

**INQUIRY INTO THE CLOSURE OR DOWNSIZING OF  
CORRECTIVE SERVICES NSW FACILITIES**

**Name:** Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

## Upper House Parliamentary Inquiry Submission

On

Closure and/or downsizing of NSW Corrections Facilities since 26 March 2011

I, \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ make the following submission.

### Overview:

I have been employed as a teacher by NSW Corrections since 1995. Until 1997, all teachers were employed on short term contracts. However, in early 1997, the Department advertised for 10 full time teaching positions across the state. I was appointed as the first and only full time teacher at Grafton Correctional Centre in July 1997.

Over the next 15 years I remained teaching at Grafton Correctional Centre among an Education Staff that had grown to almost 6 full time positions.

### Family:

Grafton has been my home now since 1989. This is the community where my husband and I have built our first home and raised our family. The last two of my sons were born at Grafton Base Hospital. All my four sons have been educated here in Grafton, with one currently completing an electrical apprenticeship. My husband continues to work with Clarence Valley Council, a position he has held since 1989.

Both my husband and I have parents in their eighties and we are the closest relatives to offer assistance if required. My husband's father is about to turn 88 and currently resides with his wife in Queensland. My mother turns 83 next birthday and lives by herself at Kingsliff just over 2 hours north.

My husband's brother has also made Grafton his home after we had moved here. He is legally blind and moved here for family support.

### Community:

#### 1. Sporting

My husband and I have been involved in community sporting groups over our time here. My husband has held senior and junior coaching positions with Clarence Valley Football Association and then with North Coast Football Federation after an amalgamation. He has also coached state representative teams for this area. He continues to coach the only Grafton football (soccer) team playing in the 1<sup>st</sup> division.

I myself was manager for many years as my sons played in the local soccer competition and then held one of the inaugural positions on the board of North Coast Football after the amalgamation.

As well as football commitments, my husband currently holds positions on the board of Grafton District Golf Club.

During my time I personally have been involved with Grafton Netball Association as a member of the executive, a representative umpire and an umpire coach. When I arrived at Grafton, I held the highest level of umpiring badge a National B. Since then I initiated a coaching program that has developed umpires from this area and region. Grafton now boasts many badged umpires of National C and B level.

I am also a member of Waterview Heights Squash Club and have been an active player for many years. I had attended yoga classes twice weekly prior to the restructuring and am an active cyclist.

## 2. School

After initially organising a local playgroup for children in Grafton, I took up positions on the pre-school executive when my sons reached pre-school age. Between my husband and I we held executive positions on primary school P&Cs and then High School P&Cs, at one stage attending both, for the entire time our sons attended our local public schools.

Our commitment to this community of the Clarence Valley has been ongoing since our arrival and continues today.

## 3. General

In early 2012, I was one of the foundation members of a community organisation of public sector workers that evolved to represent the needs of the community of Clarence Valley. This group, known as the Clarence Valley Community Unions, had held two public forums prior to the June 29 Grafton Gaol announcement. At these forums community concerns were raised regarding the downgrading of services to regional towns in general and specifically the impact of these on our community here in the Clarence Valley.

During the forum held on the 20 June, concerns for reductions in service delivery in areas of health and education in particular schools special needs programs and threats to TAFE from contestability were raised. Staff from Grafton Gaol also raised awareness that Corrective Services could also be a target after the State Government's budget announcement of 15 000 public sector job cuts.

The community requested that the local Member of Parliament, Chris Gulaptis, attend the next public forum to address community concerns and put forward his plan to maintain effective and adequate service delivery for his constituents.

## Background:

Rumours around the closure of Grafton Gaol had been aired for some time. These rumours had come from a variety of sources and it was imperative that they be exposed and clarified.

During the by-election for the seat of Clarence late last year, the National Party candidate, Chris Gulaptis, and his colleagues, were questioned on this issue and it was publically recorded that Grafton Gaol would not be closed by this State Government.

At a Joint Consultative Committee Meeting held in June this year, where members of NSW Corrections management and NSW Teachers Federation representatives meet to discuss workplace issues, Luke Grant Assistant Commissioner was asked to confirm or deny rumours of a north coast gaol facility being earmarked for closure and the possible job loss that may occur as a result. His response was that the recidivism and therefore incarceration rates were falling so this would inevitably lead to some job loss.

## Aftermath:

It could be, and has been argued, by this State Government, that Grafton Gaol has not 'closed' and therefore there have been no broken promises. However the reality is that Grafton Gaol no longer exists. It has been effectively closed. What has taken its place is a transient centre that houses approximately 80% less offenders, offering little more than a reception and processing function.

There are no visits, no buy-ups, no education, drug and alcohol counselling, psychology and mental health services, no industries where offenders can learn valuable work skills. The entire minimum security area has been 'mothballed' and locked down. The oldest wing has been emptied. All industry areas and education areas, classrooms and group rooms are abandoned. The administration block has also been closed.

