# Inspector’s overview

##### Most Aboriginal employees choose to work for the Department of Corrective Services because they aspire to make a difference to the lives of others in the Aboriginal community. Given the gross over-representation of Aboriginal people in prison in this state – which is by far the highest in Australia - it heartens me that the Department has Aboriginal as well as non-Aboriginal employees who are so motivated and so dedicated to the rehabilitation of people who are incarcerated.

Over the years, our prison inspections have clearly demonstrated that Aboriginal prisoners will seek out Aboriginal staff for support and assistance. This has many benefits, including building communication, bridging the gap between staff and prisoners, reducing risks to both prisoners and staff, and improving the prospects of rehabilitation.

##### It is therefore of particular concern that the year 2015 saw the highest number of Aboriginal employees leave the Department over recent years. There were a number of reasons for this, but our consultations for this review strongly highlighted the need for Aboriginal staff to feel more valued, and for their skills to be better used. They believe their cultural, social and community knowledge base is not being fully recognised, and that they have little opportunity to provide genuine concrete input into new initiatives. It is devastating for them when initiatives or changes that are not sufficiently considerate of Aboriginal prisoners’ needs, or are not culturally appropriate, are implemented.

##### Recruitment and retention of Aboriginal staff is critical if the Department is to meet its stated objectives of improving offender management and rehabilitation, and of creating a Department that is more responsive and innovative. This is also central to its key objective of reducing recidivism generally and specifically for Aboriginal people.

##### It is important, too, that the Department’s strategies to improve recruitment and retention promote Aboriginal employment in all areas of the agency including policy, corporate services, and senior management. Aboriginal employees should not be limited to positions that are primarily focused on working with offenders. Increased diversity in the workplace will bring benefits to all staff, and will add innovation and value to business outcomes.

## The Present

##### The high rate of incarceration of Aboriginal people in Western Australia means that the needs and management of Aboriginal people is part of the core business of the Department. Improving Aboriginal staff representation rates will have a positive impact on offender management and rehabilitation.

##### This review has identified that in terms of its number of Aboriginal employees, the Department is performing well in comparison to its peers nationally, and to comparable Western Australian agencies. That said, there is always room for improvement and this report highlights both challenges and opportunities. In particular, while the Department’s recruitment strategies appear to be reasonably effective in attracting and recruiting Aboriginal applicants, retention rates are poor.

##### There is no simple benchmark for the “ideal” level of Aboriginal employee representation, but work in other jurisdictions suggests that there is a need to ensure a critical mass to counter the effects of minority group isolation. The data in the report shows that the Department’s overall rate of Aboriginal employment (7.9% of all staff) compared favourably with the proportions of working age Aboriginal people in Western Australia (2.8%) and the state’s public sector average (2.8%). The proportion of permanent employees in the Department is much lower (4.6%), but still considerably higher than the public sector average.

##### The percentage of permanent employees drops further (to 3.4%) if you only look at staffing rates in Adult Prisons and Juvenile Detention Centres. The number of Aboriginal staff working in a strictly custodial role is lower again (2.8%). The low numbers of Aboriginal staff working in operational roles in prisons suggests that all of the potential benefits are not being fully realised.

##### The review also found noticeable differences in the rate of Aboriginal employment across prisons, even between prisons where you would expect to have similar rates given their locations and functions. For example, Acacia Prison only has 0.9 per cent Aboriginal staff compared with Casuarina Prison at 2.5 per cent and Hakea Prison at2.0 per cent. Likewise Albany Regional Prison at 3.0 per cent and Greenough Regional Prison at 3.4 per cent were different from Bunbury Regional Prison at 1.5 per cent. There was also a stark contrast between Eastern Goldfields Regional Prison at 7.9 per cent and West Kimberley Regional Prison at 10.0 per cent compared to Roebourne Regional Prison at just 3.9 per cent. These data suggest that there is an opportunity for greater consistency of employment, or perhaps deployment, across all prisons so that the level of Aboriginal staff better reflects each prison’s population demographic and needs.

## Retention

##### As stated above, the Department has generally been relatively successful in attracting and recruiting Aboriginal staff. The picture in relation to retention rates is not so positive and this is an area requiring greater attention. There are significant investments involved in the recruitment of staff, not just Aboriginal staff. These costs include the time and money it costs to run recruitment processes and the costs of induction and training, and also on the job training, supervision and mentoring of new employees.

##### There will always be a rate of separation for new and existing employees, but the data shows that between 2009 and 2015 the overall rate of separation for Aboriginal staff in the Department was 12.7 per cent. This was almost 60 per cent higher than the rate for non-Aboriginal staff (8.0%)

##### In 2015 the separation rate for Aboriginal staff peaked at 20.8 per cent; double that of the public sector average for the same period. Only time will tell if this is a developing trend or a one-off peak. Either way, it is clear that the retention rate for Aboriginal staff is a longstanding issue that needs to be addressed.

##### Our analysis of retention and promotion trends did not suggest that Aboriginal staff had poorer career progression opportunities. However, in order to improve retention, the Department should consider targeted incentives and initiatives. Examples of such initiatives include mentorship programs, culturally appropriate induction processes, support networks, greater leave flexibility, and the provision of a culturally inclusive workplace. This should not only improve the overall rate of Aboriginal employment but also the progression of Aboriginal people into more senior positions.

## The Future

##### The Department launched its Reconciliation Action Plan 2015-2018 (RAP) in December 2015. The RAP aims to improve how the Department works collaboratively with Aboriginal people in developing culturally appropriate services and initiatives that will underpin the broad objective of reducing recidivism rates. A key outcome set by the RAP is to increase the number of Aboriginal people employed by the Department across a range of positions and places.

##### The RAP lists a number of actions to address this outcome, including an action to investigate opportunities to increase Aboriginal employment to 7.5 per cent across the Department. The RAP also has a number of other actions and initiatives that aim to improve the Department’s engagement and collaboration with Aboriginal people and to strengthen the cultural competency of the Department and individual staff.

##### All of these initiatives are laudable and the Department is to be commended for the development of the RAP. However, this is far from its first attempt at improving the rate of Aboriginal employment and retention. A number of previous plans and strategies have also been comprehensive, well intentioned, well-crafted and launched with fanfare. But they all failed for want of effective implementation.

##### The success of the RAP in improving Aboriginal staffing rates and its broader objectives will turn on effective and sustained implementation. And this must include retention as well as recruitment. Only time will tell whether the objectives and commitments set out in the RAP come to pass but the opportunity is there and the time is right for change. It is also important that future evaluations of the RAP will be rigorous and publicly reported.

##### Unfortunately, I have to report that despite our statutory powers of access to information (balanced with clear statutory criteria regarding confidentiality), we found it tiresomely difficult to access the information required for this review. For a large part of 2015, the Department refused to provide information to update what it had given us in 2014, questioning our right to even conduct the review and our right to information. This significantly delayed finalisation of the review. However, the information, once received, amply confirmed our key findings, especially in relation to the rate at which Aboriginal employees have been exiting the Department.

Eamon Ryan

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