

Winnunga News

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Inside this Issue:

Official Opening of the New Winnunga Building and Community Day Photos	4
Christmas Presents	6
Transitional Release??	7
Attorney-General's Department and Justice Policy Partnership	9
Damning Prison Report Not For the Faint Hearted	10
Winnunga's Opening Times Over Christmas and New Year	12
COVID-19 Update	13
Staff Profile	15

CEO Update

I wish, as we approach the end of another extremely busy and challenging year to applaud the outstanding contribution which all staff at Winnunga have made to the health, wellbeing and lives of our thousands of clients and their families.

Without you and your devotion to the work you do the lives of many within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community of Canberra and our region would be far more challenged than they are. I thank each one of you for your outstanding contribution to our community and extend best wishes to you for the Christmas season and the new year.

I also extend on behalf of the Winnunga Board and all of us here at Winnunga, seasons greetings and best wishes for the coming year to all our clients, partners and the Aboriginal community at large.

Winnunga was very happy to again join with our sister organisation Gudan Gulwan in hosting the Children's Christmas Party. The Party was a great success bringing obvious joy to a large cohort of very excited and happy children. I look forward to continuing Winnunga's and my very strong partnership with Kim Davison and her team at Gudan as we work together on behalf of our community. Our photographer captured a number of wonderful images on the day which we will publish in next month's Newsletter.

I am, of course, acutely aware of just how challenging the Christmas season can be for many in our community. Sadly, life for many Aboriginal residents of Canberra remains a constant struggle with many experiencing poverty, living in substandard housing or homelessness, addiction, unemployment, bearing the pain of our children under care and protection orders, or have loved ones in prison. I am aware that it is particularly difficult for Aboriginal families living in poverty or with any of these sorts of issues, especially people with young children, to endure the Christmas season when its central message is completely alien to their lived experience.

Please know, however, that Winnunga is here for you no matter what.

I was reminded, once again, of just how dramatic and tragic the over representation of Aboriginal peoples incarcerated in the AMC is when I attended, last week, a family day for Aboriginal detainees. While I am aware of the ACT data in respect of Indigenous incarceration, namely that in the ACT Aboriginal peoples are locked up at the highest rate in Australia, at a rate 21 times higher than that of non-Indigenous peoples, and have by far the worst recidivism rate at 94% the awful reality behind these statistics becomes brutally apparent when one sees many of the individuals relevant to the data



Julie Tongs OAM, CEO



If You Are Not Part Of The Solution You Are Part Of The Problem

'There is a clear double standard at operation in relation to these matters. Say and think what you will...'

in a room at the same time. In other words when the numbers become real people.

While the AMC management is to be commended for organising the family day, which was in many respects a joyous and happy occasion as partners, parents, siblings and children were afforded an opportunity to enjoy an extended period of time with a loved one, it was difficult to not reflect on both the shocking extent of the over-representation of Aboriginal peoples in the prison, and the fact that the situation is worsening rather than improving.



Ellie Gilbert has donated to Winnunga the print "Colonising Species", artist Kevin Gilbert

I also entered the prison mindful of the litany of failures recently identified by the Inspector of Corrections in his recent damning report on the operations and management of the AMC and the implications of his findings for all detainees.

It is because of the range and breadth of the failings identified by the Inspector of Corrections along with the outcomes of a range of other similarly critical reports that I and a number of other Aboriginal leaders in Canberra have for a number of years been calling on the ACT Government to convene a broad ranging Royal Commission style inquiry into all emanations of the disadvantage endured by Aboriginal peoples in Canberra including in particular those that are related to the operations of the ACT justice system, including the police, prosecutors and the courts and the over-representation of Aboriginal peoples in prison.

As I have noted, at regular intervals over the last two years, the ACT Government is yet to respond to my and other Aboriginal community leaders request for such an inquiry. You will, therefore, I am sure forgive my cynicism and that of the Aboriginal community that while our repeated requests for an inquiry including into the operation of the justice system have been studiously ignored for years, that within two weeks of demands for an inquiry into a single case involving a high-profile non-Indigenous woman, that the ACT Government has bent over backwards to initiate such an inquiry.

