

Inspector's Overview

A prison under strain, caring for an increasingly vulnerable population

Melaleuca Women's Prison is Western Australia's primary remand facility for women, accommodating people with high levels of trauma, vulnerability, mental ill-health, substance use issues and instability. Many women spend only a short time there and arrive in crisis, separated from children, families and support networks. This demanding environment requires trauma-informed practice, strong support services and a stable custodial workforce.

The imprisonment of women has consequences that extend far beyond the individual. Behind many women in custody are children, families and communities affected by their absence. This makes it especially important women are treated with dignity, supported to maintain family connections and provided with genuine opportunities to heal, recover and rebuild their lives. The findings in this report should be considered in that context.

This inspection found a prison operating under significant and sustained pressure. Chronic staffing shortages, workforce inexperience and increasing population pressures affected almost every aspect of prison life. The consequences were visible throughout the inspection. Women experienced frequent lockdowns, reduced access to family contact, fewer meaningful activities, and difficulty accessing some services and supports. Staff were required to continually adapt routines and redeploy resources simply to maintain safe operations.

Importantly, many of the issues identified in this report are not unique to Melaleuca. The prison was included in a Show Cause Notice shortly before this inspection, reflecting broader concerns about conditions across parts of the custodial estate. The findings of this inspection reinforce the conclusion that sustained workforce shortages and increasing demand are placing significant strain on the system's ability to provide safe, humane and rehabilitative custody.

Despite these challenges, the inspection identified examples of commitment, professionalism and good practice. Reception processes were well managed despite their complexity and staffing pressures. Access to legal representatives and court appearances was prioritised, and an experienced Bail Coordinator worked proactively to assist women to secure release at the earliest opportunity. Education staff continued to provide practical and relevant learning opportunities, and a range of voluntary programs remained available, despite significant infrastructure and staffing constraints. Across the prison, staff were working hard to support women and maintain essential services in difficult circumstances.

However, the inspection also identified areas of serious concern. Women reported feeling less safe than at the previous inspection with lockdowns a defining feature of daily life, increasing isolation and limiting access to family, support services and meaningful activity. Conditions for women in crisis, and for pregnant women, were not consistent with the needs of these particularly vulnerable groups. The physical environment continues to present significant limitations, having never been designed as a women's remand prison.

One theme emerged repeatedly throughout this report. Staff and managers were often required to focus on maintaining essential operations rather than improving services or planning for the future. Considerable effort was directed towards managing immediate pressures and mitigating risk. While this commitment is commendable, it is not sustainable as a long-term strategy. Goodwill, adaptability and resilience cannot indefinitely compensate for shortcomings in staffing, infrastructure and resourcing.

This report also raises broader questions about how women are accommodated within Western Australia's custodial system. Melaleuca was adapted from infrastructure originally designed for a different purpose and population. While local staff have worked hard to make the environment as supportive as possible, there are inherent limitations that cannot be addressed through operational practice alone. The case for a purpose-built remand facility for women is compelling and increasingly difficult to ignore.

The findings and recommendations in this report are intended to support improvement both at Melaleuca and across the wider custodial system. There remains a committed workforce, dedicated support staff and examples of good practice on which to build. However, meaningful improvement will require more than local effort. It will require sustained attention to workforce capability, infrastructure, service delivery and, most importantly, the needs of women in custody. Without this, the pressures identified throughout this report are likely to continue to affect not only the women held at Melaleuca, but also the children, families and communities connected to them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We have four Independent Prison Visitors for Melaleuca. They are community volunteers appointed by the Minister for Corrective Services, who attend Melaleuca on a regular basis and observe the operations of the prison. They also provide an opportunity for the women to raise issues and complaints which informs the work of our office. I acknowledge the importance of their work and thank them for their contribution to our ongoing monitoring of the prison.

I thank Superintendent Lisa Ryan and her team, and the Department of Justice, for their cooperation and openness throughout this inspection. I am especially grateful to the women who generously shared their experiences and insights, helping ensure their voices are reflected in this report.

We had two independent experts join us for this inspection. I am very grateful for the expertise provided by Ms Justine Eades, from the Western Australian Ombudsman, and Ms Shayna Burton, an environmental health expert with the WA Department of Health.

Finally, I acknowledge the professionalism and dedication of the inspection team, and particularly Lauren Netto and John Shenton for coordinating the inspection, and Lauren Netto for preparing this report.

Jane Higgins

Acting Inspector of Custodial Services

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