

THE SPECIAL HANDLING UNIT AT CASUARINA PRISON

THE SPECIAL HANDLING UNIT IS A HIGHLY RESTRICTED ENVIRONMENT FOR PRISONERS THAT IS GENERALLY WELL MANAGED

The Special Handling Unit (SHU) within Casuarina Prison is the State's only specialised high security unit for male prisoners who are assessed as posing a 'major threat'. This includes prisoners who pose a significant risk of escape, or risk to the security and good order of the prison, or a serious threat to staff, other prisoners or visitors. Invariably, the SHU holds a complex cohort of prisoners who require very careful day to day management by unit officers, supported by good leadership and oversight.

Our review examined all aspects of the operations, management and oversight of the SHU, and generally we found that unit staff and management at Casuarina did a reasonably good job in very challenging circumstances. Notwithstanding that, we did find some areas where we made recommendations for improvement, all bar two of which the Department of Justice (the Department) accepted and committed to, or were already, implementing change.

There were a couple of commendable findings worthy of noting. The first was that a solid policy framework and robust governance processes were in place, including an effective multi-disciplinary committee that managed how prisoners are initially placed in the SHU and how they are then managed towards transition back to mainstream. We also noted what appeared to be a genuine commitment by management and staff to actively case manage individuals and their time spent in the SHU, with the ultimate objective of returning suitable prisoners back to the mainstream population. There were some gaps in documentation and recording of decisions, but these were matters that can and should be addressed by improvements in systems and processes.

Of course, given the complexity of the prisoners held in the SHU, transition back to mainstream is not always going to be possible and some prisoners can, and often do, remain there for many years. We also found that although transition back to mainstream can be achieved for some prisoners, it often takes a long time for them to progress, and for some they are returned after relatively short periods.

The situation in the SHU is complicated further because it also holds prisoners with significant underlying mental illness and propensity for violence. It is well accepted that prison is often not an appropriate or therapeutic environment for the care and management of those with significant mental illness. But unfortunately, the SHU is where some of the most complex cases end up. At present, there appears no viable and safe alternative placement – certainly not within the prison system.

Although the SHU, with a capacity of just 17, is a relatively small unit by comparison, there are significant challenges in achieving the required daily minimum time out of cell for all prisoners. This is complicated by having to manage a complex matrix of risks and alerts

between prisoners who cannot safely be out of cell at the same time. In past inspections, the issue of minimum time out of cell had been the subject of criticism, but in this review we found that the majority of prisoners on most days were receiving above the minimum amount of time out of cell. There were, however, exceptions, as illustrated by the example of Prisoner L who, by virtue of his deteriorating mental health and propensity for violence, had many days with less than one hour out of cell. This is not at all therapeutic and the detrimental and lasting impacts that isolation can have on those with significant mental illness is well documented. Although we recognise the difficult task prison staff face in managing acutely unwell people in a prison setting, these examples emphasise the need for additional secure mental health beds in Western Australia.

The nature of the restrictions required to safely manage prisoners within the SHU limits access to a meaningful daily regime that includes structured recreation, programs, employment and other activities. This impacts the daily life of SHU prisoners and opportunities for them to engage in rehabilitation and reintegration activities. But surprisingly, the SHU has recorded a steady decline in incidents over recent years, including fewer critical incidents. Generally, we have found a calm and stable atmosphere on the occasions we have visited, and the data tends to support that observation.

The very first inspection undertaken by this office was an unannounced inspection of the SHU in November 2000. Comparison of the results of that inspection and the finding of this review show how far the SHU has progressed over the past 20 years. Yet many similar challenges remain, including the impact on prisoners of a significantly restricted regime. There is no easy solution and, like it or not, the SHU is a necessary and essential placement option for prisons in Western Australia. While acknowledging the challenge this presents for management and custodial staff, we remain concerned at the length of time some prisoners have remained in such a restrictive environment.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is important to acknowledge the contribution and assistance we received in undertaking this review from key personnel at Casuarina Prison and in the Department.

I acknowledge the contribution and hard work of the staff in our office who were involved in undertaking this review. I would particularly acknowledge and thank Ryan Quinn for his hard work in leading this review and as principal drafter of this report.

Eamon Ryan

Inspector of Custodial Services

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