

SERO4 Purpose Statement - "Women and their families are thriving"

SERO4 Ltd was established in 2013, the name SERO means *growth* in Latin, growth to the power of 4 - women, workers, organisations and community. The expanded acronym means - **support-education-resilience-opportunity**. SERO4 is a limited by guarantee public company ASIC registered, is a charity registered with the Australian Charities and Not for Profit Commission.

SERO4's purpose is to provide services and support to women and their families who have had experiences that have impacted their wellbeing. Providing a continuum of care and opportunity for recovery and resilience making. We want to create sustainable change in women's lives, identify challenges and gaps in human services sector delivery, develop solutions, new knowledge and practical solutions.

The philosophy of our organisation – is to work towards outcomes where '*Women and their Families are Thriving*'

- Women are at the centre of everything we do
- We want to raise awareness about the destructive effects of violence on families
- We advocate for the rights of all women and families regardless of social, economic, ethnic background, sexuality and identity
- We want to increase knowledge, practice awareness and capability about the complex dynamics of domestic and family violence

The MARA Project (MARA) – Women's Re-entry Model- South East Queensland

The MARA model grew out of a range of intensive workshops and discussions, where a range of information was considered from; women in correctional centres, international and Australian research, Queensland Corrective Services service provision from multiple perspectives (custody to the community), experienced professionals who have worked with women who have experienced trauma, violence and abuse and those with extensive experience in the criminal justice system.

The main outcome of this co-design collaboration was to develop a model which delivers an *effective relationship with women* and reviews and rebuilds an *effective system*, which can respond to women in ways that consider the complex needs of women who have experienced trauma. This was to lessen the levels of returns to custody that women were experiencing due to the lack of; coordinated, timely and consistent support.

MARA operates an Inreach team and an Outreach team in the four SE Qld women's correctional centres. The MARA model is based on relationship, the Inreach make contact in custody and support women to determine their needs and make referrals to the MARA Outreach team. The Outreach team meet the woman in custody before release and then support her with faye of release if required and ongoing connections to the community. Both teams are supported by resource workers and administration who assist the team to access resources so that the Outreach worker can concentrate on relationship building and supporting women.

MARA from its inception has developed and improved upon the Critical Time Intervention model, offering a continuous and supported relationship and service delivery to women from in custody, during release and into the community for up to six months, allowing for women to reengage with MARA through our Step in- Step out phase, at any time if they need to reconnect with the program.

The strength of this MARA continuum of relationship and support cannot be understated. The MARA joined-up model ensures that there is a holistic and seamless response and connection from in custody, to release, to the community. Our experience tells us that the loss of consistency of relationships and trust has an impact on the risk of women immediately reoffending upon release. This is due to the fact they tend not to engage with or link with supports, networks or services, because they lose focus, momentum and direction without the initial intensive connection with an outreach worker, commenced in custody.

Domestic and Family Violence statement

SERO4 is committed to ending domestic and family violence (DFV) in our community and has zero-tolerance for domestic and family violence in our organisation. SERO4 will proactively support our staff, who may be victims or supporting family members who are victims of DFV and ensure their privacy is respected. We will support these staff members with any DFV related requirements, such as moving to a safer home environment, court attendance and any legal/counselling appointments.

Responses to Qld Safety and Justice Taskforce - Summary paper April 2022

Cross-cutting issues

Overrepresentation of ATSI women and girls

For SERO4/MARA self-determination in practice has been defined by some of the following:

- Listen to elders and the community and build relationships with key First Nation organisations, respecting their responsibilities to their community.
- Understand the historical and cultural contexts and continue to build cultural competence.
- Knowing when to step back and respect the boundaries of the woman and her community.
- Enable women we support to lead the relationship, support her to link back with their family and community and her culture.
- Allow time for the woman set goals and take action.
- Understand her kinship responsibilities.
- Observe her grief and loss regarding her relationships with her children, some may be in kinship care in the care of others in the child protection system.
- **Reputation is key** and being vouched for as a service by Aboriginal and TI women to other ATSI women
- Reputation is born out of good practice and consistent responses, and
- Data analysed from our database suggests some of the following

Wherever possible and appropriate, MARA has supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to be linked to cultural service providers, including specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander supported accommodation providers, identified previously.

