

MEDIA RELEASE

EMBARGOED UNTIL 12PM 23 OCTOBER 2023

Inspection of Casuarina Prison and Review into the Special Handling Unit

Today, the Inspector of Custodial Services, Eamon Ryan has released two important reports examining Western Australia's largest publicly run custodial facility, Casuarina Prison. The reports cover the 2022 inspection and an in-depth review into the State's specialised high-security unit, the Special Handling Unit (SHU), located within Casuarina.

The inspection found the prison undergoing an extensive expansion project that will eventually make it the biggest in Australia with capacity for more than 1,800 men. Mr Ryan noted that the new units and additional bed capacity had broader implications. There was increasing complexity associated with managing so many people and their needs. He said:

The question has to be asked, 'how big is too big?' In addition to the mainstream units, Casuarina currently has a number of specialist units, including the SHU, a special protection unit, and the Mallee residential alcohol and other drugs rehabilitation unit. A high security unit is under construction while works for a forensic mental health unit, an expanded infirmary and a high dependency unit have yet to commence. While I welcome these units as the services and care they will provide are desperately needed, the expansion comes with significant risks.

Safely managing prisoners with so many diverse needs, conflicts and risks between them is a considerable challenge. Layered on top of this is the high prevalence of health and mental health needs, and intellectual and cognitive impairments within the prison population. The situation is exacerbated by the lack of meaningful and constructive activity in the daily regime, with high unemployment and underemployment.

The inspection report shows that the infrastructure and resources to support meaningful prisoner activities like industries, recreation, education, and programs had not kept pace with the accommodation expansions. Casuarina fundamentally lacked adequate support capacity. And this was undermining safety and security as well as the prison's ability to rehabilitate prisoners and prepare them to re-enter the community.

Chronic custodial staffing shortages seen at the time of the inspection were an aggravating factor. The shortages, which were primarily driven by unplanned absences like personal and workers' compensation leave, meant staff were redeployed from other duties. Consequently, activities and services for prisoners were frequently restricted or cancelled. Throughout the inspection, prison officers cited short staffing as one of the main reasons for low morale.

The SHU review examined all aspects of the operations, management and oversight of the 17-cell SHU and found that it was generally managed well in challenging circumstances. The review recognised that the increasingly complex cohort of prisoners being managed in the SHU – including a number of violent offenders with complex mental illnesses – had impacted the available time out of cell and ability for management to transition prisoners back into the mainstream population. Notwithstanding this, management were providing active case management and proactively identifying ways to increase recreation and time out of cell. Mr Ryan commented:

Given the complex matrix of risks presented by prisoners in the SHU, we recognise the need for some restrictions and limits to the daily routine. Despite this, we found that the majority of prisoners on most days were receiving above the minimum required time out of cell.

The very first inspection conducted by this Office was an announced inspection of the SHU in November 2000. Reflecting on the findings of that inaugural report, Mr Ryan noted, 'The unit has come a long way in this time'. He added:

While many similar challenges remain, including the impact on prisoners of a significantly restricted regime, the SHU is a necessary and essential placement option for prisoners in Western Australia. We were pleased to see management demonstrating a commitment to progressing prisoners out of the SHU by identifying and mitigating known risks. Still, four out of 10 prisoners spent more than a year in this restrictive environment. While we acknowledge the complex risks management are navigating, we continue to raise concern about the length of time some have remained in this unit.

For further information:

The Inspector, Mr Eamon Ryan, is available for comment from 12pm Monday 23 October 2023 on 0421 480 925.

The full reports will be available on the Inspector's website (www.oics.wa.gov.au).