

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2023-24 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Thursday 15 June 2023

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Paul Hamer

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O'Brien

Ellen Sandell

WITNESSES

Mr Enver Erdogan MLC, Minister for Corrections,

Ms Kate Houghton, Secretary,

Mr Ryan Phillips, Acting Associate Secretary,

Ms Emma Catford, Deputy Secretary, Corrections and Justice Services, and

Ms Larissa Strong, Commissioner, Corrections Victoria, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards our witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check, and verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Corrections the Honourable Enver Erdogan and officers from the Department of Justice and Community Safety. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening presentation or statement of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you questions.

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Chair, for that opening. It is a pleasure to be here today. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

I am joined here today by our department Secretary, Deputy Secretary and our Commissioner for corrections, and also our Associate Secretary is with me today on the panel.

Visual presentation.

Enver ERDOGAN: In terms of our corrections system, if we could go to the next slide, as an overview you will see we employ over 5700 people within the corrections system. This includes custodial staff working in our prisons, clinicians and program staff as well as those delivering community correctional services across Victoria. These dedicated staff are currently supporting more than 6400 people in prison and more than 10,000 people on community correction orders. As at 19 May, 61 per cent of the prison population was sentenced. Across Victoria there are 11 publicly operated prisons and three privately operated prisons. We also have a transitional centre, the Judy Lazarus Transition Centre, which provides a supervised pathway back into the community for selected prisoners. The government has also opened the Maribyrnong community residential facility to provide a range of services and short-term accommodation for men exiting the prison system.

The total output budget for corrections in 2023–24 is \$1.84 billion. We also have \$784 million worth of prison infrastructure projects currently underway to deliver the modern, fit-for-purpose infrastructure required to achieve rehabilitation and community safety outcomes. The 2023–24 budget also invests \$18.4 million to continue critical lapsing programs in prisons and for people on community-based orders and improve outcomes across the system. The government has invested \$42.9 million to commission public health providers to deliver primary health services for women in prison, commencing on 1 July. This funding will enable public providers to deliver an enhanced model of primary health care for women in prison to address the particularly complex and unique needs of women in prison.

In the decade leading up to the pandemic prison numbers increased by about 80 per cent. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit we saw the prison population decline. From the end of March 2020 until the end of May 2023 the number of Victorian prisoners decreased by around 20 per cent. We know a substantial part of this relates to the pandemic. More people at home led to a decrease in police-recorded crime, and we also saw a necessary decrease in court activity to stop the spread. We have also seen improvements in recidivism and diversion rates in line with the government's increasing investment in rehabilitation, early intervention and diversion programs. It is too early to make a confident assessment as to whether the current trend will continue in the short or medium term.

The cultural review of the adult custodial corrections system was publicly released on 24 March 2023, along with the government's response. The review recommended reforms to improve system oversight and performance, support the workforce and improve staff conduct, Aboriginal cultural safety and supports for people in custody. The government supports the reform directions set down in the report, and we are committed to creating a better corrections system for staff and the people in its custody. As a government we are also acting on the recommendations, making better use of existing resources supported by investments in this budget and will continue to work with staff, stakeholders and people with lived experience of the custodial system to further implement the cultural review's recommendations.

The government is committed to reducing offending, recidivism and overrepresentation in custody. This is a whole-of-government effort, and the corrections system plays a crucial role in this. The 2022–23 rate of return to prison within two years is expected to be 39.2 per cent, in line with our target. The 2022–23 expected rate of return to corrective services within two years of discharge from a community correction order is 10.9 per cent, which is a strong result, significantly better than our target of 14 per cent. This year's budget reflects our commitment to reducing reoffending, with \$18.4 million allocated to continue critical programs that support rehabilitation and reintegration and reduce the risk of reoffending. I will not go through every program on the slide, but I do want to highlight the \$3.3 million to continue critical work in terms of cultural safety for Aboriginal people in prison, in particular our rollout of Aboriginal wellbeing officers in line with the cultural review.

In terms of our COVID management, we have had very high rates of vaccination in our corrections system for staff and people in prison. This has been very effective, with 83 per cent of people in prison receiving at least two doses of the vaccine and 69 per cent receiving three doses. Thanks to this and other critical measures – such as isolating, the use of PPE and surveillance testing, and enhanced cleaning – Corrections Victoria was able to ease COVID-19 restrictions this year.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. The first 7 minutes of questions are going to go to Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. It is great to see you here. Minister, can you tell me the number of prisoners who have been transferred between 1 January 2003 and 15 June 2023 from Barwon Prison, Beechworth Correctional Centre, Dhurringile Prison, Fulham Correctional Centre, Hopkins Correctional Centre, Langi Kal Kal Prison, Loddon Prison, Marngoneet Correctional Centre, Melbourne Assessment Prison, Metropolitan Remand Centre, Port Phillip Prison and Ravenhall Correctional Centre to the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre or Tarrengower Prison?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you very much for that question, Ms McArthur. It is very specific in its detail. Our system's placements are about making sure our community is safe. In terms of the specifics of that question, I might need to take that on notice.

Bev McARTHUR: That would be great. Thank you, Minister. We will look forward to your answer. Let us go to the prisoner supervision output item, page 277 of budget paper 3. Have you discussed the topic of Paul Denyer and the position taken by your government not to support any legislation to keep this man behind bars with the Premier?

Enver ERDOGAN: In terms of the proposed legislation from the state opposition, I do not want to pre-empt debate that may be before the chamber in the near future, but what I will say is that we have an independent adult parole board that makes these sorts of decisions about parole – whether to release someone, whether to deny parole in these circumstances. The design of our parole system is so that we have experts making these decisions – I am sorry to say, Ms McArthur – not the state opposition making these decisions.

Bev McARTHUR: I know you are a very caring man, Minister, and I know how you support women and the safety of women, so do you think Paul Denyer should remain incarcerated for life?

Enver ERDOGAN: What I will say is I do not want to – like I said, it is important that we respect the independent adult parole board. It is legislated to be that way. We have a team of experts. They understand that their paramount duty is community safety, and to all the victims of Denyer – I know the fear he created in the Frankston community more broadly, not just the direct families affected. I share the thoughts of all victims, survivors and the families. The parole board was set up to make sure that community safety is paramount, and in this instance they have made, I believe, the right decision.

