

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

2021–22 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Wednesday, 30 June 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr James Newbury

Mr Danny O’Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Ms Natalie Hutchins, MP, Minister for Corrections,

Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Secretary,

Ms Larissa Strong, Acting Corrections Commissioner, and

Mr Ryan Phillips, Deputy Secretary, Corrections and Justice Services, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

The CHAIR: I declare back open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, with Minister Hutchins. This time we join you for consideration of the corrections portfolio. We again invite you to make a 5-minute presentation, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

Visual presentation.

Ms HUTCHINS: Thank you, Chair. If I could get straight into the presentation and just give you an overview of the corrections system: we employ over 7000 people within the system servicing both custodial facilities and supporting community corrections in Victoria. These individuals help support over 7000 people in prisons and over 8000 people on community correction orders. Of those individuals in prison, as of the end of April, 44 per cent were unsentenced and on remand. Across Victoria there are 11 publicly operated prisons, three privately operated ones—Fulham, Port Phillip and Ravenhall—and one transitional centre. The transitional centre—I was very pleased to visit last year—is the Judy Lazarus Transition Centre, which provides supervised pathways back into the community for selected prisoners nearing the end of their sentence.

The next slide provides further information on the scale of the corrections portfolio. The total output budget for corrections this year is \$1.675 billion.

As you are aware, a key recent priority has been keeping the corrections system, including our staff and offenders, safe from COVID-19—and thus the broader community. We have spent \$86 million on COVID-19 responses to 30 April 2021. I have previously spoken about the significant infrastructure investments that we have made in this space, and we have \$2.1 billion worth of prison infrastructure projects currently underway, considering the importance of modern and fit-for-purpose infrastructure allowing for and achieving rehabilitation and community safety standards.

Next slide: during COVID-19 the population of our prison system declined due to the impacts of COVID-19 on the front end of the justice system, such as changes in policy and a decrease in court cases. From the end of March 2020 the number of Victorian prisoners decreased from over 8000 to just under 7000 in late October 2020, a reduction of about 14 per cent. This is largely due to the decline in unsentenced prisoners. A decrease in police-recorded crime during the stay-at-home restrictions, along with changes to police and court operations over the period of COVID-19 restrictions, has contributed to the overall decline in our prison population over the last 15 months. The number of unsentenced prisoners is now 3203 as of 30 May, which is consistent with numbers from 31 March 2020. However, as mentioned, the total prisoner numbers at the end of April—7274—is still below the end of March 2020 figures.

Onto the next slide—we have continued our efforts to prioritise the health and wellbeing of staff and offenders and have kept the system safe from COVID-19 transmissions. Can I congratulate the workforce, who have done a tremendous job in doing that. The adaptations we have made in the corrections system include additional support measures in recognition of the importance of maintaining physical and mental wellbeing while restrictions are in place, innovative approaches to service delivery and enhanced cleaning and safety measures. You can see by the data on the previous slide that there have been significant efforts to date in the corrections system to provide the right support to ensure access to services and visits during the pandemic, and given the recent outbreak this has unfortunately meant the reintroduction of restrictions in custodial settings, including suspension of in-person visits and services, due to health advice and consideration of our obligations under the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities. I am really pleased to be able to report a total number of 28 COVID-19 cases amongst prisoners has been reported since the start of the pandemic. It remains that all

these cases were acquired in the community, and we were able to keep them isolated. There have been no new additional cases since I last presented to this committee. It demonstrates the success of the measures and the investments that we made.

Our commitment to the safety and wellbeing of our staff in prisons is also evident through the recent announcements that we have made. We have commissioned an independent review into the culture of the Victorian prison system. The review will inquire into and report on culture, safety, inclusion and integrity within the Victorian custodial corrections system.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister and colleagues. Minister, budget paper 3, page 377, outlines IBAC's role in Victoria. You are obviously aware of IBAC's recent special report on corrections. Since that report was released, how many Corrections Victoria staff have been dismissed?

Ms HUTCHINS: I thank the member for his question. I also thank the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission for the report that they tabled in the Parliament just last week. I welcome the opportunity to work with IBAC on improving the culture of our corrections system. I am not going to comment on individuals that may have—

Mr D O'BRIEN: I did not ask you to comment on individuals; I asked for how many have actively been dismissed.

