

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Friday 24 May 2024

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

WITNESSES

Enver Erdogan MLC, Minister for Corrections; and

Kate Houghton, Secretary,

Emma Catford, Deputy Secretary, Corrections and Justice Services,

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 2024–25 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, any comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream this afternoon 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, as well as officials from DJCS. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you questions. Your time starts now.

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Chair, Ms Connolly. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. I wish to also acknowledge any Aboriginal people with us today or watching online.

Visual presentation.

Enver ERDOGAN: You will see that I have got a table on the first slide that talks about the state of our current corrections system. We have got around 5600 people employed within the system. There are around 6000 people in custody, 9800 subject to parole or court orders under supervision and 125 serious offenders on a post-sentence scheme order. The number of people in custody and supervised in the community has reduced since last year following the downward trend that has happened since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the end of April, 34.2 per cent of the prison population were on remand. That is 6.3 percentage points down on last year. Across Victoria we have 12 publicly operated prisons, three privately operated prisons, two post-sentence residential facilities and two transitional centres, and there are 35 community corrections locations across the state responsible for supervising people who are on orders and not in custody.

The 2024–25 budget provides a total of \$1.8 billion for the corrections portfolio. This consists of \$1.54 billion for prisoner supervision and support for the safe, secure and humane containment of prisoners, and \$268 million for community-based offender supervision to deliver effective supervision of offenders in the community. Total capital expenditure is estimated to be \$155 million for the prison infill expansion, essential upgrades to the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre and upgrades to community corrections offices.

Turning now to new initiatives in this budget, \$41.3 million has been allocated to the corrections portfolio as well as \$28.2 million to address Aboriginal over-representation across the justice system, including in corrections. As part of this, \$5.6 million has been provided to continue gender responsive supports for women in prison, \$12 million has been provided to continue culturally safe supports for Aboriginal people, \$14.4 million has been provided for short-term accommodation and transition support from men exiting the

prison system at the Maribyrnong community residential facility and \$22.6 million is also provided to support rehabilitation and reduce recidivism, including personal care services for older people in prison, the KickStart program and the employment pathway broker service, and wellbeing, mental health and disability initiatives.

One area where we have made significant reforms and that has been of significant focus is the delivery of primary health services. As of 1 July 2023, all public prisons in Victoria transitioned to a new primary health care model, delivered by new primary health providers. That includes our two dedicated women's facilities, which have transitioned to public health providers. Service uplifts are part of this new model, including an Aboriginal health workforce and expanded multidisciplinary team, tailored health assessments and a greater focus on improving health outcomes and continuity of care. Aboriginal health checks are a new service provided in all public prisons. The check is equivalent to the Medicare item 715, delivered in the community it supports. The development of an integrated care plan for ongoing management of health needs – as of 31 March 2024, over 900 Aboriginal health checks have been conducted, resulting in over 730 integrated care plans.

I am pleased to advise the committee that Victoria consistently performs better than the national average on a range of quality indicators. The imprisonment rate in Victoria is 125.4 per 100,000, well below the national average of 201 per 100,000. 93.7 per cent of people in custody in Victoria choose to participate in employment compared to the national average of 81.4 per cent, and 31.1 per cent of people in custody are participating in formal education and training, higher than the national average of 25.8 per cent. People in custody in Victoria spend an average of 10 hours a day outside their cell compared to the national average of 8.8.

One of the key goals of our system is to reduce reoffending, and our reoffending rates are better than the national average. The rate of return within two years was 39.5 per cent in 2022–23 against the national average of 42.5. The expected outcome this year is 39.7. The rate of return to corrective services within two years of discharge from a community correction order was 10.7 per cent in Victoria, better by half the national average of 24.3 per cent. The expected outcome this year is 12.5 per cent, which is still below the target of 14 per cent. So we are reducing reoffending.

Prison system demand. In no small part because of those quality indicators and the investment we have made, we are seeing less people in prison.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. The first 7 minutes are going to go to Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister and team. Minister, page 75 of the department's questionnaire response shows the men's behaviour change program for incarcerated perpetrators of family violence has been cut. The program was lapsing at the end of this year and has not been renewed. Why, at a time of increased incidents of family violence, was this program cut instead of being widened?

Enver ERDOGAN: I will just go to – page 75, you said?

Danny O'BRIEN: Of the questionnaire.

Enver ERDOGAN: One second, I have it in front of me. Thank you, Mr O'Brien. I can confirm the importance of these programs. We run a range of programs in correctional facilities that are aimed at rehabilitating and addressing people's behaviour. In relation to the programs you specifically refer to, what I can say is those programs were subject to a bit of a different process, but they are being funded. Since that time there have been small modifications to some of the outcomes.

Danny O'BRIEN: The note in the questionnaire literally says:

Continuation of funding for these initiatives is being considered separately to the 2024–25 Budget process.

So is it running next year or not?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes, it is.

Danny O'BRIEN: Where? How? Where is the funding for it?

Enver ERDOGAN: Well, the funding is coming. Like I said, since then we have had discussions and it is funding from our base funding in our corrections system. As you will notice in budget paper 3, we have got a

\$1.5 billion budget in Corrections. These are some of the core roles that we do in terms of addressing people's behaviour, so funding for this will come out of our base funding.

Danny O'BRIEN: How many men were able to undertake that course last year, and how many will undertake it next year?

Enver ERDOGAN: I do not have the specific figure of the amount of men in that specific course. Obviously we run a range of programs in our custodial facilities. But our Commissioner might have the exact number in front of her.

Larissa STRONG: I would have to take it on notice for men's behaviour change in community corrections.

Danny O'BRIEN: If you would not mind, because of course it is a little bit unclear now, Minister. If it is suddenly absorbed into the department's funding, then we really do not know where it is and how it is going.

Can I ask about Western Plains Correctional facility. For each of the past three years, tens of millions of dollars were allocated to it. Based on your comments during question time, you are using it as a training facility. There is no such funding amount in this budget, so does that mean funding has been cut?

Enver ERDOGAN: No, we make no apologies for investing in our corrections system, and Western Plains is our newest facility, a public prison. It cost \$1.1 billion to build and it is being used as a training facility whilst we plan its opening. We are in a unique position in Victoria. We are very different from other jurisdictions where we have got a reduction in the number of people in prison. As I was saying in my opening slides, there are 25 per cent less prisoners in our system from March 2020 to what we have now in custody, so we are taking the time to plan its opening.