There is a clear double standard at operation in relation to these matters. Say and think what you will but as far as I am concerned, I am sure my feelings are widely shared in the Aboriginal community of Canberra. The bottom line is that our rights and our needs run a very poor second to those of everyone else.

It was with equal portions of joy and pride that I, all our wonderful staff and hundreds of community members gathered on Saturday 3 December to celebrate the official opening of our beautiful new purpose-built health facility at Narrabundah.



'It was wonderful to see the hundreds of local community members who attended the opening and took the opportunity to undertake an inspection of all it has to offer...'

The realisation of the centre follows the culmination of a decades long campaign by Winnunga for the Aboriginal community of Canberra to have a health facility equal in design, appearance and utility as other Canberra health centres. The design and construction of the building was managed by Winnunga in partnership with JUDD Studios, SAFM Solutions, RLB and Built and has resulted in a building which is fit for purpose, and a place that we can with justifiable pride call our own.

It was wonderful to see the hundreds of local community members who attended the opening and took the opportunity to undertake an inspection of all it has to offer now and, in the future as we have some capacity to explore options for expanding the range of services we provide.

I am grateful for the support and participation of several honoured guests who participated in the formal opening. The Welcome to Country was delivered by esteemed Ngambri Elder Dr Matilda House and Paul Girrawah House and I thank them for their participation and support.



Ngambri Elder Dr Matilda House

The official opening included speeches by Senator Patrick Dodson, one of Australia's most outstanding and inspirational Aboriginal leaders in the last several decades, Mr Craig Ritchie the longstanding Chairperson of the Winnunga Board, myself and Ms Rachel Stephen-Smith, ACT Minister for Health, representing the ACT Government. I thank each of them for their support and attendance.

I am also grateful for the support shown by Senator David Pocock - his first visit at Winnunga, and members of the ACT Legislative Assembly through their attendance in particular ACT Greens leader Mr Shane Rattenbury and ACT Greens Whip Andrew Braddock, Leader of the Opposition and Liberal leader Ms Elizabeth Lee, Shadow Health Minister Ms Leanne Castley, and Liberal Members Mr Peter Cain and Mr James Milligan.

As grateful as I am to all three parties in the Legislative assembly for their support for the construction of the health centre my focus on the need for the Aboriginal community of Canberra and our region to have access to state of the art health facilities has not, however, been entirely satisfied and I am now deeply engaged in the planning and development of a long overdue Aboriginal specific drug and alcohol residential rehabilitation facility at Watson.



Smoking ceremony at the official opening of the Winnunga building

Official Opening of the New Winnunga Building and Community Day Photos

'The realisation of the centre follows the culmination of a decades long campaign by Winnunga for the Aboriginal community of Canberra...'



If You Are Not Part Of The Solution You Are Part Of The Problem

Official Opening of the New Winnunga Building and Community Day Photos (contd')

'...resulted in a building which is fit for purpose, and a place that we can with justifiable pride call our own.'



If You Are Not Part Of The Solution You Are Part Of The Problem

Official Opening of the New Winnunga Building and Community Day (contd')

THANK YOU FROM WINNUNGA TO THE FOLLOWING INDIVIDUALS AND BUSINESSES WHO SUPPORTED US FOR OUR OPENING OF THE BUILDING AND COMMUNITY DAY AT WINNUNGA, 3rd DECEMBER 2022

McLeod's Angels	Canberra Trophy Centre	Yalburu Weaving
Volunteers	Johnny Huckle	Chef Ray
Dan Bouchier	Jerrabomberra Butchery	Officeworks
Dr Aunty Matilda House	Canberra Hire	Discount Party Suppliers
Paul Girrawah House	Old Kentucky	Bunnings
Geoff Bagnall	Mood for Food	Gecko Gang
Paddywack	Classic Soft Serve	City Florist
Jesse Longstride Byrne	Barlens	COSTCO
Greg Stone	Majura Comedy Magic	Big W
Amanda Jane Birchall	Kean Bean Coffee	Woolworths
Andros Cup and Bake	Kennards	Coast to Coast Golden Roast
BP Promo	Gugan Gulwan Youth Aboriginal Corporation	
Rotary Club Tuggeranong	Creative Lighting and Sound Systems	

'Thank you to everyone who supported us on the day.'

