

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S

ANNUAL REPORT 1997/98

One of ACRO's greatest strengths, or weaknesses (depending upon who is asked), is to be globalist in perspective; to look at the bigger picture, dissect elements of this montage and reconstruct, on the basis of more reasonable approaches, that which will benefit the larger number of people. Whilst it has always been my prerogative to use this forum to editorialise the "big picture" in the context of ACRO's work, my comments this year will be more directive and critical than in the past.

This has been a year of great confusion for the majority of Australians. It has been a year that has significantly challenged the way our society is managed. It has been a year that has seen the development of unparalleled cynicism towards political leadership. It has also been a period that has witnessed the unprecedented growth of extremist sentiment, which has enabled the emergence of unfortunate attacks against sections of the Australian citizenry. Australians have been forced to reconsider the character of this country. We have exposed, as a consequence, an underbelly of resentment, which places this country at a crossroad. The great trait of tolerance and the axiom of a "fair go" rest on one path, intolerance, bigotry and injustice loom as pharisees on the other. Never before has the role of the community sector been so important in the mediation of balanced opinion to assist the community in choosing the appropriate and responsible path. ACRO's mandate lies in the criminal and social justice arenas. Its work this past year has clearly reflected an undeniable resolve to engage in debate that reinforces the positive nature of the Australian character.

From ACRO research, it is clear that the elements that have moved the community to this crossroad have more to do with fear of macro-economic and global trends than with intolerance and bigotry. However, it has been the weapons of intolerance and bigotry that have been used by self-serving opportunists to heighten fear and destabilise our communities. It is a regrettable fact of history that in times of crisis it is those who are "different" who are targeted as the "problem". In the current environment it is racial discrimination particularly against those of Asian or indigenous descent, and young people who have had "blame" apportioned to them by some to explain the negative economic and social consequences of macro-economic and transnational influences. It is a terrible irony that waves of immigrants to Australia have chosen this continent to escape persecution, only to be confronted with the very thing that they left behind. It does appear clear that there are some within our community who do in fact hold extreme views. They are, mercifully, in the extreme minority. There are other citizens however who, through fear of an uncertain future and disenchantment with what they perceive to be poor leadership, have joined with these extremists, and unwittingly set an agenda that is dangerous in the extreme to the future of this country.

ACRO is an apolitical organisation. It shows no favour for any political party or organisation. We do form part of a sector that should be, nonetheless, aware of the political consequences of our work. As a legitimate advocate for the Australian community we must not regale from *our* responsibility to respond to issues that harm, injure or impugn the reputation of fellow Australians. In doing so, we are confronted with considerable risk – not from the constituencies that we strive to protect, but from the political masters who expect compliance to policy shifts which, in our view, may not be in the best interests of the population. We, as an organisation, have grown considerably over the past few years and have demonstrated that a positive approach to problem-solving social issues will find popular support.

Our promise to the community is simple: to remain at the vanguard of social reform and to fight on behalf of those good citizens whose goal is to secure a sustainable and peaceful community. Undoubtedly this position will incur a cost – but the greater evil would be to sit on our hands whilst our fellow citizens are attacked. My wish for the membership of ACRO and the people we represent is for a positive Australia - with honour and with integrity.

ACRO has continued in its mission to represent criminal and social justice issues throughout the country during this past year. Once again we are indebted to our colleagues across Australia who have contributed to our work and continue to provide support in pursuit of our endeavours. These supporters include government officials at all levels, practitioners, the corporate sector and journalists. Without the patronage of all engaged with ACRO, many significant social innovations would not be possible.

This is particularly true of the Community Policing Partnership Program (CPP, also known as the ACRO Model), a creative Partnership model embraced by the Queensland Government, various participating Local Government Authorities, local business and concerned citizens. Based upon the best of known partnership practices from overseas experiences, this Model sought to take into account the legitimate concerns of ordinary citizens and translate these concerns into strategic processes involving all levels of government and the community to give effect to their resolution. ACRO successfully negotiated a contract with the Queensland Government to monitor and evaluate a "pilot" of the model during the past twelve months across five local authorities. Intended to be supported by the highest levels of government, this Model could have significantly altered the fabric of the work of the public service by requiring performance by government departments based upon expressed needs of communities rather than the opinion of "experts" purporting to understand the needs of those communities. Whilst this *should* have been an outcome, this was not to be the case. As always seems to be the case, personality got in the way of a reasonable concept, and the Model was hijacked by apparent opportunism to construct an "industry", lack of resolve on the part of principle players and, in ACRO's opinion, a singular lack of belief by some in the ability of citizens to understand their circumstances and respond appropriately. Whilst the performance of the pilot is the subject of a specific Report still being undertaken by both the organisation and the Criminal Justice Commission (who are undertaking the pilot evaluation), it will be our assertion that the spirit of the ACRO model was never really tested during this pilot period. It is also my belief that the final Reports from the CJC will demonstrate the impediments of opportunism by public servants through omission. Caesar should NOT judge Caesar.

