

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Budget estimates 2020–21 (Hutchins)**

Melbourne—Tuesday, 15 December 2020

### **MEMBERS**

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O’Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

Ms Bridget Vallenge



**WITNESSES**

Ms Natalie Hutchins, MP, Minister for Corrections,

Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Secretary,

Ms Larissa Strong, Acting Corrections Commissioner,

Mr Ryan Phillips, Deputy Secretary, Corrections and Justice Services, and

Ms Carly Edwards, Acting Deputy Secretary, Corrections and Justice Services, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister Hutchins. We will now resume with consideration of the corrections portfolio, and I will hand over to you for another 5-minute presentation, followed by questions from committee members. Thank you.

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Thank you, everyone. We have got some slides to take you through.

**Visual presentation.**

**Ms HUTCHINS:** To give you a sense of the scale of the system across Victoria, there are 11 publicly operated prisons and three privately operated ones, we employ over 7000 people across our prisons and community corrections, we have one transition centre, and we currently have \$1.8 billion worth of investment in infrastructure projects either being completed or underway.

While numbers are trending upwards over the long term, over the 2019–20 period the prison population decreased from 8102 on 30 June 2019 down to 7151 on 30 June 2020. So we have seen a decline, as you can see at the end there.

In terms of our COVID management, the government has quickly adapted the corrections system to ensure COVID-safe operations, and I am pleased to be able to report—and I know you have heard this from the previous minister today—we have had a total of 28 COVID-19 cases amongst our prisoners, with no prisoner-to-prisoner transfer to date in our system. Can I put on the record my gratitude to our staff across the corrections and youth justice systems, who worked extremely hard during this time. It is not easy wearing the PPE equipment that they had to wear during the time of dealing with both positive prisoners and also those in isolation.

Our budget overview is to ensure that we are able to continue to meet this challenge, and the government has invested \$103.6 million in both corrections and youth justice in the 2020–21 budget for a range of measures for us to continue to operate a COVID-safe place. We have also been able to deliver through this budget funding of \$21.2 million over two years to ensure prisoners have access to quality VET education programs to reduce barriers to paid employment upon their release, and \$6.7 million over two years have been committed to the critical capital upgrades at the Emu Creek facility.

In addition to this, the budget has also had further investments to support increased access needs for the national disability insurance scheme for people in both corrections and youth justice, which has been an issue very much on our workforce up until now; to support the continuation of the tailored women's psychological trauma counselling service to help address the high rates of mental health issues faced by women prisoners; and also to enable court assessment and prosecution services to continue to support the bail and remand court.

Finally, on rehabilitation of offenders, our programs are absolutely critical in ensuring community safety and reducing reoffending. Our programs cover programs such as behavioural programs, forensic intervention programs, education and training, mental health, alcohol and drug services, transition and reintegration programs, and employment and jobs programs. The Victorian prison system provides a range of treatment options to help address substance abuse, and these services are targeted at both rehabilitation and reducing recidivism.

Drugs in prisons have continued to be measured across our system, and we have been able to introduce additional measures, including reforms that cut off the supply routes and give staff authority to take

photocopies of incoming mail, which has somewhat stemmed the flow, and enhanced barrier control technology with the introduction of a new drone system program. As you can see from the graph, there has been significant reduction in the contraband and drugs in our prison system.

As Victoria grows, our government knows that investing in infrastructure in our corrections system needs to keep our community safe. It is critical to plan and prepare for the long term, and that is what we are doing here with building upon the budget investments to ensure that we keep pace with demand. These builds that we have got across the state are enhancing community safety, creating hundreds of local jobs and in particular during the build period local jobs for apprentices, trainees and engineering cadets. You can see from that slide up there the breakdown of sites and new prison beds across the system.

**The CHAIR:** Perfect timing, Minister. I will pass to Mr Danny O'Brien in the first instance.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thanks, Chair. Good afternoon, everyone. Could I start with Acting Commissioner Strong. We have previously been advised by your predecessor on the number of emergency management days awarded in relation to COVID-19. At 26 August it was 71 000 days granted to 4313 sentenced prisoners. I was wondering if you could give us an update on that figure now as a result of COVID-19.