Ms HUTCHINS: Well, I might refer that element of the question to the Commissioner. But I will say on the report that was handed down that I am very pleased that my department has agreed to implement two of the recommendations that were directed to them in the findings of this report and that I am also giving careful consideration and due diligence to the recommendation that requires legislative change. We know a vast majority of our corrections staff actually do the right thing and stood up last year to protect Victorians in stopping the spread of COVID through our prison system and out into the community. But unfortunately, yes, there have been some issues that have been identified, and I just note that they were referred to IBAC by Corrections Victoria. It is essential that we remain vigilant to the risks that continue to be in place, and we need to make sure that we are building the barriers to stop that from happening and improving our system, our training and our staff to uphold the highest standards.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So, Minister, perhaps directly: what action have you taken to do that since the release of this report?

Ms HUTCHINS: Well, I actually took action to announce a review into the culture and appoint independent reviewers to undertake that work. I know that Corrections Victoria has also done a power of work to improve ethics amongst our staff and training, but I will ask the Commissioner to supplement.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, are you still Acting Commissioner?

Ms STRONG: Correct, yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes? Sorry, just to be correct on that. As we throw to you for a response to the question of how many staff have been dismissed, can I also ask over the last 12 months how many cases of prison officers smuggling drugs and contraband, using excessive force and having inappropriate relations with inmates have occurred, if you have that information.

Ms STRONG: Sure. To go to your first question, which was in relation to the IBAC report into corrections and the four cases or the four operations that IBAC report to, it is actually detailed in the IBAC report, but in the public prisons a number of prison officers were dismissed and actually two ended up with prison terms as a result of those investigations.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry. I am having a bit of trouble hearing you. How many have actually been dismissed?

Ms STRONG: From the IBAC recommendations in the corruption report I think there would have been at least three that were dismissed, and two ended up with prison sentences in relation to that. Those reports go back to conduct between 2016 and 2018.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay, so three dismissed and two actually imprisoned, did you say?

Ms STRONG: They did get prison terms, yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, okay. And do you have the data on how many cases of prison officers smuggling drugs or contraband, using excessive force or having inappropriate relations with inmates have occurred in the past 12 months?

Ms STRONG: I do not have that particular data. I can say for the 19/20 financial year we had 17 prison staff that were suspended while we were doing investigations and three prison staff were terminated. Obviously the suspensions are still going through a process, so we do not yet know the outcome of that process.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Are the three terminated the same as the three dismissed that you referred to earlier?

Ms STRONG: No, they will be different.

Mr D O'BRIEN: They will be different, so that is in the last 12 months—the 17?

Ms STRONG: That is this financial year up to—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Are you able to tell me what those suspensions relate to without going into personal details?

Ms STRONG: No. I would have to take that on notice.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. If you are able to, that would be good. Do you admit, consistent with the findings of the IBAC report, Acting Commissioner, that Corrections Victoria has a serious systemic corruption issue that has contributed to below-par service delivery?

Ms STRONG: I think corrections environments are unique environments which have unique risks in terms of misconduct and corruption that we are well aware of, which we have a number of systems in place to identify, as the minister mentioned. The IBAC reports were all referred to IBAC by Corrections, which is showing to some extent we are picking up on misconduct and concerning staff behaviour. It is an area that we are always, I guess, diligent to. There has been a lot of reform in the last two years: a special integrity and investigations unit within the department to manage the relationship with IBAC in terms of referrals, but also to do, I guess, the reviews independently of Corrections Victoria. So we absolutely have unique risks. I do not think we have a systemic issue, but we can always improve, and that is what the aim of the cultural review is.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Commissioner. Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister, Commissioner, Secretary and officials, and thanks, Chair. I would like to take you to budget paper 3, page 293, and I am particularly interested in getting a bit of an understanding around female prisoners and again note at 426 the number of female prisoners is lower than the target of 582 to 614. I am interested in understanding and perhaps if you can provide for the committee the reasons for the difference between the target and the outcome.

Ms HUTCHINS: Well, the expected outcome is lower than the target, and I think that reflects a number of issues and a number of reasons: primarily the fact that we have had a recidivism and rehabilitation strategy in place for some time now but also due to factors relating to COVID, which I mentioned in my presentation. We have seen a decrease across the whole prison system, and it was particularly marked in the women's system. I think it is certainly worth us as a government having a look at some of the reasons behind the fall in crime and the areas in the fall in crime that occurred during the pandemic. There might be lessons for us to learn in the crime prevention space there.