In terms of the funding for Western Plains, it is in the budget. It has now been gazetted as a prison, so the funding is no different to the funding for all our other corrections facilities. We believe that making sure that our facilities are safe and secure is a core role, so therefore it is part of that \$1.5 billion funding that is under prison supervision and support on page 152 of budget paper 3.

Danny O'BRIEN: That is a very large – that is the overall figure. Where is the funding specifically for the training that you say is going on here?

Enver ERDOGAN: I think training, staff salaries, safety of premises and facilities –

Danny O'BRIEN: I know, but specifically for –

Enver ERDOGAN: that is part of our base funding.

Danny O'BRIEN: Right. Can you tell me how many – I assume when it is training, it is training for prison officers.

Enver ERDOGAN: That is right, onboarding new –

Danny O'BRIEN: How many prison officers have been trained there in the last three years and will be trained there this year?

Enver ERDOGAN: I think it is important to understand that Western Plains provides us an opportunity to train new people into our system. We are recruiting new people. In the past when this training was done it would affect the operations of other facilities. Western Plains has been used during the Beaufort fires – we did transfer prisoners from Langi Kal Kal during that period and returned them safely – decamped that prison and returned them to Langi Kal Kal. In terms of the number of people we have recruited in the last 12 months –

Danny O'BRIEN: No, how many have been trained at Western Plains?

Enver ERDOGAN: Trained at Western Plains specifically – I might actually ask my Commissioner. I do not have that specific information right in front of me.

Larissa STRONG: I will find out if we can get that information, but it is being used regularly as a training facility both for tactical operations training, things that you can do in a built prison that disrupts operations. We

have used it for roof extraction training, for cell extraction training. We also have where we have to have assessment and transition coordinators – or community corrections services have also used it rather than paying for facilities for conferences et cetera.

Danny O'BRIEN: It must be a little bit limiting to train somebody as a prison officer in a prison where there are no prisoners.

Larissa STRONG: Obviously it is training where it is appropriate for that, so for things like how do you do a roof extraction. If you were doing that in a live scenario, that prison would be locked down so –

A member: Role-play.

Danny O'BRIEN: Role-play. Minister, construction was completed in 2022. Since then how many operational procedures have been produced and are in place for when the facility gets a prisoner?

Enver ERDOGAN: In terms of?

Danny O'BRIEN: Western Plains.

Enver ERDOGAN: What stage of its –

Danny O'BRIEN: No. How many operational procedures are actually in place, assuming that at some stage in the future it will get a prisoner?

Enver ERDOGAN: I might pass that to the Commissioner. She would know. It is a very detailed operational question, Mr O'Brien.

Larissa STRONG: It was gazetted as a prison just prior to the transfer of the Langi Kal Kal prisoners.

Danny O'BRIEN: Sorry?

Larissa STRONG: It was gazetted as a prison just prior to the transfer of the Langi Kal Kal prisoners during the bushfires so that we had the appropriate powers to manage the men at Western Plains. It is well advanced in terms of its operational commissioning. It is very hard to define all of your local operating procedures until you have decisions made about what cohort would be going into Western Plains.

Danny O'BRIEN: Was that gazettal temporary or is it now a formal –

Larissa STRONG: It is gazetted.

Danny O'BRIEN: So it stays gazetted. Is it correct that there were no operational procedures in place when it was used temporarily?

Larissa STRONG: I would have to get back to you on that and let you know.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay, thank you. On page 102 of the performance statement it shows recidivism is up for those who were up on community correction orders, Minister. Is this because your government has cut the funding for community supervision?

Enver ERDOGAN: One moment. What I can confirm is our government is committed to keeping the community safe, and in terms of our community corrections staff there has been no net reduction in the amount of staff that work in that team. In terms of the positions available we do have some vacancies in community corrections, but there have been no cuts.

Danny O'BRIEN: But budget paper 3, page 152, shows a reduction in the budget by \$37 million, so what programs are no longer running?

Enver ERDOGAN: That is 152 –

Danny O'BRIEN: I might have to come back to it, Minister, but if you want to have a look in the meantime, that would be great.

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you. I will do that.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. We will go straight to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister, Secretary, Commissioner and Ms Catford. Thank you for joining us. Minister, I would like to ask you about community corrections services. Specifically there is a line item in the output summary table in budget paper 3, page 152, 'Community Based Offender Supervision'. How is this line item keeping the community safe, with people under supervision?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Mr Galea. Thank you for the question. It is a privilege to be able to highlight the hardworking community corrections staff that are working day and night right across the state. As I said, there are 35 locations across the state, so they serve both metro and regional Victoria very well. This budget provides \$268 million for community-based offender supervision. That is an increase of 2 per cent on last year's funding and is now more than 70 per cent higher than when we came into government in 2014. The funding is incredibly important for keeping Victorians safe and helping people engaged with the criminal justice system to turn their lives around. The focus of this budget is managing the supervision of offenders who are not in custody but are under court-ordered supervision in the community.

The funding provides for several types of community supervision. There are people who have been sentenced by a court to serve a community correction order. This can be instead of a custodial sentence or it can be ordered to be completed after serving a period of time in custody, such as someone on parole. That second stream is those on parole after serving the non-parole period of their custodial sentence – they can be supervised in this way. There are people who have converted outstanding fines or financial penalties to community work. I might add that figure is reduced because we did make some reforms to our fines system a few years ago, and since then we have seen that reparations orders are less than what they were. At the end of April, we have just got under 10,000 people who are subject to these types of supervision. To support the functions, the budget provides for about 900 staff to work across the 35 locations, as well as funding for a range of rehabilitation support programs that are targeted at addressing the underlying causes of people's reoffending. Supporting people to address these issues and turn their lives around reduces the risk of reoffending and keeps all Victorians safe from crime.

I want to take this opportunity to give a shout-out to everyone in community corrections. It is a very rewarding career, and if there is anyone watching, I would recommend them to apply. I know in my job I have the opportunity to travel to some of the offices. I took the privilege during our Echuca recent visit and our sitting week up there in the north to visit the local office of the justice service centre there and the staff there and see how committed they are to making a difference and keeping our community safe. It is really important.

Michael GALEA: Thanks, Minister. You mentioned those rehabilitation support programs, which I understand were funded as part of community correctional services. Can you go into a little bit more detail about what the budget actually provides for with those rehabilitation programs?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes, definitely. Thank you for your question, Mr Galea. We know that providing services to people that need to turn their lives around is important to reduce their risk of reoffending, and that is what we need to do to keep Victorians safe. The 2024–25 budget provides \$41.3 million in support programs in the corrections portfolio, which is supporting people that are both in custody and being supervised in the community. This provides for a whole range of support services in terms of community corrections, but I want to focus on three key areas, and I think they are key areas for probably all us in this room: housing, employment and substance abuse. I know, Mr Puglielli, you are probably interested in some of those issues from your statements in the chamber.

