



# SIGNALLING SUCCESS

Evaluation of the *Success Works Pilot Program*

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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**SIGNALLING SUCCESS: EVALUATION OF THE *SUCCESS WORKS PILOT PROGRAM* WHEN YOU EMPLOY A *SUCCESS WORKS* CANDIDATE, YOU'VE KEPT A WOMAN OUT OF PRISON, TRANSFORMED HER CHILDREN'S LIVES AND HELPED BREAK THE INTERGENERATIONAL CYCLE OF DEPRIVATION AND CRIME.**

– Megan Etheridge, Founder of Dress for Success Sydney and Success Works, 2019

The *Success Works Pilot Program (SWPP)* was established in January 2019 as an initiative of Dress for Success Sydney (DfS). The program is administered through Dress for Success Sydney and run out of their Marrickville office.

The *Success Works* program is in its third year of operation and was designed to support candidates to develop skills, enable work readiness and provide transitional support to women who have a criminal record. The program's central aim is to get women into employment and to support women prior to release and post release with the further aim of reducing recidivism.

Due to Covid 19 and along with other factors (mentioned below) the workshops which were designed to be run for women prior to release from corrective service centres were abandoned. For this reason, the report focuses predominately on the post-release program.

***What makes the SWPP unique, compared to other employment programs, is that it directly engages employers as important stakeholders in the program, providing an important bridge between the candidates and potential employment.***

The aims of this evaluation are to identify how successful the *SWPP* has been in achieving its key goals and how it might continue more effectively in the future. The main method used to evaluate the program includes semi-structured interviews with candidates, employers, staff and other participants of the program between 2019–2021 (see *list of interviewees in Appendix 1*). The report has been subject to ethics approval from the University of Sydney Ethics Committee protocol number: 2014/032. Other research methods include a literature review and document and data analysis.

The evaluation identifies a number of key findings regarding the design and delivery of the pilot program, and outlines the competencies, appropriateness, effectiveness and sustainability of the program.

It evaluates the *SWPP* against its original aims and its progress up until the beginning of its third year of operation.

The evaluation is structured around the four founding goals of *Success Works*:

- 1 **To create and maintain positive employment outcomes for participants** in the program through the development of partnerships between the program and employers.
- 2 **Increase employability** of program participants.
- 3 **Create a database** to best manage the interface between candidates and potential employers which will identify skills and experience, preferred careers and create a match with the employment opportunities available through registered employers.
- 4 **Identify the most effective entity** to ensure the ongoing operation of the *Success Works* program, e.g., social enterprise.

This evaluation reports on these four goals within the evaluation section, and also addresses: factors that have enhanced or hindered implementation of the *SWPP* and challenges and opportunities that might strengthen the program.

It concludes with twelve recommendations which will secure better outcomes for *Success Works* staff, and the candidates and employers participating in the *Success Works* program.

***Our findings show that the SWPP provides practical, social and emotional support and education that builds the eroded self-esteem, resilience and confidence of candidates, and it does this work with effect.***



The rollout of *Success Works* has proved challenging due to the impact of COVID 19, especially for those women without access to suitable and reliable technology.

## THE IMPACT OF COVID 19

From the outset we note the impact of COVID 19 as it affected the delivery of *Success Works* services and the opportunity for personal interaction throughout 2020. All staff worked remotely from March 2020 until November 2020. There were no face-to-face candidate meetings from March 2020 until August 2020 with all candidates contacted by phone.

During 2020 the Career Support Workshops offered through Dress for Success became virtual. Virtual communication (such as Zoom workshops) with *Success Works* candidates was at times difficult, especially for those women without access to suitable and reliable technology. These women often relied on local libraries to access computers and internet connection with libraries closed during the lockdown periods of COVID 19.

COVID 19 also affected the extent to which employers could engage in the program. For example, two employers with formal *Success Works* agreements were unable to hire post March 2020 but indicated they were still on-board the program.

Another impact of COVID 19 was that many SWPP candidates received the Coronavirus Supplement in addition to their regular JobSeeker payments and therefore did not engage well during this time as they were receiving a higher weekly income. They began to re-engage with SWPP staff as this payment was decreased.

***The rollout of the Success Works program has proved challenging due to the impact of COVID 19, the context of program delivery, staffing and support, and establishing strong communication channels with candidates and employers.***

## SUCCESS WORKS STAFF

Between May 2019 to May 2021 the program was delivered by 1.00 full time equivalent staff member. This included one part time Program Manager, Michelle Bonner and a part time Peer Support Coordinator, Eleni Psillakis. The Program Manager resigned in August 2020 and the position was filled by the Peer Support Coordinator to combine the roles and create a full-time position. A Project Consultant, Rachelle Tulloch who focused on employer engagement was engaged in 2019 for a period of three months and there have been between 4–5 committed volunteers, including a *Success Works* candidate, Juanita Schaffa de Mauri who has been volunteering 6 hours week (February 2021 to current). The program has remained under resourced from a staffing perspective. Despite these challenges, SWPP staff have received considerable positive feedback as articulated below:

*Thank you so much for welcoming me into the Success Works program for women with a criminal record. Today I received a job offer... since completing the workshops with you I have gained my confidence back. Before I met you, I was so down on myself and willing to just give up, thinking no one would ever see me as more than just a criminal, you not only taught me work skills you empowered me when I could have so easily given up. I am truly so grateful to you and the program.*

– Email to Eleni Psillakis from Candidate, April 2021

***Although SWPP continued to function during the challenging times of COVID 19 and received quality feedback, the continuation of serious understaffing may have considerable implications for risk management including potential staff burnout and the sustainability and efficiency of the program.***

## SUCCESS WORKS CANDIDATES

The SWPP targets female ex-offenders and employment but acknowledges that attaining successful employment outcomes relies on achieving stable and safe housing and also addressing health and addiction concerns as a first priority. Apart from unemployment, being homeless presents as one of the greatest risks for reoffending.