When analysing the Justice Star data for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women that MARA have supported, some interesting findings¹;

¹ The Justice STAR analysis and QCS contract has concentrated on 4 main domains (responses developed holistically) Mental Health, Alcohol and Drug addiction, Housing needs, Domestic & Family Violence current and previous risk and safety.

Support needs, by ethnicity

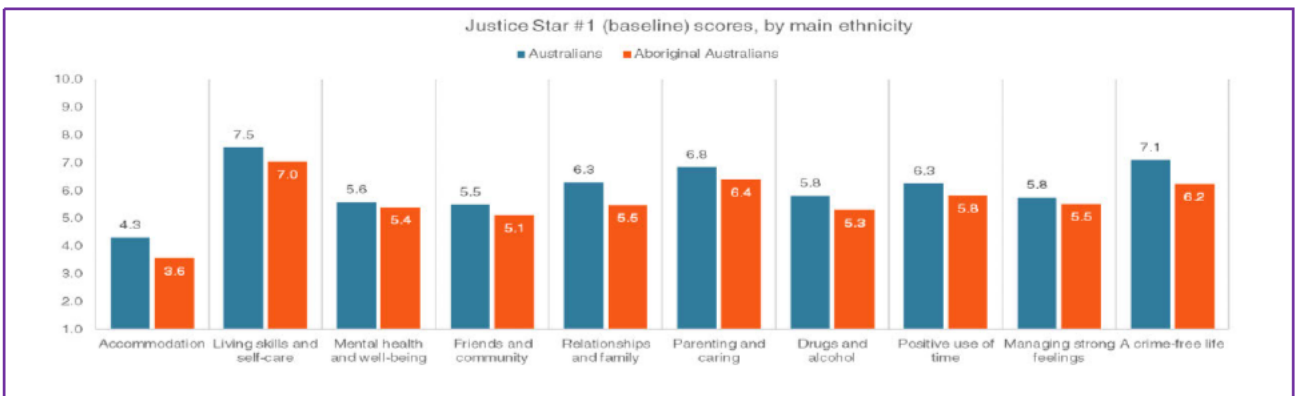
- When comparing support needs between participants identifying as 'Australian' (n=230) and 'Aboriginal Australian' (n=103), there are a few differences
 - Overall, Mental Health and AOD as support needs were identified for similar proportions of both groups
 - Overall, Housing was identified as a support need for nearly twice as many non-Aboriginal participants (35%) compared to Aboriginal participants (19%)
 - Overall, DFV was identified as a support need for slightly more Aboriginal participants (31%) compared to non-Aboriginal (25%)

Table 2 - Support needs identified for Australian (n=230) vs Aboriginal Australian (n=103) participants, by domain

	Mental Health	AOD	Housing	DFV	None
Australian Aboriginal (%)	60%	80%	19%	31%	0%
Australian (%)	63%	80%	35%	25%	0%

- When considering multiple support needs
 - Mental health/AOD support needs were slightly higher for Aboriginal participants
 - Non-Aboriginal participants were more likely to have Mental health/Housing/AOD support needs than Aboriginal participants

Support needs	Australian	Aboriginal	Total
AOD	17.39%	20.65%	18.39%
AOD DFV	7.25%	7.61%	7.36%
Housing AOD	6.76%	3.26%	5.69%
Mental health	11.11%	6.52%	9.70%
Mental health AOD	23.67%	29.35%	25.42%
Mental health AOD DFV	5.80%	14.13%	8.36%
Mental health Housing AOD	15.94%	8.70%	13.71%
Mental health Housing AOD DFV	8.21%	4.35%	7.02%
None	3.86%	5.43%	4.35%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%