Bev McARTHUR: So you understand that for the families and friends of Paul Denyer’s victims, in their campaign for Mr Denyer to be prevented from making future parole applications, this is causing immense trauma to these people? Do you appreciate this?

Enver ERDOGAN: I am very grateful I had the opportunity to meet with some of the family and friends of the victims. It was a private discussion, so I do not want to go into the details of that, but I do understand their perspective and different perspectives from different victims groups that I have been consulting since getting into the portfolio. But what I will say is, like I said, we have an independent parole board. Their paramount duty is community safety. There is a different, higher, test for I guess murderers, for serious offenders, and they have applied that test with great scrutiny. Some in the media have peddled that people are imminently to be released, which is not necessarily the case. But I think it is important we allow them to do their job with the legislation in place.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay. Then how do you explain, Minister, your government’s position that it has faith in the adult parole board to keep Paul Denyer behind bars but it did not have faith in 2018 when your government introduced legislation to prevent Craig Minogue from making parole applications? Why is there this inconsistency?

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, this is an inquiry into the budget estimates for 2023–24. Whilst I have allowed these questions to go through, despite them being completely irrelevant to this inquiry before us, I would remind you to keep your questions to the inquiry that this committee has been tasked with undertaking.

Enver ERDOGAN: Mrs McArthur –

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Minister.

Enver ERDOGAN: I do also share the Chair’s concerns about relevance to the budget papers, which we are here today to look over. But I will say that you are talking about 2018, which was before my time in Parliament. But I guess since that time I have looked at this issue very closely in the portfolio, and I can say that we have introduced tougher rules in terms of who is eligible to apply for parole. We have the toughest parole system in the country at the moment. Since that time we have had the two-tier test for serious offenders, so there is a higher threshold. The parole system has been reformed since that period to make it tougher for criminals like Mr Denyer to get out.

Bev McARTHUR: I think – with respect to the Chair and you, Minister – this is a critical issue. Obviously there is a cost involved in allowing Mr Denyer to make parole applications, so I think it is important to the budget.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. If you could point to that cost in the budget paper before us, that would be much appreciated.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, we are looking at budget paper 3, page 277. That is what we are looking at in the area of costs. These differing positions of your government on two equally dangerous and reprehensible murderers would be traumatic and confusing for the families of Paul Denyer’s victims, so how do you justify the inconsistency?

Enver ERDOGAN: To your first point, there is a right to reapply for parole for people that are denied parole –

Bev McARTHUR: But there was not for Mr Minogue.

Enver ERDOGAN: I do not want to talk about individual applications, but what I will say is that obviously when the parole board makes its decisions, they look at the criteria, and some of the criteria will not change overnight. So I do not expect their decisions to change overnight if the substantial facts have not changed. You are talking about 2018, which was, again, before my time in the legislature, in the upper house, with you. But what I will say is that our parole board has been toughened up for serious offenders and there is a two-tier test. Remember, community safety is paramount, and I have got faith in the parole board to do their job.

Bev McARTHUR: Good. So you will guarantee not to roll it back, then, if it is the toughest situation?

Enver ERDOGAN: I think the parole board is operating quite well at the moment. Even under great media scrutiny, I think they have made the right decision.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay, Minister. Let us go to a situation, which we read about on Tuesday, about the plan to close one of the three youth justice facilities in Victoria after promising to use them all concurrently –

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Unfortunately, your time is up. We are going to go to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister. Good afternoon, officials and Commissioner. Minister, I would like to ask you about prison health services, specifically with reference to budget paper 3, page 82, table 1.18. There are a few line items on custodial health services. Minister, how do these custodial health services have an impact on the patient health outcomes in our prison system?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Mr Galea. Definitely the health outcomes in our correctional system are very important, and our budget does – you have clearly identified – invest over \$42 million into primary health care services for people in custody. This investment is in addition to funding that exists within the Department of Justice and Community Safety’s base funding to provide health services in prisons. We know that people in custody have unique health needs. People entering custody are more likely to be experiencing chronic health conditions or have undiagnosed health needs. In many cases these health needs are linked to their offending behaviour. This means that time in custody is a critical point in people’s lives to support their medical care and maintain their health.

From 1 July 2023 new providers will deliver primary health care services in all adult public prisons in the state. Currently these services are delivered by Correct Care Australia under contracts that will expire on 30 June 2023. The end of these contracts has given us an opportunity to review and update our arrangements for supporting the health of people in custody. Primary health care in public men’s prisons will transition to GEO Healthcare, and to Western Health and Dhelkaya Health in our two women’s prisons Dame Phyllis Frost and Tarrengower. The new contracts include improvements to service delivery, particularly for Aboriginal people and LGBTIQ people in custody. The improved service expectations include consolidation of primary health care, alcohol and other drug treatment and hepatitis services into a single provider; a larger health workforce in prisons and new multidisciplinary teams; a greater focus on release planning; specialised services addressing Aboriginal health and LGBTI health needs; and faster response times for non-urgent medical appointments. These services will be delivered under the new health services quality framework for Victorian prisons. This framework will ensure that providers are clear on our expectations for the delivery of health services in custody. We are also supporting this with a strengthened clinical oversight model represented by the new providers, the Department of Health and Corrections Victoria. These changes have been made to support the uplift of service quality of health services in custody and ensure we deliver the best possible outcomes across the system.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. Specifically in relation to Aboriginal inmates, how does this investment support their health?

Enver ERDOGAN: I have met with many of our Aboriginal stakeholders since taking over the corrections portfolio, and we all know that there is an over-representation of Aboriginal people in custodial settings. I think this was very important to get right, and I think these new contracts provide that opportunity. With the new contracts, starting from 1 July 2023, we have made a range of changes to better support the health of Aboriginal people in custody. In both the men’s and women’s systems the new providers have been contracted to provide greater access to Aboriginal health workers, a specific Aboriginal health check that is the same as the Medicare rebate health check available in the broader community, improved connections and case management with Aboriginal community controlled healthcare organisations that will provide continuity of care for people when they transition out of custody and a more culturally competent workforce.

