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**n Interview with Reginald Blow, Aboriginal Program Development
Officer, Victorian Government Office of Corrections**

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An Interview with Reginald Blow, Aboriginal Program Development Officer, Victorian Government Office of Corrections

By Penelope Andrews

Tell me a little about yourself, your past work experience and how you came to be in your current position.

I was born in Rockhampton, Queensland and moved to Melbourne 21 years ago. My wife is from the Cummeragunja Mission out of Echuca - and we decided to make Melbourne our home. I attended the Leichardt Ward Public School, Caulfield Tech, the Watsonia Welfare Training Institute and a number of management training programs. My early work experience was varied and involved mostly manual labour - fruit picking, truck driving and farming, amongst others. I was an active unionist and a union delegate at one job for a number of years. I have held senior positions with a number of major initiatives across all portfolio areas. I have also been employed as a research assistant at Monash University's Aboriginal Research Centre and as a policy advisor to the Victorian Ministry for Aboriginal Affairs. Just under a year ago I was seconded to the Office of Corrections to take up the position of Aboriginal Program Development Officer.

Can you tell me what exactly your job entails?

I am employed to consult with Aboriginal organisations, statewide committees and services, local communities and co-operatives, and community corrections officers. The focus of these consultations is discussion, development and the promotion of a model for the involvement of members of local Aboriginal communities in the criminal justice system at the stage before and after the court proceedings. The aim is to imbue Aboriginal communities with a significant degree of responsibility and participation in the control and assistance of Aboriginal offenders.

How are these consultations and proposals followed up? How do you concretize the aims you just mentioned?

The plan is that Aboriginal volunteers nominated by their communities will be registered as community correction volunteers after initial training for broad involvement in the criminal justice system. They will then build towards and develop community justice panels which will involve themselves and other members of the Aboriginal community. This will also involve liaison and consultation with the police and the courts.

What are some of the positive consequences you envisage resulting from this broad program? What is it to achieve?

There are a few clear objectives:

- Hopefully a lower remand rate for Aboriginal offenders will result because of the community's guaranteeing the offender's appearance on the date fixed.
- greater access for Aboriginal offenders to police Diversionary Programs since control and discipline of these offenders now becoming the responsibility of community members.

- the provision of stronger and more credible character and background evidence in support of Aboriginal offenders at Court. By ensuring effective input from the local community, the quality of reports and recommendations affecting Aboriginal offenders will be of a more substantial quality.

To assist in attaining these objectives, an Aboriginal Liaison Officer has recently been appointed. She and I will work together but her activities will be conducted in the outlying areas around the state, namely in the Wimmera, Mallee, Loddon-Campaspe Region.

Can you describe in more detail the activities of the Aboriginal Liaison Officer?

Essentially she will be conducting the same kind of activities that I do as part of my job description, namely consultation with Aboriginal communities. More particularly she will develop training programs for community corrections officers providing court advice in relation to Aboriginal defendants. She will also assist in the recruitment and training of Aboriginal community corrections volunteers. She will establish regular channels of consultation and liaison with the police, the courts and legal services in relation to the sentencing of Aboriginal offenders.

You've been doing this job for a rather brief period so I guess it's difficult to assess unequivocal successes and failures after such a short time. But what successes do you think you've achieved in this brief period?

I think the most positive aspect of this job has been the growing recognition on the part of the government to involve Aboriginal communities in the criminal justice system in developing policy, in providing criticism of the system and suggestions for reform. In the same way there is a growing appreciation on the part of Aboriginal people to be more involved so that the terrible situation which does exist today of disproportionate Aboriginal imprisonment and all the terrible negative aspects of the criminal justice system can be overturned.

What about failures? Disappointments?

Well one of the disappointing aspects about this job is the constant criticism from radical elements within the Aboriginal community about the "Uncle Tom" image which they perceive of Aborigines working in a white environment. There is a distrust on their part of official structures, which obviously is justifiable, but they tend to knock back anything before it even gets off the ground. So it's been difficult trying to involve some individuals in initiatives which would greatly benefit the community, because of that distrust. I also feel that some members of the Aboriginal community who are supportive of some aspects of the program, lack the political will and courage to stand up and be counted. They will not go along with something they believe is a politically unpopular decision, even though they might personally feel the opposite. This behaviour can be linked to our cultural trait that relates to the extended family, a protective action. Then there is also the lack of confidence I feel in some ministers who fail to distinguish between good and bad advice. Of course they have to consult with as broad a spectrum of the Aboriginal population as they can, but sometimes I fear that they respond in a way that is politically expedient but not necessarily in the best interests of Aboriginal people. There seems to be a preoccupation in government circles with the here and now i.e. short-term programs without an appreciation of long term programs and strategies.

Do you have future plans for this program?

Yes. Mainly monitoring and maintenance of initiatives to date such as:

- the pilot project in the North West region;
- consultation process on the establishment of Aboriginal community justice panels;
- the linkage of correctional centres with Aboriginal organisations;
- cultural awareness programs for corrections staff;
- the acceptance of traditional values incorporated in the charter of principles I developed so Aboriginal communities can operate on an Aboriginal foundation. If Aboriginal people behave as Aborigines we would go further up the road. It's the copying of European behaviour that lands us in trouble.

In connection with future plans, what I am presently proposing is a project involving post release options for Aboriginal offenders. The main aims would be:

- To investigate the needs of Aboriginal offenders for a more complete rehabilitation into both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.
- To compile a comprehensive list of available resources and services which may be used to assist Aboriginal offenders' rehabilitation.

- To undertake an evaluation of the adequacy of present resources and services to meet the needs with a view to updating and supplementing where necessary.
- To develop as a top priority objectives and funding responsibility strategies to address current and anticipated needs of Aboriginal offenders and the communities' capacity to serve such needs.

The success of the program will depend on the development of resources in the Aboriginal communities and their willingness to participate. Aboriginal inmates will also have to decide whether they want to participate, as their participation will certainly improve the quality of their lives.

I'm hoping that this project will be accepted by the Department of Corrections.

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