There are other challenges such as health and addiction vulnerabilities which have to be given detailed consideration when accepting women into the SWPP. Many of these challenges manifest in low self-esteem and poor confidence levels for candidates as articulated below:

*I thought they know how I feel and that gave me the confidence to actually apply for jobs. I would have put it off until the bracelet [electronic ankle tag] came off, and then I would have been out for six months and then I think my confidence would have got worse, and it would have been a bigger step to climb. So, I think for me, that whole Success Works program... that gave me the confidence.*

– Interview Success Works candidate, June 2020

**The profile of a SWPP candidate is typically one of a woman with a limited employment history and weak connections with a 'worker' identity, or a woman with a specific criminal record which makes it difficult or impossible to work in their previous occupation. Over the course of the SWPP it has been recognised by the staff that meaningful engagement in the Success Works employment program occurs when the candidate has secure housing and the support of psychological therapy. This can apply to women following release from prison, or after they have lost employment due to a conviction and where the sentence is served as a community order.**

## SUCCESS WORKS AFFILIATIONS

The Success Works program is administered by Dress for Success Sydney. The program is advertised on the Dress for Success website (under Career Centre/Client Services) and through a flyer distributed through the Dress for Success 'Pack and Send' clothing service (offered to women upon release from corrective service centres).

The current program manager has also presented the Success Works program to the majority of the Community Corrections Offices in the Greater Sydney region. The SWPP is also supported through the strong endorsement of a number of different partnerships such as: Corrective Services NSW; Keeping Women Out of Prison Coalition (KWOOP); Nelly's Healing Centre; Penrith Women's Health Centre; the employers and the University of Sydney.

While affiliations are vital for the SWPP, strong communication links between Success Works and Dress for Success would ensure that the Success Works candidates have access to volunteer mentors, along with access to the Dress for Success styling program, and the Career Support Program. Better communication would also support promotion of the Success Works program to increase candidate numbers.



**43% OF SUCCESS WORKS CANDIDATES** HAVE EXPERIENCED MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES, INCLUDING DRUG AND ALCOHOL ABUSE, AND GAMBLING ADDICTION

**33% OF SUCCESS WORKS CANDIDATES** ARE OVER 40 YEARS OLD



**40% OF SUCCESS WORKS CANDIDATES** HAVE EXPERIENCED HOMELESSNESS

**19% OF SUCCESS WORKS CANDIDATES** IDENTIFIED AS ABORIGINAL OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER



**45% OF SUCCESS WORKS CANDIDATES** DID NOT GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOL



**39% OF SUCCESS WORKS CANDIDATES** ARE SINGLE MOTHERS

# LITERATURE REVIEW

THE *SWPP* IS UNIQUE AS THERE ARE NO OTHER PROGRAMS IN NSW WHICH HELP OFFENDERS REBUILD THEIR LIVES OUTSIDE THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM IN RELATION TO EMPLOYMENT.

*SWPP* has played a vital and unique role in providing targeted support for ex-offenders seeking opportunities for employment in NSW because it brings ex-offenders in direct contact with potential employers. On that basis, a number of opportunities were identified and recommendations made to further strengthen the program, and enhance implementation, outcomes and program sustainability. Additionally, this report recognises the importance of understanding the current literature that relates to women, incarceration and employment set out below.

## INCARCERATED WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT

The *SWPP* responds to related literature on incarceration and employment, with a particular focus on female ex-offenders and employment. Although females comprise only eight percent of the prison population (ABS 2020) this intersectional group is important because female ex-offenders face unique circumstances compared to their male counterparts, especially in relation to employment opportunities (Worrall & Gelsthorpe, 2009; Moore & Scraton, 2013; Sisters Inside, 2017). Research has established that women, especially those with caring responsibilities, already experience employment discrimination (Kaine, 2017; Smith, 2006). The addition of a criminal record is particularly problematic, inhibiting equal opportunity in employment for women.

As is widely understood, employment provides economic and social benefits, but is particularly important for ex-offenders because employment promotes rehabilitation and protects against recidivism (Baldry, 2018; Baldry & Maplestone, 2003; Payne, 2007; Giles, 2016). Recidivism remains at an alarmingly high level in Australia and creates significant economic and social costs for individuals and society. In New South Wales, just over 40 percent of sentenced prisoners released from custody reoffended within 12 months of discharge (Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research NSW, 2018). In recognition of this situation, the NSW Premier has set a state priority that adult reoffending rates be reduced by 5 percent by 2023 (NSW Government, 2019). While recidivism rates are no worse for women than men, female recidivism (and female incarceration more broadly) remains poorly understood.