But certainly we are committed to reducing women's reoffending by ensuring that we have got policies in place that are gender responsive but also that go to the heart of some of the core reasons and root causes of why some of these women have ended up in incarceration and trying to work with them around those issues—many have been victims themselves of family violence or violence—and also stepping up the services to assist those that are released to make sure they are in a space that means they can return to society without the risk of

reoffending, and that includes support both whilst they are in prison but also connecting them to services outside of the prison system, whether that be in mental health or working with them on drug and alcohol addictions. And housing is a really, really big issue. Also there are some targeted programs which I am really pleased we have continued to support in this budget for Aboriginal women, who remain to be over-represented in the numbers in our prison system. So we are making sure that we are tailoring support, and our announcements that have come out of this budget really do go to the heart of that but also previous budgets that have done that.

I think one of the best programs that I was able to see firsthand at Tarrengower was a mothers and children's program that works hand in hand with reconnecting those women with their broader families as well as their children in a very managed way, with the support of psychologists and a family maternal health expert as well in place. So some good work is happening there.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Minister. I am also interested in understanding, using the same budget reference, perhaps if you could explain, the investments that are being made to DPFC to help support Aboriginal women in custody.

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes. Of course there have been concerns raised in the broader community and in the Aboriginal community around preventing Aboriginal deaths in custody, and as part of our commitment to that, of the \$33 million that we have invested in preventing Aboriginal deaths in custody, moving forward over the next few years \$4.8 million has been allocated for a new healing service and unit at Dame Phyllis Frost for Aboriginal women in prison and \$1.9 million to ensure the 20-bed Aboriginal healing unit is a culturally safe space as well. So that will be developed in consultation with the broader Aboriginal community and our Aboriginal Justice Caucus as well, with the aim of the healing unit being able to reduce recidivism by addressing the underlying factors of offending and providing a culturally strengthening environment for those individuals.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Minister. I think I will leave it there, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Richards. Mr Limbrick.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Minister and team, again. I have got a couple of questions about the women's prison upgrade on budget paper 4, page 94. I suppose the first question is: why has the project been delayed, and when do we expect that to start? I think it was stated it was going to be completed in quarter 2, 2022–23, but when do we expect that to start?

Ms HUTCHINS: I might have to refer to the Commissioner around the actual start date, but there have been a number of projects at Dame Phyllis Frost that have been ongoing and undertaken, including a new industry-based kitchen facility to support transition-to-work programs in regard to vegetable preparation. That in itself was quite a construction job that happened. So this work has to be staged. It cannot all happen at once at the facility, but certainly some of the older facilities that we have announced that we are decommissioning had to be upheld and utilised during the COVID period for isolation reasons. But certainly the infill program on new beds has started, to my knowledge, but I will throw to the Acting Commissioner for clarification.

Ms STRONG: The minister is correct. The new kitchen has occurred at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, which was part of the upgrade component. The work on the accommodation unit is well underway. The design has been signed off. I am pretty sure a builder is being engaged and earthworks are occurring. I think the earthworks preliminary work is due to be done by about September.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. I have a couple of other questions about it. The accommodation, how many bed units does this actually include, and of those new units how many will be isolation and how many will be remand units?

Ms STRONG: The new accommodation unit will be a reception unit. From my recollection it is about a 60-bed accommodation unit for reception—women when they first come into the prison system—so it is fair to assume that most of them would be remandees but some might be sentenced prisoners. It also includes two units to support women with, I guess, complex needs who often find themselves in a management regime as well. So that is another 40 beds, through two 20-bed units, for women with more complex needs.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. And another question, on page 92, budget paper 4, the Chisholm Road prison project. It says that there is an extra \$460 million in the next financial year for this project, bringing the total investment to around \$1.18 billion: what was the original total expected investment?

Ms STRONG: Would you like me to—

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes, because it was before my time.

Ms STRONG: Yes. Chisholm Road was funded in two stages. So in the 2018–19 state budget it was a \$689 million project, and then it got a further allocation in the 2019–20 state budget to expand it to 1248 beds, taking it up to the amount of money you just mentioned. So \$689 million plus \$429 million, with two different budget outcomes.

