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# LIVED EXPERIENCE FRAMEWORK

2026

# **Contents**

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<b>Background to the Lived Experience Framework</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>A brief note about the Justice Reform Initiative</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Intentional hiring</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Choice in lived experience identity</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Media guidelines: Positive representation of people with lived experience</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Payment schedules for short-term or one-off collaborations</b>	<b>12</b>

# Background to the Lived Experience Framework

Developing frameworks for engaging people with lived prison experience in employment and/or participation in projects is a vital step in ensuring people have access to work and career progression for the same reasons as everyone else: to provide for themselves, to participate in the legal economy, and to fulfill personal and professional goals.

Although in some sectors and communities in Australia there is strong recognition of the value of lived experience (i.e., Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led organisations, mental health, disability, LGBTQIA+ and youth sectors), there is very little published information on how Australian employers can best support employees or other people with lived prison experience.

This framework was initially developed as part of an internal process for the Justice Reform Initiative (JRI). While the principle of centering lived expertise in advocacy and campaign work had been articulated in our early strategic plan, we recognised the importance of more formally articulating how this might occur operationally. This included interrogating internal policies and practices around employment and human-resources as well as exploring our approach to stakeholder and media engagement.

## The questions guiding the development of the framework included:

1. What are the HR and Employment practices that ensure positive outcomes for employers and their formerly incarcerated employees?
2. What is the best way of engaging with people with lived experience, regardless of the level of participation? (Including people who contribute their time and expertise but are not engaged as employees)
3. How do staff identify/not identify as a person with lived experience – whether that be someone who has been criminalised or incarcerated; or someone who has been impacted by the criminalisation or incarceration of a loved one; or someone who has other lived experience of harm and the criminal legal system.
4. How might policies and practices be adapted to encourage, support, and strengthen engagement with people with lived experience, particularly with regard to media engagement?

While the framework was intended to inform the development of internal operational policy for the Justice Reform Initiative, given the overwhelming interest in this area from colleagues and stakeholders around Australia, including the interest in other aspects of our more external facing lived expertise work (i.e., the ACT Lived Experience Speakers Bureau Pilot Project and the 'Our Voices Unlocked' webinar series) we decided to make this document public. We are hopeful that this framework might also be of use to other organisations who are looking to reflect and develop work in these areas.

**The key policy areas and recommendations that this framework covers include:**

1. **Intentional Hiring.** People with lived prison experience are 'a talent pool worthy of a specific and intentional approach.'<sup>1</sup> There is the need to develop an intentional hiring policy using the Onramps Guide checklist<sup>2</sup> and the Envoy self-assessment<sup>3</sup> (covered in more detail below).
2. **Choice in Lived Expertise Identity.** To develop and enact policies and practices that recognise the individual risks and responsibilities of identifying lived experience, ensuring that staff members or participants should be in charge of what, when, and how they disclose.
3. **Media Guidelines.** To ensure staff and participants are treated fairly and respectfully and people with lived prison experience are represented positively.
4. **Payment Schedules for short-term or one-off collaborations.** To implement a transparent payment and reimbursement schedule for people with lived experience modelled on one developed by the Western Australian Association for Mental Health<sup>4</sup> (outlined further in this document).

The framework draws on the expertise of trailblazers in the United States of America, where mass incarceration has driven particular mobilisation around employment market access. The recommendations centre around intentional hiring practices and creating a safe and inclusive work environment for both prospective and existing staff, as well as formerly incarcerated people who the organisation engages with on ad hoc or short-term arrangements.

The work for this framework has been developed by, for, and alongside people who have lived in prison.

# A brief note about the Justice Reform Initiative

The Justice Reform Initiative was established in September 2020 with a goal to reduce Australia's harmful and costly reliance on incarceration. We seek to reduce incarceration in Australia by 50% by 2030 and build a community in which disadvantage is no longer met with a default criminal justice system response.

Our list of patrons includes 120 eminent Australians, including two former Governors-General, former Members of Parliament from all sides of politics, academics, respected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, senior former judges, including High Court judges, and many other community leaders who have added their voices to the movement to end the cycle of incarceration in Australia. A full list of patrons is available at our website [here](#).

We also work with stakeholders across Australia and are excited to keep growing this coalition. At the time of writing, over 170 supporter organisations (including the Law Council of Australia, the Australian Medical Association, FECCA, multiple peak organisations and Aboriginal led organisations) have joined the Justice Reform Initiative as supporters. The list of supporter organisations can be seen [here](#).

