

The Inspector's Overview

ALBANY REGIONAL PRISON 2015: SOME SLIPPAGE, BUT STILL A GOOD PRISON

INTRODUCTION

This is the report of an announced inspection of Albany Regional Prison (Albany) conducted in January 2015. Previous inspections conducted between 2002 and 2011 have consistently praised Albany as one of the state's best performing prisons, although the 2011 inspection made a number of recommendations to ensure that performance did not slip and to make sure that the prison possessed adequate infrastructure to meet both existing and future needs.

During this inspection we noticed slippages in a number of areas. Despite this, Albany remains a good prison. The prison feels calmer than most metropolitan prisons (despite now housing a significantly higher proportion of maximum-security prisoners) and both prisoners and staff generally felt safe.

Our process of continually, and regularly visiting and monitoring all prisons, meant that even prior to the 2015 inspection we had identified several significant changes that had occurred since 2011, and which appeared to warrant specific attention. These changes included:

- In 2011 Albany had hosted a significant number of minimum-security Indonesian nationals. More than 50 were being held at Albany, with the vast majority having been charged with 'people smuggling offences'. By 2015 only one Indonesian prisoner remained in Albany and the prison's demographic mix had changed to reflect a higher proportion of maximum-security prisoners; and
- Albany had experienced significant leadership change, with senior managers who had provided continuity and stability moving to different positions at other prisons.

With these two factors in mind we decided to focus on four areas during the 2015 inspection:

- Albany's role in the wider prison estate;
- The changing demographics of the prison population;
- Providing meaningful activities for prisoners at Albany; and
- Albany's change in leadership.

In summary, we found that while the change in leadership had created some initial difficulties (as one might have expected after a long period of stable leadership) this had eased by the time of the inspection. We also found that the changing prisoner demographic had influenced the general temperature of the prison. The minimum-security Indonesian prisoners had left and the prison was operating appropriately as a maximum-security facility. However, it was our view that the respectful relationships observed in the 2011 inspection occurring between staff and prisoners had deteriorated and that relational security was now a much lower priority.

'THE ALBANY WAY' AND ITS RELEVANCE TO OTHER PRISONS

Previous reports have made positive comment about 'the Albany Way'. In my 2011 report I noted that "by and large, 'the Albany Way' is implicit rather than explicit. Local management, staff and prisoners refer to it, and it informs daily life at the prison

but it has not been formally analysed or articulated.”ⁱ In that report I therefore set out what I saw as the six key ingredients of ‘the Albany Way’. These were:

- Shared positive values are evident throughout the prison with staff knowing, understanding and applying its core values, including a strong focus on decency and respect.
- The prison possesses a positive, pragmatic staff culture with a ‘can do’ attitude.
- The prison has a stable, but not stale management culture with an experienced team who are visible throughout the prison. At many prisons, Superintendents complain that the demands from above (head office) and from below (the prison) are such that they have no time to get ‘out and about’. However, the benefits of maintaining a good balance between reporting up and managing locally are clear, tangible and positive.
- A pro-social staff/prisoner culture. This does not involve ‘being soft’ on prisoners; it involves treating people with dignity and respect, knowing the prisoners, knowing what is going on under the surface, and working through issues which might otherwise escalate.
- The prison should be both innovative and responsive in its technology, programs, and communication strategies.
- The prison should possess strong community links which improve the support offered to the prison, and its prisoners, enabling community based agencies to provide positive, proactive and well-coordinated re-entry services.

Although these are all positive attributes for any prison, the Department of Corrective Services (the Department) requested me to remove all references to ‘the Albany Way’ in this report. I have not done so. While this report finds that the prison has moved away from ‘the Albany Way’, I disagree with the Department’s view that this is the result of “a shift in the prisoner profile from minimum to maximum-security”ⁱⁱ and am disappointed it has happened. In fact, the key ingredients I had identified in 2011 are ones that I would expect to find in all the best-run prisons. I therefore urge the Department to imbed the six ingredients more widely throughout the system.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

During the inspection Albany came across as both relaxed and calm, despite being a maximum-security prison. Most prisoners who responded to our pre-inspection survey reported that they felt safe at Albany, and that one of the reasons for this was being housed with other people from the local area. It was obvious that many preferred being at Albany in comparison to other prisons.