**Ms STRONG:** I understand we have provided those figures in September. I have to take it on notice and give you more update since September. As you know, the emergency management days have been used throughout the COVID pandemic in response to some lockdowns that we have applied to manage the risk of the pandemic for prisoners. We have also used them in the past when there was a fire at Port Phillip Prison in 2017 and also at Fulham's industrial relations action in 2012, but I will get back to you on that number.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Sorry, can you just pull the microphone a bit closer to you? That is better. So you will take that on notice?

**Ms STRONG:** I will.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Likewise, the data that was provided suggested it was an average of 16 days but that EMDs were granted, for quarantine at least, on a one-for-one basis, so if you were in quarantine for 14 days you would get 14 EMD days, all things being equal. I am just wondering why the average is so high.

**Ms STRONG:** Again, I might have to take that on notice. I mean, EMDs can be granted for up to four days for every day of disruption. We look at the decision about whether or not to apply an EMD based on the individual circumstance, what the deprivation is, what the disruption is, whether the prisoner has been of good behaviour before a decision is made, so they are actually made on an individualised basis. However, as a general policy in terms of the lockdown with COVID we are more looking at kind of not granting up to four days. It is more the one-for-one component, as you suggested.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** And would that have applied across a lot of lockdown, as opposed to just prisoners who came in and had to quarantine for 14 days and be confined to cell for that period? Is it applied to the broader prison population who might have been locked down and unable to get out?

**Ms STRONG:** Prisoners can apply. They can apply for any reason if they believe that they have been subject to disruption or deprivation, so certainly if they were in lockdown for a reason unrelated to COVID, for example, they could apply for an EMD and that would be considered on a case-by-case basis.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** But specifically related to COVID, is there a blanket application of EMDs or is it all on application?

**Ms STRONG:** There is no blanket application, but we have a process whereby the application process is being streamlined so that we can streamline the application process and consider the decision about whether to apply the EMD. But prisoners do not have to apply and put in the application form, if you like. We have tried to streamline that process for all the COVID-related ones.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. Can I also ask: there was a report in the *Age* recently about 97 security incidents relating to drones near prisons since the suspension of visits; can you advise what the total quantity of contraband items including drugs and weapons has been as a result of those incidents?

**Ms STRONG:** Not the actual number. I mean, we have seen as we have not had face-to-face visits in prisons that prisoners have been more inventive in terms of how they get contraband into prisons. One way has been through incoming mail, the other means has been through drones. We have invested in drone detection technology, with the first drone detection system operational in October and all of them operational by November, in response to the fact that we were seeing drones dropping contraband into the prison system. In terms of the actual number due to drones, I will have to take on notice.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** If you could. So the question was: what items of drugs and weapons would have been seized as a result of the drones?

**Ms STRONG:** The drops that we have seen, often they have had a range of different things. So they have had budomorphine, they have had green vegetable matter and some mobile phone type issues as well.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. Have drones themselves been seized? Have they been recovered, or are they sort of dropping and flying off?

**Ms STRONG:** The drone detection system allows us to detect that the drop has happened. That way we can then go and actually seize the contraband, and we also then work with police and report the actual detection of the drone to VicPol, who are undertaking an investigation at the moment about those drone drops.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. But the question, I guess, is: have any of the 97 incidents, have any of the drones themselves, been recovered by Corrections Victoria or police?

**Ms STRONG:** That would be a question for police in terms of their investigation of whoever was flying the drone, for want of a better word.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** And do you know—I am not sure I can get this question right—of drone incidents where you have not been able to recover anything that has been dropped?

**Ms STRONG:** I guess we—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** In other words, successful entry by someone outside.

**Ms STRONG:** Since we have had the drone detection system? Obviously prior to having the drone detection system, possibly we would not be aware of that.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** And when was that introduced?

**Ms STRONG:** The first one was in October, and they were all operational by November.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. How does that actually work?

**Ms STRONG:** I am sorry?

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** How does it actually work?