Nonetheless ACRO would like to express its deep appreciation to all those involved with this process who maintained a genuine interest and belief in the logic of the Program and who gave of their time and resources to help their communities. Furthermore ACRO deeply appreciates the information provided by local citizens via the Crime Surveys conducted in Thuringowa, Mackay, the Sunshine Coast, Logan City and Gold Coast city. Their candid responses were constructive and informed. If the issues that these good citizens raised had been actioned appropriately and strategically mapped, I believe that the Program would have been an outstanding success – with measurable outcomes possible even within the twelve month period of the pilot.

For the information of members, some 40000 Survey instruments were distributed for completion by randomly selected respondents from across Queensland. Of these 8571 people completed the instruments – representing approximately 22% of those canvassed. A further 5664 secondary students from across 23 Secondary Schools in Queensland completed the same instrument. A total of ten (10) Reports were published representing analysis of both community and youth gleaned material. As an innovative inclusion to the Survey instrument, Participation Forms were included for citizens who wished to have an on-going active involvement in any work to be undertaken as a consequence of the Survey. Some 2000 citizens put their hand up to assist. The data analysis and subsequent report writing that resulted from the completed surveys was conducted by Stephanie Whelan with many sleepless nights made necessary by the insane deadlines that we at ACRO appear to thrive on. The entire process was completed within four (4) months and the wealth of material provided by this process provided a raft of material that will prove invaluable to crime prevention practitioners for years to come.

It is deeply regretted that the majority of participating local authorities summarily dismissed the views of their constituencies and failed to act upon the legitimate concerns raised by their citizens from the Survey. Furthermore the majority these local Authorities failed to engage the good citizens who volunteered to assist during the implementation period (having indicated on

Participation Forms that they were prepared to engage). The survey process was to a certain degree corrupted by delays outside of the control of ACRO. Perhaps we should have provided a proscriptive working document (the "Reports") with very clear demands on the direction to be taken by local partnerships (based upon identified community needs) and taken a longer period to finalise the final publications. Neither Stephanie Whelan nor myself are convinced that a highly proscriptive document would have been more effective than the document provided to local partnerships and believe that the failure of most Partnerships and Coordinators to consider and act upon the needs identified by the community was based upon factors other than an inability to apply the information provided by the Survey Reports. ACRO was subjected to vexatious and potentially defamatory vitriol by an allegedly competent person whose views significantly and unreasonably tainted the credentials of the final Reports at a critical period. Subsequent vindication by other more competent academics failed to reverse the damage done to the process. It is of greater regret that the State Government of the day similarly was dismissive of the survey outcomes.

It will be of some interest to see whether the incoming State Government take any note of this work in the context of its Crime Prevention Task Force. Given political expediency and the fact that this work was undertaken during the life of a previous Government it is highly unlikely that the material (or indeed, ACRO as the State's principal crime prevention practitioner organisation in the non-government sector) will be integrated into any proposed strategy by this government, particularly during the consultative stages of Task Force development. A performance measure on the proposed Task Force should be to see whether they are capable of engaging comparable numbers in its work (13765) in the first four (4) months of its operation at a cost of no more than \$120000 with the benefit of the hundreds of active recommendations and signposts to community-based crime prevention provided by the ACRO Reports. This writer doubts it.

Whilst CPP consumed much of the attention of the organisation over this past year, the historical work of the organisation continued.

During the year the ACRO JobClub closed its doors after some nine years of operation. The changing priorities of government account for this closure, not the performance of the program. The decision by a brave lone public servant all those years ago to have the JobClub funded specifically for released prisoners was totally vindicated by the outstanding results of the Program during the intervening years – often achieving employment outcomes which were the highest in the country for JobClubs. I place my personal thanks on record for David and Lesley Lovell and their successors Chris Munroe and Margaret Gill in achieving outstanding results for ACRO in this Program. JobClub will return but undoubtedly funded by private enterprise and not government. For the record the JobClub conducted ten (10) clubs this past year, engaging 85 clients, 50 of whom were successfully placed in full-time employment – that is, a placement rate of 59%.

