

# Inspector's Overview

## *Casuarina Prison is stretched to capacity and struggling to cope*

We undertook this inspection of Casuarina Prison in October 2025, just over three years after our last inspection in September 2022 (OICS Report 150, July 2023).

My overview to the 2022 Casuarina Prison inspection report posed the question “How big is too big?” in relation to the expansion project already underway at the prison. In that discussion I drew parallels between our 2019 and 2022 inspection reports, both of which highlighted continuing risks associated with existing and planned expansion. We noted the potential impacts on the prison's ability to provide a meaningful and constructive daily regime because of high rates of prisoner unemployment and underemployment, the ongoing effects of regular daily staff shortfalls, and inadequate infrastructure to cope with the expanded population.

Three years later, it is no surprise that our 2025 inspection has again identified the same issues, but they are now more acutely felt by staff and prisoners. The prison population has risen by 600 since 2022. On an average day, 66% of the Casuarina population are held on remand, with over 40% of them having been held for more than 6 months. The prison now consistently operates at over 100% of its general-purpose bed capacity, and, despite several units having some cells triple bunked, as I write this, up to 40 prisoners are still sleeping on a mattress on the floor.

Daily staffing shortfalls, in both custodial and non-custodial staff groups, continue to have a significant impact on daily life. At the time of our inspection, up to 15% of rostered uniformed staff are absent each day and we were told the overtime bill is between \$400-600,000 per month.

Despite the best efforts of management and staff, restrictions to the daily regime mean regularly reduced access to welfare support services, recreation, library, education, employment, and visits. Chronic system level backlogs to treatment assessments combined with limited availability of criminogenic and voluntary programs means few prisoners receive meaningful rehabilitation support.

We also identified that health and mental health services struggled to meet the demands of a complex and growing prison population, with significant shortfalls in the clinical workforce.

Over the past several years, two of the most positive aspects of day-to-day life in Casuarina had been the Mallee Solid Steps drug and alcohol rehabilitation program, and the Kaartdijin Mia cultural learning centre providing support for First Nations prisoners. But both were significantly reduced at the time of our inspection, with Kaartdijin Mia rarely open and the number of participants in the Mallee program significantly reduced.

After our inspection, in April 2026 the Department announced that, due to the need to manage sustained custodial population pressures, the Mallee Solid Steps Program would close in August 2026. This is a devastating blow to the many men who are struggling with addiction and hoped to be accepted into the program.

The Department's response to our 23 recommendations was mixed. Positively, it was pleasing to see additional resourcing allocated in the 2026-27 State Budget to increase primary health nursing and mental health staffing over the next five years, and funding for an additional 22 staff to address the backlog in treatment assessments. While additional funding is very positive, the real challenge will be in the recruitment and retention of qualified clinical staff.

As already mentioned, the most disappointing response was to Recommendation 15. Rather than providing greater certainty to the Mallee Solid Steps Program, the program would be closed. The Department's response went on to emphasise their commitment to the delivery of drug and alcohol services with planning for the development of a new program aligned with the existing Djarraly drug and alcohol program in Bunbury Regional Prison. Replacing a well-respected effective program with 'planning for the development of a new program' is another example of the dire consequence of the problems facing prisons in Western Australia.

The issues we have documented in this inspection report are from a point in time last year (October 2025), but throughout 2025 and continuing into 2026 we have observed similar conditions across most Western Australian prisons. The prison system now regularly operates at over 100% of its general-purpose bed capacity. Record prison populations, significant infrastructure limitations, regular staffing shortfalls, services stretched beyond capacity, and the flow-on impacts these are having on daily life in prison and restrictions to welfare and rehabilitation supports cannot be ignored.

By the time this inspection report is tabled in the Western Australian Parliament and published on our website, another report will have already been tabled and published relating to a Show Cause Notice I issued in March 2026 raising concerns about conditions in Casuarina Prison, Melaleuca Prison and Hakea Prison. These concerns reflect a system that is struggling to cope.

Funding announced in the 2026-27 State Budget included capacity expansion programs at Acacia Prison (480 beds) and funding *'to progress planning for a 512-bed expansion at Casuarina Prison, while planning is underway to expand remand capacity'*.

Overall, the announcement of funding for additional bed capacity is welcomed as a medium-term initiative to address population and infrastructure issues. But given the impacts we have already seen from the existing expansion of Casuarina, the proposal to plan for an additional 512 beds raises many questions around how the prison will cope. This will be an initiative that will require very careful monitoring, particularly as we have seen that right now services and infrastructure are struggling to cope.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We have four Independent Prison Visitors for Casuarina who are community volunteers appointed by the Minister for Corrective Services. They attended the prison on a regular basis observing operations and providing an opportunity for the men placed there to raise issues and complaints. The reports they provide after each visit informs the work of our office, and throughout the year they have continued to advocate strongly for improvements in conditions for the men held there. I

acknowledge the importance of the work undertaken and thank them for their contribution to our ongoing monitoring of Casuarina.

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

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

We had several independent experts join us for this inspection. I am very grateful for the expertise provided by Mr Kealan Devaney, from the Office of the Chief Psychiatrist, and Ms Sahar Okhovat and Ms Emily Collett from the NSW Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services.

I acknowledge the contribution and hard work of the team in our office who were involved in undertaking this inspection. I would particularly acknowledge and thank Liz George and Ben Shaw for their work in planning this inspection, and Ben as principal drafter of this report.

Eamon Ryan  
**Inspector of Custodial Services**

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