

Inspector's Overview

Many improvements seen in Albany, but opportunities are being missed.

We undertook this inspection of Albany Regional Prison (Albany) in February 2021 at a time when the overall prison population in Western Australia had declined from the previous highpoint reached in early 2020. This had a flow on effect for Albany with the population sitting at around 300 compared to 450 when we last inspected in 2018. This has eased pressures on already crowded accommodation units and demand for services across the prison.

The reduced population has allowed the prison to close Unit 1 A and B wings, something we welcome having been a strident critic in the past of the conditions in that Unit. Protection prisoners previously housed in A wing had all been transferred back to Hakea, despite the prison having made some improvements to conditions for them since our last inspection. Unit 1 also houses the medical centre, kitchen, education and programs.

The closure of the two wings in unit 1 presents the perfect opportunity for the much-needed renewal, either by way of a complete rebuild or total refurbishment. Sadly, we were told that there were no concrete plans to make improvements to the conditions in Unit 1 or to any of the other facilities located within that building. Instead, we observed that the two wings were set up for immediate re-occupancy. This is a missed opportunity to address many of the agreed shortcomings of the facilities located in the Unit 1 complex.

Our report has identified many areas where past improvements have been either sustained or improved, including: reception, orientation, education and training. But despite the lower population, the number of men engaged in meaningful employment, education and programs is down, with 55 per cent of the population either unemployed or under-employed in unit work.

Many prisoners complained to us about the lack of organised sporting competitions; football in particular was sorely missed. Recreation activities were often restricted by staff absences and/or the availability of recreation officers to coordinate activities. Other activities for prisoners such as unit-based music and art, chaplaincy and spiritual support were either unavailable or regularly cancelled. While not dismissing the challenges faced, we think that these activities should be able to be facilitated without significant resources or effort.

In 2018 we identified that the peer support available for prisoners in Albany was lacking. But we saw improvements in the year or so before this inspection, with a large team of peer support prisoners offering effective support. By the time of our inspection conflict with prison management had become evident and was impacting the functioning of the peer support team and the vital services they offered to prisoners. Regardless of the merits of either side of the conflict, it ought to have been resolved and the peer support team returned to offering effective support. Disappointingly, we now understand that Albany does not have a current Prison Support Officer.

At the time of our inspection Aboriginal prisoners comprised 38% of the Albany population but made up only 14% of prisoners employed in industries or other service areas. It is not uncommon for us to see similar data sets in other areas that is not representative of the overall prisoner demographic. We were told that in Albany, Aboriginal prisoners were given the same opportunity for employment as other prisoners and could apply for employment opportunities. That may well be the case, but clearly it is not working. If the Department is to meet set targets to reduce the high rates of Aboriginal incarceration and recidivism rates, then it (and by application individual prisons) must do more. Simply making the opportunity to apply for a job the same for all prisoners is obviously not enough and greater focus and individual support is required. We were pleased to see the Department's support for Recommendation 15, but disappointed that it had closed the recommendation which suggests that the current status quo will remain. By making this recommendation we had hoped that it would lead to new initiatives to get more Aboriginal men into industries and employment within the prison.

The Department's response to seven of the 15 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.

Regional prisons face many challenges that larger metropolitan facilities often do not. We see the limiting impacts of factors such as: the size of the facility; the location; limited available services; and a lack of local resources. But we also see many opportunities for regional prisons to engage with their local community and businesses in innovative partnerships for the provision of specific services. Many conversations we have had with regional prison leadership groups result in them lamenting the absence of enough autonomy to engage outside of defined Departmental requirements. This presents many possibilities around increasing empowerment of local superintendents, building capacity, setting frameworks and providing adequate budget flexibility. Albany, like most regional facilities, would benefit from this kind of initiative, but it would require careful thought, and system level design and planning.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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

I would also like to acknowledge and thank our two recently retired Independent Visitors for their many years of service at Albany and for their contribution to our ongoing inspection work.

It is important to also acknowledge the support and cooperation we received throughout the inspection from the Superintendent and staff at Albany and from key personnel in the Department. The men and women who took the time to speak with us and share their perspective on being imprisoned in Albany also deserve our 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 Cliff Holdom for his hard work in planning this inspection and as principal drafter of this report.

Eamon Ryan
Inspector of Custodial Services

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