We know that having a job and place to live are the fundamentals for many people to stay on the right track. That is why we have invested in a range of employment programs that provide a pathway for ongoing employment. Some of these pathways even start when people are still in custody. One program I would like to highlight is the Baggarrook Aboriginal women's housing program that received over \$400,000 in the 2024–25 budget to extend their services. It is a great program that supports Aboriginal women who are at risk of homelessness and incarceration to get into housing and avoid going to jail. Another of our budget initiatives I would like to highlight is the KickStart program. It is a drug and alcohol program that is targeted for people on community correction orders. We know how important it is to support people to address their substance abuse,

as these issues are the main drivers of offending behaviour in many instances. We also know that addressing alcohol and drug addiction for people in the community looks a bit different than it does for people in custody. That is why I am pleased to report we have been able to provide \$13 million in this year's budget to continue this important program to tackle substance abuse.

It is important to recognise that our investments in community corrections are working. The number of people under community supervision has reduced by almost 20 per cent. That is good for all Victorians. I am pleased that in 2022–23 only 10 per cent of people who successfully completed community correction orders returned to corrective services within two years, well below the national average of 24 per cent. Once again, we are leading the way.

Michael GALEA: Thanks, Minister. And connected with that of course is parole. When prisoners are given the privilege of parole, what budgetary supports are in place to ensure that they are as supported as possible and we get the best outcomes?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you for that question. I appreciate the opportunity to talk about our parole system, because it is an important part of the correction system as a whole. We have one of the strictest parole regimes, and I know last year we had the opportunity to even make it stricter for many people on life sentences.

But parole is not a right; it is a privilege. It is an important feature of promoting community safety. The purpose of parole is to provide a supervised, managed transition out of custody. We know that reintegrating back into the community after a period of time in custody can be very difficult for people. It is well known that immediately after release is often the highest risk period for reoffending. I think it is also worth noting that this government has taken steps to strengthen parole laws, as we did last year. We are always looking for improvements to make, and we take the feedback of victims of crime and the impacts it has on them very seriously. I am also the Minister for Victim Support. I know we will have an opportunity to discuss that role a bit later, but parole is supervised by our hardworking community corrections staff, and that is an important part of the \$268 million allocated to community-based offender supervision next year.

Michael GALEA: Thanks, Minister. Lastly, reparations: it is obviously an important part of the justice system – again without going too far into the field of victim support, which we will get to later – that those who have been the victims of crime are able to receive appropriate justice outcomes. How do the community corrections budget line items support reparations and community work by offenders?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you. You are right, making reparations to the community is part of showing remorse for committing a crime and repairing the damage to the community caused by crime. A big focus for our community corrections service is giving offenders supervision and an opportunity to contribute back to the community.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Minister. I will stop you there. We are going to the Deputy Chair.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you very much. Thank you, Minister, as well. Just looking at appendix E, performance statement, page 103 – it is in very small font, so you will excuse my light – it says:

Proportion of benchmark measures in prison services agreement achieved

And you will see there from the figures the target for 2024–25 was 90 per cent; the expected outcome was 77.7. The previous target was 90 per cent again, and the actual was 75.4. What does that refer to – the proportion of benchmark measures in prison services agreement – and why are we so far off the mark? Perhaps, Minister or Commissioner, whoever would like to answer that.

Enver ERDOGAN: I might start, and I am sure that if our Commissioner or Deputy Secretary have anything to add, we can pass to them. I guess what I would say is that we have got high expectations of private prisons and manage their contracts tightly. Over the last several years some of the impacts of the pandemic have impacted the performance against benchmarks due to restricted access to programs and staff absences. You would notice, as you have pointed out, it has gone up actually slightly from 75.4 per cent to 77.7 – still below the 90 per cent mark we are aiming for. Private prison benchmarks are improving, and we are working closely with providers to make sure that their performance is up to the high standard that we expect of them.

Some measures are stretch measures, so they are deliberately ambitious, which means they are above what you might view as minimum targets. We are aiming for better outcomes, and they are often around rehabilitation and recidivism. We call them stretch measures. Outcomes against these measures are commercially sensitive, so it is difficult for me to go into too much detail, but I might see if our Commissioner has anything further to add on this.

Nick McGOWAN: Commissioner, that is obviously falling a long way short, right. We are close to 20 per cent underperforming for some reason. Where are they underperforming, these prisons?

Larissa STRONG: So that is one of the BP measures out of the 15 measures that the prison supervision and support has. That measure comprises up to 23 service delivery outcomes. How many each prison has depends a little bit on the prison, but each prison has between 16 to 20 SDOs. I think the denominator is 309 service delivery outcomes. The target was 90 per cent – it is an ambitious target – and the achievement was 77 per cent of those 309 SDOs across all prisons. If we had met target, it would have been 278, but we were at 240. The minister is right – some of those service delivery outcomes, and this is across the public and private systems, have stretch marks – sorry, not like that.

Nick McGOWAN: We hear you – it is Friday, it is fine.

Larissa STRONG: They are a stretch objective, so we are trying to push performance – sorry?

Nick McGOWAN: We hear you – it is Friday, it is fine. But I suppose I am none the clearer as to what it is they are not achieving – in simple language for some people who are joining us online.

Larissa STRONG: It will vary a little bit depending on each prison. There are 309 indicators that make up the denominator for that 77 per cent and 90 per cent target. For some prisons it might mean that they are not meeting SDO 23, which is a case management SDO that measures case management. For another prison it might mean that they are not meeting SDO 5, which is a self-harm measure. They all obviously have different targets depending on the cohort of that prison, so it will vary depending on the prison, and that is an aggregated number.

Nick McGOWAN: Do you have a document that you can share that does give the breakdown of where they are not performing or where they are not making their targets?

Larissa STRONG: We have certainly in the past provided by I think prison, but there are some sensitivities in being too disaggregated in terms of each prison and each particular SDO. So we can see what we –

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. I appreciate that, thank you.

Enver ERDOGAN: Mr McGowan, because in our system we have got three private prisons, we have really got to be careful with what we do share because there is commercial sensitivity, especially in regard to some of their benchmarks.