What we do know is that employment is a primary feature of successful reintegration (Visher, 2011; Uggen, 2000) because employment networks may serve as 'informal social controls that help prevent criminal behaviour' (Visher, 2011, 699). However, there are specific barriers for female ex-offenders seeking employment. The increased incidence of criminal record checks and more pervasive media 'profiling' of (particularly female) job candidates makes attaining and keeping employment particularly difficult for women with a criminal record (van den Broek & Thompson, 2017; McDonald et al, 2016; Blumstein & Nakamura, 2009). In Australia, there are limited legal constraints on employers using criminal history information in making employment decisions (Naylor et al, 2005, 174) and there is little understanding about what employers actually do when interviewing candidates with a criminal record (Heydon & Naylor, 2018; Heydon et al, 2011). Research indicates that employers are pre-emptively screening out women on the basis of poorly understood information, and as such they are unjustly discriminating against ex-offenders when applying for work (Black and van den Broek, 2019; Dietz, & Kleinlogel, 2015).

## PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYMENT AND A WORK IDENTITY

Compared to men, most women enter the prison system already disadvantaged: 'they are frequently poor, unskilled and unemployed, with histories of childhood abuse and violent relationships' (Stone, et al, 2017, 296–297). For women the added stigma associated with criminality is acute and can persist long after any sentence has been served. In contrast to men many female ex-offenders not only want to re-engage in work, but they also want to disclose their criminal record to employers (Brown, 2006; Black & van den Broek, 2019; van den Broek, Black & Psillakis, 2020). This disclosure often 'signals' that female ex-offenders are managing shame and trying to set the record straight (Probyn, 2005). As such, the disclosure and recognition that a new phase of rehabilitation is taking place can be an important part of an identity-affirming or transformational process towards desistance (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016).

## BEST PRACTICE AND SIGNALLING DESISTANCE

One meta-analysis evaluating employment re-entry programs undertaken by Visher et al (2011) in the US suggests that there is limited evidence that re-entry programs work. However, more recent work by Bushway and Apel (2012) suggest the need to reframe the problems ex-offenders face when attempting to re-enter the labour market as 'a case of asymmetric information' where employers are not given any other information other than a criminal history check. These researchers found that while some employers may not want to employ an ex-offender, completion of re-entry programs was one important way that ex-offenders can signal their desire to move beyond their criminal past to prospective employers. Employers are also more willing to hire ex-offenders if they can reliably identify desisters. One of the ways that employers might identify desisters is through completion of, and endorsement of programs such as the *Success Works* workshops which 'can provide a reliable signal to employers' that an ex-offender is prepared to be a productive employee' (Bushway and Apel, 2012, 18).

Bushway and Apel (2012) also suggest that recidivism gains can also occur without immediate gains in employment. As such, the authors suggest that lower recidivism rates were not just due to successful employment, but also the result of thorough 'wrap-around services' that provide important support to ex-offenders hoping to re-enter work and society. Therefore, rates of successful employment are an important measure of the success of re-entry programs, however another could be rates of recidivism in relation to the women who enter and complete the *Success Works* program which signal to the employer the prospect of desistance.

The literature analysing Australian programs targeting women in contact with the criminal justice system are relatively limited. Given the appalling statistics on incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, important research has rightly focused on this vulnerable population (Council of Australian Government's Prison to Work Report, 2018; Hardcastle et al, 2018).

However, looking more broadly at a wider population, Trotter and Flynn (2016) systematic review of the literature on women, incarceration and employment argued that rehabilitation interventions were overwhelmingly reported as working, but there was also some evidence that addressing the specific needs of women was important to help to reduce recidivism and improve well-being. (Trotter and Flynn, 2016).

This report also confirmed that women have specific needs which are often different to those of men. In particular Trotter and Flynn's research refers to relationship and family issues including parenting, mental health, housing and drug use as being particularly important. Amongst other things they note that services should be for women only, and should:

*... empower women to address their own problems, meet the learning styles of women, be holistic, address offence related problems, link women with mainstream agencies, provide ongoing assistance where required, provide mentors for personal support and provide practical help (Trotter & Flynn, 2016, 6).*

## ANALYSIS OF RE-ENTRY PROGRAMS

This literature on incarceration, women and employment identifies that more work needs to be undertaken to analyse what types of programs are most successful in supporting female ex-offenders into employment and society. However, what we currently know from the literature analysed above is that:

- Analysis of re-entry programs has tended to focus on male populations, despite the fact that female incarceration rates in Australia have increased by 55% over the last decade.
- There are challenges in evaluating programs for women given their small representation in the overall prison population.
- There is some evidence that rehabilitation interventions can reduce recidivism by around 20%.
- Research suggests that there needs to be provision of wrap-around career support services that link to multiple relevant stakeholders.
- The success of programs should include an assessment of the 'signalling' that takes place between ex-offenders and employers after the completion of re-entry programs.

***This evaluation identifies that SWPP is a program of rare quality, addressing real needs and providing clear value for female ex-offenders in NSW. The program can also be considered an important community vehicle to educate employers about the discrimination ex-offenders face as they seek employment and reintegration back into the community.***

# EVALUATION

## THIS SECTION OF THE REPORT EVALUATES THE SWPP BASED ON THE FOUR GOALS OUTLINED ON PAGE 3 OF THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.

