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Report No. 71 – Acacia Prison

Quality, Accountability and Value for Money at Western Australia's Private Prison

Acacia, the State's largest and only privately operated prison, is delivering quality services, meeting high accountability standards, and providing value for money, according to a new report from the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services.

On releasing the report of the November 2010 inspection of Acacia Prison, Inspector Neil Morgan said

'It is very difficult to compare prisons because all of them are different. But it is clear that Acacia's performance has improved since Serco took over the contract five years ago. It is at least equal to the best public sector prisons in the State, and in many respects it is superior'.

The level of performance was all the more impressive in light of Acacia's capacity increasing from 785 prisoners to 1,000 prisoners since 2007.

'Increases of this magnitude bring significant pressures to both staff and prisoners but this report describes many positive aspects of prison operations and areas of improvement over the past three years,' Mr Morgan said.

The report found that the prison had maintained a good record in terms of security, safety, and duty of care. It also found that positive and meaningful interactions between staff and prisoners were complementing a multitude of services and initiatives aimed at preparing prisoners for release and reducing re-offending.

Whilst Acacia was generally performing well, the report found room for improvement in a number of areas. In terms of security, there had been a number of incidents where prisoners had climbed onto roofs. The prison has also struggled to provide sufficient meaningful employment for its prisoners. Despite significant investment over the past three years, almost a quarter of prisoners (around 240) were unemployed. Another 200 were underemployed, doing menial tasks that took as little as one hour per day and provided little skill development. 'Providing adequate employment has been a persistent challenge at Acacia and indeed at most prisons,' Mr Morgan said.

The maintenance arrangements at the prison are also a concern.

'The maintenance contract is under-funded and is separate from the prison services contract. This means that Serco is neither responsible for nor in control of maintaining the facility it operates. This situation creates risks not only for Serco but also for the State because the prison is a state asset,' the Inspector said.

In addition to delivering high quality services, Acacia Prison delivers a substantial financial saving to the State. The daily cost of managing a prisoner at the prison is approximately 30 per cent less than at a public prison. The report found that that Acacia enjoys some benefits in terms of costs because of its size and modern design but that, even allowing for these factors, it provides real value for money.

'It is no coincidence that the best private prisons are found where there is transparency and strong external accountability. And Acacia is the most closely monitored and accountable prison in Australia,' Mr Morgan said. 'First, it is governed by a contract that sets clear standards and is publicly available; second, the Department of Corrective Services has developed good contract management processes; third, it is subject to the independent scrutiny of this Office, which has now conducted four formal inspections since 2001.'

One of the original goals of establishing a privately operated prison was to encourage the sharing of knowledge and innovative practices. The inspection identified many innovative practices at Acacia and concluded that the Department of Corrective Services should develop better processes to identify these practices and to apply them more widely: 'There are real opportunities to build on the Acacia experience by encouraging more system-wide learning and by developing stronger performance measures for the public sector prisons,' Mr Morgan said.

Neil Morgan
Inspector
17 May 2011

For more detail, see the Inspector's Overview to the Report (copy attached)