment if we are to successfully address criminal offending related to substance use.

Restorative justice is a major feature of our Juvenile Justice System, with family conferences having the involvement of victims or their representatives in about 60% of conferences. Personal apologies, compensation and other obligations are a way to bring home to young offenders the seriousness of their actions. Victims get a lot out of the experience as well. Our Juvenile Justice system has been in place in South Australia since 1994 and the number of young people coming into contact with the juvenile justice system has fallen about 13% since then. The number of offences being committed by young people has also fallen. These results are not well known in our community.

Victims are also a strong feature of a new minor shop theft initiative. A significant problem with shop theft has been that the effort of reporting and testifying for victims was very time consuming and it didn't matter if the item stolen was worth \$1 or \$100. A new Shop Theft Infringement Notice system is being initiated in the next few months after legislation passed earlier this year. That sets up a new way of dealing with instances of minor shop theft, below \$30 in value and from \$30 to \$150. It gives the victims more say in the way the matter is dealt with, either through apologies, compensation or other obligations or using the usual court process. It will mean the items stolen will be able to be returned to the victim quickly and the offender will face his or her victim and face the consequences of their offending straight away, rather than being delayed.

The Correctional Services Department is within the Justice Portfolio and it recognises that most of the offenders coming into secure detention will not be staying long. Twenty one percent of the sentenced population will spend less than three months under the supervision of the Department. That is one reason why up front services are important, dealing with people as soon as they come into contact with the criminal justice system. The window of opportunity may not be open long.

There are a number of very innovative programs working with young people and families. The Police in Schools program which is working with primary and secondary schools in the northern suburbs of Adelaide and in regional centres such as Port Pirie. The SA Police have Blue Light Camps at Iron Knob in the mid-north and Rendelsham in the South East and Discos at primary and secondary schools, working with both young offenders and school groups.

There are initiatives at the local council level, with State Government funding support such as Tea Tree Gully's Drug Offensive. That project has involved a Youth Focus Group developing pro-choice anti-drug material for their peers and the Life Education organisation visiting schools in the area, with over 5000 primary school students attending its classes.

There are a lot of very positive things happening. And all of that is before we even start to consider the programs targeted at those who are in secure detention or on parole. Over the next few days you will come to hear of programs operating through the Correctional Services Department such as the Nursery and Orchard Project, involving olives, date palms, mulberry

trees and citrus trees at the Port Augusta prison, and MOWCamps working to build things such as walk ways in the Coorong National Park and carrying out maintenance work in the Dangali Conservation Park and in the Gammon Ranges. Prisoners are also working with Greening Australia to propagate and plant hundreds of thousands of seedlings.

Another major feature of this work is the assistance of about 100 volunteers, which helps the offenders re-engage with the community. They assist with transport, medical visits, Housing Trust interviews, pre-release home visits, Centrelink appointments and TAFE programs. Their work is immeasurable and they are vital to the work of community corrections centres.

As you can see we do have a comprehensive approach. One size does not fit all and it is not an easy fix, but there is a high level of cooperation across agencies.

I notice the previous conference was entitled “what works”. From the South Australian Government’s perspective there is no one strategy that works - it must be a teamwork based, whole of system approach. We have to make sure that people don’t fall through the cracks.

I’m sure you will see that South Australia does take the responsibility of developing innovative and effective programs to prevent crime very seriously, and that we take a big picture view. But we are open to new ideas and will look forward to hearing about your programmes and ideas during the conference (we won’t be averse to “stealing” some - you are welcome to draw on ours).

I am pleased to formally open the Probation and Community Corrections Officers Association 2001 Annual Conference.

Further information is available from departmental web sites such as.

Department of Justice www.justice.sa.gov.au

Office of Crime Statistics www.ocs.sa.gov.au

Crime Prevention Unit www.cpu.sa.gov.au

Courts Administration Authority www.courts.sa.gov.au

Correctional Services www.corrections.sa.gov.au