The Justice Reform Initiative seeks to work with parliamentarians from all sides of politics, policy makers, people with experience of the justice system, and people of good-will across the country to embrace evidence based criminal justice policy in order to reduce crime, reduce recidivism, and build safer communities.

# Intentional hiring

## Employment, the labour market and incarceration

More than 40,000 adults (about the seating capacity of Sydney's Allianz Stadium) are housed in the nation's 115 prisons on any given day.<sup>5</sup> More than half of people in prison in Australia were jobless just before incarceration, and for those who are incarcerated for longer than 6 months, nearly 80% expect to be unemployed on release.<sup>6</sup>

The labour market struggles in Australia mirror those of formerly incarcerated people in the United States, with 45% of people in the USA reporting no earnings in the year after their release and for those who were working, their reported median income was less than \$15,000 USD.<sup>7</sup> When working aged people are making the difficult

transition from prison to community they face an unemployment rate 5 times the average.<sup>8</sup> Systemic barriers contribute to the high levels of non-employment; most recruiters require applicants to undergo background checks and a conviction history can reduce the chances of an interview by as much as 50%.<sup>9</sup> For formerly incarcerated First Nations people, especially women, their chances of experiencing 'labour market punishment' are even greater.<sup>10</sup>

One study found that with every year of incarceration, chances of employment post-prison reduced by 3.6%, but for incarcerated people who had stable employment before prison, their likelihood of finding a job reduced by 24%.<sup>11</sup>

## Creating employment opportunities

How might employers adopt intentional hiring practices to include the expertise of people with lived prison experience, improve retention and mobility outcomes, and contribute to creating stronger communities?

The first step for many employers wishing to make opportunities more accessible to candidates who have lived in prison is reviewing internal policies and processes. Updating hiring procedures does not have to mean a total overhaul. Simple changes to specific areas can attract talent, provide pathways into employment and progress career aspirations.

Every business or organisation has the ability to create meaningful employment opportunities within their organisation for formerly incarcerated people. When researching successful frameworks for engaging people with lived prison experience in work or projects, there is little to no literature from an Australian context. This is not to say that intentional hiring practices are not undertaken (see [Fruit2Work](#), [Flat Out](#), [Confit Pathways](#), [Vacro](#), [Sisters Inside](#), [Deadly Connections](#), [Community Restorative Centre](#)), they are just not shared or formalised in a way that has warranted in-depth documentation.

In the United States, the Second Chance Business Coalition (SCBC) is a 'cross-sector coalition' of companies dedicated to expanding and advancing Fair Chance hiring practices.<sup>12</sup> The SCBC has created one of the most comprehensive resources charting a range of lived experience engagement pathways for Fair Chance employers.

**The Onramps Guide foregrounds case studies and provides a checklist for adopting intentional hiring practices across 4 pathways:**

1. HR Policy and Practice: Job posting and application, candidate assessment and interviews, background checks, benefits and retention strategies, onboarding and orientation.
2. Talent Partnerships: Re-entry and workforce partnerships, expanded partnerships, public partnerships and incentives.
3. Measurement, Learning and Culture: Learning and development, staff engagement, internal communication, measurement and assessment.
4. Community Investment and Influence: Philanthropy and corporate social responsibility, influence and external communication.

Intentional hiring initiatives like “Fair Chance” in the United States provide opportunities to people regardless of their lived prison experience. They signal to people with lived experience who are looking for stable employment that the workplace will be welcoming and safe. As the universal entry point to the jobs market, the Second Chance Business Coalition emphasises that vacancy postings and application language ‘should encourage not dissuade’ applicants from engaging.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Fair Chance employment strategist Envoy developed an online self-assessment tool for employers interested in intentional hiring practices.<sup>14</sup> Assessment questions cover internal policy on conviction disclosure in the recruitment process to support opportunities for employees with lived prison experience. **Envoy recommends the following intentional hiring practices:**

- Application does not require candidates to disclose past convictions and specifically states they are a “Fair Chance” employer.
- Do not use background checks and consider all applicants regardless of conviction, or if legislated, only run background checks for a subset of relevant positions after an offer of employment has been made.
- Use a background check provider that limits screening to the last 0–3 years.