I had the honour of giving evidence to the Yoorrook Justice Commission, and I am acutely aware of the over-representation of Aboriginal people in custody and the need for dedicated services that will improve outcomes and cultural safety for Aboriginal people. For this reason I am pleased that the 2023–24 budget has invested in a range of Aboriginal programs and supports, including improved health care. These improved health services will complement other investments we have made in Aboriginal programs and supports. We have also allocated \$3.3 million to extend the range of existing programs, including the Torch in-prison art program, which supports Aboriginal people in custody to connect to their culture through art. This is much more than just an arts program. It can provide participants meaningful connection to their mob, a sense of purpose and a source of income. Djirra’s prison support program provides legal assistance for Aboriginal women engaged with corrections. The Wadamba prison to work program provides employment opportunities for Aboriginal people leaving prison, because we know how important having a job is to reducing the chances of reoffending. The Baggarrook program provides transitional housing for Aboriginal women leaving custody.

This budget also increases the number of Aboriginal wellbeing officers across the prison system. This is really crucial. Taken together, these investments provide an increase in our services to Aboriginal people in custody and are important in tackling the over-representation of Aboriginal people in our justice system.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. You also, I believe, referred to female prisoners earlier, and whilst we know that women make up a relatively small portion of our prison population, they nevertheless have specific health needs. How is this initiative supporting female prisoners in particular?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes, you are 100 per cent correct, Mr Galea. Just like in the community, women in custody have specific needs, and we saw in Veronica Nelson’s tragic circumstances what can occur when they are not met. Often women come into custody in a state of poor health, sometimes with chronic or undiagnosed health conditions. Time in custody is an opportunity to undertake a proper medical assessment and to put in place the right treatment plans that people need. The women’s prison is more contained, and we do have the opportunity through the review of the contracts to move the women’s system over to two public health providers. I want to take this opportunity to thank Western Health and also Dhelkaya Health for stepping up and taking on this role. Transitioning this service to public providers means the health services in the women’s system will be delivered to a similar standard as what is delivered in hospitals. In practice this means women in custody will have access to Western Health and Dhelkaya Health’s comprehensive range of high-quality services, skilled workforce and proximity to facilities. The men’s system is much larger, around 20 times larger, and the plain reality is that it was not realistically possible for the existing public health providers to take on such a substantial volume in such short time. Instead we have made significant changes in the contracts of the new providers in men’s prisons. The contracts require greater access to medical officers and Aboriginal health staff and will enable greater involvement by Aboriginal community controlled health organisations in providing services. The enhanced clinical governance arrangements across the system will also support making sure these services are delivered to the high standards we expect.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. If we do have time, very quickly, how does this investment interact with other initiatives to support the rehabilitation and reintegration of people in custody?

Enver ERDOGAN: That is a very good question, Mr Galea, but I will get back to you on that, I think.

Michael GALEA: We will have another time.

The CHAIR: Apologies to be the bearer of bad news. Your time is up, Mr Galea. We will go back to Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, I started to ask you about the closure of the three youth justice facilities in Victoria after promising to use them all concurrently, but have you had any discussions about closing any adult facilities?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you very much, Mrs McArthur. Thank you for referring to my announcement on Tuesday. We are closing the Malmsbury youth detention centre because we are opening a new chapter in our youth justice system, which you will have an opportunity to ask me about later this afternoon. But in relation to our men’s system, I think what I will say is that we always look at the configuration of our adult correctional facilities. I think it is important you get the balance right. I am pleased to report that our prison population is 20 per cent less than what it was in February 2020. Less people in prison is ultimately a good

outcome. So we will continue to invest in our facilities, and you will see in the budget papers in budget paper 3, but also in 4, that we are making significant investments in infrastructure in our corrections system so that we can upgrade facilities. I have had an opportunity to visit many of the facilities since taking office, and many of them were built actually during the Kennett government era, which Mrs McArthur, you may be familiar with, and some of them are aging.

Bev McARTHUR: I was in nappies then.

Enver ERDOGAN: And much of that infrastructure is actually aging, so there have been opportunities for us to invest in upgrades of those facilities, and over time there will be opportunities to decommission older units, but there has been no decision made about any closures at this point.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, at the moment, Minister, don't you have Western Plains prison sitting empty at the cost of \$36 million a year to operate, with no staff?

Enver ERDOGAN: Mrs McArthur, that is right. In budget paper 3 we do note the cost of \$36 million to make sure we secure and maintain Western Plains. Western Plains was a significant investment of this government. It is a significant investment in community safety and our ability to reduce recidivism in the community. I have been out to Western Plains. It is a very modern facility and a facility that is the future of our corrections system in terms of the level –

Bev McARTHUR: But without any prisoners.

Enver ERDOGAN: But what we are doing is, as I said in my answer to your previous question, our prison numbers are less than what they were. In terms of Western Plains, that project was only completed at the end of last year – I believe November was the completion date, so just before I took over the portfolio – and we are working on a plan to operationalise Western Plains in due course. Right now it is being used as a state-of-the-art training facility, which is important. It means that services or other prisons are not affected while that training is happening.

Bev McARTHUR: At \$36 million a year, Minister.

Enver ERDOGAN: It is a \$1 billion investment, so it is important that we spend money to protect that investment.

Bev McARTHUR: To train people, in a \$36 million –

Enver ERDOGAN: It would be irresponsible to not protect that investment, and that is what we are doing in securing that facility. And you should be pleased that that facility, in terms of the construction of that facility in your region of Western Victoria, created hundreds of local jobs. I have been out to Lara and Geelong, and many of the people out there in the community and organisations – there was social procurement as part of that project – benefitted from the work there. Apprentices, Aboriginal community groups, we have a growing female construction workforce out in Western Victoria, and they were all part of the construction of that project. You need to understand – I know that your party has been out of government for a long time – this is a major infrastructure project and you cannot just turn it on overnight. The physical construction was completed in November last year, but it will take some time to make it fully operational. That planning is happening as we speak.

Bev McARTHUR: So you are expecting, obviously, an increase in the number of people needing prisons, with the stats that are out today, Minister?

Enver ERDOGAN: I think what we need to do is – I will guarantee that we will – continue to invest in keeping our community safe, and we need to have that ability to scale up and down as needed. That is what futureproofing is, and as Minister I am happy to see that we do have the infrastructure ready in place if needed. Obviously I ultimately want to see less people make contact with the criminal justice system, and that is what our government's goal is. You would have heard from many of the ministers in the preceding weeks about our investments in education, in health, in child care. This is all about making sure people stay out of the criminal justice system.

