

## Inspector's Overview

This report forms part of our Snapshot Series which allow us to highlight issues or trends that we see in the custodial environment. We are confident *Snapshots* are a valuable addition to our review work that allow us to bring forward matters that may warrant attention or consideration by the Department of Justice, Corrective Services (the Department) or the Western Australian Government.

Western Australia's population is aging and so too is our prison population. We commenced this review to look at how the Department is planning for, and meeting the needs of, the growing number of older prisoners.

It is fair to say that the needs of many older members of our society are different to those of the rest of the population. Some people require intensive support and assisted living and many others can live independently with less support. It is also true that many people get along quite well with minimal, if any, support. The prison population is no different, and the Department and individual prisons will have to meet the varying needs of older prisoners. We think there ought to be some level of coordination at a system level and this should not be left to individual prisons to manage.

The information and data in this report demonstrates that there is a growing number of older prisoners across the prison population. The trends in data for Western Australia's prison population are generally consistent with data trends in other Australian States. In this report we touch on some of the causal factors that may be influencing the growth in older prisoner numbers within prison populations. There is of course the obvious one, that the general population is aging and therefore prison populations are likely to reflect that trend. There were some other possible factors we identified, including rates of offending for older people, the types of offences they were being convicted of led to longer sentences, and changes to sentencing laws and practices.

The way forward appears mixed. It was pleasing to see the Department had already commenced planning for an Assisted Care Unit at Casuarina Prison, but unfortunately nothing is planned for women. Also, the existing assessment processes address some of the needs of older prisoners. But there is no overarching strategic plan or framework to guide prisons in how they should manage the increasing numbers of older prisoners that make up their populations. The likely outcome of this is that it will be left to individual prisons to manage and, even with the best will, that will result in mixed responses and varying standards across the system.

Older prisoners make up around 12 per cent of the prison population in Western Australia. That is approximately 840 men and women who fall within the definition of older prisoners. We accept that not all of these will ever require any form of specialist support, but many will. And without a strong strategic framework their needs are unlikely to be met consistently across the system.

We have made three recommendations which are focussed on developing a system-wide consistent approach to managing older prisoners. The Department's response to our draft report indicated a level of support-in-principle for each of these recommendations and noted a commitment to undertake extensive research to determine a future model that will provide optimal solutions to accommodating older prisoners. It is our hope that this work is recognised as a priority and is commenced sooner rather than later.

It is important to acknowledge the contribution and assistance we received in undertaking this review from key personnel in the Department and at the privately managed facility, Acacia Prison. It is important to also acknowledge the hard work and significant contribution of the team within our office in planning and undertaking this review. I would particularly acknowledge the work of Christine Wyatt in leading this review and as principal drafter of this report.

Eamon Ryan  
Inspector

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