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to interrupt, Mr O'Brien, but your time has expired. I will pass the call to Mr Tim Richardson.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thank you, Chair. Minister, can I refer you to budget paper 3, pages 105 and 110, which provides a \$21.2 million investment over two VET programs in prisons. Can you please provide for the committee's benefit how this contribution is made to the rehabilitation of prisoners?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Yes. Thank you. This is a really big investment over the next two years. Having visited only a handful of prisoners because of lockdown but having met online with most of the GMs across the state, I have been asking around the current delivery of VET programs in prisons and what the need is going forward, and this will go so far in terms of need. These can also address factors. Not only is it just about getting an educational outcome with a potential job at the end of it once time is served but this is also a really big, broad approach around developing life skills and also, I guess, becoming routinized into education, which will then help people once they have left prison.

There are currently 360 different units of education and training on offer, but what we want to do is match up some new courses and extend some current courses to match up where the job opportunities are. Particularly the growing need for staff in warehousing is one growth area that has been identified already by a number of prisons—that they would like to be able to provide that sort of training, including the obtaining of certain certificates and requirements to get onto the job, whether that be a blue card for the transport industry or an occupational health and safety certificate as well. So there are a range of areas where we will be expanding across the next two years.

We certainly have some pretty good runs on the board already when it comes to employment and education programs compared to other states in terms of both the variety of units that we can offer and we plan to offer in the future but also the number of eligible prisoners we have enrolled in education, which has gone from around the 36 per cent mark up to now being quite high. I think the average across Australia is around 35 per cent. We are leading the way having peaked at 39 per cent of our prisoner population now engaged in our programs, but there are still a number of programs that prisons are keen to be able to deliver.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** We know that is critical in rehabilitation, in keeping people out of the corrections facilities in future. What are some of the sorts of training units prisoners are enrolling in, Minister?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Just from my short number of visits at this stage to prisons I have been able to see everything from carpentry courses through to engineering through to hospitality and food safety, including barista courses. There is a lot of preparation work and some specific courses around leading prisoners into jobs in the construction sector, and there is a need for more of that down the track. I think one of the most important things that has come to the forefront in training this year has been around cleaning training and COVID-safe cleaning. There is a real demand out in the community to have qualified cleaners who are able to I guess provide that COVID level of cleaning, including touch point cleaning, infection prevention cleaning as well. We have seen a real uptake in that short course, and I am sure we will into the future. It gives them a qualification, and it certainly basically helps I guess also manage our prison system, where we have got people that are in prison doing these sorts of courses and being conscious of how touch points can be a leading factor to spreading the COVID virus.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** I might leave it there, Chair, and come back to some questions in a minute.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, and I will pass the call to Mr David Limbrick, MLC.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister and team, for appearing today. A couple of questions. I will firstly start with the chart which shows the fall of illicit drug detections. Obviously it coincides with the lockdown. Does this mean that most of this drop in drug detections was due to the inability of visitors to come in and therefore we would expect it to go up again?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Thank you. I think that is a good question to actually ask. Certainly there have been probably two other big factors, and that is the legislative change that we have made around now photocopying incoming mail. There was a real component of drugs being hidden, particularly in children's artwork. So by photocopying it means they are not getting the original that might have the contraband in it. Secondly, the drone detection has played a huge factor. I am not going to deny that maybe face to face has certainly driven it down, but I also need to mention that we have invested in some new X-ray machines and technology that have gone in during the COVID lockdown period, because it was able to be put in place with no visitors or limited visitors being able to come in. Those X-ray machines are now detecting and picking up more as well. It is a bit of a number of avenues with which we have tackled this pretty serious issue. I do not know if Carly or Larissa want to expand.

**Ms STRONG:** I am happy to, absolutely. We have invested in X-ray scanning machines, which can tell you if there is something in someone's internal body. That is in all of our public prisons that are walled, which will certainly help us. We prepared for the return to face-to-face visits last Friday. Part of that preparation was all visits are now prebooked. So you must prebook your visit, which allows our prison intelligence to also know who is coming in and do some checks before people arrive at the door. That combined with improved barrier control through the X-ray scanners is also a component of resetting our visit program to reduce the chances of drugs being introduced through prison visitors.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you. If I could turn your attention to budget paper 3, pages 299 and 297, there are a couple of metrics on there: ‘Rate of return to prison within two years’ on page 299 and on 297 the ‘Rate of return to corrective services within two years of discharge from a community corrections order’. These figures are fairly disappointingly going up slightly. They appear to be very stubborn. Considering that there has been a big investment in trying to stop reoffending and this sort of thing, do we expect that this would go down over the next year, and what sort of things are we prioritising to reduce recidivism rates?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Thanks for the question. I assume that was to me?