Bev McARTHUR: But currently, Minister, we have got a 90,000-person backlog of cases in the courts and a 10-year high of aggravated burglary incidents, so we are really in awful trouble. We cannot get through the courts to get them into your prison – your brand new billion-dollar facility with the \$36 million ongoing cost.

Enver ERDOGAN: The impact of COVID-19 on our prison population is evident, but also what is evident is the success of our diversionary programs and our early intervention framework. I think what we are seeing is that we have been able to reduce the rate of imprisonment. But like I said, I do not want people coming into contact with the criminal justice system, let alone in the corrections system, because the corrections system is really the end of the criminal justice system. The initial point where we might want to see them is making contact with the courts. We want them out of the court process; we want them living happy, healthy lives in the community.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, you cannot keep using COVID as an excuse for everything that goes wrong in your government. But Minister, in budget paper 3, page 276, the target for the ‘Proportion of benchmark measures in prison services agreement achieved’ was missed by over 15 per cent. Have you sought an explanation from the department about why this is the case?

Enver ERDOGAN: We have our department Secretary right here. So if you like, you can ask the department Secretary yourself on that.

Bev McARTHUR: No, you are in charge, Minister. You answer the question. We are questioning you, Minister. You give us the answer.

Enver ERDOGAN: Which page was that, Mrs McArthur?

Bev McARTHUR: This is budget paper 3, page 276. I know you will be able to find the answer, Minister.

The CHAIR: Can I also remind you, Mrs McArthur, as has been the case over the past eight and a half days, you can ask the questions, but you do not get to determine who answers them. The minister may be happy to answer your question, and there may be other witnesses there sitting at the table with comprehensive information to provide you. I am sure you would like to hear the answer to your question.

Enver ERDOGAN: I understand our Commissioner will be able to answer that question.

Larissa STRONG: I presume you refer to the budget paper measures – the 15 performance measures – where 10 of these measures were not expected to fall within the 5 per cent variance. Of those 10 measures, one of those measures not reflected within the variance is a positive result. It is the percentage of random drug tests that tested positive, so the fact that it did not reach the target was actually a good thing. It meant less people were being found to have a positive drug test result from a random sample, so that is a good thing. Of the remaining nine, five of them were impacted by lower than forecast prisoner numbers, so they reflected –

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. We are now going to go to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Chair, Minister and officials, we have all watched with interest the recent hearings of the Yoorrook Justice Commission in regard to criminal justice and child protection. Minister, I note that in the evidence that you gave you spoke about the over-representation of Aboriginal people in prisons, and you spoke a bit about the services and programs that are being put in place by the government. On page 82 in budget paper 3 there is something there on ‘Supporting the corrections system to improve community safety’. Can you talk to how this will assist with addressing over-representation of Aboriginal people in prisons?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Ms Kathage. The 2023–24 budget outcomes show the government’s commitment to delivering programs that support people in prison and people on community orders – all designed to keep the community safe. We know that simply locking people up is not enough. When people are required to spend time in custody, we have an obligation and an opportunity to help them use that time productively to address the cause of their offending and help them turn their lives around. This means that when they are released they have a much better chance of living their best life and making a positive contribution and a much lower risk of further offending, which is good for the community and good for them.

This budget has invested \$17.6 million to continue successful rehabilitation and reintegration programs that would otherwise have expired. Of that investment, \$3.3 million will go to dedicated programs for Aboriginal

people in custody. Our government is committed to improving the lives of Aboriginal Victorians, and we are not just talking about it, we are delivering it – truth, justice and treaty. Whether it is through Aboriginal self-determination, the path to treaty or our investment in Aboriginal-led services and programs, our government stands with Aboriginal Victorians. Through our investments in this and previous budgets we have shown that we are committed to a system that is responsive to the needs of Aboriginal people.

Since 2000 Victoria has had an Aboriginal justice agreement. The agreement has the Victorian government and the Aboriginal community working together to improve Aboriginal justice outcomes. Victoria's Aboriginal justice agreement is the single longest running in the nation and has self-determination for Aboriginal people at its core. It came in direct response to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Under this agreement we have invested \$40 million in community-based intensive diversion programs, culturally appropriate restorative justice models and programs to keep Aboriginal young people connected to their family and culture. We will continue this work in partnership with the Aboriginal Justice Caucus and the wider Aboriginal community to help address the over-representation of Aboriginal people in custody and to provide fairer and better outcomes for First Nations people. In this year's budget we are investing a further \$3.3 million, as I stated earlier, in a range of programs.

I am committed to continuing to work closely with the First Nations communities and my cabinet colleagues across Victoria to continue to improve our services and supports so that we can really start to tackle the over-representation of Aboriginal people in our justice system.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thanks, Minister. You just mentioned the supports available to assist with over-representation, and I think having access to a safe and secure home when you leave prison is pretty vital if you are going to turn things around and avoid reoffending. So what support is available in this budget for Aboriginal people leaving prison to have access to a safe and secure home?

Enver ERDOGAN: That is a very good further question. You are absolutely right; having a stable place to live is critical to reducing the risk of reoffending. That is why we invest in a range of reintegration supports for people leaving custody. One of the initiatives that was established by this government is the Baggarrook women's transitional housing service, which supports Aboriginal women leaving custody to secure housing and support services. The 2023–24 budget provides funding to keep this vital service going. While women in custody make up a very small proportion of the whole system, they have specific needs, and programs for women need to be designed differently to meet those needs. Baggarrook is delivered by the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, partnering with a range of support services, and providing transitional housing and reintegration supports to Aboriginal women leaving custody.

While we are talking about supports for Aboriginal women in the justice system, it would be worth mentioning that this budget also provides funding to continue Djirra's prison support program. This program enables Djirra to provide legal advice and case management inside our correctional facilities. This is so important in ensuring women in custody have assistance with issues such as family violence or child protection and making sure they get the legal support they need to prepare for release.