Nick McGOWAN: Of course. But to the extent you can, Commissioner, I would appreciate that. Thank you. Minister, I am looking here at page 67 of the questionnaire. I think what strikes me perhaps is that at a time where you are reporting that we have fewer prisoners, the costs over the forward estimates certainly increase, or you could use the words ‘blow out’ perhaps, in the order of \$60 million – and I am rounding, but thereabouts – so we are obviously going to pay more to receive less. What is the principal cause for those increased costs from Ravenhall, from the Victorian correctional facilities, Fulham, Port Phillip and so forth?

Enver ERDOGAN: In terms of our corrections system, we make no apologies for investing in keeping our communities safe. With running so many facilities across our state, you understand there are a lot of fixed costs in the system. We are in an enviable position compared to other jurisdictions which are having capacity issues. I know Ms McArthur would be aware, but she is unfortunately not here, of the problems they are having in the UK prison system where they are having to release prisoners because they do not have capacity. We have got this unique opportunity that since we invested we have more prisoner capacity because we have done a good job of diverting people away from the criminal justice system. Some of that is the pandemic effect, but I genuinely do believe some of it is because of the programs that we are running as a whole of government to

keep people away from the criminal justice system. But there are obviously economies of scale; if you do a good job of keeping people out of prison, the per prisoner costs will increase.

Nick McGOWAN: I am sorry, I am not sure I follow the last statement – if you are doing a good job of keeping people out of jail, I accept that you would have to have fewer prisoners. But surely that would cost either the same to keep the existing prisoners or less, not more.

Enver ERDOGAN: There are a whole range of measures for prisons, and I think in Victoria we do take the opportunity to say we are leaders in many parts in terms of we do invest more in the facilities and the wellbeing of those in our custody compared to maybe some other jurisdictions. We run specific programs. I have talked about our centres of excellence for employment programs –

Nick McGOWAN: I suppose, Minister, I am just trying to understand why we are going from \$511 million to \$575 million in a very short period of time. That seems to be a very substantive increase. That surpasses the 22 per cent increase in construction costs in Victoria, for example.

Enver ERDOGAN: Well, some of those costs could be –

Nick McGOWAN: Perhaps, Commissioner, you could shed some light, no pun intended.

Larissa STRONG: The first point I would note is that is an estimate, so it would be based on calculations to do with both – those are private prison partnerships, so there is the capital component that, potentially depreciation. It will obviously be varied on actuals depending on available prisoner places that are funded for those particular prisons. So I suspect it is an estimate based on the contract, but it might be something we need to give you more detail on.

Nick McGOWAN: Just very quickly, Commissioner, Cherry Creek – do you know how many WorkCover claims have been lodged since it has been opened, by the employees?

Enver ERDOGAN: Mr McGowan, I know you are interested in Cherry Creek because you had an opportunity to visit there –

Nick McGOWAN: I am very interested in it, Minister.

Enver ERDOGAN: but we will have a session on our youth justice system a bit later this afternoon.

Nick McGOWAN: How clumsy of me, I do apologise.

Enver ERDOGAN: That is okay, Mr McGowan.

Nick McGOWAN: I was just trying to sneak one in there.

Enver ERDOGAN: I am interested in Cherry Creek as well. I am happy to talk about it when we get that opportunity this afternoon. Thank you.

Nick McGOWAN: Such little time and so much to ask.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We are going to go to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. Still on the community corrections services, in particular the post-sentence operations, Minister, referring to budget paper 3, page 152, I hear from my constituents that they are often worried about people being released from prison who are not rehabilitated or still pose a risk to community safety. Minister, what is the government doing to keep the community safe from these types of offenders?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Mr Tak, for that important question. The ‘Prisoner Supervision and Support’ line item reflects the base funding that goes into our corrections custodial system. In 2024–25 we have allocated over \$1.5 billion to run Victoria’s prisons and keep our Victorian community safe. This funding provides for the operation of our 16 custodial facilities that are located right across the state. These facilities are targeted at the specific rehabilitation and security needs of prisoners. They include six maximum-security facilities, five medium security and five minimum. As members of this committee know, two facilities are

dedicated to women. Most of you would be familiar with those facilities because they are out in the west and I know how passionate you are about the western suburbs of Melbourne: the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre and also – well, Tarrengower is out more regional west, north-west-ish. But it is important to know that. Our corrections facilities serve two complementary purposes: the first of course is to keep the Victorian community safe in the short term by keeping dangerous people in custody, but the second purpose is to improve community safety in the longer term by providing rehabilitation and reintegration services for people who have committed crimes and are at risk of reoffending.

We know that investments in our prison systems that maximise people's capacity to rehabilitate and turn their lives around are what will make us all safer in Victoria. We know that people in custody provided with the programs and tools they need to improve themselves are the most likely to succeed at successfully reintegrating into the community. I think that is important so if we get the right – and that was why I was proud to share our results in terms of the employment education engagement, which I am sure I will talk a little bit more about later, but that is why we are investing in initiatives to address substance abuse, provide mental health support, education support, health support. These are all protective factors that when people are released back into the community it reduces their chances of reoffending, meaning all our communities are safer. This budget strengthens that commitment with an additional \$41.3 million for a range of services, including family engagement, housing support, mental health support. By providing prisoners with the support and resources they need to rehabilitate we will be implementing preventative measures in the community so that we can work towards creating a safer and more secure society for all Victorians.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. I would like to talk to you on the reintegration program. Minister, I refer to budget paper 3, page 152. Could you please explain what the 'Prisoner Supervision and Support' line item is, and how does this investment help to keep the Victorian community safe?

Enver ERDOGAN: Just talking about the work we are doing in our prison system, I think one point I want to talk about is actually in relation particularly to employment, because I think employment is an important part of that piece. As I said, I was talking about protective factors, and it is one that we can be proud of because in Victoria we have one of the highest participation rates in the employment programs by prisoners and over 90 per cent engagement, and that is all part of that broader \$1.5 billion budget we have for the 'Prisoner Supervision and Support' line item. We know that when people can get a job on the way out of prison that is a factor that will allow them to turn their lives around and reintegrate back into the community. In Victoria we currently have the lowest unemployment rate in decades, and fantastic employers are lining up to offer people in our custody employment opportunities upon leaving prison. We have been very successful at the moment. Unfortunately, in the past that was not the case. We know that employers historically were reluctant to take on people into employment opportunities. I have had an opportunity to visit some of the facilities and some of our partners in corrections that do take people on their release from prison, whether that be warehousing work or construction work, and it feeds in well together with our educational investments we have made in terms of TAFE and real employment set-ups that we have set up, and employers can come into employment hubs in our custodial settings to help attract people. That is all part of what we are doing in this space.