Grafton Gaol is a shell of what it was. Emptied buildings, abandoned office equipment, idled resources, silent corridors and overgrown gardens. Only memories now fill the many voids.

For the sake of 'efficiency' claims, 108 positions were abolished and offenders uprooted from an environment where they were settled, established with visits and programs and contributing to the working industries housed within this gaol. Staff, many of whom had been long term employees were given notice. Although there were a few positions on offer, these needed to be applied for. But for many there was no option, only despair as they and their families faced the inevitable prospect of no wages or to move their family from a community which they called home.

## My Community Experience:

The emotional turmoil that followed the announcement of Grafton Gaol restructure was an experience like nothing I had ever been through previously. The realisation that lives had been suddenly thrown in a spiralling downward direction leaving lifelong emotional scars was devastating. It is still difficult for me to express this without my eyes filling with tears as the memories of the past few months come flooding back.

I was in Sydney on a secondment working with NSW Teachers Federation when the story of the Grafton Gaol restructure broke. On June 27 a colleague and fellow teacher from Grafton Gaol rang me seeking union verification and advice after an offender in his class that day had announced that the gaol was closing and that he, namely the teacher, had lost his job. Although Grafton's daily newspaper confirmed the rumours the following morning, the union had still not been informed, let alone consulted.

It wasn't until the afternoon of 28 June that NSW Teachers Federation received a request to attend a meeting at Long Bay Complex the following afternoon. This would be after the extra ordinary staff meeting held at Grafton Correctional Centre Friday morning 29 June when the announcement was officially passed onto staff. It was the last day of second term and the last day of my secondment as I was due to return to my Education position as a teacher at Grafton Gaol for third term. With that announcement, my life and those of many others took a new direction from which there would be no return.

While I remained in Sydney for the NSWTF Annual Conference held July 1-3, I liaised with my Clarence Valley Community Unions colleagues to organise a community action plan which included a parliamentary petition and a community rally. My return was planned for the night before the rally at which I would address the community and share how this decision impacted not only on our community but on me personally.

Comments made publically by the Member of Parliament, Chris Gulaptis, during the lead up to this initial community rally were insightful and distressing. Being referred to as a 'bad apple' and having the significance of this decision referred to by him as a minor economic disruption that equated to a slight reduction in sales of 'bread and milk' only, and, that most of the staff live outside the community anyway, fuelled and intensified the emotional turmoil of all those impacted by this decision.

After the first rally, when faced with the reality of community anger over his Government's decision and his public comments and how this may well impact on his chances of re-election, the Member changed his attitude. Claims of being not 'invited to the table' when decisions were made became the new mantra after he realised and publically stated in an apology that he was 'supposed to represent the people not just follow the party line'.

When the decision to form the picket line was made on July 7, staff and community alike had spirits lifted as they joined together to have their voice heard. Demands for the decision to be put on hold and consultation to take place were put to the State Government. This was clearly only what should have taken place initially if the State Government had followed their own policy and undertaken an economic impact statement.

Offender families joined in the protest as well. Indigenous community members called for the Government to uphold the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody. The need to keep offenders close to family and country is well documented.

This renewed spirit and determination invigorated and cemented my community like I'd never witnessed.

Information was circulated that gave us hope. The Grafton Gaol maintenance budget for the financial year was \$150,000 *under* budget. Cessnock Correctional Centre's new wings were not ready to accept offenders yet. Finally, in the initial attempt to remove the offenders, the prison trucks were turned away and forced to return to Sydney.

Unfortunately as the days rolled on and after the second community rally, the State Government still refused to meet with the community to enter consultation. Threats of bringing in the riot squad to quell our protest left some of community members fearful as there were elderly, children and community members with mobility issues involved in our picket line.

In the end the decision stood. This community, which underwent a massive transformation during this experience, is still coming to terms with what this means for our region, our businesses and ultimately our survival.

Impact on Immediate Family:

For my immediate family this decision has impacted already on two of my sons. One of my sons had recently returned to our community after serving 5 years with the army, including two overseas deployments to Afghanistan. He returned with his soon to be fiancé to seek employment and make this community their home. Unfortunately, although his fiancé secured some part time work, my son was unable to. Due to the downturn in Grafton's economy the prospects of permanent work have declined. This couple have now relocated in Brisbane, away from any family support.

Another son, completing his final year of an electrical apprenticeship, has been told that as soon as he is signed off he will be asked to leave. The company he has been employed with since 2008 have already had to put off half of their qualified electricians last month due to a lack of work. As a repercussion of the gaol restructure, at the end of this year, another of my sons will be forced to relocate away from this community and his home to secure employment.

#### Personal Impact:

My options were clear cut – take a voluntary (or more realistically *involuntary*) redundancy or transfer to another gaol.

As I had not considered ending my employment or ‘retiring’, the option of voluntary redundancy was not on the table. If I was to take up this offer, it effectively denies me an opportunity to continue to work as a public teacher for the next twelve months. How was I to then gain employment as a public educator, regardless of my extensive qualifications and experience, after a break of this length?