Christmas Presents

A big thank you to Transport Canberra and City Services Directorate, ACT Government who delivered a donation of Christmas presents to Winnunga on Friday 9 December. The gifts will greatly assist many families in ensuring children receive something special from Santa this year.



Left to right: Aaron Bloomfield, Thomas Acheson, Ellen Acheson (Senior Director, Policy and Governance) and Ambrose House



Transitional Release??

'...there has been no meaningful access to vocational training at any time in the decade I have spent here...'

Below is a letter written to the Corrections Commissioner, Ray Johnson, by a prisoner who has been in prison since the age of 19 and has now served over a decade in AMC.

Without the required reform, he'll leave prison unemployed, broke, and almost certainly homeless. This is the reality for many prisoners in Canberra as the program designed to assist prisoners reintegrating is run with an extremely punitive mindset, only available in the final months of a sentence, and short term prisoners are prioritised for placement. This leaves long term prisoners (those who actually need help reintegrating) in a position where they are released straight from prison into the community with no form of progression or transition. No one benefits from this scenario.

It's not just the prisoner and those around them who benefit from adequate rehabilitation and reintegration, but the entire community. ACTCS needs to stop seeing education, progression, family, community and cultural connections, work, food, sunlight, or exercise as a privilege and instead begin to see these things as the vital components to the rehabilitation process that they are. Below raises one issue of many within ACTCS.

The Canberra community deserves an answer as to why these things are happening. It's the safety of their homes which is continually put at risk by a prison system that refuses to allow prisoners access to what is needed to rehabilitate. Canberra, and its residents deserve better.

Mr Johnson,

I am writing to express my concerns about the lack of rehabilitation here at the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC), particularly the Transitional Release Program (TRP). The ability for prisoners to spend their final years in low security settings, earn an income, reconnect with family and the community and deinstitutionalise is vital to reducing recidivism. However, despite the TRP consistently being identified as underutilised and overly restrictive by the Office of the Inspectorate of Corrective Services (OICS) since 2019, the program has only become more difficult to access, with greater restrictions. This letter is not a complaint but an appeal for you to act, it is a plea for action.

I am highly motivated to improve myself, despite the almost insurmountable barriers I have faced while incarcerated at the AMC. As there has been no meaningful access to vocational training at any time in the decade I have spent here, I had no choice but to undertake tertiary education at my own expense. I have almost completed my undergraduate degree despite almost no support from the prison, instead having family bear the burden of providing course materials, conducting research and facilitating enrolments. Further, the cost of textbooks has meant I have often had to choose between supplementing the meagre prison diet or my education.

Transitional Release?? (cont'd)

'You have the ability to change things, to give prisoners genuine access to needs-based rehabilitative services and to improve community safety.'

I have no savings, I have never completed a tax return nor held a driver's license. I have not been to a supermarket since I was 19. I want to be released from prison and never return. I want to rejoin society and contribute to my community but without change I will not be given access to the TRP, much less access that is sufficient for me to meet my parole date adequately prepared to reintegrate.

There are repeated instances of prisoners serving short sentences being given access to the TRP, with two prisoners recently being able to access the program after serving less than 2 months in prison. The Transitional Released Centre (TRC) is not a low security prison but housing for those who need assistance in reintegrating back into society, those participating in the TRP. If prisoners serving long sentences continue to be excluded those most in need will be denied vital reintegration support, with detrimental outcomes for both prisoners and the community. The evidence supporting the need to effectively reintegrate prisoners is unequivocal and the TRP is the only opportunity for prisoners in the ACT to access rehabilitative services. TRP also enables detainees to become financially stable and gain employment, reducing pressure on government services and allowing prisoners to become functioning members of society.

In 2017 when the TRP functioned in a manner that allowed prisoner's rehabilitative needs to be met the recidivism rate among TRP graduates was substantially lower than the notoriously high rate of the AMC. Detainees were placed in full time employment and encouraged, rather than discouraged, to spend time with loved ones each weekend. Prisoners spent periods in the TRP congruent with their length of sentence. They were encouraged to genuinely reintegrate.