The programs we engage in include vocational training centres of excellence in partnership with government into six prisons. At Loddon Middleton we have got a partnership with the Kangan Institute – many of you might know it, and it is out in Bendigo, but also they are a community provider of TAFE as well in Broadmeadows. That is innovative. It means that people can get employment – they get the skills to get employment upon release. The program also engages with potential employers to guarantee jobs upon leaving prison, so we have had really good success of lining people up with a job whilst they are still in custody, so part of their release planning, and obviously we look at connecting people and referring them to appropriate services always, and one of them is employment.

I want to flag that we know how reintegration can be harder for Aboriginal people leaving custody, understanding that we still do have an overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in our custodial settings. In Victoria we have worked hard to reduce that overrepresentation, but it is still very real. Last year, and I might talk about and reflect on it later, I had the privilege of appearing at the Yoorrook commission, talking about some of the outcomes for Aboriginal prisoners, but in this budget I want to give a shout-out in particular to Wadamba Prison to Work, who received \$3 million in this year's budget to provide employment services to Aboriginal people on short sentences, a critical service in helping these people connect back to the community.

We know that when people have a job their path to rehabilitation is much easier. If you have job it helps you get a house, because we know how hard the housing market is at the time. People will usually check your reference, and the first reference that real estate agents will check will be your employment history, and they might call your employer. Firstly, they want to see that you have an employment record, but more so: are you currently employed, how much are you earning? That is what we have been focused on. We know it is a main protective factor. I think employment can be understated. It is the dignity of work. Many of us got involved in politics, that is our reason for it – we understand value of dignity of work, and I think employment pathways are one of the key ways that I measure success, and that is why I was proud of the *Report on Government Services* and the range of reports reflecting on the great job we have done in getting people into work.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you.

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Mr Tak.

The CHAIR: We are going back to the Deputy Chair.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. Thank you, Minister. Minister, I am just again looking at the performance statement, appendix E. In particular what I am interested in is whether it is correct that there are new units at Barwon Prison and Melbourne Remand Centre that either need to be torn down and started again or substantially rebuilt. Commissioner, if you could assist, is that –

Enver ERDOGAN: Which page?

Nick McGOWAN: Page 103, the prisoner support and supervision output.

Danny O'BRIEN: You will not find the answer there, though, Minister.

Nick McGOWAN: But the Commissioner may have the answer.

Enver ERDOGAN: Are you talking about Melbourne Remand Centre and Barwon Prison –

Nick McGOWAN: Yes.

Enver ERDOGAN: and our prison infill program?

Nick McGOWAN: Well, particularly Barwon Prison and Melbourne Remand Centre. I understand that there were units that had been built there that either need to be torn down and started again or substantially rebuilt.

Enver ERDOGAN: We have invested in upgrading our facilities. Obviously we have got the Western Plains facility, but also a long-term commitment of ours was to build up capacity in our system and at our existing facilities, such as MRC and Barwon. The prison infill project is providing us with additional capacity at a number of existing sites. For some of these projects, construction is not yet complete, so I have not had an opportunity to inspect, like you did at Cherry Creek last year, Mr McGowan. The Department of Justice and Community Safety is managing the contracts for these in terms of new infrastructure to make sure they are delivered to a standard, and we do have high standards of what we like to see that our facilities. We are aiming to have the most modern and the best facilities possible. Where there are defects or problems, it is my expectation that all of these will be rectified by the department and contractors.

Nick McGOWAN: I suppose that is a good segue, then, Minister. Commissioner, do you have any knowledge of or visibility over this?

Larissa STRONG: Certainly. Capital projects are managed by another business unit in the department, the Community Safety Building Authority. In terms of the prison infill expansion project, there are five projects. Marngoneet and Middleton are complete. There are three that are still underway. There have been some defects certainly identified at the Metropolitan Remand Centre. We call them CSBA, but the building authority is working through that process with the builder in terms of making sure that they are rectified as is appropriate.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay, and are you aware of any defects at Barwon as well?

Larissa STRONG: I understand CSBA is now also looking at Barwon, based on the learnings from MRC to see if the same issues apply at Barwon. They are actively looking at that at the moment.

Nick McGOWAN: And what is the quantum of the cost of the remand centre for the remediation works or the repair works?

Larissa STRONG: We do not have that figure yet. They are still working through with the builder what the problem is and what the rectification will be.

Danny O'BRIEN: Is it right, though, that the buildings are going to have to be torn down and rebuilt?

Larissa STRONG: I do not think that is correct – no, not to my knowledge at this point in time, but obviously investigations are underway. It is too early to know what the rectification is.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. Again, Commissioner, perhaps this is a question for you: do you know how many times the minimum staff levels at Victoria's prisons were not met?

Larissa STRONG: I am sorry. Could you repeat –

Nick McGOWAN: How many times that the minimum staffing levels at Victoria's prisons were not met – either by calendar year or financial year, whichever is easier.

Larissa STRONG: That is actually very difficult in terms of the database to compile – we do not have a good collection record. But in general, prisons are operating as they are required to do. We did make changes about 15 months ago to our medium security prisons to reduce out-of-cell hours because we were having some staff shortages, so they were reduced from 11 hours to 9 hours. That has meant that we are able to offer that 9-hour out-of-cell offering regularly. Where we have had to have a lockdown due to a staff shortage, it has often just been for a few hours – a rolling lockdown, sometimes because we have not had an emergency response group staffing contingent at Barwon on a weekend. But it is by no means a very regular occurrence in terms of full-day lockdowns at all because of staffing shortages as opposed to an incident.

Nick McGOWAN: Can you tell me how many times you had a lockdown due to staff shortages in Victoria for each prison?

Larissa STRONG: I would have to take that on notice. It is really hard to get the collection of that data.

Nick McGOWAN: I accept that. Thank you. That would be good; thank you very much.

Enver ERDOGAN: We are still recruiting, Mr McGowan, as you would understand. I am sure throughout this week you have heard from other ministers how difficult it is recruiting new staff across different frontline work services. The economy has been running very hot in terms of a tight labour market. It is probably the tightest we have seen in our lifetime and probably your lifetime as well. So there are vacancies, and we are still hiring.