Complex needs and Sexual Violence

- All women are offered a service (voluntary)
 - SV women offenders
 - Case example
 - In custody 5 years sexual offending against children
 - Accommodation challenge – could not return to family in Nth Qld
 - Supported accommodation only option
 - MARA access to IOMs enables contextualising of offending - access to court transcripts
 - Documented DV victim history and own CSA victim history
 - Perpetrator forced the woman to be part of it
 - The woman has mental health issues, possible cognitive impairment (often appears to dissociate)
 - With ongoing consent from woman can negotiate with the accommodation provider as able to speak to the context of the offending accommodation referral accepted – accommodation provision would have been near impossible

Recognising and responding to trauma

- No clear / nor visible consistent processes and protocols by system agents generally re trauma
- Strong partnership with MARA and QCS – Community Corrections enables strong information sharing and planning with the woman
- Relationship with MARA worker enables trust-building for disclosures and risk assessment for SA/DFV/vulnerability/ risk of reoffending

Rights of women

- Inconsistent practice in particular police

- Some individual responses problematic – criminal history influences responses
- Few pathways for individual police officer accountability and internal protection of colleagues
- Women are unlikely to complain about their treatment – a sense of hopelessness ‘what’s the point’ and impact on outcomes

Women better supported to reduce recidivism

- Safe and affordable accommodation
- Issues with ARA (accommodation risk assessment) and accommodation suitability lengthens time on remand (bail applications) and parole release
- Missed opportunities in custody as women bored and then become unmotivated and complacent need to review education offerings – the need for women-centred group work and other life skills offerings

Consent is a complex issue for some of the most marginalised women in the community who are sleeping rough, AOD use, DV victims and histories of abuse and trauma

Reporting SA

- MARA identifies women often experience SV within an intimate relationship as is related to the DV tactics and power
- Less likely to report – fear of the perpetrator, impact on charges on foot, parole, hopelessness re: action by the system, not being believed, being judged because of criminalisation
- Disclosures, MARA refers to specialist counselling and where trauma and nuance of DV are understood

Challenges of mental health professionals

- Experience with poorly informed and trained mental health practitioners (ie Psychologists) who don’t understand DV risk and fail to recognise escalation and high-risk situations

Part 3

- Drug diversion
 - What are the issues that drive the AOD use, *Maslows Hierarchy of Need*. The bottom two layers of Maslow, basic human needs are not dealt with (shelter, food, water, sleep and then safety- personal security, employment/income, resources and health) it will be a challenge to impact the AOD misuse
- Barriers accessing quality legal advice
 - Lack of consistent advocacy and support with legal matters is a huge gap and helping women understand the criminal justice system
 - Women are further traumatised by the lack of support resulting in behavioural issues in custody where women are further sanctioned
 - Women helping other women in custody – lots of disinformation
 - Major communication issues with LA lawyers about their matters – women spend hours trying to contact a lawyer
 - Not understanding what lawyers want from them regarding their matter(ie contents of affidavits, parole applications, bail applications, immigration issues and deportation)
 - In custody for extended periods because of system clogging and mentions as lawyers don’t have information from clients in custody
 - End up pleading guilty as finalises matter, can’t give the lawyer what they are asking for, equals very poor justice response
 - This results in poor justice outcomes for women
 - **Solution** a community-based advocacy support role that can liaise with women in custody and their lawyers to communicate between parties about their matters and

support women to understand what is being asked of them by their lawyers (noting - not to give legal advice)