The first goal was designed to 'create and maintain positive employment outcomes for participants in the program through the development of partnerships between the program and employers'. The second goal was to 'increase employability of program participants'. This next section evaluates these two goals by analysing employer and candidate engagement as well as workshops and other SWPP activities.

### 1. SUCCESS WORKS PARTNERSHIPS (GOALS 1 AND 2)

#### Employer Engagement

As the program took shape, the SWPP commenced discussions with potential employers, setting guidelines for both candidate and employer engagement. In the first year, six employers registered to participate in the program and three candidates were placed in employment. Since December 2019, the SWPP has been presented to a number of corporate employers including Mirvac, Veolia, Hammond Care, Harris Farm as well as government bodies: Australia Post, Local Government Network, Georges River and Burwood Councils, NSW Public Service Commission and Transport NSW. The social enterprise Two Good Co. has also employed women in their employment program.

Employer Partner Commitment Tracking was started by the Project Consultant, Rachelle Tulloch but due to lack of adequate resources, these activities have not been updated. This should be recommenced through a formal process and reported on at *Success Works* team meetings, and in regular meetings of *Success Works* staff with the CEO of Dress for Success. The formal employer inclusion process should include a seven-stage process:

1. Listed as potential Employer Partner
2. Contact initiated
3. Initial meeting scheduled or conducted by phone or face-to-face
4. Additional meetings scheduled or conducted by phone or face-to-face
5. Ongoing communication
6. Not proceeding as Employer Partner
7. Signed Employer Partner Commitment

To date successful SWPP candidates have been employed in industries including: digital marketing, retail, customer service, aged care, disability support, childcare and warehousing.

One Indigenous candidate also completed Traffic Control and Implement Traffic Control courses after successful assistance from *Success Works* in obtaining an Indigenous education grant to fund the courses.

***Success Works has recognised that despite considerable interest from employers it is challenging to get them to commit to a formal registration process. The program has trialled a number of options including presenting employers with a client for consideration in their recruitment processes to demonstrate the quality of the candidate and employment support, rather than trying to officially onboard employers in the first instance. Nevertheless, steps 1 to 5 should be carried out in all instances of employer partnership development.***

#### Candidate Engagement

From the inception of the program in 2019 there have been 94 women who have connected with the SWPP (79 in the community and 15 in prison). The 15 women who attended workshops in prison could no longer engage in the program due to incarceration.

Of the 79 women in the community, as at April 2021:

- 36 (46%) have gained employment
- 32 (41%) of the women have disengaged from the program, including 5 (<1%) women who have re-offended and were reincarcerated and 1 (<1%) placed on an Intensive Community Order.
- 11 (13%) of the women remain engaged in the program and are seeking employment.

There has been a proportionally high number of women who have disengaged from the program for specific reasons including: housing instability, the candidates not having support for drug and alcohol rehabilitation services or counselling services, little or no support from family/friends, moving out of the area, and ongoing court appearances.



For those women with ongoing court appearances, and for those that remain engaged, the staff of the SWPP have been able to write letters of support for the court which improves the women's chances of staying in the community and with sentencing.

Success Works staff have recognised that the candidates require support to remain engaged in the program. This is evident in data of candidates from September 2019. Of these women, 4 have been employed for over 12 months, 3 lost employment due to mental health and housing issues and one candidate moved out of the area and lost contact with the program.

The loss of these 3 candidates in this first year reinforces the view that wrap-around services are essential for re-entry programs to work and that adequate housing and mental health support must be in place before candidates enter the program. As such, a list of networks and support services were identified and have been used to support SWPP candidates with issues such as housing, dental care, domestic violence and legal services.

**While acknowledging that over a third of the candidates have disengaged with the program it is a testament to the SWPP that despite the COVID 19 interruptions, a number of women have remained engaged with the program and new participants are keen to access support to gain employment.**

## Workshops and Programs

Like other pilot programs, the SWPP has faced a number of challenges in terms of resourcing, staff changes and COVID 19. As highlighted earlier, the program has been delivered by 1.00 full time staff member (initially a part time Program Manager and part time Peer Support Coordinator) and several volunteers. Throughout the life of the program significant staff shortages have led to undue pressure on the staff members and resulted in compromises to the quality of the program. Overcoming such understaffing will be addressed in the recommendations.

Despite the challenges with staffing the holistically focused workshops run by Success Works staff have been highly successful. To date six SWPP workshops have been delivered at Penrith Women's Health Centre (beginning September 2019) and Nelly's Healing Centre in Redfern (beginning March 2021). Bankstown Community Corrections (beginning April 2021) is currently completing the Success Works workshops and the workshops will be run again at Penrith Women's Health Centre (beginning May 2021).

St. Leonards Community Corrections has also recently expressed interest in hosting a series of Success Works workshops. Each workshop had four to eight women in attendance and they covered the following areas: Building Resilience, Affective Communication, Building a Better Resume, Effective Job Search, Starting Your Own Business (Global Sisters), and an additional workshop on Interview Skills.