More broadly, this government has established a range of housing programs for people in custody, including the Maribyrnong community residential facility, which provides supported transitional housing for men leaving prison. Since it opened in June 2020 183 people have been accommodated at this facility. Corrections Victoria partners with a range of housing and community support organisations to assist people leaving prison to find housing, because we know that is what helps keep Victorians safe in the short and the long term.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister. We have heard through the Aboriginal Justice Forum from First Nations leaders about the importance of connecting to culture, deepening understanding of culture and being able to practice culture as being intrinsic to the wellbeing of Aboriginal people. What supports are available for First Nations people to connect with culture when they are in custody?

Enver ERDOGAN: Well, there are a range of cultural programs available in corrections that are designed to connect Aboriginal people with their community and culture while they are under supervision. These programs are important because we know that having strong connection to culture and community is a key factor in helping people turn their lives around and reducing reoffending. Across the prison system we have dedicated Aboriginal wellbeing officers available at all locations. The 2023–24 budget provides further investment in

those roles, with 27 of these positions currently funded. These roles support Aboriginal people to engage in programs that promote cultural connection and help to drive cultural safety across the broader prison system.

The budget also gives funding to the Torch, which provides cultural connection and economic independence through art for Aboriginal people in prison. In fact I had the great pleasure of attending the Torch's annual exhibition at Glen Eira town hall last month alongside a number of Aboriginal wellbeing officers. It was remarkable to see the quality of the artworks and the pride and sense of community that the Torch has provided those participants. It would also be remiss of me not to take this opportunity to also acknowledge the work that the Torch has done in terms of their CEO Kent and also the chair of the board Mr Jeffrey Kennett as well and their strong advocacy for this cultural program. It has been one of our most successful cultural programs in custodial settings. It has a very large uptake, and it is a great example of both public and private partnerships – the Torch's funding model is that they get a lot of funding from us, but they also source a lot of philanthropic donations. Also the participants get a sense of value-creating and a sense of purpose and self-confidence.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We will go to Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair, Minister. The rate of return to prison within two years went from 37 per cent in 2021–22, after your government changed the accounting method to show a reduction, to 39.2 per cent in 2022–23. That is an increase of 6 per cent, Minister. This is the prime performance measure of any government's corrections strategy. Are your efforts to reform inmates while they are in custody actually working, and are they better people upon release, Minister?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. May I indulge you in asking which part of the budget papers and which performance measure you are referring to?

Bev McARTHUR: Oh, yes. Look, I thought you would want to know that, Minister, so it is budget paper 3, page 276. It is about 'Prisoner supervision and support' – quality performance measures. That is what we are looking at: quality performance measures. I know you are interested in quality performance measures. So are we, actually, and so is the whole of the Victorian community.

Enver ERDOGAN: Obviously our programs are designed to keep the Victorian community safe –

Bev McARTHUR: Safe – yes, we have got that.

Enver ERDOGAN: and you know that. In terms of our recidivism rate, our programs are working.

Bev McARTHUR: Really?

Enver ERDOGAN: You would know that the *Report on Government Services* confirms that the rate of the return to prison within two years fell in 2021, compared with the previous year. In that short time the rate of return was reduced from about 43 per cent to 37 per cent, so well below the national rate of 42 per cent. So compared to the national rate, that is actually a very positive statistic – we are below that. Obviously our numbers of people in prison has decreased during that time as well, but I want to see it lower. That is why we are investing in a range of diversionary programs and a range of rehabilitative programs in our corrections system. Some of the most successful programs I have seen in the short time I have been in the portfolio are our programs about vocational training opportunities and our connections with Kangan Institute and other TAFEs.

Bev McARTHUR: But, Minister, considering it is a 6 per cent increase in recidivism, how is that not evidence that your government strategy is failing?

Enver ERDOGAN: Sorry, Mrs McArthur, I do not agree with the premise. The variance that I am seeing is a 0.5 per cent variance.

Bev McARTHUR: What, it is worse by 5 per cent?

Enver ERDOGAN: No, 0.5 per cent. So it is within our 5 per cent goal of the target.

Bev McARTHUR: When I went to school we did that subject: how to lie with statistics.

Enver ERDOGAN: No, I think you might be looking at the wrong figures. So our expected outcome is 39.2 per cent, our target was 39 per cent. So there was actually a 0.2 per cent difference.

Bev McARTHUR: 0.2 per cent, okay.

Enver ERDOGAN: So we are on target to what our goal is, but obviously I want to see that figure go down.

Bev McARTHUR: You want to get it better.

Enver ERDOGAN: I want to get it better.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay, good, Minister. Another \$36 million is in the budget for securing and training at Western Plains correctional facility. Is this despite the corrections Commissioner telling the Yoorrook Justice Commission that, in her direct words:

We don't have money to operate that prison because our demand has dropped, so we don't need to use those beds.

So a \$1.1 billion capital cost plus \$75.5 million across two years for maintenance and upkeep of a prison you do not need. If there no demand for it and no operational funding, why do you continue to put money into it?

Enver ERDOGAN: I think it is fundamentally a good outcome to have less people in prison, so I am not going to make apologies about investing in our corrections system. This is about the future. Western Plains – I have been out there. It is a great modern facility. It has got cultural spaces, a state-of-the-art primary healthcare facility on site and opportunities for vocational training and education to really give people the opportunity to rehabilitate themselves once they are in our custodial settings. But right now – exactly – our population of people in prison is a good outcome. As I said earlier, some of the facilities are ageing, and in due course there will be opportunities to decommission units across the system and utilise Western Plains. Like I said, we do not want to see an increase in the prison population where we have to, I guess, build more prisons, but sometimes you have to make decisions where you think about the broader future. Victoria's population is increasing, and we need to be able to meet demand, whether it scales up or down. Obviously keeping it down is our whole-of-government goal.

Bev McARTHUR: Good. Minister, relating to the 'Prisoner Supervision and Support' output line item on page 277, budget paper 3, in a response during question time on 2 May you stated that operations of some prisons were not your responsibility as those prisons are privately run. Minister, if you are not the ultimate person responsible for oversight of government prison facilities, regardless of if they are privately run, what are you responsible for?

Enver ERDOGAN: What I will say is that private prisons are required to operate under the same laws and policies as public prisons, so I am the minister responsible for all correctional facilities.

Bev McARTHUR: All prisons, right.

