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Sandy Cook  
Executive Officer  
Drugs & Crime Prevention Committee  
Parliament House  
Spring St, East Melbourne Vic 3002

Dear Ms Cook,

The Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA) would like to thank the Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee for the opportunity to provide a submission to the *Inquiry into the impact of drug-related offending on female prisoner numbers*.

This inquiry is an important opportunity to address a neglected and often overlooked area. Relatively little attention has been paid to the specific and unique characteristics of female offenders; the links between drug-use and female criminality and the specific needs of women imprisoned for drug-related offending. This Inquiry provides scope to develop strategies to reduce the number of women in Victorian prisons for drug-related offending and, importantly, improve outcomes for female prisoners.

As you know, VAADA is the peak body for alcohol and drug services in Victoria. We provide advocacy, leadership, information and representation on AOD issues.

As the state-wide peak organisation, VAADA has a broad constituency. Our membership and stakeholders include drug treatment agencies, consumer advocacy bodies, hospitals, community health centres, primary health organisations and others.

VAADA purpose is to ensure that issues for those experiencing the harms associated with alcohol and drug misuse, and the organisations that support them, are well represented in policy and program development and public discussion.

### *The impact of drug-related crime on the female prisoner population*

Even though women constitute a minority of prisoners in Victoria (only 6.5 per cent of all Victorian prisoners), the female imprisonment rate has grown by 58 per cent between 1999 and 2009.<sup>1</sup> Drug and alcohol use, substance dependence and drug-related offending feature heavily in the profile of Victorian female prisoners.

Findings from the Australian Institute of Criminology's (AIC) Drug Use Monitoring in Australia (DUMA) points to some interesting gender differences in the relationship between drug use and crime. They found a stronger association between drug use (particularly illicit drug use) and offending for women and that women's drug use typically precedes their offending.<sup>2</sup> They also note 'women may also become more quickly entrenched in offending and drug use than do men.'<sup>3</sup>

The Australian Institute of Criminology has estimated that '39 per cent of women's offending, at a national level, could be attributed to drug or alcohol dependence: 30 per cent to dependence on illicit drugs, eight per cent to dependence on alcohol, one percent to dependence on concurrent alcohol and illicit drugs'.<sup>4</sup>

Gender differences have been found in the types of drugs used by male and female offenders. For instance, female offenders are likely to have higher rates of illicit drug use, are more likely to have injected drugs and are more likely to have used drugs such as amphetamines, heroin and cocaine as well as illegal use of prescription drugs such as benzodiazepines.<sup>5</sup>

Although VAADA was unable to locate specific figures on the number of women imprisoned on drug-related offences in Victoria, we believe drug-related crime has made a significant contribution to Victoria's growing female imprisonment rate and that a substantial proportion of female prisoners are serving drug-related sentences.

### *The demographic profiles of women in custody for drug offences and the types of drug offences*

Women in custody for drug offences are likely to be disadvantaged on a range of social and economic indicators including health, housing, education and employment. Significant numbers are likely to be responsible for the care of dependent children; be living in public housing; have lower-levels of education than Australian women generally and lower rates of employment.<sup>6</sup>

A recent study of prisoner health in Australia found a high proportion of female prison entrants with a history of mental health problems (57%) and high rates of psychological distress (50%) and self-harm (31%) among

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2009) *Prisoners in Australia*, Cat. No. 4517.00

<sup>2</sup> Loxley, W. & Adams, K. (2009) *Women, drug use and crime: findings from the Drug Use Monitoring in Australia program*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.

<sup>3</sup> Loxley, W. & Adams, K. (2009) *Women, drug use and crime: findings from the Drug Use Monitoring in Australia program*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, p.18

<sup>4</sup> Loxley, W. & Adams, K. (2009) *Women, drug use and crime: findings from the Drug Use Monitoring in Australia program*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, p.17

<sup>5</sup> Forsythe, L. & Adams, K. (2009) 'Mental health, abuse, drug use and crime: does gender matter?' *Trends and Issues in crime and criminal justice*, no. 384, November 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Loxley, W. & Adams, K. (2009) *Women, drug use and crime: findings from the Drug Use Monitoring in Australia program*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, p.7.

female prison entrants.<sup>7</sup> Research has also found a strong relationship between drug use, crime and prior experiences of physical and sexual abuse among female detainees.<sup>8</sup>

Research has shown that Indigenous women in custody<sup>9</sup> are further disadvantaged than their non-Indigenous counterparts. In one study, Indigenous women were found to be most likely to be involved in minor offences; were most likely to be involved in violent crime; and to use alcohol more heavily.<sup>10</sup> Intergenerational patterns of social disadvantage, violence and trauma must be considered when responding to Indigenous women in prison.

