

Inspector's Overview

DIFFICULTIES IN RECRUITING AND RETAINING STAFF AT EASTERN GOLDFIELDS REGIONAL PRISON IMPACTS ALMOST EVERY ASPECT OF PRISON OPERATIONS

Our inspection of Eastern Goldfields Regional Prison (EGRP) was undertaken in February 2020 just as COVID-19 was starting to have an impact in Australia. Although the pandemic did not impact the on-site component of the inspection, arrangements to deal with the response phase did slow the process of drafting and finalising this report resulting in a regretful delay of several months in its publication.

Overall, the infrastructure at EGRP is in good condition but two accommodation units are not being used. Unit 3 is closed, and Unit 5 has never been used. At the time of inspection, the population at EGRP was significantly below capacity resulting in Unit 3 being temporarily closed. The Department's rationale for this decision was that there is system capacity elsewhere, there has been a decline in overall prison population since COVID-19 emerged, and ongoing staffing challenges at EGRP. Although the rationale is perhaps understandable, the impact locally is a loss of the earned privileges accommodation option to incentivise and reward good behaviour. The importance of this as a means of internal prison management as well as the positive impact of developing independent living skills for the men involved should not be underestimated.

There was uncontested agreement that EGRP has issues with recruitment and retention of staff across many employment groups. There is a steady line of custodial staff who, once appointed, nominate to transfer out to other facilities. This report details many of the impacts this has had across the operation of the prison, none the least of which are consistency of practice and frustration on the part of longer-term staff. The Department's response to our recommendation to address this issue almost exclusively focused on the recruitment of new staff. We believe that the underlying cause of the problem may have more to do with retention rather than recruitment. We understand that additional location allowances may not be feasible, but consideration must be given to finding solutions to the issue of recruitment and retention otherwise the situation will not change.

It was pleasing that the Department accepted our recommendation to find and address the root cause of staff dysfunction among certain groups of staff at EGRP. This is an issue that was, at the time of our inspection, having a significant impact on staff and even on the prisoners who saw it manifest as inconsistency in practice. We were told that this issue was one of the factors that influenced some staff to seek opportunities elsewhere. Since the inspection we have retained an interest in the resolution of this issue because of its impact on the effective and efficient operation of the prison. We will continue to monitor this as part of our ongoing liaison with the prison.

The crisis care unit at EGRP is unremarkable when compared to similar units in most other prisons. The difficulty is that in taking away the tools of self-harm, they inevitably create a cold, sterile and non-therapeutic environment which is usually the opposite of what is needed for the most vulnerable prisoners. The Department did not support our specific recommendation about improving these facilities at EGRP. While there may be no easy solution, there remains a systemic issue for the Department to address. Vulnerable prisoners continue to be placed in an entirely unsuitable environment that does not meet their therapeutic needs

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other than perhaps close monitoring. At the time of our inspection we were told that the situation at EGRP was exacerbated by ongoing difficulty recruiting a mental health nurse.

During the inspection staff, prisoners and management told us that problems with the prisoner phone system was a constant source of complaint and frustration. Prior to the inspection, the Department had taken steps to remedy the situation and was continuing with those efforts. It seems there were difficulties with being in a regional location and the need to rely on an external contractor coming to Kalgoorlie to provide support. We understand that at the time of writing the Department was confident that problems had been resolved. We will continue to monitor this issue because the ability for prisoners to maintain contact with family is so important to their wellbeing.

Unit 4 at EGRP is designated for women prisoners, many of whom are from the local region. The importance of having women from regional areas held as close to home as possible cannot be overstated. We were pleased to see improvements in services and support for the women at EGRP since our last inspection. At the time of our inspection there was a Women's Support Officer and a Life Skills Officer appointed to support the women; the women told us that they valued the level of support they received from both staff members. Women have better access to employment, education and recreation, but access to programs was still problematic. Most of the management and staff we spoke to were very supportive of having women at EGRP and worked hard to meet their needs; unfortunately, there was a small pocket of staff who were less supportive and voiced their views. It was pleasing to see that the Department supported both of our recommendations to ensure all staff were appropriately trained and followed the relevant plans and policies for working with women at EGRP.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to acknowledge the support and cooperation we received throughout the inspection from the Superintendent and staff at EGRP and from key personnel in the Department. The men and women who took the time to speak with us and share their perspective also deserve our acknowledgment and thanks.

Finally, I would also like to thank the members of the inspection team for their expertise and hard work throughout the inspection. I would particularly acknowledge the work of Christine Wyatt for planning the inspection and Jim Bryden for his work as principal drafter of this report.

Eamon Ryan
Inspector

15 December 2020