Nick McGOWAN: I do not know, Minister. You are forecasting for unemployment to go up, so I am not quite sure whether it is still an issue. But I will move on. I thank you for the point. Minister, again on the performance statement, we have often heard the government talk about how proud they are that there is a decrease of recidivism. However, the rate of return to prison within two years – each target has failed to be met, so that means that people are returning more frequently than you are actually targeting here. I can walk you through it. The expected outcome was 39 – it is actually 39.7. The target for 2023–24 is 39, and the actual is 39.5. Whatever that refers to – days, weeks, months – I am not sure. Why is that the case?

Enver ERDOGAN: It is important to understand the context of our prison population and that we do have the second-lowest imprisonment rate in the country. Reoffending rates remain below those of comparable states: New South Wales and Queensland. We like to compare ourselves with those big states normally, and our recidivism rates are below theirs. Our targets are ambitious. We wanted exactly 39 per cent – we are at 39.7.

Nick McGOWAN: I accept your point, Minister, but I am not sure they are particularly ambitious. What I am concerned about is that we do not have frequent flyers here. We do not want the same people coming back time and again. Yet for every target we have got here we are failing to meet them for some reason. What is the reason for that?

Enver ERDOGAN: I think what you see is that we are performing a lot better than the national average, which is in the low 40s. But we will invest in programs to make sure that people address their behaviour. We have dedicated professional staff – and I want to give them a shout-out again – that really do want to see a difference in these people’s lives. We have programs that will provide those opportunities for people to change their behaviour and address that, and when they are back out in the community, to make sure that they have support networks. But ultimately if individuals do reoffend, a custodial setting may be more appropriate for them.

Nick McGOWAN: I will move on to the participation rate for education. Again, that seems to be somewhat concerning. It is in the performance statement and appendix E. How would you explain the dwindling interest – let us put it that way – of the prisoner population in education?

Enver ERDOGAN: We have the second highest education participation rate out of any correction system in the nation. The national average shows that about 25 per cent of prisoners engage in education, but in Victoria it is much higher than that.

Nick McGOWAN: So why are your targets, though, expecting less, not more? You are consistently achieving less, not more.

Enver ERDOGAN: It could be a number of factors.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr McGowan, we are out of time. We are going to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. Minister, I would like to discuss that same performance measure as Mr McGowan, on the rate of return to prisons in two years. That is on page 103 of the ‘Department Performance Statement’. Now, you mentioned in your presentation the Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility. Does the work of that facility contribute to the outcome for this measure?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Ms Kathage. You are right, the Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility opened up in 2020, so I want to give a shout-out and a thankyou to the previous ministers who had the foresight of a need for this kind of facility upon release from the men’s system – particularly to Minister Carroll, Minister Tierney and Minister Hutchins. Many of them contributed to getting this facility off the ground. It is a 44-bed facility. It started as a COVID innovation that utilised the former immigration facility that was no longer needed by the Commonwealth as a temporary housing option for men leaving prison who would otherwise be homeless. What has followed is the creation of a safe environment for people exiting prison who might otherwise find themselves on the streets. The people residing there have either completed their sentence or commenced parole. While residing at the facility residents are supported in a variety of ways to assist their rehabilitation and reintegration into the community. Residents have access to single-room accommodation, shared communal facilities, living areas, kitchens, administrative offices and outdoor areas. Expectations are set for residents that they will work hard to secure long-term housing and employment with the assistance of an onsite case manager. We have partnered with Jesuit Social Services and G4S to deliver this important service.

I was out there not too long ago, and I saw the passionate team at Jesuit Social Services, who are really making a difference, and it was great to hear directly from some of the men in the facility. Some of them had done a lot of time, to be frank. One of the blokes I met had done over 10 years time, and he said he really needed a facility like this. We do not allow everyone to apply for this facility, I might say. But he really needed this time just to readjust, because the outside world had changed during his time in custody. He had done over 10 years, and he was finding it really helpful so that he could really plan ahead in terms of employment, see what options are out there and also get into the right headspace. Like I said, it can be confronting coming from the custody environment out to the community environment.

We have been able to support 252 men since it commenced in 2020. All residents are, as I said, risk-assessed based on their offending and behaviour. Those convicted of a sexual offence or suspected of posing a significant risk to staff or other residents or the wider community are not eligible to reside at that facility. All

residents must agree to a code of conduct and are required to engage with support services while living at the facility. I will make the point that this is voluntary, so these amendments apply because they have finished their sentences; they are applying to stay at this facility while they get their lives back on track. I am pleased that this budget allocates over \$13 million for continuation of the Maribyrnong centre for a further two years. This is a tangible demonstration of our government's commitment to supporting people in a safe and effective transition back into the community. It is innovative, and it is a key support to reintegrating people into the community after the time they have spent in prison.

We know that releasing people into unstable housing or, worse, homelessness, dramatically increases the chances that they will reoffend again and return to prison. By providing these new alternative placements we can drive down the risk of reoffending, not just focusing on what we have achieved, which is below the national average, but aiming for something better and a safer community for all Victorians.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. It is good to hear there is an onsite case manager for that intensive support; that is really great. It sounds like that is sort of one piece of the puzzle in terms of settling back into the community. What other supports in other parts of people's lives are provided for in this budget to help them settle back in?

Enver ERDOGAN: Employment and housing are very important. There are many other factors as well to successfully transition. Rehabilitation needs to begin from the moment people enter our custody, and the programs this government invests in recognise that. I know that is a focus of our commissioner as well. We want to do everything we can to make sure that people are healthy and stable upon their release. That is why our budget provides \$41.3 million over four years to strengthen programs and services for rehabilitation and reintegration for people in custody. As part of that, \$1.3 million is for family engagement services that are designed to provide trauma-informed, gender-responsive supports for women in prison and to help fractured relationships. Such initiatives include the Tuning into Respectful Relationships program, which helps people in custody create healthy, respectful relationships with family and loved ones, as we know many of the women in our system do have children, siblings and partners on the outside; the Safe, Strong and Connected program, which provides information support for women in custody who have experienced family violence; and the Living Free from Violence program for women who have caused harm or used a form of violence in a family setting.

These investments build on our expansion in primary health services in Victorian prisons. This includes moving primary health services at women's prisons to public providers and increasing services provided at men's prisons. We are already seeing dividends on that investment. One example is that over 90 per cent of Aboriginal people in custody have taken up specific Aboriginal health checks. This is a new service that has been delivered since 1 July last year. I want to make a point about these Aboriginal health checks, because they are comparable to what is available in the community, but what you would find in the community is that 90 per cent of Aboriginal people are probably not taking up these health checks, so they are theoretically available. For a lot of the cohort that we see now in our system in custody it is the first time they are getting these health checks, so people are not necessarily utilising the health services that are available out in the community. There is obviously a lot going on. That is why they end up in custody. But whilst they are with us – I think that has been one of our more successful rollouts, these Aboriginal health checks.

