



Australian Government
Department of Employment
and Workplace Relations

Reconnection, Employment and Learning (REAL) Program

Public Consultation Paper



The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations acknowledges the traditional owners and custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures, and Elders past, present and emerging. We extend that respect to the First Nations peoples who have so generously shared their wisdom, time, knowledge and lived experience with us in developing this program.

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We want your feedback

The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (the department) is developing a grants process for the provision of the REAL Program. The purpose of the consultation paper is to provide interested people and organisations with information about the service being provided, and the opportunity to comment on the Phase 1 draft guidelines (guidelines) for the grant. This paper outlines what we have heard from you so far about what a First Nations¹ prison to employment program should look like in both a youth and adult justice setting. The paper then asks questions about the draft guidelines and how they can be strengthened to make the REAL Program the best it can be.

The department is mindful of its responsibilities throughout this process and to ensure transparency and accountability across the design of this opportunity.

What is the REAL Program?

The REAL Program is a grant program that will help First Nations people to transition from the justice system and to reconnect with jobs and/or with learning. The program is voluntary. Support will start up to 6 months before release and continue for up to 12 months after release. Support will be delivered by services providers who successfully apply for grant funding.

The REAL Program will be available to First Nations people, aged 15 years and older, who are incarcerated, with a known release date, or who are held on remand. By ongoing participation in the program, participants will meet any mutual obligations they may have related to their Centrelink payments.

Initially Phase 1 of the program will begin in a cross-section of facilities across states and territories from the second half of 2025. Phase 2 will be available nationwide from the second half of 2026. Organisations will be selected to deliver the program through a competitive grant process.

What consultation has taken place?

We are committed to working in partnership with First Nations people on the policies and programs that will affect them. We value the experience and wisdom of those that work with First Nations people who have lived experience of the justice system. Your collective feedback and ideas have and will continue to help inform the design and delivery of the REAL Program.

A consultation process was held in 2023 that directly informed the bigger picture of the REAL Program. A second consultation process in 2024 has informed the detailed design and implementation of the REAL Program, including the development of the draft grant guidelines. The REAL Program guidelines are now available for your consideration and comment before they are finalised to open grant round. We invite interested people and organisations with information about the services being provided to comment on the draft guidelines for the delivery of the grant.

What you have told us so far

Through consultations we heard from First Nations people with lived experience of the justice system, First Nations groups, justice reform advocates, community organisations and service

¹ Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people are referred to in this paper as First Nations people. 'Indigenous' has been used when the term forms part of a name.

providers from across the country on how employment supports can be improved for First Nations people who have been incarcerated. From these consultations we heard that:

- First Nations people being released from custody need help with the barriers they face that make it hard for them to get jobs or have their needs met (for example police checks for certain jobs, restrictive parole conditions, bias against those with a criminal history)
- Services should be expanded to include people on remand and in juvenile justice
- Greater support is needed for First Nations women who have been incarcerated
- Services should be people-centered to lessen the need move from one organisation to another after being released from incarceration
- Better coordination of support services is required
- Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) should be supported to deliver employment services for First Nations people
- Services need to be trauma-informed and culturally safe
- Policy outcomes for the program should align with the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms and socio-economic targets
- Success is interpreted differently by providers, participants and communities.
- Mentors must build rapport and trust with participants to provide effective support.
- A holistic approach is essential, including:
 - Tailored support for diverse participants
 - Continuity and consistency of servicing
 - Collaboration between providers and employers to reduce stigma and improve employment opportunities for people exiting the justice system
 - The development and implementation of transition plans to help participants and providers meet personalised goals, and
 - Flexible provider contact to ensure consistent service access, regardless of location.