I cannot comprehend why the TRP is not being taken seriously, and its reform continuously pushed back, as it is the greatest tool available to reduce recidivism and improve outcomes for prisoners and the ACT community. You have the ability to change things, to give prisoners genuine access to needs-based rehabilitative services and to improve community safety.

Mr Johnson, impel this change, provide increased access to TRP for long term prisoners and prevent the punitive AMC mindset from infecting the TRP. I implore you, provide a genuine pathway to rehabilitation and allow us to become a part of the community again.



'...other states and territories expressed interest in this fantastic and much-needed initiative and wanted to hear more about it.'

Attorney-General's Department and Justice Policy Partnership (JPP)

On Tuesday 13 December a meeting of the Attorney-General's Department and the Justice Policy Partnership (JPP) was held at Winnunga. The JPP was established in July 2021 as the first of five policy partnerships under Priority Reform One of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The JPP brings together representatives from the Coalition of Peaks, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts, and Australian, state and territory governments to take a joined-up approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy – in the ACT the focus is justice issues.

The JPP has met a total of five times, with the first meeting in September 2021. Due to COVID-19, only one of those meetings has been in-person and was held in Adelaide in September 2022. At that meeting, the ACT representative Ms Julie Tongs briefly mentioned the work Winnunga does in delivering standalone coordinated health care services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander detainees in the Alexander Maconochie Centre.

Representatives from other states and territories expressed interest in this fantastic and much-needed initiative and wanted to hear more about it. They asked the Secretariat to arrange a visit and have Julie and other relevant staff speak with them.



Above: Members of the JPP at meeting held at Winnunga

Right: Winnunga workers Warren and Ambrose, Tamsyn Harvey Dep Secretary Justice and Communities Group Attorney-General's Dept and Commonwealth Co-Chair of the JPP under the Closing the Gap National Agreement, Phil Nean and Julie Tongs



Damning Prison Report Not For the Faint Hearted

City News, Opinion, 7 December 2022

“The ‘Healthy Prison Review’ is damning. There is simply no other descriptor that reflects the extent of the failings identified in the management and operation of the AMC,” writes JULIE TONGS.

THE incarceration and recidivism rates of Aboriginal peoples in Canberra provide one, albeit very stark, example of an area of public administration in relation to which the ACT government is clearly failing. And it’s one that we, the community, through our silence and studied indifference are complicit.

The latest data from the ABS publication “Prisoners in Australia” reveals that the ACT currently has the highest rate ratio of Aboriginal incarceration in Australia of 21 and unsurprisingly, the highest indigenous recidivism rate in Australia, of 94 per cent.

What is particularly disturbing about the data is the degree to which it has deteriorated in the last decade. In 2011 an Aboriginal person in Canberra was 11.6 times more likely to be imprisoned than a non-Aboriginal person while the national average was 14.4 whereas in 2021 an Aboriginal person in the ACT was 21 times more likely to be imprisoned while the national average was 15.8. The ratio of Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal women incarcerated in the ACT in 2019-20 was 67.3, by far the highest in Australia. Overall, the ACT experienced an increase in the last decade in indigenous incarceration of 279 per cent, which was five times higher than the national increase of 59 per cent.

A very clear and deep insight into one of the major contributors to these extremely poor, Australian worst, outcomes is provided in the latest report of the ACT Inspector of Correctional Services, titled “Healthy Prison Review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre 2022”. The report speaks for itself, and I urge anyone interested in seeking to understand the extent to which the justice system in Canberra is failing not only those in detention but by extension the entire community, to read the full report.

It needs to be remembered that it is not only an unreformed and embittered detainee returning to life in the community following the completion of a period of imprisonment who will potentially suffer the consequences of not having received appropriate treatment, care or training within the AMC but if he returns to a life of crime, it is the community that suffers.

The report is damning. There is simply no other descriptor that reflects the extent of the failings identified in the management and operation of the AMC. The inspector also reveals some Aboriginal-specific data that is very troubling and regrettably raises, at least for me, the spectre of racism.

