

2024 INSPECTION OF ALBANY REGIONAL PRISON

DESPITE MANY CHALLENGES THERE WAS A RENEWED SENSE OF ENTHUSIASM SEEN IN ALBANY

Albany Regional Prison (Albany) faces the same two challenges that we have seen in almost every prison inspection undertaken over the past few years, rising prisoner populations and staffing issues.

At the commencement of our inspection in February 2024, the Albany population was 393, with 33% held on remand. Fast forward to 18 December 2024 and the population has risen to 437, with 29% held on remand. Although the remand data shows a slight fall in percentage terms, the actual number of remand prisoners has only reduced by 5 to 125. Albany is currently operating at around 87% of its general-purpose bed capacity, meaning they still have a small level of flexibility in managing the complexity of its population.

Our report documents many issues we observed during the inspection arising from daily staffing shortages, including impacts on core services like health, recreation, employment, and education. Restrictions were also evident in the daily regime and interactions between custodial staff and prisoners, both of which are essential for the safe and secure operation of the prison. The Department has acknowledged many of these issues and the impacts they have on the day-to-day operation of prisons. We have received regular briefings and updates on system-wide strategies to increase the custodial workforce, including improving retention allowances and incentives for some staff and increased recruitment and training of custodial staff. This has extended to running regional recruit training schools, two of which successfully ran in Albany this year.

Just prior to the commencement of our inspection, an acting Superintendent was appointed to lead Albany. This appointment brought noticeable change and generated renewed enthusiasm and focus on getting prisoners out of their units to participate in activities like employment and recreation. Our ongoing monitoring of progress has seen this enthusiasm continue throughout the year.

Aboriginal men now comprised almost 50% of the population in Albany, yet they were proportionally under-represented in employment and higher gratuity levels. Notably they only comprised 24% of men employed in positions outside their unit (traditionally seen as more meaningful and higher paid positions), but they comprised a majority of unemployed prisoners at 56%.

On a more positive note, Aboriginal men engaged in education comprised almost 60% of the student population. Reducing educational gaps is one of the key building blocks in addressing disadvantage for Aboriginal prisoners and creating opportunities for rehabilitation. For these reasons we have made three recommendations to improve access to, and engagement in, employment and educational opportunities for men in Albany.

Aboriginal prisoners in Albany would benefit from the development of a dedicated cultural centre to encourage engagement in learning, employment, and cultural activities. There are two noticeable examples of the success possible with this type of initiative, the Kaya Link centre in Bunbury Regional Prison and the Kaartdijin Mia cultural centre in Casuarina Prison. Both have had success in engaging Aboriginal men in positive activities, including education, cultural support, and rehabilitation activities. There is an obvious need for this type of initiative in Albany – and indeed in all prisons – and the current atmosphere of renewed enthusiasm for change has created an ideal opportunity.

Health and mental health staff working in Albany do a remarkable job providing services to prisoners. But at the time of the inspection, they were overwhelmed by access issues and difficulties in recruiting and retaining appropriate clinical staff.

Prisoners' access to a medical practitioner was restricted to tele-health appointments, and access to a dentist was reduced to one day per month, which we heard was often cancelled. The longstanding inability to recruit a specialist mental health/AOD nurse, had led to significant gaps in services available for prisoners in need. There was only one Psychological Health Service counsellor who, along with general nursing staff, did their best, but access and service gaps remained. We understand that at a system level effort to address many of these issues across the state are underway, but this is of little comfort to the staff and prisoners in Albany.

Despite these and several other challenges facing staff and prisoners in Albany, there was a strong sense of enthusiasm and appetite for fresh ideas and change. This needs to be encouraged, supported, and where possible resourced.

Publication delayed by the Department's response

We sent a draft of this report to the Department for comment on 10 October 2024. The response from the Department was originally due on 3 December 2024, but this was extended to 17 December 2024. The Department then advised it would not be in a position to meet the revised deadline. We prepared the report for publication and at the time of lodging the report with Parliament we had not received a response.

There is a Memorandum of Understanding between the Department and my Office which sets out agreed operating parameters, including timeframes for various processes such as responses to draft reports. It is not a legally binding document but establishes what we both agree are reasonable timeframes. The agreed timeframe for the Department to respond to draft reports is five weeks.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We had two Independent Prison Visitors for Albany at the time of our inspection, but one has recently resigned. They are community volunteers appointed by the Minister for Corrective Services and attended Albany on a regular basis observing the operations of the prison and providing an opportunity for the men placed there to raise issues and feedback that informs our office. I acknowledge the importance of the work undertaken and thank them for their contribution to our ongoing monitoring of Albany.

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

Finally, I acknowledge and thank members of the inspection team for their expertise and hard work throughout the inspection. I would also particularly acknowledge and thank Kieran Artelaris for his work in planning this inspection and as principal drafter of this report.

Eamon Ryan
Inspector of Custodial Services

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