In the time I have left I will just highlight one more rehabilitation program, in particular the \$13 million that we have invested in the Kickstart program, which provides dedicated alcohol and other drugs treatments for people on community correction orders. We know how important addressing substance abuse is in addressing these issues, particularly as it is so important to us in the community, so this investment will help people under supervision achieve that.

Funding for rehabilitation reintegration support for people leaving custody is a cornerstone of our corrections budget, because the government recognises that successful rehabilitation is dependent on these factors. So employment and housing, but we are also addressing, I think, the substance abuse, which we know is prevalent in our communities, but it is very common in those that end up in our custodial facilities.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thanks, Minister. I know we are working to reduce over-representation of Aboriginal people in the justice system, and I guess part of that is stopping recidivism, so what are we doing in that space?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Ms Kathage.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Ms Kathage. We will go to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. Minister, could you advise the committee which, if any, of the line items in this budget acquit the recommendations from the parliamentary inquiry into children affected by parental incarceration?

Enver ERDOGAN: In terms of the budget and the work we are doing in this space, I know it is important we recognise the importance of family connections in promoting rehabilitation, reducing recidivism and supporting the reintegration of people in custody. I want to thank the members of that committee and those who gave evidence, especially those with lived experience of the justice system.

The report did hand down 69 findings and 29 recommendations. These recommendations span various areas of the criminal justice system. Some of it does fall in my portfolio, some falls within the Attorney-General's or police and some also to DFFH. We are already undertaking some work to meet some of those recommendations. We know that the work never ends, so we will continue to do that, but we have invested over \$140 million over the last four years in services and programs designed for employment pathways for men and women in prison and to strengthen family relationships. I gave an example of one of the programs we are running –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I appreciate that response. Just to check your response just then, though, which, if any, of the recommendations are acquitted by this budget? Could you point to any of them?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes. Specific recommendations?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: From that inquiry.

Enver ERDOGAN: I do not have a list of all the recommendations, but I am happy to see what I can provide.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: On notice? That would be fine.

Enver ERDOGAN: On notice, yes. There were 29 recommendations, so I will need to – I do not have a list of them.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: On notice would be great. To get specific, one of those recommendations was regarding the cost of phone calls in prison. In 2022 Telstra made all phone calls from payphones free across the country, yet people in Victorian prisons, I understand, are still charged a rate of \$7 for just 12 minutes of call, which to my understanding is the highest rate in Australia. People in prison are reliant on phone calls to stay connected to their families. So Minister, in your role, what you doing to reduce the costs of those phone calls from Victorian adult prisons, which are the highest in Australia?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Mr Puglielli – really good question. I think we know the importance of connection to family and community, and that is why supporting those outcomes and allowing people to connect to community as cheaply as possible is important. That is why since my time as corrections minister we have invested in a different range of methods to increase that connection. Phone calls are one option, but we have also increased Zoom calls. I am pleased to report to the committee today that in this financial year up until 31 March we have had 75,000 Zoom calls in our custodial facilities. We have made that easier. It is part of onboarding people into our custodial settings now, knowing that that option exists. During the pandemic we had lot of disruption with in-person visits, which have now returned in all our facilities. But your point about phone calls is right. It is more expensive than what is available in the community. The reason for that is the security settings that are required to record and monitor those calls makes it expensive.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sure.

Enver ERDOGAN: We know how vital these arrangements are for community safety.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes. Just for the sake of this committee, when can we expect to see the cost of a phone call come down or ideally be free?

Enver ERDOGAN: I want to see the cost come down, so I will put that on record. I said that at the Yoorrook Commission last year and I will say it again, I want to see the cost come down. There is a contract in place until 2025. As part of looking at that contract, I am committed to seeing what options are available to reduce the costs of these calls.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. So 2025 is a hopeful window for that being addressed. Thank you for noting that.

You have talked about the First Nations health checks, that particular program, so the recent investigation into health care provision for Aboriginal people in Victorian prisons showed that gaps in culturally informed health care put Aboriginal people at risk in Victorian prisons. Could you just, again, with respect to the budget, point to the budget line shows allocation for implementing recommendations from that investigation?

Enver ERDOGAN: I think we have made changes in our prison system to health contracts. I do want to thank – and I did see the Ombudsman’s recent report. It was quite concerning, parts of that report. But since 1 July we have had new health practitioners in place – GEO Healthcare in the men’s system and Western Health and Dhelkaya Health in the women’s system. Not only are we doing work in making sure that our service is provided in an Aboriginal culturally safe way, we have increased our Aboriginal workforce to make sure we can address those needs with an investment in Aboriginal wellbeing officers in a lot of our custodial facilities. Aboriginal health checks – like I said, over 900 specific health checks have been completed since 1 July. So that Ombudsman’s report – with all due respect, like I said, since that time we have had some drastic investments in our health system that, I believe, acquit some of that report. There is always more we can do, and I know it is a topic that is always raised with me with Aboriginal stakeholders, whether I speak with the Aboriginal Justice Caucus or with the Aboriginal Justice Forum. It does come up about the need for a culturally sensitive and appropriate way of treatment. There are shortages in finding qualified Aboriginal workforces, especially in the health field. That is why a government has invested in free TAFE and pathways for educational programs, so we can build up that workforce and we can deliver those services.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Minister. The Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service runs the Baggarrook program, which provides housing and supports Aboriginal women exiting the prison system. I understand the budget has committed ongoing funding for Baggarrook, the level of which, though, means they can continue only assisting up to six women at any time. Despite requests from them for more funding, there is no additional funding beyond that to help more women get that stable footing and keep out of prison. Will you advocate to the Minister for Housing for greater investment in Aboriginal community controlled housing?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you for that, Mr Puglielli. Yes, we have invested in the Baggarrook centre, and I think it is really important that we have, to prevent homelessness, supports for Aboriginal women leaving our custodial facilities. I want to thank VALS advocacy on that issue. I think housing is an issue that you are very familiar with, and the Minister for Housing is as well. I think we need to do more. It is a broader societal issue, not just unique for people leaving our custodial facilities. As a government that is why we are committed to building 800,000 new homes over 10 years, but some of it – this space is much more unique in terms of transitional support and housing for Aboriginal women. I will always advocate for more resources for housing in our state.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. With respect to the Western Plains facility, we have heard it is being used for training and there are no prisoners in there. Do you have an overview of exactly how much money has been spent over how many years keeping that facility open? You can provide it on notice.

