

Reintegration Puzzle Conference: Using Lived Experiences to Build a Better System

The Enabling Justice Project background

Nearly half of adult male prisoners and one third of adult female prisoners in Victoria have an Acquired Brain Injury (ABI), compared with about two per cent of the general population. Yet people with an ABI remain unrecognized and unsupported in the system that they are overrepresented in.

The basic supports accepted as essential for people with other kinds of disability in other contexts are lacking – leaving people with an ABI to fend for themselves in a system which is already overwhelming for most people without an ABI.

The criminal justice system is clearly not meeting the needs of people who have an ABI, but it is also not meeting the broader community's need for a system that makes us safer by successfully changing the behavior of people who have broken the law.

Like the city built for cars, not people, or the hospital that would function perfectly well if only there were no patients, the criminal justice system has been built without the needs of its users in mind. Despite their centrality to the criminal justice system, there is not a deep understanding of the “user” experience because there is no feedback mechanism for learning whether its processes, programs and approaches meet the needs of the people it delivers services to.

Our legal system has been designed with convention and procedural efficiency as its hallmarks, with people's experience of it seeming to be irrelevant.

The Enabling Justice project was about starting to address this systemic failure, highlighting the fact that, when a system is not designed with its end-users in mind, when it does not respond to their needs, that system is not going to be effective.

The Enabling Justice project partners – the Centre for Innovative Justice and Jesuit Social Services wanted to make people with lived experience of ABI and the criminal justice system visible. We designed this project in a way that allowed the participants to be seen as more than research subjects by supporting them to tell their stories, firstly to us and then, when ready, to the broader community. In this way, inclusion and participation of participants was a core purpose of the project, beyond data collection.

During the first phase of the project, people with an ABI and lived experience of the criminal justice system were invited to share their experiences and identify the ways in which the system could be more responsive to their needs during one-on-one interviews. Participants were then invited to form a Justice User Group, which provided a consistent, collaborative and supportive environment in which participants could continue to share their experiences, discuss alternative approaches and solutions and build their individual capacity to advocate for change.

Participants also undertook advocacy activities – presenting at conferences, meeting with Ministers, doing media and even launching their own campaign about the lack of post-release housing.

The *Enabling Justice* project has been about doing research, doing reform and doing system-design differently – placing the

experiences of the users of this system firmly at the centre of every process.

So, what have participants gained from being involved? During evaluation, one participant said:

I've had a chance to come out and have a go at something that I had never done before... something that's good for me you know?

Another told us:

This place here, is giving me the opportunity to realise what went wrong. And now I want to make things right.

And finally, one participant said:

I like to think what I've been through is now going to be a stepping stone to making things different.

The final report of the Enabling Justice Project will be launched in the coming months.

Introduce Brigid and Doddy

Today I have with me Doddy , one of the participants in the Enabling Justice Project and a self-advocate who has lived experience of ABI and of the criminal justice system.

Also with me is Brigid Henley, Coordinator of Adult Justice Special Projects at Jesuit Social Services who supported the participants during the project and beyond.

We want to demonstrate how working with people with lived experience of the criminal justice system and of ABI provides unique insights which can help governments,

services and policymakers to design a better system and can benefit everyone.