
The SERO4 / MARA Project partnership with Volunteering Qld

Pathways to Volunteering for Justice involved women – SERO4 Project Coordinator Clarissa Heil

Project Summary

The project was originally designed to deliver the Certificate I in Active Volunteering within correctional centres across Southeast Queensland. Delivery was affected by a range of barriers, including lockdowns, participant transfers, court appearances, competing work orders, delays associated with USI registration requirements and restrictions on participant access. Training resources required approval prior to delivery, and some practical activities could not be undertaken due to centre-specific policies and procedures. As a result, delivery was ultimately limited to the low-security correctional centre at Helena Jones.

A total of five women enrolled in the program and all five commenced training. Participants successfully completed all five units, including theoretical and practical learning activities and volunteer hours. All participants received a Certificate of Completion and were encouraged to continue towards the full qualification following release into the community.

Attendance and continuity of learning were often affected by operational requirements outside the women's control rather than a lack of motivation or engagement.

Key Project Learnings

- Women were not always available for scheduled classes due to transfers, court appearances, work requirements and other operational demands.
- Programs delivered in custody require support from both correctional management and frontline custodial staff.
- USI enrolment processes and responsibilities should be clarified prior to program commencement.
- Delivery models need to accommodate interrupted attendance and varying learning needs.
- Learning resources may require adaptation to meet the requirements of individual correctional centres.
- Women benefit from clear pathways to continue education, volunteering and employment following release.

- A dual delivery model incorporating both in-custody and community-based training may provide greater continuity, flexibility and participation opportunities.
- Future projects should allow additional time for correctional approvals, operational disruptions, participant movement between centres and transitions from custody to the community.

Inclusive Volunteer Opportunities for Women with Criminal Histories

Volunteering can help women build confidence, develop skills, gain work experience and create pathways to employment while supporting successful reintegration into the community. Organisations seeking to engage volunteers with criminal histories should adopt a strengths-based and trauma-informed approach that focuses on individual capability rather than past offending. Creating environments where women feel welcomed, respected, valued and able to contribute meaningfully can significantly improve volunteer engagement and outcomes. Clear communication, realistic expectations and reasonable flexibility can further support participation, particularly when women are managing parole requirements, housing issues, transport barriers, family responsibilities or ongoing engagement with support services.

Criminal history should only be considered where it is directly relevant to the volunteer role. Decisions should be based on the nature of the role, the circumstances of the offence, evidence of change and any genuine safety considerations. Women should be assessed as individuals and provided with fair opportunities to participate.

Volunteer roles should be meaningful, clearly defined and matched to a woman's skills, interests and support needs. Women should not be restricted to low-value tasks because of their criminal history. Appropriate supervision, clear expectations and opportunities to contribute meaningfully help create positive volunteering experiences.

Confidentiality is essential. Information about a woman's criminal history should only be shared where necessary and on a need-to-know basis. Organisations should ensure personal information is protected and does not become the subject of workplace gossip or unnecessary discussion.

Leadership commitment is critical to success. Organisational policies, recruitment practices and workplace culture should reflect a commitment to inclusion, dignity and fairness. Staff should receive information about trauma-informed practice, professional boundaries and organisational expectations, while volunteers should have access to regular feedback, support and opportunities to succeed. Managers should actively address discriminatory comments, fear-based assumptions and exclusionary behaviour. Partnerships with reintegration services, women's services and community organisations can further assist organisations to support volunteers and address barriers to participation.

Conclusion

The project demonstrated that women with criminal histories can successfully engage in training programs when provided with appropriate opportunities and support. Despite the operational challenges associated with delivering training in correctional environments, participants remained engaged and achieved positive outcomes.

The project highlighted the value of volunteering as a pathway to skill development, confidence building and community participation. It also reinforced the importance of organisations creating supportive and inclusive environments that recognise the strengths, capabilities and potential of women with criminal histories. Future programs will benefit from strong correctional partnerships, realistic implementation timeframes, flexible delivery approaches and clear pathways that support women to continue participating in education, volunteering and employment following release.



Amy Compton-Keen

CEO

ceo@sero4.com.au