Initially, the SWPP planned to provide six core workshops at Silverwater Women's and Emu Plains Correction Centres. Only one series of workshops was conducted at Silverwater Women's Corrective Centre (beginning in May 2019). The workshops were the same as the ones noted above but included a 'Transitioning from Prison' workshop. The 'Transitioning from Prison' workshop was conducted twice at Emu Plains (9 women over the 2 sessions) and also at the Mary Wade Correctional Centre, Lidcombe (18 women attended).



**46% OF SUCCESS WORKS CANDIDATES HAVE GAINED EMPLOYMENT**

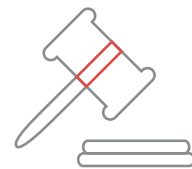
**SUCCESS WORKS CANDIDATES HAVE BEEN EMPLOYED IN INDUSTRIES INCLUDING DIGITAL MARKETING, RETAIL AND AGED CARE**



**36% OF SUCCESS WORKS CANDIDATES RELY ON COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS FOR SUPPORT NETWORKS RATHER THAN FAMILY AND FRIENDS**



**44% OF SUCCESS WORKS CANDIDATES HAVE EXPERIENCED DOMESTIC VIOLENCE WITH 32% CHOOSING NOT TO ANSWER THE QUESTION**



**NEARLY 1/3 OF SUCCESS WORKS CANDIDATES HAVE OUTSTANDING FINES**

Aside from the problem gaining access to corrective service centres during COVID 19 the workshops were discontinued in April 2020 because of the difficulties managing corrective services bureaucracy, poor attendance numbers, the number of planning hours, finding space to conduct the workshops and because the women were often moved at short notice to other corrective service centres, thereby interrupting the delivery of workshops.

## **2. SUCCESS WORKS CAPACITY BUILDING (GOALS 3 AND 4)**

This section of the report evaluates the SWPP based on goals 3 and 4 outlined on page 3. The third goal was to 'create a database to best manage the interface between candidates and potential employers which will identify skills and experience, preferred careers and create a match with the employment opportunities available through registered employers' and the fourth goal was to 'identify the most effective entity to ensure the ongoing operation of the Success Works program'. This next section evaluates these two goals by analysing digital storage, marketing, communication and reputation activities through stakeholder engagement and the fourth goal is analysed in the section Identifying the 'Most Effective Entity Under which Success Works Operates'.

### **Digital Storage**

Effective capacity building relies on the efficient storage and management of data. To date the use of the ACTIVE campaign software and EXCEL spreadsheet systems by SWPP has proved inefficient. The ACTIVE campaign software is a Dress for Success management system and is not tailored to the needs of the SWPP. It is clear that more resources need to be directed to improving the systematic collection of candidate and employer data to ensure that the goals of the SWPP can be measured, met and exceeded in the future. SWPP staff and volunteers are working together to improve data collection and analysis.

Capacity building has however taken place in other areas as a result of the SWPP alliances with support networks such as the Ian Potter Foundation, Vincent Fairfax Foundation, KWOOP, and the University of Sydney research which has tracked participants in the SWPP from its inception. A report of Success Works was completed in 2020 and is located on the Dress for Success website and publicly available at <http://doi.org/10.25910/0w6x-hy94>. Other activities are detailed in the section on marketing, communication and reputation.

In terms of employment matching and capacity building we note that employers are an integral and unique stakeholder in the SWPP initiative. They are also an important part of the 'signalling' process outlined in the literature that identifies individuals seeking to desist from crime and show a commitment to an organisation (Bushway and Apel 2012). Interviews with employers undertaken for this evaluation reported that preparing and onboarding candidates is important to the success of the program. Harris Farm expressed appreciation of SWPP support during onboarding and with ongoing follow-up support after candidate placement with the firm (Interview, March 2021).

They were emphatic in their support for future placements of SWPP candidates and reported that they were currently devising company policies around the issue of employing staff with a criminal background (Interview, February 2021). Many employers mentioned the obligation business has in integrating ex-offenders as articulated below:

*...society has educated everybody to think that being a criminal is bad and, yes, they go to jail and they do their time, but what's next? They do have to come back into the workforce. We can't just have them on the dole. Because I've seen what happens when people are on the dole. Long term unemployment is demoralising. They turn to crime, they're back in the system again, or they turn to drugs.*

– Employer Interview, March 2021

When asked if employer expectations are the same for Success Works candidates as others, one employer stated:

*I think it's important for their self-esteem, that they get it [employment] on their own merits. Yes, they've been incarcerated, but that's not going to get them the job, but it's also not going to lose them the job. It's on their own merits. And I see that as so critically important for their self-esteem, because they're constantly judged. So, they're always a number, there's always something that's against them or something that has held them back, and if they get that job on their own merits, they know that they can get any job on their own merits.*

– Employer Interview, March 2021

***There is no doubt that while there has been effective informal communication between SWPP staff, candidates and employers, there must be a more systematic approach to storing more detailed program data in the future. Core to these activities is the need to collect information post-employment to ensure that the quality of candidate employment is satisfactory and the experiences of participating employers is positive.***

## Marketing, Communication and Reputation

Marketing of the SWPP commenced in 2019 through a Job Services Expo at Dillwynia Correctional Centre (Women's) due to the original intention to offer workshops in corrective service centres. SWPP approached Mary Wade Correctional Centre and delivered one 'Transition to Employment' workshop for 18 women. A Job Fair was held at the Dress for Success showrooms in March 2020, with the day well attended by approximately 30 candidates and 6 employers. Soon after the Job Fair, COVID 19 restrictions were put in place and since then no further job fairs have been organised. As already mentioned, all external services to correctional centres were halted in early April 2020 due to the pandemic and in-house workshops will not be reinstated. However, the NSW Department of Justice has indicated their ongoing support for SWPP through its membership of the Keeping Women Out of Prison Coalition (KWOOP).

