

Women in Prison II – Ombudsman Report

An Ombudsman investigation report relating to the conditions faced by women in the Alice Springs Women's Correctional Facility has been tabled in the Legislative Assembly.

Women in Prison II revisits similar issues to those discussed in a 2008 Ombudsman report. It concludes that progress since then has been limited at best. The ongoing initiative and dedication of correctional officers is acknowledged. But the reality is that promising initiatives have been proposed or commenced only to be swamped in time by the voracious resource requirements of the traditional correctional system.

The current investigation was initiated in light of a range of complaints about conditions and analysis which shows the number and proportion of female prisoners in the NT has grown rapidly in recent years. Combined with substantial growth in male prisoner numbers, this has put enormous pressure on the correctional system and sub-standard conditions for female prisoners have persisted.

The report notes that, in Alice Springs, rapid growth in numbers and limited facilities have contributed to a broad range of problems for female prisoners, including:

- Chronic overcrowding (growing numbers in a limited space, inside a male prison)
- Housing and facility issues (wear and tear, not enough amenities)
- Limits on education and rehabilitation programs
- Limits on employment opportunities
- Issues with health care of prisoners, including At Risk prisoners
- Problems with the basics (clothing, hygiene, food and recreational activities)
- Cultural issues for the predominantly Indigenous population
- Language and communication issues for the predominantly Indigenous population
- Inadequate arrangements for housing children with their mothers.

The report identifies attributes shared by many female prisoners in Alice Springs:

- Indigenous
- Around 30 years old
- A carer
- Substantial health issues (including mental health)
- Dependence issues
- Communication issues (English may be a third or fourth language)
- Violent or otherwise confronting home situations
- In prison for less than 6 months.

The report concludes that the fundamental purpose of the correctional system should be rehabilitation and that, in order to promote rehabilitation, solutions must be designed with specific prisoner groups in mind. To that end, there must be:

- solutions designed specifically for women;
- solutions designed specifically for Indigenous women;
- involvement of Indigenous stakeholders and communities in both design of solutions and delivery of solutions.

There is every indication that NT Corrections is approaching the recommendations in *Women in Prison II* with good will and considerable effort. The challenge will be to ensure the ongoing allocation of sufficient resources and strategic focus necessary to attack the many issues identified.

Focus on rehabilitation

The report notes the potential for the young women in prison today to contribute positively to their families and their communities in the future. However, the chances are that without substantial support and guidance many will instead be in and out of the justice and health systems for decades to come.

We cannot, as a society, financially or morally afford to allow this situation to continue. If there is not a transformational shift in the correctional system towards rehabilitation and reintegration, the underlying contributors to offending and poor health will persist as a burden on the community.

The traditional correctional model does not work; certainly in so far as women are concerned. As a community, we need to acknowledge that things will only get better if we invest in the future of offenders. We need to explore alternatives to custody and create an environment in custody and afterwards that encourages and assists people to build better lives for themselves, their families and their community. We need to facilitate non-offending.

This requires long term investment not limited by annual reporting or electoral cycles. The whole structure of the correctional system has to be aimed at rehabilitation, breaking away from traditional stone wall models.

Courts and authorities must have a wide range of well-resourced options for dealing with less serious offenders. Many options will be non-custodial. Where a custodial term is considered essential, custodial environments need to be designed with women in mind to accommodate the limited risks they actually present.

Women in Prison II recognises that Government and Corrections are undertaking a variety of initiatives aimed at providing targeted and flexible options. It simply stresses that there is much more work to be done.

Reframing the public debate

The report states that Government and the community must be in this for the long haul. Different approaches must be trialled. False starts or missteps must be seen as part of the long term development process. In such a complex area, mistakes will be made. People will falter. These should be seen as lessons for the future rather than signs of crisis or collapse.

We can gain considerable guidance from international bodies and other jurisdictions around the world. We can learn and adapt their approaches as well as developing our own unique initiatives. Indigenous stakeholders and communities have an essential role to play in this regard but Government must take the lead role.

If we fail to act now, with initiative and resolve, there is every indication we will need to revisit these same and worse issues in years to come.

The Bigger picture

The report notes that the solutions extend well beyond the correctional system. The broader justice system must have a renewed focus on non-custodial solutions. This will include a greater focus on involvement, help and support for victims.

Even more broadly, offending levels are indisputably linked closely with socio-economic conditions. Low incomes, poor education and limited access to facilities and opportunities all contribute to an environment where crime is more likely. Solving problems of crime and offending necessarily requires society to address those broader issues.

Peter Shoyer
Ombudsman NT
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