Mr LIMBRICK: And is that higher than what was originally expected, or is that—

Ms STRONG: No, that is what was provided for in the budget.

Mr LIMBRICK: Right. Okay. There was another budget item: \$33.1 million for preventing Aboriginal deaths in custody includes an Aboriginal healing unit. Could you describe what that actually is? Like, it talks about healing and rehabilitation in a culturally safe way. What does that mean exactly?

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes, I can answer that. I did just touch on it in the previous question, but certainly there is evidence across the whole of Australia that having a healing centre actually helps to deal with the trauma that has been experienced by the prisoner before coming into contact with the justice system—the intergenerational effects of colonisation. So a culturally safe healing centre is about having Aboriginal practices embedded in the psychological and mental health assistance that some of these prisoners have requested and some of them have been assessed as needing in order to rehabilitate.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Limbrick. Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Can I just ask a couple of quick questions in follow-up to Mr O'Brien and the report referred to earlier. Operation Caparra found that a former Corrections Victoria employee inappropriately accessed data on behalf of 15 individuals, including known criminals. Minister, what data was taken and have those affected by the breach being informed?

Ms HUTCHINS: Sorry, I did not hear that last bit.

Mr NEWBURY: What was taken, what data was accessed, and have the affected individuals been informed?

Ms HUTCHINS: I might ask the Commissioner to go into the detail.

Ms STRONG: I will have to get back to you in terms of the individuals whose data was accessed and what action was taken, but we would have had a privacy impact process that we would have followed as part of that.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. If you do not mind taking notice, that would be terrific. Minister, will former corrections commissioner Emma Cassar be dismissed, or will she be allowed to return to her role?

Ms HUTCHINS: She would be absolutely welcome back in her role.

The CHAIR: And I would request, Mr Newbury, that you keep to the estimates for the 2021–22 budget period, please.

Mr NEWBURY: I am just referring to previous testimony.

The CHAIR: I am referring to the budget estimates, the scope of this inquiry, please.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you, Labor Chair. Commissioner, can I take you to budget paper 3, page 292. Would you mind providing an update on the total number of emergency management days that are provided to inmates relating to COVID restrictions?

Ms STRONG: I think we provided the committee with that information in January. I propose that we wait until end June, and I can give you the financial year data. It takes a couple of weeks post 30 June to process and grant them, so I will give you the data up to end June on notice.

Mr NEWBURY: Do you have anything with you now?

Ms STRONG: Only what we would have provided you I think back in January.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay. Is there a cap on the number of days that can be provided to prisoners?

Ms STRONG: No. The policy is a one for one for every day of significant disruption or deprivation or one day of EMD, subject to good behaviour.

Mr NEWBURY: Would you have any idea of the largest number of days any single prisoner has been awarded?

Ms STRONG: Not off the top of my head, no.

Mr NEWBURY: In terms of the data that you are going to provide, questions on notice are due within 10 days of the hearing, so if you actually are able to capture what you have at the moment—

Ms STRONG: I would just have to check that delay between the granting of that.

Mr NEWBURY: No, I completely understand—whatever date you have. But can I ask—I am interested in a total number of days—what is, without obviously going into specifics, the largest number of days, perhaps, that have been awarded to any single prisoner, so just the maximum number.

Ms FALKINGHAM: Mr Newbury, consistent with previous practice we do not provide numbers in relation to individual prisoners. We will provide the total number.

Mr NEWBURY: De-identified.

Ms FALKINGHAM: We do not provide that because it is identifiable through the data we provide.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay. What are you able to provide?

Ms FALKINGHAM: The data we provide every six months in relation to the total number for the quarter it applies to, so consistent with the past practice of what we provide to PAEC.

Mr NEWBURY: Minister, this is perhaps a question for you. There was genuine community concern about Adam Brookman being released nine months early, and I think that is a completely understandable community concern, especially if it related to nine months worth of emergency management days. I would offer you an opportunity, perhaps without going into the individual if you choose not to, to talk about how that was able to happen and any comments you would wish to make.

Mr MAAS: On a point of order, Chair, Mr Newbury cannot ask a question about an individual and then have the minister respond by not referring to that individual.

Mr NEWBURY: I specifically said—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury! I am hearing Mr Maas on the point of order.

Mr NEWBURY: This is getting ridiculous. This is just simply a Labor intervention—I mean, seriously.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, again you are yelling over the top of me.