For example, the report notes that in 2020-21 while making up 27 per cent of the detainee population, Aboriginal people were the subject of 55 per cent of all use of force incidents in the AMC. In similar vein while comprising 27 per cent of the detainee population, Aboriginal detainees accounted for 47 per cent of all segregation orders and 41 per cent of all maximum-security classifications.



The Alexander Maconochie Centre... “There is little incentive to get out of bed and participate in activities.”

Damning Prison Report Not For the Faint Hearted

(cont'd)

The report is almost 250 pages long and I cannot do it justice in the space available to me but will attempt in the following quotes to provide a flavour of the report's findings and concerns.

"The apparent lack of a structured day at the AMC and resulting boredom presents an ongoing concern for the OICS and is a matter that has been raised in a number of our reports.

"With very little to do all day, many detainees have no routine or daily responsibilities and as a result lack motivation to participate in their rehabilitation and preparation for release. There is little incentive to get out of bed and participate in activities, which OICS finds entirely unacceptable.

"It is OICS' view that in the years since first raising this issue, the situation has only become worse.

"It is a matter of grave concern to OICS that there has been no education provided at the AMC since September 2021 and only very limited vocational training. The absence of education can have significant implications for detainees' rehabilitation and future employment prospects. This matter must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

"Furthermore, OICS is concerned about the obstacles faced by many of the detainees currently enrolled in university courses. In accessing course material, conducting research and participating in course requirements.

"There has been a gross shortfall in programs delivered in the AMC over the last three years. Detainees are missing a hugely important key to rehabilitation, and it is exceptionally unfair to detainees.

"OICS has reviewed the list of available job opportunities and while on paper there appear to be a considerable number of positions, the reality is that the majority are menial positions such as sweepers and cleaners providing a couple of hours per week of work.

"Transitional release at the AMC is intended to support rehabilitation, prepare detainees for their return to the community and improve prospects for employment following release. The Transitional Release Centre has been either empty or close to empty for the last three years. The squandering of this important reintegration facility cannot be attributed to COVID-19."

The OICS report is, as I noted above, almost 250 pages long and I have quoted just half of one page. I urge you to read the rest but be aware, it is not for the faint hearted.

Julie Tongs is the CEO of Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Services.



Winnunga's Opening Times Over Christmas and New Year

**Over the Christmas and New Year Period, the Winnunga clinic
will be open in a reduced capacity with access to a
Nurse and a GP**

Monday 26 December: closed

Tuesday 27 December: closed

Wednesday 28 December: open 9am to 1pm

Thursday 29 December: open 9am to 1pm

Friday 30 December: open 9am to 1pm

Monday 2 January: closed

**Back to normal hours and services 9am to 5pm from
Tuesday 3 January onwards**



COVID-19 Update

COVID case numbers are increasing. Please attend the Winnunga Respiratory Clinic for testing or do a RAT if you have symptoms. Keep your COVID-19 vaccinations up to date.

Please stay at home if you are sick or test positive to COVID-19

While isolation for people with COVID-19 is no longer mandatory, if you catch COVID you should stay at home and minimise your contact with others until your symptoms have gone and you are feeling much better.

If you test positive for COVID:

- Speak to your health care provider about your symptoms and check if you are eligible for antiviral medications
- Maintain separation from other people in your household
- If you need to leave your house wear a mask
- Avoid attending large gatherings or crowded indoor places
- Don't visit high risk settings (like hospitals, aged or disability care) or visit people who are at high risk for at least 7 days
- Follow ACT Health advice for people who test positive: <https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/stay-safe-and-healthy/information-for-people-who-test-positive-for-covid-19>

What to do if you are exposed to someone with COVID-19

- Closely monitor for COVID-19 symptoms
- If you become unwell, get tested and stay home
- Wear a mask indoors if you are not at home and on public transport
- Consider testing regularly for COVID-19 using a RAT
- Avoid visiting people at high risk of severe illness, anyone in hospital, or an aged or disability care facility
- Follow ACT Health advice for people exposed to COVID-19: <https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/stay-safe-and-healthy/exposed-to-covid19>



COVID-19 Vaccinations

Everyone aged 5 years and older is eligible for COVID-19 vaccination. Two doses are required to start with (3 for people with severe immunocompromise), followed by boosters.