- Of those positions that require a background check, review each candidate’s convictions individually in the context of the position requirements.
- Develop comprehensive and embedded programs to engage candidates who are formerly incarcerated.
- Offer on-site support to formerly incarcerated employees who may be facing re-entry challenges, or partner with expert re-entry services.
- Partner with First Nation led providers who have embedded cultural safety and responsiveness protocols as well as experience or interest in working with justice involved employees.
- Create tailored incentives, training, and/or advancement opportunities to formerly incarcerated employees to encourage and accelerate their mobility.
- Offer training to HR staff and relevant managers on the impact of incarceration and how they can support people after prison.
- Use person and human-centered language explicitly in communicating about incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people.
- Advocate to stakeholders, policymakers, and peer organisations to improve intentional hiring practices.<sup>15</sup>

Writing for the Harvard Business Review, Jeffrey Korzenik shares his ‘True Second-Chance Model’ for successfully employing formerly incarcerated people. Although there are justified reservations regarding the term “second chance” – namely that “second chance” implies that someone squandered their “first chance”, when the reality is that many people never had a chance to succeed to begin with – there are merits in the model. Jeffrey Korzenik draws on the experiences of employers who viewed the formerly incarcerated population as ‘a talent pool worthy of a specific and intentional approach’.<sup>16</sup>

Of particular interest are approaches that include the provision of internal “navigators” to help

employees build the resources necessary to thrive at work, rather than outsourced employee assistance programs that assume a level of experience or knowledge to access their service.<sup>17</sup> The idea of “navigators” is also supported by the team at Next Chapter. Executive Director Kenyatta Leal, who lived in prison for over 20 years, teamed up with tech company Slack to create a playbook for hiring and retaining people who have lived in prison.<sup>18</sup> The guide breaks down everything from HR and legal hurdles to the human elements of making intentional hiring programs a success; and even though the guidelines are developed with tech companies in mind, the industry’s less formal business culture aligns with social movement organisations.

Mirroring the guides developed by the SCBC and Envoy, the primary focus of Next Chapter’s work is changing the perception of formerly incarcerated people within the companies that hire them and in wider society. Leal argues that to achieve this, employers need to connect with the layers of challenges and barriers faced by people who have lived in prison.<sup>19</sup>

Others have noted that a key ingredient in success is cultivating a sense of belonging in a positive, supportive work environment.<sup>20</sup> There is a need to look to “trusted messengers” during the onboarding stage for communicating company culture and all of those spoken and unspoken rules and expectations that we all must navigate.<sup>21</sup> Navigators then, must be attuned to the fact that formerly incarcerated people have more immense hurdles to overcome outside of their employment which can include unstable housing, parole limitations, absence of reliable transport, interpersonal conflicts, long periods of time without health care access, problems with drug and/or alcohol use, and a lack of social support. People may need guidance to navigate social environments, develop meaningful working relationships, understand social norms, and improve financial literacy.

Unfortunately, Australia has very few specialist third-party re-entry organisations that support formerly incarcerated people with their unique challenges. This means people often have to navigate multiple complicated systems and often siloed, generic providers alone. Similarly, whilst some employers may provide integrated support as part of a standard benefit offering, many do not.

This is where Slack’s Playbook is most helpful. Creating a ‘village of support’<sup>22</sup> ensures that staff with lived prison experience get access to targeted and informed guidance as soon as the need arises. These supports may involve trauma-informed care, access to physical and mental health services, peer-to-peer mentoring, financial literacy programs, technical training, and life coaching.

In addition to creating a supportive and caring work environment, the Slack Playbook points out that there is the need for clear and open communication around expectations. Being honest about progress and providing clear instructions and feedback fosters long-term success, as does being explicit about employee benefits and problem-solving mechanisms. Ideally, all key people in the organisation should receive extensive training around implicit bias and issues specific to people who have lived in prison.<sup>23</sup>

# Choice in lived experience identity

Navigating contested and hard-won spaces can be surprisingly tricky for formerly incarcerated people and a minefield for system impacted people more generally. Accounts from people with lived prison experience and also from people with incarcerated loved ones reveal significant problems when engaging in these spaces.

Sharing experiences in spaces where people are tokenised, pitied or spectacted, or exposed to micro-aggressions, risks further traumatisation and feelings of fear and shame. People can also feel they lack the “right” type or level of lived experience compared with others or feel like they have to speak on behalf of the entire lived or living experience community.