- Taking charges for the perpetrator of DFV
 - QCS in custody staff wanted to highlight the number of women who are in custody (both Aboriginal, TI and non-Aboriginal women) who have taken charges for the perpetrator partner or ex-partner. Men believe and coercively convince women that they will get a lighter sentence than him
- Women on remand
 - Currently approx. 41% of women in custody on remand – this is a judicial and court and police issue
 - Long waits for matters to be heard or resolved
 - **Solution** – better coordination at courts to enable suitable bail addresses to be found and referral to a support service such as MARA for transactional support
- Late notice releases (LNR)
 - Not a QCS issue a court issue
 - **Solution** legislative change and procedural change that may allow
 - No consideration nor flexibility on time of release which may increase vulnerability
 - Numbers of women leave SEQ for other parts of Qld on LNR
 - QCS and community service provider is sometimes expected to pull a rabbit out of a hat with no notice
 - MARA is not adequately funded in LNR to ensure a quick and temporary response and plan for next steps
- Women being released directly from the court
 - When women are transported from a Correctional Centre to a Court for their matter, they are not allowed to take anything at all with them in the prison transport vehicle
 - If the woman is released to immediate parole or bail (if on remand) nothing is provided for her regarding practical support. Women may reoffend – jump a train, or steal food or commit other offences to meet their basic needs.
 - The woman needs to return to the correctional centre to retrieve her belonging and also any money in her trust account
 - **Solution** – needs to be a more consistent coordinated response in court
- Women as primary carers of children
 - Many women already have children in the care of the state
 - Pregnant women in custody and community risk subsequent children being removed (at birth)
 - Women feel over-surveilled because of their criminal history – lack of differential and contextualised investigation and response
 - **Solution** - consider the new research and model posed by Professor Dr Susan Dennison *Transforming Corrections to Transform Lives* project at Griffith University Institute of Criminology. <https://www.transformingcorrections.com.au>

Reintegration

- What works well
 - **MARA model**
 - Individualised /differential responses
 - Flexible approach (which needs to be funded properly)
 - Proactive outreach in the community and proactive Inreach in correctional centres
 - Having access to QCS's IOMS (Integrated offender management system database)

- Not trying to be everything to the woman, linking with quality service providers and specialist pathways
- Working with the woman's identified Hierarchy of Need (Maslow)
- Helping the woman build readiness to achieve her goals through practical support
- Building trust with the woman by having **consistent practice which is systematic/structured and detailed** – to enable strong communication with the woman
- Women comment of the consistent response and timely responses no matter what worker you engage with at MARA
- **Having a good reputation amongst women and stakeholders**, consistent positive messages about MARA from partnerships and other stakeholders – supports the woman/ worker relationship, creates good engagement and partnering
- Access to quality information and partnering with QCS (IOMS) access
- Quality risk identification and safety planning, pre-emptive, responding not reacting for DFV/vulnerability of VAW/ risk of reoffending/MH crisis/AOD relapse/breaches and suspension of parole
- Going the extra mile, even if the woman is not eligible for the service at that time
- Problem-solving (not problem making or ruminating)- finding gaps, building relationships with other service providers to find solutions
- Learning to commence in custody then continues in the community – not only formal education but informal education such as life skills, real-world issues and problem-solving for women with complex histories and needs
- For women returning to custody MARA Inreach interview WWW (what went well)
 - Look at how things were different in the community this time
 - Help women recognise (distance travelled)
 - Use of Justice star – a visual representation of movement toward goals
 - Consider improvements in practice
 - Identify themes and gaps
- **Step In Step Out** – women can check in with the service even if off the caseload can be returned to the caseload if required
 - Women can disengage once initial re-entry needs are met
 - Important to negotiate coming off the caseload with the woman as demonstrates professional boundaries and self-determination

Return to Custody Data

SERO4/The MARA Project internal data from our Justice Star data of MARA clients indicates that between 2% (during COVID – court disruptions) and 9% (pre-COVID) of MARA clients return to custody for a variety of reasons including:

- Historic charges not dealt with whilst in court
- Homelessness and lack of resources, as such women may re-offend
- Return to AOD misuse, new charges
- During COVID there were significant court disruptions where women's matters were adjourned in that time women were in the community, they may or may not have

reoffended, once courts were open their matters were heard and they were remanded to custody, sentenced and released.

Solution

- Broaden the scope and funding of MARA to be able more women to be supported in custody and upon release, on remand, and sentenced.
- Have a strong coordinated and integrated approach with courts and community organisation (preferably a single provider)
- Funding a state-wide model with one service provider so consistent and effective practice can be provided across all women's correctional centres.

Amy Compton-Keen
CEO SERO4 Ltd and The MARA Project



The MARA PROJECT

The Women's Wellbeing Project www.womenswellbeingproject.com.au

- *THRIVE microgreens.* www.thrivemicrogreens.com.au
- *i.thrive bespoke – handmade goods*

I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians past, present and emerging whose land I walk, I work, I live and respect.