Since 2019, SWPP personnel have attended numerous events and given public lectures designed to draw attention to the program and also to receive support funding. The Empowering Women Changing Lives Breakfast at NSW Parliament House (25th September 2019) brought together important stakeholders such as the NSW Public Service Commissioner, Kathrina Lo. The breakfast event has led to future opportunities to present the program to the Diversity and Inclusion team of the Public Service Commission. In April 2021, Eleni Psillakis, Program Manager of SWPP presented a talk at the Lyceum Club to help raise awareness about the SWPP as well as other venues during International Women's Week. Donations raised at some of these events have been directed to the SWPP.

In September 2020 a monthly newsletter was initiated by the SWPP and sent to all relevant and interested parties participating in the program. This was designed to keep all stakeholders engaged with the program and was intended to provide positive vignettes about women who had succeeded in the program. However, due to a lack of resources publication of the newsletter has been sporadic.

Given its size and its scope, the reputational capital of the SWPP has been extremely significant, particularly within the mainstream media. In February 2019, the *Success Works* program was a central part of the 'Criminalising Women' program for 4 Corners, ABC television. In 2019, ABC TV filmed the *Success Works* 'Transition to Employment' workshop at Silverwater Corrective Centre. The program included interviews with incarcerated women and with Megan Etheridge the Founder of *Success Works*. The program was screened in February 2020. Also, a print media article about the issue of incarceration and employment and the SWPP appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in July 2019.

Communication channels have been established with the Public Service Commissioner regarding government roles across departments for *Success Works* candidates and the SWPP and the Program Manager were announced as finalists in the Changemaker category of the *Women with Altitude Awards*, 2020.

The SWPP has retained on-going links with researchers and academics at the University of Sydney. In 2019, the researchers and the SWPP Program Manager, Eleni Psillakis, presented at a well attended seminar about ex-offenders and employment. The seminar created important networks with legal scholars and practitioners and has resulted in an Australian Research Council grant application regarding employer discrimination and female ex-offenders. Researchers from the University of Sydney and Eleni Psillakis have also recently published an article on incarceration, women and employment in a highly ranked internationally peer reviewed journal, *Work, Employment & Society* in the UK.

These activities suggest that much work has been directed to elevating program recognition, however a more systematic and consistent approach which includes monthly newsletters and annual events to broader local audiences would strengthen links with existing partners and build the potential for engaged candidates and new employer partnerships.

***Judicious concern around the full marketing of the SWPP has been appropriate given the impact of COVID 19 and the pilot nature of the program.***

## Identifying the Most Effective Entity for Success Works

In August 2019, a committee was established comprising the Chair of Dress for Success, the *Success Works* Program Manager, the *Success Works* Peer Support Coordinator, Megan Etheridge (Founder of DfS and the SWPP) and Winsome Bernard (Recruitment Consultant) to provide oversight of the program and offer support where relevant. Discussion continues to establish the most effective structure for an ongoing program that will strengthen the most powerful and unique aspect of the program; the links between candidates and employers.

For example, in December 2019, *Success Works* sought pro bono legal advice on options for a possible legal entity and evaluated advice received from the successful UK service Working Chance (an employment charity for women with convictions) as well as discussions with employers and recruitment advisers. The program could be strengthened by identifying the most effective entity to ensure ongoing operation of the SWPP, for example through the creation of a Social Enterprise (see *Recommendations*).

# CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES: STRENGTHENING THE *SUCCESS WORKS PROGRAM*

ALTHOUGH THERE IS CONSIDERABLE INTEREST AND GOODWILL FROM CANDIDATES AND EMPLOYERS TO ENGAGE WITH THE *SWPP*, THE ABILITY TO SECURE QUALITY EMPLOYMENT THAT CAN MUTUALLY SATISFY WOMEN AND FIRMS REMAINS A COMPLEX AND LENGTHY PROCESS.

As mentioned above, staff have trialled various approaches of presenting employers with a candidate for consideration in their recruitment processes. However, to date, no targets or earmarked positions have been established for *Success Works* candidates with participating employers.

It has also proven challenging to satisfactorily onboard employer partners due to limited resources and staff. The *SWPP* has undertaken discussions with employers about what a criminal record means, the inherent requirements of a role and having a risk assessment in place within their businesses. However, it may be that *SWPP* could develop further employer/recruitment education around these issues.

*Success Works* staff have assisted the candidates do their own Police Check, so they are more aware of what an employer receives as they undergo the same check. This is currently done on a case-by-case basis depending on the needs of the women.

