

Inspector's overview

The Department of Justice has a responsibility to ensure family and broader relationships are maintained while people are in custody. These relationships are key to being able to successfully re-integrate at the end of a sentence. Once released, family and friends often provide a place to stay, financial support, and a way to reconnect with their community. These factors are essential in reducing reoffending.

In general, the Department is enabling prisoners to maintain these relationships but it is becoming increasingly difficult due to overcrowding in our prisons.

Phones are used to maintain frequent contact

The easiest way for prisoners to maintain contact is by telephone. An estimated four million calls are made by people in custody across Western Australia each year.

Yet, access to phones is not equal. There are fewer phones in regional prisons, and less opportunity to access them. Similarly, there are less hours in the day when prisoners in maximum security facilities can access phones. Logically people with lower security ratings should have more privileges, but half the population being held in maximum-security facilities are rated medium or minimum. Access to phones for these people should not be less than if they were placed in a facility reflective of their rating.

Overcrowding in prisons is creating more competition for accessing phones. Prisoners have developed their own informal queuing systems to manage and police access. This is risky and prisoners have raised concerns with us about the rising tensions it is causing.

The Department has been relying on old technology to provide phone services to prisons. Adding new phones to existing facilities is expensive. The Department has been slow to adopt new technologies and needs to consider alternatives such as the use of mobile phones and tablets through wireless technology. In its response to this report the Department has stated it is exploring alternatives for prisoner phones, with a solution expected in the first quarter of 2019. We look forward to seeing the proposal and the subsequent implementation.

Visits are being facilitated but the Department can improve

While phone contact is important, the benefits of having family and friends visit in person cannot be underestimated. People on remand are entitled to daily social visits, and those who are sentenced can have weekly visits. Except for Roebourne Regional Prison, the Department is meeting these requirements.

Roebourne does not provide daily visits meaning people on remand in Roebourne are unable to access their legal entitlements. This was raised in our 2016 inspection and again during this review. The Department has indicated this situation will be resolved by the end of the financial year.

Despite visits session being available daily, in practice:

- people on remand receive around three visits each month.
- sentenced prisoners receive around two visits per month

Access to visits is limited by individual circumstances such as location or distance from family, security rating, and the additional needs of prisoners such as those requiring protection. Although most prisoners are receiving visits, overcrowding and population pressures are placing a strain on the Department's ability to schedule and facilitate regular visits.

One of the major difficulties for visitors is booking a visit. Currently, manual bookings are taken at each facility over the phone by one or two staff members. People are often unable to get through during booking hours. Some visitors told us they had made more than 100 attempts to make a booking. Others reported having to spend days or weeks trying to get through. Anyone cancelling a booking has to go through the same difficult process of trying to call, therefore people rarely cancel when they can no longer attend. A 'no show' can be harmful for the prisoner and may prevent others from accessing a visit as they believe the session is full.

The Department is yet to adopt a modern approach, such as an online booking system, which will make it easier to make and manage bookings. It responded to our recommendation for an online system by stating it is "piloting interim solutions to address the volume of calls". This seems to be about managing the queues rather than making booking easier. Having alternatives to phone bookings and extending the hours in which to book is desperately needed.

On a positive note, we found the Department is treating visitors well and providing much needed family support services for visitors. This is a credit to all staff, and arguably the most important factor in whether a visitor chooses to return.

Neil Morgan

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