There is significant care and thought that needs to be taken with identity and disclosure. Many thinkers in this space have pointed out that it should not be the job of the person with lived prison experience to educate colleagues about the prison system or their personal circumstances, nor should they be in a situation where they are expected to disclose their background – this should be on a strict need-to-know basis only.<sup>24</sup>

Others have taken a deeper look at disclosure, distinguishing between ‘implicit’ and ‘explicit’ forms.<sup>25</sup> Tanya Mackay and Rose Thompson define explicit disclosure as when a staff member is in control of ‘what, when, and how much is shared.’<sup>26</sup> This is voluntary sharing. For example, a JRI employee may be involved in an advocacy campaign whereby their

lived experience of incarceration is central to the conversation. Comparatively, a staff member may use their lived prison experience to inform a project more subtly by advising on adjustments or safeguards to support formerly incarcerated participants.

On the other hand, implied disclosure is via association. For instance, the JRI Board may commence a Lived Experience Advisory Committee which would require members to have a specific lived experience. Similarly, if staff are invited to participate in a panel of formerly incarcerated people, their role as a panel member means a lived experience of prison is also implied. Through these examples we can see that disclosure is dependent on context.

In the development of policy in this area, organisations need to explore what happens when power imbalances collide with informed choices about disclosure and representation, and how care can be taken internally to elevate the level of choice and control people with lived experience have when determining disclosure. There is also the need to define clearly what is meant by lived experience or expertise, particularly when it comes to recognising the unique experience of family members of incarcerated people, while at the same time maintaining space for people who have themselves been to prison.

# Media guidelines: Positive representation of people with lived experience

A key component of successful advocacy is challenging preconceived assumptions about incarcerated people. The 'Correcting the Narrative' campaign in the United States<sup>27</sup> is a useful starting point for explaining why positive representations are so crucial to informing community perceptions but can also shape how those of us who have lived in prison perceive ourselves.

A lack of understanding about people with convictions often fuels stigma and unhelpful stereotypes that result in formerly incarcerated people having to do all the heavy lifting to prove their worth and correct biases.<sup>28</sup> Engaging with sections of the community who are indifferent and antagonistic toward people who have lived in prison can challenge negative assumptions and the media plays a significant role in positioning and shaping these conversations.

Accurate media representation ensures an organisation's staff with lived experience and the wider lived experience community are represented positively and respectfully. When developing media guidelines and policies, there is a particular need to interrogate questions of the way knowledge and power operates in the media landscape, particularly in terms of both 'fixing' stereotypes, and privileging particular representations and people.<sup>29</sup> Part of JRI's work with the media is necessarily focused on interrupting old, harmful narratives and constructing positive representation and new meanings when it comes to people with lived experience.

## Starting points

1. When writing articles, care should be taken to reflect each person's humanity, their expert insights, and respect how each person wishes to identify – especially when sharing their individual stories.
2. Any reference to the offence type or the nature of a person's offence should be general in nature, minimal, or not used at all. It should not be the focus of the article.
3. There is no need to reproduce details about why a person went to prison unless they specifically say this is relevant to the story. It is sufficient to write that a person served a short/medium/long prison sentence.
4. Avoid pejorative, harmful labelling or salacious details which perpetuate stigma. Person-centred or human-centered language guides should be provided. Simple statements ahead of meetings can be stated or emailed – e.g.: *at JRI we use the language of least harm when talking about people who have been incarcerated out of respect for the members of our team who have that lived experience. We do not use labels like "offenders" or "ex-offenders"; we made a conscious decision to replace those with person-centred descriptors. We would appreciate it if you joined us in this effort and below/attached are some simple language swap-outs to make this easier.*
5. Recognise the positive and proactive steps a person has taken to re-establish a sense of self and helpful narratives around identity and belonging.

6. Use first name only to protect a person's privacy. If a person wants their full name to be used, then use both first name and surname. Do not use surnames on their own, as this only mirrors the use of surnames by the prison system.

## A note on language

It is very easy to underestimate the power of language. Dehumanisation frequently starts with dehumanising language. When people with lived experience are dehumanised, it is more likely that they will be denied the compassion afforded to others.

Person-centred language like *formerly incarcerated* or *justice involved* places the individual before any conditions or experiences, while human-centered language prioritises a person's dignity and perspective. Human-centered language uses phrases like *people who have lived in prison* or *someone with lived prison experience*.

It is important to say that not every person with lived prison experience wants to be referred to using person-centred descriptors and dismantling harmful language does not equate to dismantling harmful systems. However, if we want to change the narrative that is harming formerly incarcerated people, there is a need to make a concerted, collective effort to do so.