Staff also felt safe, with 81 per cent of staff reporting feeling safe within the prison. Despite staff feeling that the quality of their working life had declined slightly since 2011, Albany has low levels of workers’ compensation compared to many other prisons, with only four active cases at the time of the inspection. Consultation with staff suggested

i OICS, *Report of an Announced Inspection of Albany Regional Prison*, Report No. 78 (June 2012) iv.

ii DCS response to draft report.

that one of the reasons for this was a high level of collegial support and the generally positive working environment.

One of the measures imposed by prison management in response to large scale budget cuts was to cap daily overtime shifts to six. When these six shifts were insufficient, management had devised a redeployment strategy for the redistribution of staff to ensure the continuation of daily prison operations. While these redeployments had proved successful in ensuring that the prison adhered to its budget, there were a number of negative flow-on effects. With up to two Vocational Support Officers (VSOs) being redeployed each day, those prisoners that the VSO would have been supervising (up to ten per VSO) were being returned to their units. This was affecting access to rehabilitation and increasing the number of prisoners with nothing to do except to hang around their unit.

Another area of staffing that appeared to be creating some operational problems was the low proportion of female officers at Albany.

The inspection found that little progress had been made to improve the healthcare facility at Albany since the last inspection. As in 2011 the Medical Centre remained small, cramped and unfit for purpose. However, the healthcare staff were all dedicated to the improvement of health care for prisoners, and 68 per cent of prisoners responding to our pre-inspection survey reported that they felt the general health services at Albany were 'good', a figure well above the state average for the last three years and much higher than the 2011 results.

The 2011 inspection found that the size and diversity of the workshops were insufficient for the prison population and this was the key reason for under-employment at Albany. In 2015, while little progress had been made to address the increasing demand for work within the prison, the industries workshops had undergone some changes. The metals workshop was undergoing refurbishment with an extension being constructed to improve efficiency. A new workshop had been provided for maintenance, and the vocational skills workshop had been retrofitted to provide for a Certificate II in engineering. The textiles and upholstery workshops were continuing to function well and were providing clothing and mattresses for the prison estate.

Very few prisoners like to be idle, and idle hands tend to escalate risk. Unfortunately, my staff observed too many prisoners sitting around in units with nothing to do. While VSO and education staff were dedicated to supporting prisoner rehabilitation, they were becoming increasingly frustrated by budget restrictions that were limiting the services they could provide.

Disappointingly, inequality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal prisoners at Albany remains a serious issue, with a disproportionate lack of Aboriginal prisoners in skilled employment. Only one Aboriginal prisoner was employed in carpentry, two in metal shops and one in the kitchen. Against this, 51 Aboriginal prisoners were employed as unit workers and 11 were unemployed.

Having said that, it was particularly pleasing that Albany had implemented a strategy to prioritise the recruitment of Aboriginal prisoners into traineeships within the Education Centre. At the time of the inspection, 35 per cent of traineeships were held by Aboriginal prisoners, and the Education Centre had set itself a target of 45 per cent by June 2015. In addition it was heartening to see that the Aboriginal Health Liaison Officer (funded by Great Southern Health) was continuing, despite the loss of COAGⁱⁱⁱ funding.

THE DEPARTMENT'S RESPONSE TO OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

I am pleased to report that the Department has supported all thirteen of my recommendations to address deficiencies identified during the inspection. It is worrying, however, that the Department claims that no further action is required in relation to five of the six recommendations that were 'accepted in principle' (1, 3, 4, 9, 10 and 11). The only one where they committed to further action was Recommendation 9, which dealt with the need for an Assistant Superintendent Offender Services to create an appropriate balance between offender services and operational matters at a senior management level. The Department said it was not convinced that such a position would provide the balance required, but did at least agree to explore all options.

The five recommendations which the Department supported in principle but saw no reason for further action included Recommendation 3, which called on the Department to ensure that all prisoners at Albany were provided with a thorough orientation on their arrival at the prison. Our observations indicated that while the information provided to prisoners at reception was adequate, the physical and social orientation of new prisoners into prison life at Albany, which was supposed to be facilitated by peer support prisoners, was simply not occurring. Reinstating this orientation process would not be difficult, but it is clearly a situation of 'action needed', not one that will fix itself.

In short, Albany has slipped back somewhat from previous years but is still a good prison. With a little effort from all staff and management, and a continued focus on what had made 'the Albany Way' such a long term success, this slippage can be reversed.

Neil Morgan

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iii Commonwealth of Australian Governments (COAG).