Enver ERDOGAN: All correctional facilities. And private prisons are also subject to the same laws of the state as any other workplace – WorkSafe, Ombudsman, IBAC. So they are subject to the same requirements. Obviously some of their performance measures will be commercial in confidence, and our Commissioner for corrections is responsible for the running of them. But sometimes some of the specific lower level detailed operational stuff – obviously we have got experts in the field doing that work, so probably questions about that level should be addressed to maybe our Commissioner but also to the private operators. We do obviously have performance targets for them, which we obviously monitor, but day-to-day operations is a complex task and I trust the professionals to do it right.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay. So, Minister, on page 110 of the questionnaire, the response shows that at the end of the 2022–23 financial year the expected number of custodial officer full-time equivalent positions will be 3164.11, which is 281.4 full-time equivalent positions less than the 2021–22 financial year, when it was 3445.51. So we have come down. So, Minister, what has been the impact on prisoners due to the shortage of staff?

Enver ERDOGAN: I think we do have a large number of custodial staff: about 3000 people working in our public custodial facilities across Victoria and another 900 in community-based roles. It is a sizeable workforce

that will see fluctuations from time to time. Like I stated, we have had a 20 per cent decrease in prison numbers, and I can see in the budget papers –

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We will go to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, officials, for your time this afternoon. Minister, I was so pleased to hear in your presentation about a reduction since 2019 of 20 per cent in terms of prison numbers. I think that is a really important number that people should keep mind of during this session. But I will refer maybe to the 16 correctional facilities and maybe pick up some of Mrs McArthur's points, but maybe in a slightly different way, and also budget paper 4, pages 79 and 80. The men's prison system and the capacity as well as the prison system expansion and security upgrades initiatives in particular I want to go to. How are we ensuring that we actually have sufficient capacity within the system going forward and that it is up to the standard for specific prisoners' needs? Because there is a range of needs for different prisoners.

Enver ERDOGAN: That is right, Mr Hilakari. Thank you for that question. Our government is committed to keeping the Victorian community safe. We make no apologies for investing in our corrections system. Corrections facilities and services provide genuine opportunities for people in contact with the justice system to turn their lives around and rehabilitate. So it is good for them and it is good for Victorians. Recent budgets have provided funding to upgrade existing facilities to make sure they are fit for purpose. The prison infill expansion program will deliver 660 beds at five existing prisons. These expansions are all occurring within the boundaries of these prisons, and work is well underway. The program is a \$787 million investment to upgrade existing infrastructure at Barwon Prison, Marngoneet Correctional Centre, Middleton annexe, Hopkins Correctional Centre and the Melbourne Remand Centre.

With these new beds we will be able to expand our capacity within the existing footprint of these prisons. The construction method is using modular rooms, which are constructed off site and then simply installed in the facility. This will dramatically decrease the disruption to the operations of the prisons during construction and means less time that construction staff need to spend inside the secure boundary of the prison. Construction is well underway at Barwon, Middleton and Marngoneet and the Melbourne Remand Centre. Contracts have been awarded for Hopkins, and construction will begin soon. Once completed the project will mean we will have 243 new beds at Barwon, 212 new beds at Melbourne Remand Centre, 94 new beds at Hopkins, 72 new beds at Marngoneet and 39 new beds at Middleton. The new facilities will also mean that we can retire old or out-of-date units that are no longer required or fit for purpose, and indeed that is what we have done at Barwon Prison, with the Illawarra unit to be decommissioned.

The program is providing significant economic and employment benefits, with 80 per cent of the total program value to contribute to Victoria's economy and local jobs, creating approximately 780 jobs during construction. Investing in our corrections facilities is essential to keeping Victorians safe. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the justice and corrections systems, including a reduction in the number of people in correctional facilities. Less people, as we stated – and we both agree, Mr Hilakari – is a good outcome for Victoria. Given our record investments in the Big Build and infrastructure projects across the state, this government knows that you cannot build major infrastructure projects overnight. That is why Victoria's prison system is designed to scale up and down no matter what the future holds.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister. I would just like to take us to Dame Phyllis Frost Centre in particular – the facility for women in custody. Could you just talk about some of the investments that have been made there?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes. In particular one of the investments was a facility that I was able to visit in person myself in April. It was a \$189 million investment at Dame Phyllis Frost. It is important to note that Dame Phyllis Frost was originally built as a private prison during the Kennett Liberal government, and obviously it was the Labor government – the Bracks government – that brought it back into state hands. When we did bring it back into state hands, what we found is that it needed sustained investment to bring it up to standard – the standards that we expect. We have made those investments, especially the Andrews Labor government, and I was pleased to open some of the new facilities, which include a new reception area, new units and accommodation that replace the outdated facilities, new multipurpose buildings, an extension of the perimeter wall and expanded legal and telecourt facilities. These new and upgraded facilities are the first of their kind in Australia, having been designed in line with trauma-informed care principles – that means spaces that make the

best use of natural light, with soft furnishings and calming colour palettes. It includes more shared spaces and private areas for women to engage with professionals and service providers. There are new technologies that will make entering custody smoother and less traumatic for women, and it includes dedicated spaces that enhance cultural safety for Aboriginal women. These new and upgraded facilities will make it safer and easier for our hardworking corrections staff and partners to provide the services women need to turn their lives around, and that is good for everybody.

Mathew HILAKARI: You mentioned that prison numbers do fluctuate, so could you just talk about our ability to scale up and scale down?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes. As I was saying earlier, lower numbers of people in custody is a good outcome. We have made adjustments across the system to reflect these lower numbers, including decommissioning or turning off, if you will, some of the beds in our private prisons. However, as I touched on in my earlier presentation, we know that a substantial part of the decrease in people was related to the pandemic. People working from home and other factors did reduce demand on the system. Now that we are through the worst of the pandemic and with population growth returning to normal rates, we could see a bit of a reversal of that trend. On the other hand, there is also no doubt that our diversionary and crime prevention programs are also having an impact on keeping a lid on the numbers of people coming into custody. That is why these investments in new beds are important in making sure that the system is flexible. We continue to invest in a modern, effective corrections system that reduces reoffending, keeps people out of prison and keeps staff and the community safe. It is also why the new Western Plains facility is an important part of our system. It gives us the capacity to flex up and down as needed, driven by demand. Construction of that facility is now complete, and the 2023–24 budget provides investment to continue to plan for its opening, including working through how the rest of the corrections system can be configured to make best use of the facilities available to us.