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Yes.

**Ms HUTCHINS:** I think the investment that I have just outlined to previous questions around getting decent education and real job opportunities, and it is not just about having VET programs in prisons to keep prisoners entertained; it is about actually giving them an opportunity and a pathway to a real job when they get out. There is a particular organisation that runs outside our prison system that runs independently called Fruit2Work. It is a fruit delivery service that has operated the last couple of years who only employ former prisoners. That job opportunity has delivered a zero-reoffending outcome. Unfortunately their numbers are small, but it is an example of how, with the right pathway, employment is just such a huge part of that. Unfortunately for many people that leave our prison system too many of them are facing homelessness—and that has been another commitment from us to tackle that—but too many face unemployment and no connection with their families after they come out. They are all major challenges for us as a government, particularly male prisoners leaving prison—those stats are pretty high in terms of those factors.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** So with that Fruit2Work program, are you trying to look for other companies in the private sector that might be willing to do this sort of thing? It sounds like if that was successful, then it might be a good thing for other companies. What sort of incentives are there for companies to get involved in this sort of thing?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Well, I know we do have some new positions doing some job placement work now. We have two specifically dedicated new officers that are working in the women’s prison system. I am not sure in the male prison system whether we have—I am sure we do have dedicated staff but how they are allocated—

**Ms STRONG:** Certainly in the women’s system we have employment brokers that were introduced as part of the \$20 million that was received in the last budget to secure employment pathways for women exiting the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre and Tarrengower. We do not have specific ones yet in the men’s system, but we are looking at an employment strategy. We already have things like a centre for construction excellence at Middleton prison, for example, and we have an MOU with John Holland about placing people who have done their training in that prison into construction jobs when they get out. The other opportunity—

**The CHAIR:** I am sorry to cut you off there, Commissioner, but the member’s time has expired. I will pass the call to Mr Danny O’Brien, MP.

**Mr D O’BRIEN:** Thanks, Chair. Minister, with respect to the output provision of ‘Prisoner supervision and support’ on page 298 of BP3, we know from the Buying for Victoria website that in March this year Corrections Vic purchased 250 Samsung tablets and a \$500 000 Zoom account, noting the lack of visitation at prisons, to allow prisoners to keep in touch. Now that in-person visits have recommenced, have those two programs concluded, or are they going to be ongoing?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** I think because we are still implementing our program of coming out of COVID lockdown into a COVID ongoing safe environment, certainly the availability of iPads—tablets—for online visits is still a practice that is in place, particularly because of COVID restrictions visitors will be limited ahead of the Christmas period and people are still going to want to be able to make those contacts. I think the second part of your question was about the phone calls.

**Mr D O’BRIEN:** No, not yet. I will come to that in a moment.

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Sorry. I missed the second part.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** It was the tablets and the Zoom calls. I guess the question is: what is the total cost of those two purchases, and is there an ongoing cost into the future?

**Ms STRONG:** Our intention is actually to keep the Zoom visits going as a complement to face-to-face visits. They have been really successful. They have allowed prisoners to maintain important family connections that they would have not otherwise been able to do, which is important for rehabilitation. So we intend to integrate the tablets into our operating model.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So will that be a \$500 000 annual cost?

**Ms STRONG:** I might have to take that on notice. I think that cost refers to the purchase. That certainly would not be the ongoing cost of those tablets.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. If I could get that on notice, what the ongoing cost is. And have there been subsequent purchases of tablets? There were 250 done in March.

**Ms STRONG:** My understanding is all up we have probably purchased about 400 tablets across the correction system not just to support face-to-face visits but to support remote service delivery so people could continue to do their programs during the pandemic and also to support the AVL process with the courts—as courts took up more and more AVL, we moved the consultations with lawyers to the tablets as well.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Could I get the total cost of those tablet purchases as well?

**Ms STRONG:** Of course.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** You are going to take that on notice. Likewise, Minister, you referenced the \$10 phone allowance a moment ago. Is that ongoing, and what is the total cost of that? Sorry, for clarity, that is the additional \$10 provided to—

**Ms HUTCHINS:** I know what you are talking about.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I am more saying it for the rest of the committee's benefit.