# Payment schedules for short-term or one-off collaborations

Research is very clear that when formerly incarcerated people do find work, it is mostly insecure and lowly paid<sup>30</sup> yet “lived experience” is now a marketable skill. Ensuring people have access to stable employment and a wage that reflects expertise is a human right, however, it is just as important that organisations develop flexible approaches when collaborating with people with lived experience for short-term or one-off engagements. Recognising people’s expertise and value in a way that doesn’t leave them worse off or carry any undue risk is the best way to approach short-term or one-off engagements.<sup>31</sup>

Jo Szczepanska looked at the ways a broad range of people with lived experience collaborated with services, including advisory and focus groups, document or process reviews, program evaluations, storytelling (speaking, writing or media engagements), policy submissions and project work. They wanted to know if lived experience experts were classified as employees or contractors (with an ABN) and if those experts understood their reporting obligations to the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) or to Centrelink. Whilst the ATO does not consider honorariums taxable income, Centrelink requires payment recipients to report honorary payments in the fortnight the work was done.<sup>32</sup>

Jo Szczepanska noted the anxiety that exists around Centrelink reporting requirements, warning that if there is a lag in the remuneration for lived

experience expertise, a person may miss out on their full Centrelink benefit whilst waiting. On top of reporting-associated stress, if payment is substantial or regular, a person can lose part of their benefit or incur a rent increase if living in social or community housing.<sup>33</sup>

## Remuneration & reimbursement

Valuing and recognising expertise should be done in a way that fits with people’s individual circumstances. Remuneration refers to the monetary or in-kind compensation received in exchange for work or services performed. On the other hand, reimbursement is the repayment received for pre-approved expenses incurred to undertake participation activities. Negotiation of honorariums and in-kind payments should be done prior to any work being undertaken.

Organisations explicitly working towards best practice in this space<sup>34</sup> advise that any in-kind payment should not be less than the monetary equivalent for the services or work performed. The International Labor Organisation (ILO) notes “such allowances are appropriate for the personal use and benefit of the worker and [their] family”; and “the value attributed to such allowances is fair and reasonable”. The ILO also advises caution with in-kind payments, recognising that they can bring “less satisfaction than income in cash because [people] are not free to choose how to spend it.”<sup>35</sup>

## Recommended payment schedule for adults

The recommended payment schedule for adults with lived experience of incarceration is as follows:

**Participant Level:** A rate of \$70 per hour of participation (with a minimum payment of three hours) will be offered when a person with lived experience is required to offer an individual perspective of their lived experience and/or where no or a low-medium level of expertise in lived experience participation is required to take part in the activity or undertake a role.

**Advisor Level:** A rate of \$80 per hour of participation (with a minimum payment of three hours) will be offered when people with lived experience are required to provide higher-level advice, wider perspectives or mass publicly available information on lived experience participation, and/or to possess specific, additional technical competencies required for the role.

**Consultant Level:** People with lived experience appointed to higher-level consultancy roles to lead projects that deliver specified outcomes within agreed timeframes will be offered remuneration at the market rate by negotiation. This may align with the casual rate of a relevant award already in place at an organisation (e.g. SCHADS).

**Designated Board Members:** A sitting fee of \$200 for meetings of less than four hours and \$300 for meetings of more than four hours.

To honour people's autonomy, it is important to give them the option of having their payments deposited into a bank account or provided as credit on a gift card (e.g. Visa gift card).

## Recommended payment schedule for children and young people (under 18 years of age)

Engaging children and young people with lived experience requires additional safeguards and support structures, but their time and expertise should be remunerated in the same way that adults are remunerated. **The recommended payment schedule for children and young people with lived experience of incarceration is as follows:**

**Participant Level:** A rate of \$44 per hour of participation (with a minimum payment of three hours) will be offered when a person with lived experience is required to offer an individual perspective of their lived experience and/or where no or a low-medium level of expertise in lived experience participation is required to take part in the activity or undertake a role.

**Advisor Level:** A rate of \$70 per hour of participation (with a minimum payment of three hours) will be offered when people with lived experience are required to provide higher-level advice, wider perspectives or mass publicly available information on lived experience participation, and/or to possess specific, additional technical competencies required for the role.

To honour people's autonomy, it is important to give them the option of having their payments deposited into a bank account or provided as credit on a gift card (e.g. Visa gift card).

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