Mathew HILAKARI: Just in the limited time that we have left I might take you to culturally appropriate infrastructure. Could you outline some of our investments in that area, particularly with, I think it is fair to say, the massive over-representation of Aboriginal people in our prison system?

Enver ERDOGAN: You are right, Mr Hilakari. I have spoken about new facilities, and we have talked about Western Plains. I would also like to point out in budget paper 4 that there is a \$1.9 million investment to help us establish a dedicated Aboriginal healing unit at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre. This new facility has been designed in partnership with Aboriginal leaders and has also been designed with trauma-informed principles. The unit provides indoor and outdoor program space for Aboriginal women to engage in the services and support they need as well as providing cottage-style accommodation. Dedicated Aboriginal staff will work in the unit and provide culturally appropriate support to women.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister. I just might take us to the numbers –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr Hilakari. We will go to Ms Sandell.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister. You mentioned the government has awarded a new contract with a private health care provider in the men's prison system. I guess the question is: how can we trust a private company to provide good health care when we cannot trust them in the women's or the youth justice systems?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Ms Sandell. I think we are making improvements across our health services in custodial settings, but from my point of view, regardless of whether it is a private or public operator, it is my expectation that services to those in our custody are delivered to the highest possible standards. I think I earlier touched on the clinical oversight mechanism we have got in place now that we have developed between obviously the operators but also the departments of health and corrections working together.

Ellen SANDELL: So those benchmarks have been improved since Correct Care Australasia ran the system? Is that correct?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes, and the services offered have been improved as well. And more so, I will just say the way the framework is designed has been changed as well. So my expectation is for better –

Ellen SANDELL: You are confident that it is a significant improvement given what we saw through the coronial inquest into Veronica Nelson's death?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes. Talking about the coronial inquest – I think we do not want to see that happen to anyone. I think it is a grave tragedy what happened to Veronica Nelson, and obviously people that are entering our prisons are coming in with more complex health needs. So the level of care in custodial settings – we want it to be up to what is in the community, but by the nature of a custodial setting it needs to be different. In some aspects it needs to be more, because people are coming in with really complex drug and alcohol issues and with undiagnosed issues. A lot of the cohort coming into prison have theoretical access to health care in the community, but they are not getting that access.

Ellen SANDELL: I understand that.

Enver ERDOGAN: So when they come into our care, we need to provide that.

Ellen SANDELL: You have mentioned that the barrier to having the public system provide health care in the men's system is just the large number of prisoners in the men's system. How long is the new contract with GEO?

Enver ERDOGAN: The new contract is for an initial five-year period.

Ellen SANDELL: Okay. So have you not considered that even in the next few years we could work up to having that be provided in the public system?

Enver ERDOGAN: You are right. What I touched upon earlier is that the men's system is approximately 95 per cent of the prison population, and in such a short time frame to try and shift that to the public system would not be fair and would possibly not be possible coming off the back of a global pandemic. I think in the contract there are different levers, but obviously I am hopeful from 1 July we will see, when GEO comes in – we expect them to provide the same level of care that Western Health is providing.

Ellen SANDELL: So is the intention, then, after a certain period of time, whether that is five years or less, that it would transition to the public system?

Enver ERDOGAN: Well, there is a five-year contract in place, and if GEO obviously deliver the services that they have committed to, then I would expect them to fulfill that contract.

Ellen SANDELL: And do we know the value of the contract? Has that been made public?

Enver ERDOGAN: I might ask the Secretary.

Kate HOUGHTON: I think that would be, sorry, commercial in confidence – the value of it. It is undisclosed.

Ellen SANDELL: But I guess it is taxpayers money. I assume we have a right to know the rough quantum of the value of the contract. Is that not the case?

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes, it would be commercial in confidence. But as you had pointed out before, the performance measures and the performance standards and also the services that the private provider is providing are much enhanced since the tragic death of Veronica Nelson.

Ellen SANDELL: Okay. Thank you. I will move on to a different topic. We have had a bit of talk about the \$1 billion prison that is sitting empty, and we have also got Cherry Creek – more than \$420 million – that is sitting empty. In terms of the \$36 million a year that is being used to secure those prisons, is that correction staff or private security – private providers?

Enver ERDOGAN: It is corrections staff.

Ellen SANDELL: Corrections staff – all of it?

Enver ERDOGAN: All of it, yes.

Ellen SANDELL: When did you say you expect these facilities to receive prisoners – or we do not know for sure?

Enver ERDOGAN: I do not have an announcement to make on a date. The physical building, for example, at Western Plains was completed in November. It is a very large premise, and so it will take some time to plan and operationalise. We do not have a date. I do not have an announcement to make today. Obviously, you would have seen my announcement about Cherry Creek. That will be operational from August this year.

Ellen SANDELL: Has the government considered repurposing these facilities given they are just sitting empty. They are not exactly the same as housing, but, you know, we have a housing crisis and we have this \$1 billion facility sitting there.

Enver ERDOGAN: Both of the facilities, both Cherry Creek and Western Plains, were designed with obviously a custodial setting in mind, so the features in there are state-of-the-art prison with additional support services. We are planning to use Western Plains as we are starting to use Cherry Creek soon.

Ellen SANDELL: I guess the question that begs to be asked is: now that we have these prisons sitting empty, has there been any reflection on the government's bail decisions around 2017–18 which led to this huge investment – huge amount of money – being spent on prisons that now sit empty? Surely the government regrets those decisions now.

Enver ERDOGAN: I think our Attorney-General has been pretty up-front on this issue, so the bail laws themselves fall into the Attorney-General's jurisdiction, but I will say –

Ellen SANDELL: It could have been better spent on housing, surely, or support services?

Enver ERDOGAN: At the time, I think, there was obviously – we saw what happened with the tragedy on Bourke Street, and I think the community expected us to take measures to keep people safe in bail laws. But our government has reflected that there needs to be a rebalance. What we saw was that the bail laws had a disproportionate effect on certain cohorts in the community, and that is why we are looking at introducing new legislation in the coming months.

Ellen SANDELL: Just a final question. I will take you to budget paper 3, page 82. This is a program called 'Supporting the corrections system to improve community safety'. It is women's justice diversion programs and housing and targeted support for women on remand and short sentences, but it is only funded for one year. Why does it cease after next year, and then what happens when women need these services? So it is budget paper 3, page 82, 'Supporting the corrections system to improve community safety'. What happens after next year to those services?