*Underlying causal factors which may influence drug-related offending by women, including offending that result in women entering custody*

‘Research indicates the pathways into drug use and crime differ for males and females’<sup>11</sup>

Causal factors which may influence drug-related offending by women are many and varied. Current or previous experience of mental illness has been shown to be associated with drug use and offending among women<sup>12</sup> and VAADA calls on the Committee to examine the rates of dual diagnosis among the Victorian female prisoner population and strategies to support women with a mental illness and substance use issue.

A strong relationship has been found between drug use, offending and experience of childhood abuse. Other causal factors that may influence drug-related offending among women include poverty and social disadvantage. An AIC study found:

Female police detainees were more likely to be using ‘harder’ illicit drugs...and were also more likely to have been arrested for a property offence. This could provide some support for the argument that females commit crime as a way to fund their drug use.<sup>13</sup>

We encourage the Committee to consider the structural determinants of drug use in its work on this Inquiry.

*Strategies to reduce drug-related offending and repeat offending by women, including strategies to address underlying causal factors*

VAADA believes a number of strategies could be considered by the Committee to reduce drug-related offending and repeat offending, including strategies to address underlying causal factors.

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<sup>7</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2010) *The health of Australia’s prisoners 2009*, Canberra: AIHW.

<sup>8</sup> Again, this study refers to female police detainees rather than prisoners. Forsythe, L. & Adams, K. (2009) ‘Mental health, abuse, drug use and crime: does gender matter?’ *Trends and Issues in crime and criminal justice*, no. 384, November 2009.

<sup>9</sup> This particular study looked at police detainees not prisoners.

<sup>10</sup> Loxley, W. & Adams, K (2009) *Women, drug use and crime: findings from the Drug Use Monitoring in Australia program*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.

<sup>11</sup> Forsythe, L. & Adams, K. (2009) ‘Mental health, abuse, drug use and crime: does gender matter?’ *Trends and Issues in crime and criminal justice*, no. 384, November 2009, p.1.

<sup>12</sup> Forsythe, L. & Adams, K. (2009) ‘Mental health, abuse, drug use and crime: does gender matter?’ *Trends and Issues in crime and criminal justice*, no. 384, November 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Forsythe, L. & Adams, K. (2009) ‘Mental health, abuse, drug use and crime: does gender matter?’ *Trends and Issues in crime and criminal justice*, no. 384, November 2009, p.5.

VAADA believes it is necessary to develop a range of drug-treatment, harm-reduction, mental health and social support services for women imprisoned on drug-related offences.

Strategies at a policy level:

- Updating the Victorian Prison Drug Strategy to provide a current policy framework from which to implement specific strategies and programs
- Developing a Women's Prison Drug Strategy in recognition of the complex and multiple needs of female drug-related offenders

Strategies at a practice and program level:

- Increasing the use of suspended sentences, diversion, community-based orders, and courses such as drink driver training as forms of punishment that keep people out of prison
- Given the high rates of female prisoners with mental illness and drug and alcohol dependency, it is vital that female prisoners have access to medications and substitution therapies when entering detention
- improving mechanisms to identify and provide access to alcohol and other drug treatment services in prisons for women with a drug and alcohol dependency
- improving mechanisms to identify and provide access to mental health, counselling and other support services for women in prison
- Harm reduction strategies and programs are needed in prisons, including a trial of needle & syringe programs, to reduce the risk of blood-borne virus transmission
- improving transitional supports and treatment options for women exiting prison to assist their reintegration into community and reduce their risk of re-offending
- increasing funding for community-based treatment options for non-violent drug-related offences
- structural reforms targeting the causes of inequality and poverty

Thank you once again for the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry. Please do not hesitate to contact VAADA should you require additional information.

Yours sincerely



Sam Biondo  
Executive Officer  
VAADA