You are due for a booster if you are:

- Aged 16 or older and you completed the primary course 3 months or more ago
- Aged 5-15 years, you completed the primary course 3 months or more ago AND you are severely immunocompromised or have a disability or complex health condition that increases the risk of severe COVID-19

You are due for a second booster if you are:

- Aged 30 years or older, OR
- Aged 16-29 and you are severely immunocompromised or have a complex, chronic or severe health condition that increases the risk of severe COVID-19
- AND your previous booster was 3 months or more ago

If you have been infected with COVID-19 you should wait 3 months before getting your next COVID vaccination.

COVID-19 Update (cont'd)

Please come in to Winnunga for your vaccination or call reception on (02) 6284 6222 to book in.

If you are unsure about getting vaccinated, we encourage you to discuss this with one of our healthcare workers.

For the latest advice and updates from the Department of Health, visit:
<https://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/covid-19-vaccines>



Winnunga Respiratory Clinic

The Respiratory Clinic is located in the old Winnunga building and does PCR testing for COVID-19. Anyone who has a fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, shortness of breath or loss of taste or smell should go directly to this entrance. If you require testing because of recent exposure to COVID-19, please also go directly to the Respiratory Clinic.

Temperature, symptom and exposure screening is in place for all clients presenting to the main Winnunga entrance and you will be redirected to the Respiratory Clinic if you have symptoms or have been exposed to COVID.

Attending Winnunga and telephone consultations

Please maintain social distancing while attending Winnunga. Please do not gather in groups while waiting for services. Please use the hand sanitiser provided before entering the clinic, while waiting in the clinic and on your way out. You will also be required to wear a surgical mask while visiting Winnunga.

If you cannot attend Winnunga in person our doctors can do telephone consultations. To organise a telephone consultation call Winnunga on 6284 6222.

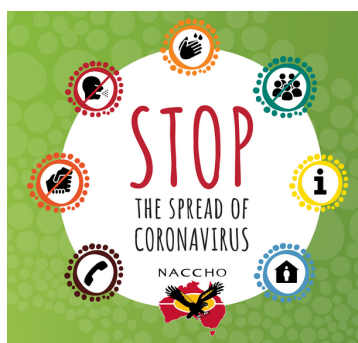
Rapid Antigen Tests

Winnunga is providing rapid antigen tests (RATs) to eligible Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander clients

Winnunga can provide Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander clients and families with rapid antigen tests if you are having difficulty accessing them.

If you have a positive RAT test at home please notify Winnunga nurses by calling 6284 6222. You may be eligible for antiviral treatments, which must be given in the first 5 days. This is particularly important for people who are immunocompromised, have chronic conditions or are not fully vaccinated.

Positive RATs must also be reported to ACT Health using the online reporting form:
<https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/stay-safe-and-healthy/rapid-antigen-test-rat-positive-result-registration-form>



If You Are Not Part Of The Solution You Are Part Of The Problem

Staff Profile



Name: Sashini Liyanaarachchi

Position: Finance Officer

Where are you from?

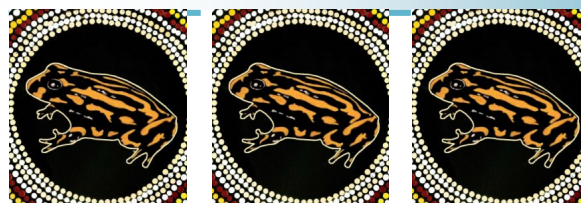
Sri Lanka

Who is your favourite singer/band?

Taylor Swift

What is your favourite song?

Only Hope – A Walk to Remember



What do you do on the weekends?

Watch movies and go for a walk

What is your favourite food?

Paella

What do you like most about working at Winnunga?

Great work environment and super friendly staff

My Favourite pet?

Dogs

What is your pet hate?

Disrespectful people