After considering the available vacancies list to decide if a transfer was to be viable, I discovered Kempsey Gaol was the closest option. This would require me moving to Kempsey or it surrounds for the working week and returning to home for weekends. The trip would take an average of 3-4 hours one way on the notorious Pacific Highway. Accommodation would also need to be secured somewhere in the vicinity of the gaol.

As my husband has employment in Clarence Valley, it would require us to live separately, through the week, leading to an increase in our expenses by approximately \$600 per week. My wage would not change on transfer to Kempsey Gaol. In fact I would be expected to do the same job as I did in Grafton for effectively \$600 a week less.

Another possible option became available through the NSW Teachers Federation. If I was to be elected as an organiser, I would then work for the union for the next three years. This works like a secondment. Release is given by Corrections NSW and my position held for me to return to. Unfortunately this would not be at Grafton as all education positions have been deleted. My name would be placed against a teaching position in another gaol eg Kempsey.

Again this means I will not be able to reside in my family home but be required to travel and be based in Sydney. As I have family support in Sydney, many of the expenses that a transfer option involved would be reduced. As well, costs involved with securing accommodation, would be greatly reduced as I could stay with family members.

It is not ideal to live apart from my husband of many years and will inevitably put pressures on our marriage. However we have few options to choose from. I am not prepared to give up employment at this stage of my career, nor am I prepared to sacrifice \$600 a week to continue doing the same job just because of this decision to restructure my gaol. The only viable option is to take up employment with the union for the next three years and hope that I am given approval to do this by the Department.

Meanwhile I sit at Grafton Gaol waiting for the decision on my future to be made. Most of my colleagues of many years have since left the workplace. For many of them, it was too difficult to uproot family from their community so they have chosen the option to leave rather than transfer. There were no retirement dinners, no individual farewells where colleagues speak highly of achievements made and share anecdotes from years gone by. No collections for gifts. Instead I witnessed a slow exodus of familiar faces, recognised voices and notable laughter that was once the very heart and character of this workplace.

I also had to say goodbye to colleagues who have chosen to leave our community. Such a loss! Not just the gaol position gone, but a partner's wage also now missing from our economy. The streets of this community are filled with houses bearing 'for sale' signs as many people struggle to sell their homes in a depressed real estate climate. Values of houses have dropped dramatically.

Local teaching positions are now under threat as student numbers drop. Supermarkets have reportedly put off staff as impacts of the wages lost in the community become evident in their monthly sales figures. Small businesses are also feeling the pinch as these wages slowly drain from our economy. My local physiotherapist, reports an expected annual loss of \$30,000 just from gaol staff and families no longer in Grafton accessing her services.

Politicians' promises of jobs for our community are met with scepticism as community members see them as empty rhetoric or recognise them as previously announced positions. The community is well aware that the profound economic impact from the Grafton Gaol restructure can not be 'fixed' by a few positions here and there.

Each day I arrive to work at Grafton Gaol, I am immediately struck by the surplus of parking spaces. It takes me only a few seconds however to remember what has transpired. It's hard not to think about the number of staff and colleagues, my close friends, who no longer requiring one of these previously limited car spaces. As I step onto the grounds I am immediately transformed back to the picket line. Images of tents, marquees, chairs and people came rushing back. The impact of this whole experience has been quite profound.



Where to now:

If the decision to restructure Grafton Gaol was made on economic terms as a cost saving exercise, as reported, there should have been an independent economic impact statement conducted. Given the revelation that the gaol maintenance budget was under by \$150,000 this past financial year, given that the ratio of officers to offenders is now higher than existed prior to the restructure, given the resources left idle or 'mothballed', given the money spent on refurbishment of sections of the gaol in the past few years now not being utilised, given the transfer and redundancy packages offered, many people from the community would like to understand just how this restructure was suppose to save the State Government money.

It was also stated that Grafton Gaol restructure was necessary to fill the newly built Cessnock Gaol wings. It was envisaged that Grafton offenders would be housed there and that officers would move from Grafton and take up positions at Cessnock. Once again with some level of consultation, it would have been discovered that this was not a viable proposition. The differences in house prices for one would make it clear that selling a home in the Clarence Valley and buying into Hunter Valley real estate market was going to incur a massive debt and therefore make this option unacceptable for most. Of course that's assuming you could sell your home here.

Many Grafton prisoners instead, due to Cessnock not being ready to accept additional offenders, found themselves in Sydney gaols or beyond. This was hundreds of kilometres away from family, making visits very expensive and difficult to organise. Research shows that a lack of family contact impacts adversely on an offender's rehabilitation. If the offender is indigenous as well, this has dire consequences as outlined in the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody.

The Clarence Valley Community fail to see how any Government could remove a vital piece of infrastructure from the economy of a community and fail to consult with those directly affected like staff and offender families, the community business section and those who have accepted our gaol as part of our community's history and future.

All we asked for were answers.

Hopefully this Inquiry will supply some.