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes, the funding to keep the facility safe and secure is part of our broader \$1.5 billion budget to maintain our facilities. It is all in there.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Minister. We are just going to move on. Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister and officials, for your attendance this afternoon. I am actually going to continue on with the question from Ms Kathage about Aboriginal programs and the over-representation, of course, of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system, which we are seeking to address through those programs. I know some of my other colleagues have been interested in these questions too. I am just hoping you can start to talk through some of those specific supports that we are providing, hoping to drag that over-representation down.

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Mr Hilakari. I know your passion for seeing improvements and reducing over-representation of Aboriginal people over a long time, and as minister I also had the privilege of appearing at Yoorrook and reconfirming our commitment to reducing that over-representation. Unfortunately, that over-representation is continuing, but as a government we all are committed to a truth-telling and treaty process for Aboriginal people. This is a pathway for walking alongside Aboriginal people to recognise the wrongs of the past so that we can improve their lives in the future.

I work closely with the Aboriginal Justice Caucus, a longstanding partnership between Aboriginal communities and the government towards addressing the over-representation of Aboriginal people, not only in corrections but across our whole justice system. We are seeing the outcomes of that work. The number of Aboriginal men in custody peaked just before the pandemic at 810, and as of 30 April 2024, that is down 12 per cent from that high figure of 810 men. For Aboriginal women, the numbers are even more promising; we have had a reduction by 60 per cent. We had 80 women in custody; now we are down to 32 women in that same period. It is worth noting that that is in line with national Closing the Gap targets, reducing over-representation by 15 per cent on 2019 levels.

While we still have more work to do, Victoria is making progress towards that target. These achievements are only possible because of the investments we have made in successive budgets to address over-representation. This budget again commits \$28.2 million for a range of Aboriginal-specific programs, including in my corrections portfolio. The Torch is one of the signature programs, a prisoner art program that enables Indigenous people to sell their artwork while still in custody. The program enables rehabilitation through cultural learning instilled through artistic practices and is a successful strategy for addressing recidivism rates. One of the reasons I want to talk about the Torch program is because it is not just an arts program, it really is about reconnecting with community and culture. A lot of the Aboriginal staff at the Torch program and Aboriginal wellbeing officers have also been in custody, which facilitated that program. They do an amazing job. For a lot of the Aboriginal prisoners, the policies of colonisation have meant that some Aboriginal people have lost their connection to country and community, and this arts program for many of them is the first time they rekindle that connection.

Mathew HILAKARI: Is that one of those really protective factors? You talk about employment and housing for the general prison population – that reconnection with culture is one of those protective factors that you have referenced a few times?

Enver ERDOGAN: A hundred per cent, Mr Hilakari, and I think it cannot be overstated, especially for our First Nations people, but also a lot of other minorities in our community, that connection to culture is a key part of healing and rehabilitation. There is intergenerational disadvantage we are talking about here, and we can only address that through that connection to culture.

The Wadamba prison-to-work program is another one that is focused. In partnership with Corrections Victoria, it aims to assist and empower Aboriginal participants to transition from prison to sustainable and meaningful employment. I think that builds upon a lot of the work we have done in other portfolios as well. You would know a lot of our government departments have procurement policies that encourage Indigenous employment because we know, again, this is an intergenerational disadvantage, the effects of colonisation playing out for Aboriginal people today, and I think we need to correct that. I think the Wadamba prison-to-work program is an important part of that, and we have Aboriginal wellbeing officers directly working with First Nations people inside prisons. These important roles are essential to keeping Aboriginal people in custody connected to their families and culture. I will add, and the Aboriginal Justice Caucus always reminds me, there is a historical distrust of institutions for Aboriginal people, and rightfully so when you understand the history and what they have experienced in the state of Victoria and in Australia. I think having Aboriginal people working with Aboriginal people to get better outcomes is key.

Mathew HILAKARI: And Yoorrook, I am so glad to hear of your appearance there, and I hope you took some insights and some learnings from there. But I know I have only got a little bit of time left, so I am going to take us to women in custody with reference to the budget paper 3, page 66, and this has a line item called ‘Supporting the corrections system to improve community safety’. I am just hoping you can talk to that but particularly to women in custody who have been over a period of time a rising population within the broader prison population.

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you for that, Mr Hilakari. It is a very important one. As the committee would be well aware, the government has proudly implemented policies that benefit women right across the Victorian community. I know many of you are talking about the pain gap at the moment – that is one of our policies – so this is important work. Investment is also continuing in our corrections system, in women’s health care, addressing the pain gap and in our reforms on family violence. These are all policies to make sure that women have economic security. These are initiatives that everyone in government can be rightly proud of. It is no different in our corrections. It is true that women only make up a small amount of our prison population, around 5 per cent. The latest figures are that we currently have less than 300 women in custody, which is down from a peak of 500 in the early –

Mathew HILAKARI: Fantastic.

Enver ERDOGAN: So that is a significant – we are talking about a 40 per cent reduction in only four years in our women’s population. I do not like comparing to other jurisdictions, because I feel like sometimes we are doing a lot better than what they are, but I know when I visited Queensland last year I noticed that their women’s prison population was over double ours.

Mathew HILAKARI: And that is a smaller population state.

Enver ERDOGAN: That is right. So definitely we are doing something right in terms of our engagement with those social supports that women need. Obviously in the men’s system we have a much higher figure, closer to 6000. Of our 18 correctional facilities around the state, two are dedicated to housing women in custody, our main women’s facilities are the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre in the western suburbs and the minimum security Tarrengower Prison not far from Castlemaine. These two facilities form the heart of our response to women in corrections. There are a range of special services. We try to make it as much as possible similar to what is available in the community. It is not always the case, but we do try. You need to understand that a lot of women in custody have sometimes different needs, so it does not need to be the same, it just needs to be tailored to their needs, and that is what we are trying to do. Western Health has joined us at Tarrengower, where the majority of women are in custody. From my initial reports, they are doing a fantastic job in that engagement and making sure that women get the services and support they need, similar to what would be provided out in the community. Thank you, Mr Hilakari.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mr Hilakari.

Minister and officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee for this session this afternoon. The committee will 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 its consideration of the victim support portfolio at 1:35 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.