Mr NEWBURY: I am not yelling. I am not yelling at all. This is a farce. I mean, every time the opposition asks questions the Labor hacks down the other end jump over the top. What a surprise.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you please stop yelling over the top of me. I am attempting to hear Mr Maas on the point of order. When I have heard Mr Maas I will seek further contributions. You are welcome to make a contribution, as is Ms Taylor. Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair. I do not believe that the minister would be able to address the question that was asked is the first point. The other thing is it just does not fall within the scope—

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I cannot hear Mr Maas when you yell over the top of him.

Mr NEWBURY: I cannot hear Mr Maas.

The CHAIR: That is because you are yelling.

Mr MAAS: We give all the members of the opposition a fair bit of leeway, I think.

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Mr MAAS: Listen here, lads gang up the other end of the table—

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I cannot hear Mr Maas. Your rudeness remains astounding.

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I cannot hear Mr Maas. Mr Newbury, can you stop being so rude, stop yelling over the Chair—

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you are being incredibly rude and disrespectful to every member of this committee as well as the witnesses. I am attempting to hear Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: I have finished my point of order. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, did you wish to comment on the point of order?

Mr NEWBURY: No. I have made my comments.

The CHAIR: No? Thank you. Ms Taylor.

Mr NEWBURY: No, sorry, Chair. Mr O'Brien—

The CHAIR: No, Mr Newbury, I have now called Ms Taylor. I quite specifically said before, Mr Newbury, that I would call you and then I would call Ms Taylor, and if Mr O'Brien would like to contribute, he can wait his turn as well. You are not chairing this meeting. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Firstly, I would like a withdrawal of the pejorative terms that referred to members up this end when he referred to us as Labor hacks.

Mr NEWBURY: Sorry?

Ms TAYLOR: I thought that was pejorative.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Mr NEWBURY: I didn't hear.

Ms TAYLOR: I do have a further point: that parliamentary privilege does not mean you have reckless indifference to the impact of the questions that you pose here, and I would like to see some sort of reflection and respect for the dignity of this process, and we are not seeing it currently.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Just on the point of order, the issue that Mr Newbury has asked a question about and the particular individual was widely canvassed in the media last week, including by the minister herself in the discharge of her duties as the Minister for Corrections. To say it is not in scope when we are looking at the accountability and integrity of the public sector and the executive is just ridiculous. The time has now expired, but members up the other end need to understand we are here to hold the executive to account on decisions they make and on decisions that they comment on, and this has been widely canvassed in the public.

The CHAIR: Would anyone else like to contribute? In relation to the point of order, I uphold it. I take your point, Mr O'Brien, but our role of scrutiny is in relation to, in this instance—

Mr Newbury interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you please—

Mr NEWBURY: It is farcical.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Say what you want—it is farcical.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: You cannot justify it.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury! Our role in scrutiny in this instance in this inquiry is in relation to the 2021–22 budget estimates, and I would ask that people keep their questions to the 2021–22 budget estimates.

To take further the contribution of Ms Taylor, I would remind all members of this committee that parliamentary privilege is indeed a privilege, and with it comes a responsibility to be decent, to be honest and to be accountable for what we say. And I would remind all members of the committee that parliamentary privilege is indeed exactly that—a privilege—and not to misuse it.

I will now pass the call to Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Minister and departmental team and Acting Commissioner. Minister, if I could take you to the topic of early intervention programs to prevent Aboriginal people entering custody and specifically reference budget paper 3, page 6, would you be able to explain for the committee how the initiative of continuing after-hours family violence support will meet the needs of Aboriginal communities?

Ms HUTCHINS: Thank you for your question. This is a really important area of work. And it was sharpened even more by the COVID pandemic last year in terms of having prevention outreach work that could go beyond the normal service delivery, and I mean that through particularly the phone services that were able to be set up out of hours by two amazing organisations—Djirra in the women's space and Dardi Munwurro in the men's space. They identified a major service gap at the start of COVID-19 of men and women who were very much at the edge and at risk of coming into contact with the justice system through some of the effects that they were feeling due to both the pandemic but also many years of trauma and disadvantage.

