

# parity

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## I Shall Be Released: Post-Release and Homelessness





# Flat Out Inc: Finding Ways to Meet the Need

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*Flat Out is a small women's feminist organisation that provides post-release support and advocacy to criminalised women. Flat Out was established in 1988 by activist group 'Women Against Prison,' and continues to be informed by a commitment to decarceration and the long-term abolition of prisons. Flat Out directly supports and advocates alongside women in multiple areas of their lives, including physical and mental health, housing, children, finances, reporting and legal needs.*

Flat Out provides individual support and advocacy to women on an outreach model which is flexible and client directed; we work alongside each woman to identify and proactively manage issues to prevent re-imprisonment. In essence our Outreach staff are 'mentors' assisting each woman to find her way in the world post-release. Our support is not tied to Corrections Victoria compliance obligations as we do not receive funding from that entity; the result for our women is that they are able to speak freely and express their concerns, frustrations, fears, anger, sadness and struggles without it being viewed or judged as some kind of risk to their freedom or to society.

Flat Out focuses on the social and structural issues that impact women's criminalisation — including homelessness, histories of physical and sexual violence, racism, inadequate mental health and other health programs including drug and alcohol supports — rather than women's 'criminality.' This approach differs from systems that use language like 'ex-offender,' or that focus on prison as a site of reform. As an abolitionist organisation, we will always advocate for investing in building community, not expanding

or 'reforming' prisons; we believe that prison exacerbates the systemic oppression criminalised women face in the community and prisons are increasingly being used as a response to social problems as funding is directed away from community-based organisations. For example, if funds were directed to the creation of more detox and rehabilitation facilities we would see a marked reduction in the number of women incarcerated on short sentences for 'drug related crime'. Whilst women in prison need safety and support, and some reforms (for example ending the use of strip-searches) are necessary, we do not want prison reform to 'shore-up' or add false legitimacy to a legal and social system which fails those most in need.

Flat Out receives referrals from a variety of sources including directly from prisons, lawyers, a range of other support services and Corrections. Importantly, we also take referrals directly from women who have recently been released without support and from previous clients who may need a little assistance without having to negotiate the entire homelessness network to get back in touch with us. We also work together with prison transition staff to address the housing needs for some women pre-release, a bit of lead in time provides us with the opportunity to explore possibilities before things get too rushed.

Flat Out doesn't have housing of its own (not for want of trying!), but what we do have is a good network of willing and supportive Transitional Housing Managers (THMs) who do their best to help us out with vacancies for women who would otherwise have difficulty accessing any kind of housing either pre-release or post-release.

## Support, Housing and Post-Release

The Victorian Ombudsman's September 2015 *Investigation into the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners in Victoria* refers to the correlation between housing and recidivism and the identified complex needs of women in prison:

'Homelessness and imprisonment are related in a number of ways, both prior to imprisonment and after release. Housing is an important indicator of stability post-release. Former prisoners in unstable housing circumstances are more likely than other former prisoners to return to prison, and those who are homeless are significantly more likely to be re-incarcerated' and '(women) experience multiple disadvantages with high levels of poverty, low levels of educational attainment and poor employment histories. Many offenders (women) have a history of sexual and physical abuse and violence.'

Housing and support is no more critical than in the current parole environment; the Adult Parole Board requires that a woman has an 'address' to go to prior to release, women are not easily able to access transitional housing because THMs are unable to hold vacancies for an unknown amount of time (parole timelines are not entirely predictable) and as we all know, public, private or social housing is not a solution for anyone in urgent need.

In 2015 Launch Housing (through Deputy CEO Heather Holst) approached Flat Out to discuss the case of an imprisoned woman who was eligible for parole but couldn't be released due to housing availability. The two agencies worked together to facilitate the woman's release into Launch transitional housing





Clint Walker, Bigambul — Creation, 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 70cm x 84 cm

accommodation, and this case, became the spark for an idea that led to a new pilot pathway into housing for women eligible for parole.

Given our shared experience of the difficulties of parole, Flat Out once again approached Launch Housing to discuss how we could work together to create a pathway into Launch's crisis accommodations that would both satisfy the housing issue and go some way to meeting the complex (and sometimes unknowable) needs of Corrections Victoria and the Adult Parole Board.

This pathway has been operational for almost a year, and to date we have facilitated the release of eight women into crisis accommodation through Launch, and worked together with the relevant ReConnect programs and Launch to provide ongoing support for women upon their release. The most important feature of this pathway is the level of

support women provided to each woman as both Launch and Flat Out are committed to not leaving any woman without access to support once their ReConnect package ends.

The success of this pathway goes a small way to addressing the needs of a specific cohort of women exiting prison but we know there remains a significant shortfall in appropriate and available supported accommodation for women exiting prison, especially for those women who are released from remand or without ReConnect packages.

### Next Steps

The gap in the provision of support and housing for women can be met by transitional housing managers and emergency accommodation providers, however, timely access will remain a significant difficulty during what is generally considered to be an extremely stressful time in the lives of criminalised women. To achieve a

clear, efficient and effective pathway from prison will require a whole of government commitment to policy review and resource allocation, but a broad commitment to 'yes' at the grassroots will certainly get the ball rolling sooner rather than later. Flat Out has also worked alongside women who have experienced discrimination based on their criminal record in accessing housing. Advocating for women at an individual and systemic level includes challenging discrimination that occurs across the community, including in the provision of social services. Flat Out's work has included community education and training to better support criminalised women's access to existing services and support.

### Endnote

1. Victorian Ombudsman, Investigation into the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners in Victoria, September 2015, pages 104 and 95.