**Ms HUTCHINS:** My understanding is that it was a one-off during that time but not all prisoners that were allocated that money would have exhausted the money that has been allocated to them, so I cannot say that it is not going to continue to be utilised. At this point my understanding is we are not planning on more investment in this space.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** According to the reports, if it was not used for phone calls it could be credited effectively as cash when a prisoner leaves prison. Is that the case?

**Ms STRONG:** Yes, I think that is the case. It can be in their withheld account to support their return to the community. Phone credits are very much linked to the fact that we had no face-to-face visits. People were having to make more calls. They will go out as part of the COVID normal when we get to go to COVID normal in the prison system.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. So that program is ongoing at the moment. They are still getting \$10 a week?

**Ms STRONG:** At the moment I think so, but I will have to confirm.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Can I get the total cost of that thus far as well, if I could, Acting Commissioner?

**Ms STRONG:** Yes.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Minister, you mentioned in your presentation the Chisholm Road project, and last year we got a guarantee from then Minister Carroll that the project would be completed on time by the last quarter of 2021–22. Are you able to match that guarantee this year?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Thanks for the question. Having visited Chisholm Road site—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Minister, I am running out of time. I am going to get cut off shortly. I just want to know whether it is going to be finished on time and on budget.

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Look, the work continued during lockdown and I visited the site, and it is still on track to be completed in 2022.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Tim Richardson, MP.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thank you, Chair. Just taking you back, Minister, to the rehabilitation and support for prisoners, I just want to take you, for the committee's benefit, to what other work opportunities or activities are provided within the prison system for prisoners.

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Thanks for the question. Having just visited Port Phillip Prison—10 days ago?—last week and had a look at some of the industry work that is being done there, it is really extremely impressive work, particularly the industrial laundry that is in place there. I think they are at absolute maximum capacity at the moment in terms of jobs that are coming in from outside the community to be done. But I saw some amazing work also that is being tailored to prisoners who have mental impairment, physical disabilities and mental health issues in terms of horticulture and agriculture in the outside environment, which provides quite therapeutic and real outcomes in industry for many of the prisoners there that we were able to see, including the cultivation of many plants and seeds in action. But there are a number of industries across our prison system. Some of them are unique to the particular site of where they are. We do have bull breeding and fertilisation of bulls, but also milks and dairy and so forth across the industry. It is a really varied program, depending on the location of the prison. I do not know, Larissa, if you wanted to supplement.

**Ms STRONG:** I just note that 91.6 per cent of prisoners in Victorian prisons are employed in prison industries—

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Yes, it is pretty high.

**Ms STRONG:** or through a work program throughout the prison.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Fantastic. Minister, can I take you now to the issue of the women's prison system, and I refer you to budget paper 3 at page 299 on the average daily prisoner utilisation rate of total prisoner capacity. The 2019–20 targets were 90 to 95 per cent, but the actual outcome was 78.1 per cent. For the committee's benefit, can you please outline for us the reasons for the differences here between the target and the outcome?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Yes, certainly. The actual outcome reflects the fact that there has been a reduction in the number of women in the system whilst capacity remains stable, leading to a lower utilisation rate. This is one reason why the performance measure of annual daily numbers of female prisoners has reduced from the range of 644 to 680 down to 580 to 614. Our prison system consists of two female dedicated prisons: Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, located in Ravenhall, and also Tarrengower Prison. Dame Phyllis has about 570 prisoners, which fluctuates. Tarrengower, which is a minimum security prison, has about 78. We have a capacity across the system of 646 beds, and as of October this year there were 395 women in prisons, which was 26 per cent fewer than at the same time last year. There is a women's diversion and rehabilitation strategy that was funded in the last budget and has rolled out a range of programs, really giving opportunities to women post sentence as well as in their time in prison.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** On a related note I refer back to budget paper 3, at pages 105 to 110, which states that:

Funding is provided to respond to the mental health needs of those in the justice system by providing specialist counselling services to women prisoners who are victims of domestic violence and trauma.