This service was set up in a very quick manner. And I am really pleased that out of the most recent budget we have been able to continue to support that ongoing service for the next two years, really specialising in particular in the family violence space both for men as perpetrators but men experiencing family violence and for women and their children as well to be able to pick up the phone and get that advice, to get counselling, to get referrals, to get legal advice. Both services do that. In particular Dardi Munwurro, when I spoke to the

coordinator of the brother-to-brother program there that provides this sort of advice and works very closely across the state with Victoria Police as well, the coordinator of the program burst into tears at the thought that we were able to continue to support this very, very vital program, which he assures me has actually saved lives in the time that we have funded it. And I am really proud that we have continued to support that and also the work of Djirra, with female-friendly support out of hours with paralegals and community support officers and solicitors as well. It is really important work that we are doing.

Mr MAAS: Excellent. Thanks, Minister. In terms of the provision of women's and men's diversion programs, would you be able to explain how this will help prevent Aboriginal people entering the prison system?

Ms HUTCHINS: Thanks. I know that the budget provides around \$4 million over two years for diversion programs for Aboriginal adults. There is different—separate—money for the youth sector, for young people and children. This funding is really about establishing a new community-based Aboriginal men's diversion program based on the success and the lessons learned from the successful Koori women's diversion program model that has been operating across four sites in regional Victoria and one in metropolitan Melbourne. So the women's program supports women at risk of incarceration and further negative contact with the justice system. Women in the program have improved both social and emotional wellbeing, reconnected with children and extended family, ceased alcohol and drug use and have had the supports and the confidence to end violent relationships that they may have been caught up in. It has also expanded the existing women's program, this funding, and established the new men's one, which we are looking very closely at in looking at its outcomes to reduce recidivism and to promote social and emotional wellbeing across a number of Aboriginal communities.

Mr MAAS: Terrific. Thanks, Minister. I will leave it there. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Maas. I will pass the call to Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Minister and your team, for appearing this afternoon. I want to ask some questions about prison utilisation rates, and you can take these on notice if you do not have the information on hand. Currently there are lower prison utilisation rates as a result of the pandemic. Now, my understanding is projections prior to the pandemic were that there would be over 9000 male prisoners in 2021 and 10 000 in 2023. Are there now revised projections for male and female prison numbers over the next four years, and if so, can they be provided to the committee?

Ms HUTCHINS: They have not actually been released as yet; they are still being put together. But we are happy to take it on notice and provide them.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Thank you. And is there also a revised output cost of actually running the prison system with those updated projections?

Ms HUTCHINS: I might ask the Secretary to supplement.

Ms FALKINGHAM: Thanks for your question, Mr Hibbins. I am not sure what you mean by 'revised'.

Mr HIBBINS: Sorry, by?

Ms FALKINGHAM: If you could just explain to me a little bit more about what you mean by 'revised'. Obviously the cost for the prisons overall does not change. Our rosters are maintained.

Mr HIBBINS: Oh, yes, because the cost is fixed. That is correct, isn't it, regardless of how many prisoners you have got? Is that the case?

Ms FALKINGHAM: It depends what prison we are speaking about in terms of what costs are fixed and which ones are adjustable. Obviously the commissioner can speak to it. Obviously we have to move prisoners according to what the safety needs are, what the requirements of those prisoners are and what the workforce looks like.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. So, for example, if you have got revised projections for actual prison capacity, in terms of the actual cost of running the system, is that included in that data or is that something that is different?

Ms FALKINGHAM: That is something different again, Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Is that information able to be provided to the committee?

Ms FALKINGHAM: We can provide it on notice.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Thank you. In terms of modelling for projected prisoner numbers, has any modelling been undertaken in regard to projected prisoner numbers based on any changes to the *Bail Act*?

Ms HUTCHINS: First of all, our remodelling work is absolutely ongoing, and we are not in a position today to talk about that in detail because we are looking at what the outcome effects are of COVID. We had a shutdown only two weeks ago, so we know that we are far from out of the woods on this pandemic and its effects on our justice system. So to plan right now for a snapshot in time would not be fair and just, but certainly based on our prison numbers over a trajectory of a couple of years, that is how we do our planning, rather than in the last few minutes.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay, thank you. Because, I mean, just looking forward, essentially the challenge continuing on the current trajectory is that it will be either building more prisons or having to have bail reform to actually reduce the number of people in prison.

Ms HUTCHINS: I think that is more of a statement than a question.