*SWPP* is aware of the challenges in attracting employers to the program. Recruitment Expert Richard Adams who was a member of the *Success Works* Reference Group (since disbanded) warned that employers who display an interest in the program do not necessarily follow through (*Success Works* Minutes, May 2019). For example, he suggested that a 65% interest rate by employers will typically only result in 1% following through. This can be seen as an example of one of the challenges the *SWPP* faces when recruiting employers to commit to the program.

The *SWPP* requires continuous and increased funding to continue to deliver on its goals. There is no doubt that the women who have used the service rely on and value the assistance offered and that they represent a complex population who require a range of supports to stay safe and secure work in the community. Many of the women engaged with the *SWPP* have experienced mental illness and trauma, having survived childhood and adult sexual abuse, domestic and family violence, homelessness and other traumatic experiences.

***IT'S VERY DIFFICULT TO FIND EMPLOYERS TO EMPLOY PEOPLE WITH CRIMINAL HISTORIES. I DON'T FIND THAT THERE ARE MANY PROGRAMS OR SERVICES OUT THERE IN THE COMMUNITY TO HELP OFFENDERS IN GENERAL, LET ALONE WOMEN. I THINK MORE FUNDING COULD GO TOWARDS PROGRAMS TO SPECIFICALLY HELP WOMEN GET INTO EMPLOYMENT, BECAUSE WE ALL KNOW WHEN IT COMES TO REDUCING RECIDIVISM, PART OF IT IS DRUGS AND ALCOHOL WHICH IS A BIG BARRIER TO PEOPLE GETTING INTO WORK AND MAINTAINING STABILITY AND ACCOMMODATION, AND SECONDLY, IT'S EMPLOYMENT.***

– SENIOR COMMUNITY AND CORRECTIONS OFFICER,  
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITIES AND JUSTICE, INTERVIEW, MARCH 2021



“ For me, *The Success Works* program was the first glimmer of hope where I felt I could talk to someone who understood how I was feeling. ”

For example, 44 percent of the *SWPP* candidates reported that they had experienced domestic violence and 40 percent had experienced homelessness.

Given the vulnerability of *SWPP* candidates, we have identified some difficulty in recruiting and retaining communication with those who engage in the *SWPP*. The numbers of candidates who disengage in the program is testament to this vulnerability.

The *Success Works* candidates who have had limited engagement with education, and a lack of employment experience face challenges gaining employment. Alongside this, the number of national criminal history checks has grown exponentially each year: from 320,000 in 2001 to 2.6 million in 2007–08 (CrimTrac, 2016, 32) and more than 5.6 million in 2019-20 (ACIC, 2020, 54).

This means that many women face employers who have undertaken criminal record checks. Employers are often uneducated about what a criminal record actually means and the women therefore run the risk of unconscious bias.

It should be recognised, as it is in the literature analysed earlier in this report, that securing employment may not be the **ONLY** achievement by which to measure the success of work integration programs for ex-offenders (see Bushway & Apel 2012).

For example, women who complete the *SWPP* do create and convey a tangible signal to potential employers (and themselves) that they are focused on desisting from criminal activity and preparing to become a productive employee.

Providing that opportunity for signalling should not be underestimated. Moreover, programs such as *SWPP* are important if the NSW government hopes to achieve its priority to reduce recidivism rates by 5 percent by 2023 (NSW Government, 2019).

The potential for *Success Works* candidates to succeed, whether they are women who exit prison or who are disadvantaged by a community service order, remains a challenge if the women have limited finances, housing issues, limited family support and pro-social connections. Employment can provide a solution to these issues and that is a potent reminder of the importance of a program such as *Success Works*.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

THE *SUCCESS WORKS PILOT PROGRAM* BEGAN IN 2019 WITH GREAT ENTHUSIASM AND WITH CLEAR AIMS AND GOALS. AS A PILOT PROGRAM WITH NO SIMILAR MODELS IN NEW SOUTH WALES, VALUABLE LESSONS HAVE BEEN LEARNED.

It has become clear that conversations need to be undertaken within the broader community around ex-offender employment. These conversations would help to build trust and reinforce values within the community around equal access to employment for ex-offenders.

Part of this conversation has commenced through the multiple media channels that *SWPP* staff and stakeholders have utilised to educate the public about how candidates have contributed to the business community to date. This work is to be commended.

It should also be recognised that COVID 19 raised important challenges in 2020, namely the lack of face-to-face contact. Despite this, during the first two years of the *SWPPs* operations there have been identifiable benefits in the short, medium and long term for those engaged in the program and associated stakeholders.

The pilot program was universally valued by all those interviewed for its endeavour to provide women with the support they need to rehabilitate and reintegrate into the community once released from prison.

Overall, the *SWPP* has provided candidates with greater confidence to re-enter the labour market and to feel prepared to undertake employment with a positive frame of mind. The offer of on-going support by *Success Works* provides a safety net not always offered by other services.

Participating employers report that *SWPP* candidates have become valuable members of their organisations. They have reported that they are now more willing to hire ex-offenders who have signalled the desire to desist from reoffending through completion of the *SWPP*. This report identifies issues which will transition this pilot program into a more sustainable and robust program into the future.