Enver ERDOGAN: That is the range of projects that are being funded for one year. They will be able to reapply. Obviously, I do not know the budget outcome for next year, but some will be continued and some may not. They are all the programs that have been granted one-year funding.

Ellen SANDELL: Okay. It seems like there are a lot of programs in this budget that have been granted one-year funding, but you would imagine that women would still need those programs after one year.

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes. Well, that is why they have been funded in this budget. Those programs are needed. I have done a lot of work with them. The Torch program is a good example and Djirra's legal supports for women as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Sandell. We will go to Mr Hamer for the last 7 minutes.

Paul HAMER: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, officials. I would like to talk about the cultural review of the adult corrections system, which was released earlier this year along with the government response, which identifies a pretty clear reform program to improve the corrections system. I would just like to refer to the two measures that Ms Sandell mentioned about supporting the corrections system [Zoom dropout].

The CHAIR: Mr Hamer, you are not coming through very clearly.

Mathew HILAKARI: Being an engineer, Mr Hamer has passed on some notes to me.

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Order! I am going to go to Mr Hilakari. Thank you.

Mathew HILAKARI: I think those engineers who might be listening at home know that it is a belts-and-braces approach to questioning, particularly in the online world that we have all been experiencing for some time.

Enver ERDOGAN: That is right.

Mathew HILAKARI: Mr Hamer was taking us to budget paper 3, page 82, ‘Supporting the corrections system to improve community safety’, as well as the line item ‘Women’s custodial health services’. They are both in table 1.18. We are just wondering how they are contributing to the corrections cultural review and implementation of the findings.

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you for that question, Mr Hilakari, because it gives me the opportunity to touch upon the cultural review, which was the most significant review into any adult custodial corrections system in our nation. I want to thank the equal opportunity and human rights commissioner Kristen Hilton for leading that review alongside the expert panel, Aunty Jill Gallagher, Tim Cartwright and Greg Smith. This review provided insights on the operations of our corrections system. It is invaluable and will support us to keep improving the system for the people that work in our facilities, people in custody and the broader Victorian community. Our government announced the cultural review in 2021 to help strengthen the safety, culture and wellbeing of the custodial system for both staff and people in custody. The findings of the review will help us to continue to improve our corrections system and to support our dedicated corrections workers that are focused on keeping people safe and providing the opportunity for people to get their lives back on track, because we know that is what we need to improve community safety now and into the future.

Over 1700 people contributed to this review, and I thank everyone who participated and shared their views and insights about our custodial system. Many Corrections Victoria staff, stakeholders and people in custody contributed, and I am very appreciative of all of this. I can say that I spent much of January reading through the over 800-page review, a very important report, and our government responded promptly. In March we released our response alongside the report. The response showed that we are already acting to improve the system. The report made 86 recommendations in total. It was very comprehensive, as I said, with over 800 pages. I am pleased that many of those recommendations are in train or will commence this year.

With the support of funding in the 2023–24 budget, there are a number of changes happening across our corrections system. I will just point to a few examples. We have new primary healthcare providers in all prisons, including new public health providers in all women’s prisons from 1 July. We are recruiting more Aboriginal wellbeing officers. We are establishing our new Aboriginal healing unit. We are also consulting with corrections staff to develop a new workforce strategy that will improve training, recruitment and retention of staff, because we know that it will take ongoing commitment, working closely with our corrections staff and key stakeholders, to drive lasting improvements.

Cultural change does not happen overnight. You need short-term, medium-term and long-term investments and commitment, and ongoing commitment, and obviously we are committed to doing the work.

Mathew HILAKARI: It is a great reflection on the staff in Corrections Victoria that over 700 contributed to this cultural review. How will the findings of this review help support staff in our corrections facilities?

Enver ERDOGAN: You are right, because the staff are the backbone of our whole corrections system. There are about 4000 staff working in corrections right across the state, both in custodial facilities and out in the community. Since I was appointed as Minister for Corrections I have had the great privilege to meet many of these staff. I am always impressed by their professionalism and commitment to their work. It is a difficult job that they do in sometimes very challenging circumstances. The cultural review showed that while the majority of our staff are doing the right thing and excelling in their profession, there are some staff that are having a harder time. This budget invests \$17.6 million to continue employment programs in the corrections system that would otherwise expire.

We are also supporting corrections workers in the important work they do every day. As part of the response to the review, a new senior leadership role focused on workforce support is being established within Corrections Victoria. This role will drive changes to complaints procedures, misconduct processes and disclosure requirements. I like to make sure that the staff have a say in the changes that will come from the cultural review, so we are consulting with corrections staff to develop a new workforce strategy, and we will improve training, recruitment and retention of staff. As we said in the response, many of the recommendations have significant policy, funding, legal and operational implications that will be carefully considered. Further work is underway with staff and stakeholders to consider the recommendations and develop an implementation plan.

In the meantime we are continuing to recruit staff to work in our corrections facilities. For anyone that might be watching this inquiry and could be considering a new opportunity, it is a great career path and it is highly rewarding, and I would encourage you to check the jobs available right across our system. We will back our corrections workforce every step of the way. The Andrews Labor government will keep doing what needs to be done to keep Victorians safe.

Mathew HILAKARI: Actually a constituent in my own community has recently made an application, so the word is getting out there, for sure.

Enver ERDOGAN: Fantastic.

Mathew HILAKARI: If I could just take us to Aboriginal prisoners and staff who work both within the system and are within the system themselves. I am interested to understand how the investments in the budget but also the early implementation work go to supporting those staff and members within the prisons themselves.

Enver ERDOGAN: In response to the cultural review we are establishing a dedicated assistant commissioner role for Aboriginal services in Corrections Victoria. The leadership role is designed to drive self-determination, engagement and program design from within the system – another key element we have to get the over-representation of Aboriginal people in custody down. The senior executive role is designated for an Aboriginal person, and the Aboriginal Justice Caucus is directly involved in helping design the role and select the right candidate.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Minister and department officials, that is the end of questions for this session. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee this afternoon. The committee is going to follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request. The committee is going to take a very short break before beginning the consideration of the portfolio of victim support at 3:20 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.