

Inspector's Overview

CASUARINA PRISON: A GOOD EXAMPLE OF WHY WE NEED BETTER PLANNING FOR OUR PRISONS

This is the report of an inspection of Casuarina Prison conducted in late 2016. It concludes that the prison is meeting reasonable expectations in relation to security, and the safety of staff and prisoners. It is, however, over-stretched at almost every point. As a result, despite the best efforts of staff, it is not meeting expectations in relation to prisoner health and support, purposeful activity, rehabilitation or resettlement.

CASUARINA HAS A GOOD RECORD FOR SECURITY AND SAFETY

Casuarina opened in 1991 and is one of three male maximum-security rated prisons in the state, the others being Hakea and Albany. For the first twenty years its main role was to manage prisoners serving lengthy terms of imprisonment. It was intended to be a 'working prison', where sentenced prisoners were engaged in meaningful activities, including employment, training, education, and rehabilitation programs. As this report shows, it is now a very different prison.

Casuarina performs a number of high risk specialist functions. They include housing the state's highest risk prisoners (in the Special Handling Unit); those who need the greatest degree of protection from others (in the Special Protection Unit); and those in need of specialised medical care (in the Infirmary). Despite these risks, Casuarina has maintained an impressive record for security and safety since a major riot in 1998. Management and staff deserve the community's respect and appreciation for this. Importantly, despite the pressures of recent years, they still show a positive, 'can-do' attitude, and a sense of commitment, pride and professionalism.

THE PRISON IS TOO STRETCHED

Staff are doing what they can with what they have, but Casuarina is too stretched to meet demand or need. Pressure points include:

- a population increase of 100 per cent in the last ten years, and 22 per cent in the last two years
- serious overcrowding, with almost all prisoners now forced to share single cells
- insufficient investment in supporting infrastructure. There are critical deficiencies in the kitchen and health centre and shortfalls in many other areas.
- a far more transient and less settled population. Over 40% are on remand, and many of the sentenced prisoners are just 'in transit' to another prison.
- a growing number of prisoners with serious health and mental health problems
- a growing number of young prisoners for whom there are few opportunities for rehabilitation
- sentenced and remand prisoners routinely sharing cells, in contravention of national and international standards
- a 'churn' of prisoners, creating unacceptable risks and backlogs. For example, we found:
 - 20 per cent of Casuarina's prisoners had not received their initial GP health screens within four weeks of arriving in the prison system.

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- a quarter of Casuarina's sentenced prisoners had not received an Individual Management Plan within the proper timeframe.
- under-resourcing of key services such as health and mental health
- too little employment for prisoners
- too few education, training and rehabilitation programs

RECENT 'MACHINERY OF GOVERNMENT' CHANGES OFFER POSITIVE OPPORTUNITIES BUT CARRY SOME RISK

At the time of writing, the Department of Corrective Services had just merged with the Department of the Attorney General (DotAG) to become the Department of Justice (DOJ). These 'Machinery of Government' changes are intended to improve coordination and to reduce bureaucracy and duplication.

I believe the changes offer a positive opportunity for more holistic and coordinated justice planning than we have seen in the last decade. For example, a surge in remand prisoner numbers is largely responsible for overcrowding across the prison system, for many of the cost blow-outs in Corrections, and for the problems faced at Casuarina. However, neither DotAG nor DCS undertook any rigorous or credible analysis of the causes of this rise, or of potential policy responses (OICS, 2015). That must be a priority for the new Department.

However, the change also presents risks that need to be managed. The previous Department of Justice was split into DCS and DotAG because it was seen as too large and dysfunctional, and because Corrections lacked its own identity and the ability to manage its budget, risks and priorities. In my view, these matters can be managed provided there is clear leadership, with appropriate delegations of authority and responsibility.

It is early days, but to date, the signs are promising. The merger went smoothly and the new Department's leaders are working well together.

CASUARINA NEEDS A PLAN AND THE STATE NEEDS BETTER JUSTICE PLANNING

Measured by national and international benchmarks, WA's prison system is chronically overcrowded (OICS, 2016). However, the new Labor government has rejected calls for a new prison to be built. Instead, it has called for measures to stem the growth in prisoner numbers.

This is an admirable objective. Compared with the rest of the country, WA already has a high rate of imprisonment and by far the highest rate of Aboriginal incarceration. And history shows that if prisons are built, they will be filled. It was only in 2010 that \$640 million was committed to expand prison capacity but even with that level of investment overcrowding has increased.

In addition, the government has called on the Department to fully utilise its existing assets. These include unused sections of prisons and expensive, under-utilised work camps. It has also committed to introducing 'meth-rehab' prisons for men and women.

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There are no ‘easy fixes’, however. The goal of pegging the prison population can only be achieved with strong political resolve, strong planning for viable alternatives to imprisonment, and a clear sense of direction. We will also need a stronger and more consistent plan for custodial facilities, both adult and juvenile.

Casuarina must obviously be a core part of any planning. Over the years, there have been discussions about adding additional accommodation units into the prison. Certainly, it has the area, the experience and the staff skills to make this feasible. However, there are three preconditions for success:

- Casuarina needs to be developed in a way that targets ‘needs’ not just numbers. The most glaring need is for a state-wide ‘step-up, step-down’ facility for men with mental health problems. Other options include drug rehabilitation and programs for young men.
- there needs to be a strategy to reduce the number of remand and short term prisoners so that Casuarina can return to its core strength – managing sentenced prisoners over a period of time
- there must be adequate investment in key supporting infrastructure, including the kitchen, the health centre and prisoner employment and education

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