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**Stemming from the findings of this evaluation, and in order to build on the *SWPP*, the following recommendations are made:**

- 1 *SWPP* should focus their services within the community and abandon workshops in Corrective Service Centres** due to the inability to manage the bureaucracy involved in administering the program; the poor use of staff time and resources; the difficulty in securing access and resources while inside prisons and the unpredictable attendance of women due to prison activities and transfers.
- 2 The strength of the *SWPP* is the engagement of employers.** Therefore, it is recommended that the *SWPP* employ a dedicated Employer Liaison person who would undertake a number of tasks including: coordination of orientation and onboarding sessions for participating employers; seeking feedback from employers about current and future candidate allocations; provide literacy to employers on what a criminal record means to avoid employers misunderstanding about criminal record history.
- 3 The *SWPP* should build on current communication activities** by ensuring a formal monthly newsletter is distributed to all participating and potential firms and individuals. The newsletter could provide updates and vignettes profiling successful candidates.
- 4 Ongoing communication should be maintained with candidates and employers for one year after work is secured** to assess the quality of the job/firm and candidate match.

- 5 **Candidate commitment is important** therefore *SWPP* should only accept and focus on women once they have addressed housing and health needs.
- 6 **The candidates should complete all six workshops before placement within firms** unless prior learning or extenuating circumstances have been identified. This will maximise the advantages of the wrap-around service that *SWPP* has designed and implemented.
- 7 **A wrap-around service should prioritise the systematic mentoring of candidates** before and after employment has been secured (preferably for 6–12 months after commencement of work). Volunteer mentors (who do not require psychology training but attend a one-day orientation) should be provided for each candidate in the program. Program Manager Eleni Psillakis has the required training and lived experience to advise on this role. Employing a staff member with lived experience in this position will help to build trust relationships between the clients, employers and the program. However, care should be taken to ensure against staff burnout in these highly demanding roles.
- 8 **The program is under-resourced, specifically in relation to staffing.** A key recommendation would be to undertake a staffing audit to identify how best to utilise staff expertise i.e., within the areas of employer liaison, candidate support, ICT etc.
- 9 **Due to the nature of the work, it is recommended that *Success Works* staff have access to and are provided with clinical supervision by a registered provider.** The benefits of this support include: offering essential risk management strategies; providing tools for staff to be responsive and adaptive to change; minimising stress and improving staff wellbeing; sustaining professional development support skills and ensuring staff morale and performance in the work environment.
- 10 **In the future *Success Works* must prioritise data collection and have a dedicated and trained ICT staff member to manage data systems.** Due to poor resourcing and lack of expertise, there has been less than satisfactory systematic collection of candidate and employer data to ensure that the goals of the *SWPP* can be measured, met and exceeded in the future.
- 11 **The current arrangement with *Dress for Success* could be strengthened by *Success Works* establishing themselves as a social enterprise under the umbrella of *Dress for Success*** to maximise its strengths as an employer and candidate driven program, and to avoid tensions between the different client needs of the two entities. This arrangement would retain *Success Works* ability to leverage DfS networks and reputation but ensure program independence which would further enable *Success Works* to apply for a broader range of private and government funding as well as broaden its scope in the future to encompass other vulnerable groups of clients who are clients of DfS. It would also enable funds sharing with DfS once it became established.
- 12 **Acting on the recommendations of the evaluation** and providing ongoing review of the *Success Works* program will be important for tracking the future success and challenges of the program.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS FOR WOMEN IN CUSTODY AND/OR LEAVING CUSTODY SHOULD NOT BE UNDERESTIMATED...THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF EVEN JUST A FEW WOMEN GAINING EMPLOYMENT HAS FAR REACHING IMPACTS AND ALL OF THE EFFORTS OF INITIATIVES SUCH AS SUCCESS WORKS TO GUIDE AND SUPPORT WOMEN INTO REAL JOBS IS CERTAINLY WORTH IT.**

– KELLY-ANNE STEWART, WOMEN'S ADVISOR CORRECTIVE SERVICES NSW, APRIL 2021

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# APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEWS

## **Dress for Success**

Leisa Sadler, CEO Dress for Success Sydney – Interviewed 24 February 2021

## **Success Works Personnel**

Megan Etheridge, Founder *Success Works* – Interviewed 12 April 2021 and 23 April 2021

Eleni Psillakis, *Success Works* Program Manager – Interviewed 24 February 2021 and 23 April 2021

Juanita Schaffa de Mauri, Ex-*Success Works* Candidate and Volunteer – Interviewed 24 February 2021

## **Success Works Candidates**

13 candidates were interviewed between March 2019 and April 2021 but due to ethics protocols remain anonymous.

## **Corrective Services NSW**

Kelly-Anne Stewart, Principal Advisor Women Offenders – Written Correspondence 30 April 2021

## **Justice NSW**

Oscar Yu, Senior Community and Corrections Officer – Interviewed 14 April 2021

## **Employer Interviews**

### *Accor*

Leanne Edwards, Director of Talent and Culture – Interviewed 3 February 2021

Chris Edwards, Director of Member Services – Interviewed 3 February 2021

### *Riverstone Medical Practice*

Chantal Chippendale, Practice Manager – Interviewed 10 March 2021

### *Harris Farms*

Liarni Camilleri, HR Advisor – Interviewed 15 March 2021

## **Stakeholder Interview**

### *Ian Potter Foundation*

Squirrel Main, Research and Evaluation Manager – Interviewed 10 March 2021





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