

2023 INSPECTION OF MELALEUCA WOMEN'S PRISON

MELALEUCA WOMEN'S PRISON NEEDS BETTER RESOURCING AND SUPPORT

Melaleuca Women's Prison (Melaleuca) has a relatively short but interesting history. Originally the prison consisted of two male accommodation blocks opened in April 2011 on the grounds of Hakea Prison to allow for population expansion. In January 2013 it was designated as a Youth Detention Centre for a period of 12 months or so, to accommodate young people displaced by a riot at the Banksia Hill Detention Centre. In December 2016, following the addition of a new gatehouse and other administration and support buildings, it commenced as the Melaleuca Women's Remand and Reintegration Centre, privately operated by Sodexo. Then in April 2020 the prison returned to public operation and was renamed Melaleuca Women's Prison and is the main reception and remand facility for women.

This potted history illustrates a key point, that Melaleuca was not designed and built as a dedicated women's reception and remand facility. Our report provides many examples of how infrastructure limitations restrict almost every aspect of daily life in Melaleuca for both prisoners and staff. These restrictions are compounded by staffing issues that often result in inadequate services or services that are overwhelmed by the demands of record population numbers.

The Department's response to a draft of this report acknowledged many of these challenges and outlined plans and initiatives to address them. These include a focus on recruitment and retention of custodial staff, with increased officer training schools. Also identified are better oversight and governance around recruitment and retention of clinical staff. All this is underpinned by long term strategic planning, including infrastructure and information technology planning.

These are positive initiatives, some of which will have an impact in the short term, such as efforts to recruit additional staff and change some processes, while others are long term such as strategic and infrastructure planning. It is imperative that the government supports the Department's plans for these badly needed improvements at Melaleuca.

One very positive aspect of our inspection was the commendable attitude and approach of most staff at all levels working in Melaleuca. Despite the many shortcomings around infrastructure and resourcing, the dedication and commitment to 'make it work' was evident almost everywhere we went. Although this was highly commendable, ultimately it may not be sustainable.

What we are seeing at Melaleuca mirrors what we see in almost every other adult prison. Record high populations, issues with staff recruitment and retention, unmet demands for key services particularly around mental health, infrastructure limitations, and significantly reduced rehabilitation opportunities for prisoners – all documented with regularity in our published inspection and review reports.

Yet the stresses and pressures in the corrections system remain year after year.

There is little value in looking back to lament missed opportunities for improvement, because there is urgent work required to be done now. If there is not significant and sustained resourcing of corrective services, then the situation we see in Melaleuca and elsewhere will not change and the prospect of reducing recidivism and incarceration rates is significantly lessened.

Continuing as we are and hoping for a better outcome is folly. There is no doubt in my mind that significant investment is required to rebuild the corrections system so it can provide meaningful rehabilitation opportunities for the people sent there by the courts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We have three Independent Prison Visitors for Melaleuca who are community volunteers appointed by the Minister for Corrective Services. They attended Melaleuca on a regular basis observing the operations of the prison and providing an opportunity for the women placed there to raise issues and feed back that information to our office. I acknowledge the importance of the work undertaken and thank them for their contribution to our ongoing monitoring of Melaleuca.

I also acknowledge the support and cooperation we received throughout the inspection from the Superintendent and staff at Melaleuca and from key personnel in the Department.

The women living in Melaleuca who took the time to speak with us and share their perspectives also deserve our acknowledgement and thanks.

Finally, I would like to thank the members of the inspection team for their expertise and hard work throughout the inspection. I 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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