

Inspector's Overview

BORONIA PRE-RELEASE CENTRE: A JEWEL IN THE CROWN. BUT HOW DO WE KNOW IT'S WORKING AND CAN IT DO MORE?

This is our fifth inspection of Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women (Boronia) and it continues to be a shining light in the corrections environment.

Boronia, opened in 2004, was purpose-built as a pre-release centre to reflect life in a community setting. It is only a short distance from the Perth central business district and is hardly distinguishable from its surroundings. Boronia is in great shape which contributes to a therapeutic environment. The gardens are thriving, the infrastructure is well maintained, and the staff have a respectful and positive relationship with the women.

This is all consistent with a pre-release philosophy and is as we would expect. The women take on more responsibility as they live in a share house and must accept domestic responsibilities. They manage their daily activities much as they would if they were living at home and are subject to principles that exist within a law-abiding society. It is reasonable to expect that Boronia will perform well. It has a group of carefully selected prisoners and is reasonably well resourced. Despite the advantages, Boronia still has room to improve. In our previous reports, we have challenged Boronia to not rest on past achievements, and not to become complacent. In the current environment where there are population pressures and fiscal restraint, Boronia must continue to strive to improve and position itself to be the model for re-entry going into the future.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS BORONIA?

It is difficult to comment on the effectiveness of Boronia as a pre-release centre. Recidivism is something that is measurable but Boronia has a carefully selected low risk prisoner cohort so that factor alone is not enough. Work we did on recidivism in 2014 shows that the reoffending rate for women released from Boronia was low. But when you consider the low risk profile of the women, it is not better than otherwise would be expected.

Since 2006 we have been calling for the Department to put in place a robust system to determine how effective Boronia is in preventing reoffending. In 2012, the Department supported in principle our recommendation that there should be a robust independent evaluation of Boronia's outcomes. Prior to the 2015 inspection we asked for evidence in relation to this. But we received nothing other than an obtuse and non-committal response from the Department relating to the review of its performance measurement framework in line with its reform program. Following our 2015 inspection the Department said there is no need for an independent evaluation because its newly formed Women's Estate Reference Group is working with the Department to improve outcomes for all female offenders which will involve an evaluation of post-release outcomes at all facilities. We noted at the time we looked forward to the evaluations which have never been done. In 2018 we find that this still has not been achieved and once again, the Department's response to our Recommendation 10 is in principle support, subject to funding. The Department advises that an evaluation framework is being developed for the newly opened Wandoo Rehabilitation Prison that will consist of both a process and outcome evaluation. We hope that this may assist in the development of an evaluation framework

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for Boronia. But what we have seen over the last decade does not give us any real confidence that this will occur.

As part of the effectiveness indicators, it is disappointing to see the number of Aboriginal women in Boronia has decreased since our last inspection. In 2015 the numbers were around 25 per cent. At the time of our inspection in 2018 they were 18 per cent. Aboriginal people are grossly overrepresented in the criminal justice system and in comparison, the number of Aboriginal women in Bandyup is around 44 per cent. The reduction in the critical mass of Aboriginal women reduces the capacity of Boronia to develop specific re-entry strategies for Aboriginal women who are some of the most disadvantaged people in the community.

In 2015 we found there was a full suite of treatment programs available to female prisoners in the women's estate. Despite this we said it wasn't enough. Despite their overrepresentation, there were no Aboriginal specific programs and there was nothing specific to address violent offending which was on the rise.

To facilitate release back into the community, it is important that the women get access to programs that address their offending behaviour. Particularly as often those programs are mandatory. It is disappointing that we find in 2018, based on information provided to us by the Department in the lead up to the inspection, that the programs available at Boronia for the women are being reduced. We were advised this is to accommodate a distribution of resources following the decision to bring Wandoo back in to being a state run women's facility. While we applaud the opening of Wandoo as an alcohol and other drugs rehabilitation prison, it should not come at the expense of the delivery of programs across the women's estate.

RISK

We are pleased to see that Recommendation 3 in relation to access to razors by the women has been supported. They will now be able to purchase them from the canteen. This may seem like a relatively small matter but was a significant frustration for the Boronia residents.

While the ban followed incidences of self-harm involving razors at other female prisons, it is not based on a risk assessment at each facility and is inconsistent with the Boronia philosophy.

Residents are encouraged to take responsibility for their decisions and actions at Boronia and the environment provides opportunities for this. The razor ban is contrary to women-centred practice, and against Boronia's own guiding principles, particularly that of personal responsibility and empowerment. Removing them suggests that the women cannot be trusted to make the right decisions at a time when they are preparing to re-enter society.

STAFF SHORTAGES

We still believe that there are missed opportunities for the residents to undertake work activities outside of Boronia in a supervised and unsupervised capacity

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(Recommendation 1). This is a low risk group of women who are on their way to being released back into the community. We have been saying for some time that we believe the program at Boronia can be more innovative, more inclusive and provide a lot more opportunities for reintegration.

There are few women at Boronia who are engaged in external activities unsupervised. Boronia is subject to the same pressures that all other prisons experience including staff shortages on occasions. This means that if there are not enough staff to supervise the women, the external activities are impacted. The profile of the residents at Boronia is certainly appropriate for more women to be out in the community unsupervised which does not have a requirement for additional staff.

OVERCROWDING

Infrastructure at Boronia has been maintained to a reasonable good level. But there are areas for improvement. The reception area in Boronia is a thoroughfare, lacks privacy and is subject to constant interruption. These are observations that we made in our 2015 inspection report and we find nothing has changed in 2018. It is now pleasing to see that our Recommendation 2 has been accepted by the Department and work has already commenced on upgrading the reception area. This will provide much needed privacy for women entering Boronia.

It is unfortunate that no consideration is being given to changing the management of health services at Boronia (Recommendation 7). Currently they are managed from Bandyup and the models of health care between the two prisons are fundamentally different. Boronia aims to deliver health care along the lines of its operating philosophy which is based on a community style model. Bandyup delivers acute medical care and is crisis focused. While staff are committed, and do an excellent job resourcing priorities, the focus is centred on the health needs at Bandyup, not Boronia.

CONCLUSION

Considering the current fiscal restraint and the drive for efficient and effective services delivered by government, it is difficult to see how Boronia can justify its existence without the establishment of measurable outcomes. Yet it would be a great tragedy for women if Boronia's reason for existing was to change. Boronia can take great satisfaction from what it has achieved and what it will accomplish going forward. It is fair to say that Boronia is providing the greatest benefit to some of the least-advantaged members of society. To take it one step further, if the world was governed by logic and reason, all prisoners would have the opportunity to be re-integrated back into society through a pre-release facility.

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