Can you please explain the funding and support that this provides?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Sure. Specifically on that page of the budget that you have referred to, it is about an \$800 000 investment around delivering a tailored trauma counselling service that I mentioned in the introductory slides. The funding will provide essential psychological support across Victoria's two women-only

prisons and is a funding response to the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence. We know that women prisoners themselves are overrepresented as victims of family violence.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. I will pass the call to Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thanks, Chair, and thank you, Minister, and your team for appearing this afternoon. The \$1.8 billion you indicated in your presentation is to be spent on new prisons is obviously because our prison population has risen significantly—33 per cent—over the past five years. Why is that?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Sorry, I am finding it really hard to hear your question.

**Mr HIBBINS:** A 33 per cent rise in prison population over the last five years, \$1.8 billion is being spent on new prison capacity. Why do we have such a significant rise in prison populations under this government?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Certainly we have talked about prison numbers significantly lowering during the COVID period and this year, and there are many reasons contributing to that. Partly lockdown has affected our prison numbers in terms of offences that have come forward to the courts and sentencing that has happened. But in terms of the growth trajectory that you talk about over the last five years, there is no one answer to that question. There is a range of factors as to why that has happened, but we have also grown as a state in the last five years. I know my own electorate has grown by close to 10 000 new residents. So there is a population factor that needs to be focused in on with that. But there have also been changes to the justice system that are better asked of the Attorney-General and others in government.

**Mr HIBBINS:** She pointed me towards you, as is the nature of estimates hearings. The rate of return to prison within two years has risen—the rate of recidivism has risen. Is there a link between the rise in reoffending and the number of prisoners, in particular the number of unsentenced prisoners who are on remand?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** The last part of your question, can I get you to repeat it? Sorry. Has there been a rise?

**Mr HIBBINS:** Do you draw a link between the increase in recidivism and the increase in the number of prisoners, in particular the increase in prisoners on remand?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** I think the reality is there has been an increase of prisoners on remand. I do not think we hide from that fact. It has been a major contributor to our numbers in prison. In terms of reoffending, our investments that I have outlined today are pretty much focused at giving opportunity to people, as they come out of prison, to have genuine rehabilitation. We know that the root causes of crime really go to issues like homelessness or issues like substance abuse or being victims themselves of family violence. There are a whole lot of contributing factors. We need to ensure that when people are released they are given the best opportunities to rehabilitate, both in prison but also upon release, by having those wraparound factors in place.

**Mr HIBBINS:** But is being on remand itself a risk factor in terms of rehabilitation itself?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** I think any prisoner that is physically in the prison system is always going to be at higher risk than a person that has not been in the system. I do not deny that that is definitely a factor. Our real challenge is: how do we divert people from getting into the prison system in the first place, and that is the kind of key thing that I have talked about with crime prevention today.

**Mr HIBBINS:** You have outlined individual budget initiatives, but given that recidivism rates are rising, what are you actually doing different now than what you were doing previously?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** I might see if the Secretary wants to answer that, given that I have only been the minister for five and a bit months.

**Ms FALKINGHAM:** Thanks, Mr Hibbins. We have absolutely had a focus in this term in relation to education and employment, as both the Acting Commissioner and the Minister have outlined. So in relation to your question in relation to people on remand or people who are on bail, we have been trying to work more at a community level to go to those kind of services the minister has outlined. We know that a secure home is the best way to keep people out of the criminal justice system. We know that having access to drug and alcohol programs is another way to keep people out of our system, and most importantly, and we are really cognisant of this in the justice system right across the board, the issue of mental health plays out in every part of our system.

That is why we are looking forward to the mental health royal commission handing down its findings so we can reorient to take account of those recommendations.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thanks.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Nina Taylor, MLC.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Thank you. Minister, actually on topic, I refer you again to pages 105 and 110. Could you please explain the government's broader strategy around women prisoners?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Thanks for the question. As I mentioned before, there is a women's diversion and rehabilitation program that has been developed. We have an ongoing amazing committee across the state that informs us as a government around the prison system—a women's advisory committee that works with us around both those women that are in prison rehabilitating but also those who have left the system engaging. That strategy and that work that has been done by that committee really goes to the heart of ensuring that there are wraparound services such as rehab services; reconnection with family services, which often is a real element upon release; and also certainly that pathway to jobs has been a big one as well.

