

INSPECTOR OF CUSTODIAL SERVICES RELEASES NEW STANDARDS FOR ABORIGINAL PRISONERS

The Inspector of Custodial Services, Professor Richard Harding, today released comprehensive Standards for the Treatment of Aboriginal Prisoners in Western Australia. Noting that Aboriginals comprise 3% of the general population and 43% of the prisoner population, the Inspector stated:

"This disproportionate level of Aboriginal imprisonment has got to the stage where it seems to be taken for granted and no longer challenged at governmental level and in the public perception. But truly it is unacceptable. However, my Office cannot directly influence imprisonment patterns. What it can do is to take account of the knowledge gained over eight years and 55 inspections that tells us that the prison experience is different for Aboriginals than for non-Aboriginals.

In the development of prison regimes Aboriginals have, as in many other ways, been evaluated against white society, rather than their culture and needs being assessed against their own standards. Progressively, my Office has built Aboriginal-sensitive standards into its own expectations of prison management, and the point has now been reached where we can draw these matters together into a single document."

Professor Harding emphasized that four prisons – Broome, Roebourne, Eastern Goldfields and Greenough – are overwhelmingly Aboriginal in population. These had been designated "Aboriginal prisons" by the Inspector's Office, as a means of drawing attention to the fact that the conditions and lack of resources would not have been tolerated if the population had been predominantly non-Aboriginal – structural racism. These issues have still not been fully addressed.

However, in more recent years, the Inspector's office has switched its attention to the positive needs of Aboriginal prisoners, whether imprisoned in "Aboriginal prisons" or in the major Metropolitan secure prisons or elsewhere. This, above all, is the focus of the new Standards – though there are special issues such as staffing profiles and cultural awareness training that are especially relevant to the situation in "Aboriginal prisons".

The new Standards comprise 42 principal standards and 140 distinct elements. They cover such matters as the following:

- The desirability of custody being "in-country" rather than, as for so many Aboriginal prisoners, out-of-country.
- As a corollary, the need for full service provisions for all security ratings to be available in the principal regions.
- The need to minimize unnecessary long-distance transports.

- The sensitive recognition of the funeral obligations of Aboriginal people and the implementation of processes to meet those obligations as comprehensively as possible.
- Recognition of the role of Elders even when they are prisoners.
- The obligation of all staff to be culturally respectful and the cessation of racist slurs or abuse.
- The public health benefit of making a comprehensive health assessment of Aboriginal prisoners upon admission and instituting appropriate health care regimes during the window of opportunity presented by the period of imprisonment.
- The desirability of adapting the presentation, the content and the range of general offender programs to Aboriginal needs.
- The opportunity to provide skilling and training programs of a kind useful upon release.
- The need to release prisoners back to country rather than leaving them stranded out-of-country.
- The absolute necessity of increasing Aboriginal staffing numbers at all levels within prisons and the Department.
- The need for the Department to build into each prison's KPI's its performance with regard to these new Standards.

In that regard Professor Harding acknowledged that progress had been made in many areas – for example, the commitment to a new prison at Derby, the opening of a Displaced Aboriginals Accommodation Unit at Casuarina; greater emphasis upon the potential of work camps as a means of constructive re-entry for Aboriginal prisoners; improved at-risk management particularly at Hakea, where in the two-year period 2001/02 there had been unacceptable levels of Aboriginal suicide; and at Acacia a comprehensive review of the management of out-of-country prisoners (mostly Wongi).

"Nevertheless, there is a considerable distance to go, and the promulgation of these Standards should act as a further stimulus. The Department is now on formal notice that the Inspector's Office, in regular liaison visits to prisons and formal inspections, will be benchmarking how prisons are performing in relation to these Standards", Professor Harding stated.

The Standards are accessible at www.custodialinspector.wa.gov.au – click "Publications and Resources ", then click "Standards for Aboriginal Prisoners".

Professor Harding is available for comment on 0403-387-440.