Mr HIBBINS: Perhaps it is a proposition that I am putting to you to—

Ms HUTCHINS: I think certainly every state faces these questions around balancing what the law currently upholds in terms of sentencing or remand and then planning around that. But certainly we are planning within the current laws.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay, thank you. Just finally, I think at the last estimates you provided the breakdown in terms of the service delivery outcomes across all prisons. Are you able to provide that latest information to the committee?

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes. We are certainly able to take that on notice and provide that to you.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay, thank you. And would it be possible for that information to be actually proactively made available through the annual report?

Ms FALKINGHAM: Mr Hibbins, we are always looking for more ways we can be as transparent as possible, so let me take that on notice and we will look at that issue.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay, thank you. Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Minister Hutchins.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hibbins. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you, Minister, Acting Commissioner and department officials. I would like to refer you to budget paper 3, page 280, exploring this issue of rehabilitation in greater detail: ‘Objective 3: Effective management of prisoners and offenders and provision of opportunities for rehabilitation and reparation’ specifically. Can you outline some of the programs and supports aimed at improving rehabilitation for prisoners?

Ms HUTCHINS: Thank you for your question. It is almost the absolute flip side of the root causes of crime that I outlined earlier with the crime prevention strategy. All of our rehabilitation and reintegration programs go to the core of tackling those root causes of crime, whether it be offending behaviour change programs; anger-management-type work; education, training and employment programs; drug and alcohol programs; specialised mental health services; prosocial activities to strengthen family relationships for both men and women; pre- and post-release services to support integration into the community; or case management to assess prisoners’ needs before they are released.

I managed to in one of my prison tours spend a bit of time with a prison officer whose job it is to do that reintegration work, and I was surprised to find out that a very high percentage of prisoners no longer have ID—

either their drivers licence has expired in the time, or because of the nature of their offending they have lost their ID along the way. That makes it extremely hard upon release to then make sure that you can see a doctor or get services, if you no longer have a Medicare card or ID. These are some of the key things—and some of the small things but very important things—that our case managers do pre-release, and we know that those first couple of weeks upon leaving the prison system are probably the most vulnerable for prisoners to face in terms of coming into contact and reoffending. The really important role is to make sure some support services are there, to make sure that there is an opportunity for engaging in a job-ready program or going straight into employment or straight into education. Because we know that old habits form fast, unfortunately, upon release, and whilst they have done a power of work with us in effectively managing some of those issues that led them to being incarcerated, making sure that those services are continually stepped up upon release is extremely important too. I think that is an area as a government that we have really pivoted to and is why we are seeing the results in the recidivism numbers that we are.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. You spoke earlier about how significant mental health is—mental health matters in this space. Could you provide more details of the enhanced mental health support being provided to prisoners that will support the recommendations of the royal commission into mental health?

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes, thanks. Certainly the budget provides \$3.4 million over three years to continue psychoeducational and wellbeing programs for people on remand. We find it is a really important element to have those services available. The corrections system will also receive \$16.6 million over four years to support the mental health and wellbeing of people in contact with the criminal justice system and also a \$15.5 million additional support package for people in prison transitioning out of custody, which is what I was touching on just before. The funding will help these prisoners plan to get their life back on track and give them that support. Unfortunately there are still so many prisoners that are being released into homelessness. We try through our management processes—and there is some great work that happens in partnering with community-based services—to try and transition prisoners into housing where we can. But at times that does not always work out, and we find that having those mental health supports helps these people keep connected post sentence. Also I just note in a range of these supports we are also expanding the HOPE suicide prevention program in custodial settings, which is a really important program both for the general community rollout but also in our prison system.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Taylor. Mr Riordan.

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you, Chair. I would like to turn to some of the outcomes of our corrections system. Minister, can you tell us please how many corrections staff are currently seconded into hotel quarantine or other COVID-19 roles at the moment?

Ms HUTCHINS: I might refer that detailed question to the Secretary.

Ms FALKINGHAM: Thanks, Mr Riordan. It is actually less than 50 currently. That number moves all the time. Obviously—

Mr RIORDAN: So it is moving, like, five or six each way or something?

Ms FALKINGHAM: Each way, that is right. Obviously that is for the whole of the Department of Justice and Community Safety, so it is right across the board. I will get you a breakdown of corrections, if you would like.

Mr RIORDAN: So there are about 50 seconded out of what sort of total available workforce that would otherwise be in our prisons? What is that total workforce that the 50 are coming out of?