Programs also include mental health services, both to women in prison and upon leaving, having that connection as well, and initiatives aimed at reducing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal women in prison, including expanded legal and housing support, and we are looking at some sort of expansion into the future of a residential facility for a diversion program that is culturally responsible for Aboriginal women as well.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Thanks very much. We have actually touched on this, and it would be nice to go a little bit broader with it. I refer you to budget paper 3, page 104, table 1.17. It refers to the corrections and youth justice coronavirus response. It was obviously a difficult time for the whole community in terms of maintaining social connections, and undoubtably for prisoners and their families as well. Could you please outline for the committee how prisoners were supported to maintain social connections during this time? I think there was a little bit of discussion on that, so it would be good to flesh that out a bit more.

**Ms HUTCHINS:** I think the value of the government's investment during this time to stand up AVL or online access for visits was an extremely important one in us keeping the prison system very stable. Certainly I was able to observe a prisoner doing an online visit with his family at home, and the most extraordinary thing I heard said was him counselling his family members about the realities of being locked down and what the effects were, how to keep yourself mentally fit. Overhearing that conversation was pretty extraordinary—to see a prisoner talking to his family in that way.

But also for many prisoners we have heard that being able to see the family dog for first time in years, being able to see the family home—these are things that normal visits do not provide, and this has been a really important tool in keeping, during that COVID lockdown, our prison system very well balanced in terms of giving that support. Obviously it does not replace a face-to-face visit, but for many prisoners it has provided new opportunities, particularly for prisoners with family in rural areas who cannot visit often. And for family members who may not be able to bring themselves to go into prison to visit their relative or their friend, being able to do it over an online service has really opened up the scope for that. That is why we are making consideration there about how we continue to provide this service into the future in our prison system. The feedback also from family members of prisoners has been very high as well in terms of this being a very positive thing for mental wellbeing.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Indeed, really insightful. So what about offenders being managed in the community? How has this management been adjusted during the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** This has been absolutely stood up by our staff across corrections, and continued. Obviously the measure of how we continue to do remote case management and supervision was challenging but has been successful. There have been circumstances where there has been a requirement for face-to-face case management to continue—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Minister. The member's time has expired. I will pass the call to Mr Danny O'Brien, MP.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Can I just go back to the Commissioner? The Rivergum residential unit next to the Hopkins facility was completed in 2018—apparent cost of \$52 million—and is, I believe, staffed by about 50 people. How many inmates are there currently?

**Ms STRONG:** I am just going to find that; I cannot think off the top of my head—apologies. I know we have got four violent offenders out there at the moment, but we have also got sex offenders there. It does take both violent and sex offenders, Rivergum. We also have a number of people who are waiting for their sentence to complete—two other violent offenders currently in custody who have an intensive treatment and supervision condition, which will mean that they will reside at Rivergum when they finish their term. In terms of the total number, I am just going to get it for you.

**Ms FALKINGHAM:** I understand we have six residents in Rivergum currently.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Six, okay. And can you tell me how many have actually been there since it was opened in 2018?

**Ms STRONG:** I am sorry; what was the question again?

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** How many have actually been there in total since it was opened?

**Ms STRONG:** I do not think we have had anyone yet exit Rivergum. It is a two-year program, or up to a three-year program if the court decides to give them a third year, so there would not have been any people that have yet exited the Rivergum program.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So there have been six in total basically. And can you tell me how many staff are currently employed there?

**Ms STRONG:** It is a 24-hour, seven facility; it is staffed 24/7. You are correct: it would be around the 50 mark.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So 50 staff for six inmates. I assume that is considerably higher than the ratio for most parts of the prison system.

**Ms STRONG:** It is, but Rivergum is a very different model. It is for a post-sentence scheme, for a civil scheme. It is a therapeutic community, Rivergum, so it has a high overlay of clinical staff as well as occupational therapists. The whole model is about engaging in behaviour change both through caseworkers as well as the clinicians and the other multidisciplinary team doing that component. So it is a very different model. There is group work every day; there is individual work every day with the residents of Rivergum.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay.