What the new program will include

Consultations helped shape the central features of the REAL Program. These include:

- ACCOs and other First Nations organisations will be prioritised to deliver the program
- Providers will deliver trauma-informed services. This will include directly providing services and connecting participants to other services where appropriate
- Funding will be available to providers to bring together local services in a way that is tailored to the unique needs of each participant
- Providers will help participants navigate and connect to social services, community, learning and jobs
- Tailored support to ensure the program can meet the needs of the diverse First Nations community, including young people, veterans, women, parents and people with disabilities
- Each participant will have a personal action plan to help set goals to successfully reconnect to the community, learning and jobs
- Program providers will aim to work with participants in the ways that best suits the participant's circumstances, to enable a consistent connection for the duration of the program. This could be a mixture of online, via telephone or in-person at the provider's or another location.

Questions to think about

We have included some questions below which may help you formulate your feedback. You are free to comment on any aspect of the proposed guidelines. We also welcome any other feedback about this grant opportunity.

We recommend you use the online survey in the consultation hub to answer the following questions or send your written responses to realprogram@dewr.gov.au.

Program Intent

1. Based on your understanding of the intent of the REAL Program for supporting First Nations people transition from the justice system and to reconnect with community, culture, jobs and/or with learning:
 - **Do you think the guidelines support this sufficiently?**
 - **Do you think the program as described in the guidelines, would support ongoing, meaningful and positive outcomes?**
 - **What would have to change in the program guidelines to achieve successful outcomes, or to make them easier to achieve?**

Capacity

2. Community organisations may have to determine their capacity to apply for the delivery of Grants. Capacity refers to an organisation's ability to manage a project – for example, whether their organisation is able to meet legislative, administrative and reporting requirements:
 - **Do you see issues with the capacity of organisations to respond to the Grants Round?**
 - **If so, how can the department help make the Grants more accessible to all interested community organisations?**

Data collection and Sharing information

3. One of the objectives of the program is to use data from the program to improve the evidence base and drive meaningful change towards Closing the Gap into the future:
 - **What would be needed to facilitate the sharing of data between different organisations to help refine the program and strengthen culturally relevant approaches in the future?**
 - **What are realistic data collection requirements to ask from REAL Providers?**
 - **How would we ensure that the data is collected in a consistent way?**

Help us get ready

4. Correctional facilities and population vary in size. In some places the number of First Nations reached by a project may vary:
 - **Do you have any thoughts on the anticipated demand for the program (both how many organisations might apply and how many participants the project might involve)?**

5. The following questions are relevant to those who represent an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO). The intent is to gauge the potential level of interest:
- **Is your organisation likely to apply to this Grant Opportunity?**
 - **If yes, which location and how many participants might you expect to deliver services to? If no, why not?**
 - **How much delivery grant funding is your organisation likely to seek?**
 - **Have you thought about a consortium arrangement for delivery? If so, have you thought about who you might collaborate with and how this would work?**

General Feedback

6. Is there any other feedback you would like to provide?

How to provide feedback

You can provide your feedback using the survey in the consultation hub. You can also provide feedback in writing to the realprogram@dewr.gov.au mailbox. Responses are due by 5pm (AEDT) on 4 April 2025.

Please note all responses to this this consultation will be confidential. Individual responses will not be published. The department may release a short paper summarising the feedback received.

To assist the department to best utilise feedback that is submitted, in providing your feedback you agree to the following:

- The department may use and copy submitted feedback for purposes related to the REAL Program, including any REAL Program-related procurement and/or grant processes. However, you will retain ownership of the intellectual property in the information you submit to the department
- The department will retain feedback in accordance with Commonwealth record keeping requirements
- The department is permitted to publish your feedback submitted in response to this paper but will de-identify your responses in any publication so readers cannot tell who the response came from
- You are responsible for any costs and expenses incurred in responding to this paper if you choose to provide feedback
- Providing feedback in relation to this paper will not give you any right, advantage, or benefit, or result in any disadvantage, in any future grant rounds. Not participating in this consultation process will also not result in any advantage or disadvantage in any future grant rounds.

Contact us

Please email us at realprogram@dewr.gov.au if you have any questions.