

MEDIA RELEASE

EMBARGOED UNTIL 2PM, 16 APRIL 2024

Despite some positive progress, addressing staffing remains a barrier to unlocking EGRP's full potential

Improving community engagement, the opening of the prisoner art gallery Palya Walkaly-Walkalya, observed examples of good staff-to-prisoner relationships, improved access to recreation time and education, and staff reporting satisfaction with making a contribution to opportunities for prisoners, were among the encouraging findings from the Inspector of Custodial Services' inspection of Eastern Goldfields Regional Prison (EGRP) conducted in 2023.

But despite these rewarding aspects to working at EGRP, Inspector Eamon Ryan said the most prevalent problem facing the prison remained the attraction and retention of staff and the consequent impact on the ability to deliver services.

"These issues were highlighted in our 2020 inspection at EGRP, and unfortunately limited progress has been made. In many respects staff shortages are even more urgent in the current context of an overcrowded prison system," Mr Ryan said.

"Difficulties in attracting and retaining staff at EGRP, particularly custodial staff, are leading to regular understaffing, staff burnout and reductions in services. Many custodial staff told us they were already undertaking overtime on a regular basis and were too fatigued to accept more," he said.

To address this problem the Department has recently announced a greater focus on recruitment, including running a local recruit school in the Goldfields area.

While attracting staff to the regional centre has been one part of the staffing problem at EGRP, retention has also been a significant factor. The ability for new staff to request a transfer out of the prison in a short time frame from commencement was again identified as an issue in 2023.

Mr Ryan noted the Department's decision to 'Support in Principle' a recommendation to review the EGRP incentive package which may have an impact on retention, and therefore staffing levels and the ability to deliver services and increase capacity.

Another knock-on effect of the staffing issue was that whole units at the prison could not be staffed and remained empty. Resolving the staff shortages could mean up to 100 beds would be available to be brought online to relieve population pressure on the adult male estate.

"The rising custodial population and the high occupancy rates for maximum- and medium-security facilities in Perth and the regions has escalated to the point where most are at or nearing capacity. The adult male prisoner population recently exceeded the previous all-time high recorded in March 2020, and the conditions in many prisons have become unacceptable," Mr Ryan said.

"In the context of these circumstances, the inability to use all available units at EGRP is a missed opportunity to improve living conditions in EGRP and across the prison estate."

Mr Ryan noted other areas of good practice and service delivery at EGRP included:

- Overall support for women prisoners accommodated at the prison
- Thorough risk-management processes for at-risk prisoners
- Improvement in access to primary health care
- A diverse range of meaningful educational opportunities were offered.

For further information:

The Inspector, Mr Ryan, is available for comment from 2pm Tuesday 16 April 2024 on 0421 480 925.

The full report will be available on the Inspector's website (www.oics.wa.gov.au).