**Ms FALKINGHAM:** It is worth noting, Mr O'Brien, that it is a 20-bed facility, so obviously that staffing profile is built on those 20 beds.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Yes; thank you. Minister, the budget papers—BP3, page 104—reference the \$103 million allocated for the corrections and youth justice coronavirus response. In the DJCS questionnaire it indicated that for 2020–21 last year's budget estimated \$83 million would be spent on men's prison system capacity. That has now been rephased to that \$103 million; therefore only \$8.3 million is being spent on men's prison system capacity in this year's budget. So, we have lost \$75-odd million from that line item from last year. What impact does that have on the expansion of the prison system for men? Does it mean that there will be construction projects not going ahead?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Thank you for the question. To date the budget has delivered \$1.8 billion to ensure that the prison system can meet demands. There is a prison infill system which, along with the Chisholm Road project, will deliver 1650 beds in the prison infill system and an additional 540 at Chisholm Road, with a total of 1248 beds in total. So our program is still continuing to drive ahead. There have not been any beds that have been diverted from our current plans to meet demand of the system into the future because of corona.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** But \$75 million has been taken out of that program and rephased to COVID response, so surely it does not mean no impact?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Well, it is not having an effect on what we had planned to roll out in terms of our prison infill program.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. Can I just go back to the question Mr Hibbins was asking on recidivism and the benchmark services as well that are listed in the budget paper. Why has your government repeatedly failed to hit the targets it set for itself over the last five years in terms of recidivism?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Well, I would make the point that we do have one of the lowest return rates to prison within a two-year period for offenders across Australia, and I think that is primarily because of our investment that we are making in both job opportunities within the prison system and education outside the prison system.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Ms Nina Taylor, MLC.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Now that restrictions are being eased in the broader community, what is the plan to ease restrictions in the corrections system?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** There are road maps that we have—and I am just trying to find my road maps. Apologies, I am getting to it. I think we mentioned before the staged return to face-to-face service delivery as well as visits. The face-to-face service delivery commenced on 23 November, which was a big step forward in being able to have more professional services delivered, obviously, face to face. Our COVID plans have still been in place, though, and screening to make sure that any health professionals or service providers that are coming into our prison system are well screened, even at this stage. In terms of the timetable for easing restrictions, it is a gradual process, and it lags behind the community's COVID restrictions lifting, and that is because we have been taking the advice from the chief health officer to make sure that we have done a step-by-step approach rather than jumping into an opening up that is not responsible.

Certainly there is potential, really high potential, for COVID to spread quickly in a prison situation. So the reason we need to take a step back from the community opening up regime and have a different trajectory that is a little bit slower and behind is really important in making sure that if things change in the community we are not seeing an outbreak in our prison system. It has been absolutely devastating to watch what is happening in America at the moment within the prison systems over there and what has been unfolding with the spread of the coronavirus in that environment. We know that prisons can be a Petri dish for this sort of pandemic spreading very quickly, so that is why we have been very careful and measured and taken the management plan recommendations from those in the know in the chief health officer's office and the department of health advising us and the department of justice as to how to step out in a safe way and ensure that our prison system is further protected.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Great. Thank you. I just think we could explore a bit more the infrastructure projects so I refer you to budget paper 3, page 299, which refers to the 'Average daily male prison utilisation rate of total male prison capacity'. Can you please update the committee on the infrastructure projects that were funded in the 2019–20 budget to increase the capacity within the prison system and how they are progressing?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Thanks. One of those big projects I mentioned just before is the Chisholm Road project, which is a site located in Lara on which construction is well underway. That was funded out of the 2019 budget and has managed to continue to progress in line with COVID-19 construction guidelines and to continue to do the footprint of that prison there. When completed, the maximum-security men's prison will hold 1248 beds. It will be a huge facility and comprise eight prisoner communities, each with 78-bed accommodation. So that work is continuing to roll out. It will provide more than 650 ongoing jobs. During the construction phase undertaken by John Holland as the managing contractor, we have seen enormous jobs growth there in terms of the construction delivery. They actually partnered with Wamarra Aboriginal construction company to deliver some services out there, having construction workers from the Aboriginal community on site. Most importantly, some of those workers did have prison sentences in the past and we were able to ensure that, with their rehabilitation that has happened, they actually were employed on this job to help us deliver this prison.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. That concludes the time we have available for consideration of the corrections portfolio. Thank you to you and your officials for your time with the committee in relation to this portfolio today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing and responses are

required within 10 working days of the committee's request. The committee will now take a short break before moving with you to consideration of the youth justice portfolio.

**Witnesses withdrew.**