

2024 INSPECTION OF ACACIA PRISON

ACACIA HAS ENDURED MANY CHALLENGES, BUT A SENSE OF OPTIMISM HAS RETURNED

Acacia Prison, as the only privately operated prison in Western Australia, has often been recognised for having a level of flexibility and adaptability in its operations that would prove difficult to achieve in public prisons. But this flexibility and adaptability has in recent years been significantly tested.

Over the past four years, Acacia has gone through the uncertainty of the contract renewal process, the commencement of a new Director, a major riot which resulted in the loss of a large accommodation unit and more than half of the adjacent industry workshops, a significant fire which destroyed the remaining industry workshops that had not been damaged during the riot, significant staffing challenges, and the residual impacts of the pandemic.

My honest assessment of their response to all these challenges is that they have come through reasonably well. And most of the credit for this rests with the leadership, operational management and staff at Acacia who have worked extraordinarily hard to keep the prison operating and provide meaningful services for prisoners. The prisoners who had to endure restricted services and conditions also deserve acknowledgment.

As will be seen in this report, at the time of our inspection there were many areas that required attention, some living conditions had deteriorated, meaningful employment opportunities for the prisoners had been reduced, access to programs and education was restricted, and the quantity and quality of food and water quality were commonly raised concerns.

The water quality issue is an interesting one. At the time of our inspection water quality was frequently raised with us by many prisoners and staff, they pointed to sediment in the drinking water and it having a metallic taste. Serco's initial response, as detailed later in this report, was that the issue had been addressed, but during a recent liaison visit we explored this issue again and heard continuing complaints from prisoners. We were also advised that recent funding applications to install a water filter for the prison water supply had been rejected by the Department. Clean drinking water is a basic right and, regardless of who is responsible, it needs to be addressed.

There were also many new initiatives seen that were quite impressive. Several of these had been implemented in response to the impacts of the riot and the fire.

One of the most impressive initiatives has been the cultural and support service networks that have been established in Acacia. The renewed focus on providing tailored services and supports, often directed at specific categories of prisoners, has included: a young adults community, cultural and peer supports for Aboriginal prisoners, a dedicated strategy and

supports for prisoners serving life or long-term sentences, additional care for prisoners with high needs, a support network for veterans, and a network of other mentors and peer supporters.

In the year or so prior to our inspection Acacia had introduced a new model of health care which had proved to be problematic, with considerable impact on staff morale. But impressively, Acacia had recognised this and taken steps to return to the previous model that provided holistic patient centred health care. But high demand for services remained, particularly in the areas of mental health and supports for managing addictions - both areas will require careful attention and resourcing now that the prison has returned to full capacity.

At the time of writing, there is a building sense of optimism at Acacia. With the reconstruction work almost complete, the two industry areas impacted by the riot and the fire are set to come back online. This will provide additional employment, education, and training opportunities. It will also have flow-on impacts in freeing up other infrastructure that had been heavily overused in trying to provide displaced services. These developments will be a particular focus area in our ongoing monitoring of Acacia in the coming months.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We had three Independent Prison Visitors for Acacia at the time of our inspection. They are community volunteers appointed by the Minister for Corrective Services, who attend Acacia on a regular basis observing the operations of the facility and providing an opportunity for the men placed there to raise issues and complaints that informs the work of our office. I acknowledge the importance of their work and thank them for their contribution to our monitoring of conditions in Acacia.

I also acknowledge the support and cooperation we received throughout the inspection from the Director and staff at Acacia and from key personnel in the Department.

The men living in Acacia who took the time to speak with us and share their perspectives also deserve our acknowledgement and thanks.

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

Eamon Ryan

Inspector of Custodial Services

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