

NON-CUSTODIAL STAFFING SHORTAGE

SHORTAGES IN NON-CUSTODIAL STAFF NEED TO BE ADDRESSED SOONER RATHER THAN LATER

Throughout our review and inspection work we consistently hear about issues and concerns arising from custodial staffing shortages. This is understandable given the essential role custodial staff play in maintaining safe and secure prisons, without which nothing else is likely to happen. We have written extensively about the causes and impacts of this problem, which have been compounded by considerable growth in the prison population over recent years. Lately, the Department of Justice, Corrective Services, has put a lot of work into bolstering recruitment and increasing retention of custodial staff.

But the safety and security of prisons is just one element of an effective prison system, albeit an important one. Of parallel importance, and arguably the best means to reduce the size of the prison population by stopping people cycling through prison and creating safer communities is the support and rehabilitation services offered to them while in custody. This is where non-custodial staff come into prominence.

An effective prison system must provide people in custody the opportunity to address their immediate health, mental health, and welfare needs; and also support change in their behaviours and attitudes through tailored programs and services that address their needs and supports desistance. These services and supports are primarily delivered by non-custodial staff working in each facility, and this review examined the incidence and impact of staffing shortages within this group.

Shortages in non-custodial staff arise for similar reasons to those experienced by custodial staff, including unfilled vacancies, planned and unplanned leave, unmet demands on services, inadequate funding and resourcing, and challenges specific to regional areas. The problem is often exacerbated by inconsistencies in identifying the required staffing levels in different prisons.

In addition to this, recruiting specialist clinical positions, such as nurses, mental health workers, psychologists, and counsellors, face an additional challenge of a nationwide shortage of clinicians and the difficulty many prisons face matching terms and conditions of employment offered elsewhere.

Our report contains several recommendations aimed at addressing these challenges. Recommendation 1 was to identify non-custodial staffing requirements using an evidence-based approach to ensure consistency across various sites. The Department's response to this recommendation noted its Safer Staffing Review now includes non-custodial staff, with phase one of the Review focussing on custodial staffing needs. Phase two of the Review will examine non-custodial staff, but this will not commence until the third quarter of the 2025-2026 financial year.

This timeframe means the Department will not begin to look at the systemic drivers behind non-custodial staffing shortages for at least another eight months. Therefore, it is unlikely we will see any meaningful change for well over 12 months and probably longer. In the meantime, the significant shortfalls we have identified in the provision of health, mental health, welfare, and rehabilitation support for prisoners will remain.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful for the support and cooperation received throughout the review from key personnel at the Department of Justice.

I acknowledge the contribution and hard work of the team in our office who were involved in undertaking this review. I would particularly acknowledge and thank Kelly Jackson for her work in leading this review and as principal analyst and drafter of this report.

Eamon Ryan

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