

Inspector's Overview

Boronia is hard to fault, but there are some opportunities for improvement

Boronia Pre-release centre for Women (Boronia) continues to shine as a prison where meaningful opportunities are provided to women who are sent there for the pre-release part of their sentence.

System level reforms and investment over recent years has seen expansion in the women's prison estate in Western Australia and the development of form and structure to the roles of each facility.

The role and function of Boronia is well known and clearly understood. As the name suggests, it is a pre-release centre for female prisoners. But for most female prisoners their incarceration journey starts elsewhere. Most, if not all, women spend time in other prisons before they are sent to Boronia, that could be at Melaleuca Women's Prison, Bandyup Women's Prison, Wandoo Rehabilitation Prison or any other regional prisons that accommodate women. All play an important part in the progression of women to Boronia.

Boronia is very different to more traditional prisons. Everything from the perimeter fence, the grounds and accommodation, through to the operational philosophy, are geared towards maximising the potential for rehabilitation and preparation for release. The Boronia philosophy is based around principals of respect, responsibility, empowerment and opportunity. Even simple things like the women being referred to as residents rather than prisoners make a difference.

We saw examples of each of these principles in the day to day operations and practice of the facility. We observed mutual respect between staff and residents. We saw a joint commitment to focus on providing the conditions for the women to develop skills and capacity for rehabilitation on release.

Unfortunately, only around 10 to 15 per cent of the total female population are resident in Boronia at any one time.

We saw many positives, but our report also identifies several opportunities for improvement. Although Boronia generally operates on a model of trauma informed practice, there should be more programs to support individual women who have experienced trauma in their lives. There should be more opportunities for Aboriginal women to reside there and, when they do get there, to provide additional culturally appropriate supports. For example, an Aboriginal Health Worker and a Life Skills Officer would be invaluable additions for both Aboriginal women and many other women.

The Department's response to our 14 recommendations was mixed at best, with only one recommendation supported outright. The remainder were only noted (7), supported in principle (4), or not supported at all (2). The Department's response is attached to this report.

Somewhat surprisingly, one recommendation that was not accepted by the Department related to an upgrade to the security of the perimeter fence. The unusual aspect to this recommendation was that its objective was to keep intruders out rather than residents in. We heard examples where intruders had scaled the fence and moved around the compound without detection. We did not

agree with the Department's assessment that the fence was adequate, and we are pretty sure that this assessment will not provide much comfort to the women residents.

Boronia is a valuable public asset that is generally maintained to a high standard, as evidenced by our observations during this inspection and many of the photographs in this report. But those photographs also show evidence of damage that requires maintenance. The extent of some of the work is such that it probably requires someone with relevant trade skills rather than resident maintenance workers who are supervised by a maintenance officer. Regardless of whether the Department notes, accepts or rejects our recommendation, the evidence shows that urgent repairs are needed before it deteriorates further.

Limited availability of post-release accommodation for prisoners is a problem we see in every inspection, and Boronia is no different. The Department's response to our recommendation relating to sourcing more post-release accommodation options for prisoners, noted the problem and fact that this is largely beyond their control. We understand that the problem is complex and housing stock is in short supply.

But the personal impact of this housing shortage was brought into stark relief during a meeting we held with residents who were due for release. In a group of around eight women, half were very positive about their future and excited to be going home to reconnect with their children and families. In contrast, the others in the group, many of whom were Aboriginal women, were anxious about their future and the fact that they had uncertain accommodation arrangements or that they had no alternative but to return to arrangements that had led to their incarceration in the first place.

A further complication for many women on release from prison is that they will require stable accommodation in order to have their children returned to them from State care. There is a moral imperative for governments and us more broadly as a community to do more to address this issue.

The Department's response to seven of the 14 recommendations in this report was 'Noted'. This is a category normally used for recommendations that are noted by the Department but largely outside their control or primarily directed at another agency or organisation. I have raised this with the Acting Commissioner and written to the Department seeking clarification.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We have three experienced Independent Prison Visitors who are community volunteers appointed by the Minister for Corrective Services. They attend Boronia on a regular basis providing an opportunity for the women to raise issues and feedback that information to our office. I acknowledge the importance of this volunteer work and thank them for the contribution they are making to our oversight of Boronia.

It is important to also acknowledge the support and cooperation we received throughout the inspection from the acting Superintendent and staff at Boronia and from key personnel in the Department. The residents who took the time to speak with us and share their perspective on being imprisoned in Boronia also deserve special acknowledgment and thanks.

Finally, I would like to thank the members of the inspection team for their expertise and hard work throughout the inspection. I would particularly acknowledge and thank Lauren Netto for her hard work in planning this inspection and as principal drafter of this report.

Eamon Ryan
Inspector of Custodial Services

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