ACRO's other correctional services include its Halfway Housing for Currently Serving Prisoners, its Family Welfare Services, and Supported Housing . Further to these "historical" projects, ACRO has also significantly assisted other citizens through a variety of other initiatives. The statistics of all of our work is impressive and are outlined below.

The Halfway House Program is now approaching its tenth year of operation. As facilities that afford appropriate persons who have graduated from the correctional system the opportunity to reintegrate back to the community (and in a community-based environment), this Project has been an unqualified success. ACRO has two such houses still operating in Queensland – one each located in Rockhampton and Cairns. The changing priorities of government and its Corrective Services Commission will see these facilities change during the next financial year from low security (caretaker presence only, share housing) to the 24 hour supervision of Community Corrections Centres. The organisation will need to reopen the debate as to whether it should assume the security role explicit to the operation of Community Corrections Centres before any such changes to its Projects can occur. However it would seem that, in the opinion of the Commission, the Program in its current form is redundant.

In March of 1998 Halycon House (in Rockhampton) finally achieved a full house after years of being told by Commission personnel in the region that there was no demand for the service. During this past year the organisation provided 759 resident nights at Halcyon House and 50% of residents successfully found employment during their residence at the House. The smooth operation of the facility at Rockhampton is due, in no small measure, to the outstanding contributions of ACRO Staff David Curren and Bernie Loth. It is with great appreciation for his consistent performance on behalf of ACRO that Bernie was awarded a Certificate of Appreciation during the year.

Rose Blank House in Cairns continued to provide quality services on behalf of the Commission. 1902 resident nights of accommodation were provided during the year with only one person absconding and three returned to prison for breaches. It is to be noted that changes to the political climate regarding the release of inmates on community orders, particularly those in use at Rose Blank House, appeared to have a negative impact on resident numbers at the facility for several months during the year. Regardless, Stephanie Whelan, ACRO's Regional Coordinator in Cairns, and her Halfway House Staff performed magnificently in the region and are congratulated for yet another successful year of operations.

ACRO's welfare services for prisoner's families maintained significant pressure on our Staff, Volunteers and resources during the year. Some 11000 people utilised our Shuttle Bus in South Queensland, approximately 1000 people used the organisation's transport services in Central Queensland, over 5000 people passed through our Family Centre at Wacol, 586 families benefited from our Christmas Appeal, and information, advice, emergency relief (by way of food vouchers and assistance with utilities and rental payments was given to many hundreds of people in need.

The Organisation's supported accommodation program provided approximately 3000 resident nights of accommodation representing support to some 2000 individuals supported during the year.

Support for elderly and disabled persons accounted for some 3500 contacts by ACRO Staff through its Home Assist/Secure Program. This figure represents a 28% increase on services provided from the previous financial year. There are some concerns that I hold about this Program, however, and these will be addressed in the coming months. It is vital that this Program not become a "security" only service but that we also seek to provide a supportive environment for the elderly and disabled within their communities that will reduce the fear they seem to hold of becoming crime victims. It is also my belief that the Program is too "bureaucratic" – a situation which, I believe, is not conducive to the style of trust and support that the client base require and need. There will be a major ongoing operational and performance audit on this program to get it back to basics with proposals for radical change being implemented next month.

I have already touched upon ACRO's partnership work across Queensland during this year but it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the highly significant contributions made by Stephanie Whelan, Leesa Beaumont and Fiona Begg in the support roles they provided to the emerging Partnerships throughout the State. Furthermore all three were there at the design stages, the negotiation stages and implementation stages. The work of Stephanie Whelan in particular deserves specific mention. Stephanie worked extraordinary hours to achieve the desired outcomes in terms of statistical analysis, Report writing and Partnership support whilst still maintaining her responsibilities for the Far North Queensland ACRO Branch. For personal reasons, Stephanie has tendered her resignation from ACRO but will continue in a consultancy mode with the organisation. I cannot speak highly enough of Stephanie, Fiona and Leesa for their invaluable contribution to ACRO's Partnership work this past year.