Ms FALKINGHAM: I think we had the number up earlier on the slides—Commissioner?

Ms STRONG: About 7000 people in the corrections system in the department of justice.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay. So out of 7000 we have found about 50 to help with hotels. Minister, to you again: with prisoner numbers almost 10 per cent down since March 2020, why have we only found about 50 out of 7000 people to redeploy to help with hotel quarantine and free up valuable Victorian police force resources?

Ms HUTCHINS: Well, that rate was probably around double that during the height of the pandemic.

Mr RIORDAN: So 100 out of 7000?

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes, and in that time we have had to step up our COVID-19 safety practices, which has not meant less staff; that has meant more staff carrying out the roles that we have needed them to with isolation and with certainly all of the procedures that we have had in place, such as temperature testing.

Mr RIORDAN: So there have been more staff needed?

Ms HUTCHINS: Well, the same amount of staff have been needed during that time to step it up. I know you are trying to make the point that there have been less prisoners, but that does not mean there has been less need, by any stretch of the imagination.

Mr RIORDAN: That is why I am just clarifying. So you are saying we have needed more staff to look after less people because of the COVID conditions?

Ms HUTCHINS: Well, the COVID procedures that we have put in place were pretty intensive, and it meant quarantining all new transfers into any prison, between prison systems, into the prison system, out of the prison system. I do not think we should underestimate the huge job that the system has to do in moving prisoners through and around due to need. But certainly making sure that those—

Mr RIORDAN: And the private?

Ms HUTCHINS: prisons are safe for the community has been really important, not to mention the amount of staff who have had to furlough at various times due to, themselves, needing to be tested and waiting for results.

Mr RIORDAN: So the privately run prisons have had the same experience, have they? Have they upped their workforce?

Ms STRONG: They would have had the same requirements in terms of our COVID-19 response in terms of supporting people who are in accommodation under quarantine requirements, yes.

Mr RIORDAN: So they would have had more staff as well.

Ms STRONG: No, I am not saying they have had more staff. I am saying they have had the same requirements.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay. I refer to budget paper 3, page 294. Commissioner, on that page it shows the rate of return to prison within two years. In the 2020–21 target it shows an increase. When was the last time that the output metric was successfully met; in other words, when was the last time we started seeing an improvement in the return-to-prison rate in Victoria?

Ms STRONG: It has been a stubborn rate. There is a slight predicted improvement in the 2020–21 year, but not where we would like it to be, so I think it has been steady for about five years. We are below the national average but we still need to do more. I think what we are doing in that component is, one, the prison infrastructure that we talked about before helps provide a foundation for a safer, more humane system. The cultural work that we are doing also is part of the safe and humane system. There is not much point delivering programs if a prisoner does not feel safe for most of the time that they are in prison. Then there is the investment in the programs and services, and this budget is particularly investing in vulnerable groups, such as people with a mental illness, people with a disability and people experiencing family violence. There is further work that we are doing, and we hope to get leverage out of the royal commission into mental health and also into the 10-year affordable housing strategy DFFH are doing as well.

Mr RIORDAN: So it seems, Commissioner, you are sort of arguing that it is a very long burn to get any change. You have said that we have not seen any change at all in five years. Who gets held responsible for that? Is that your responsibility?

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Riordan, your time has expired and I will pass the call to Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, Commissioner, Secretary and department representatives, for joining us today. Minister, I want to take you to budget paper 3, page 91, and the ‘Community-Based Offender Supervision’ section. For the committee’s benefit can you please outline for us the new funding for Community Correctional Services in this budget and how that will improve community safety and strengthen CCS’s oversight?

Ms HUTCHINS: That almost complements the previous question in terms of getting a detailed outcome on the investment that we are making. Community Corrections Services provide an absolutely vital service. From the figures that you would have seen in the overall presentation that I did at the start of this, as of 25 June this year Community Correctional Services manages 8401 offenders—887 are on parole, 6700 are on supervised court orders, 799 on reparation orders only—so it is vital that we ensure that we are well resourced to really make sure that we are effectively managing these offenders through whatever is thrown at us throughout the pandemic, but also ongoing in delivering community safety. So of our funding commitments out of this budget, \$14.4 million over three years goes to establishing a centralised, specialised team to provide case management and oversight of those high-risk offenders, continuing the court assessment and prosecution service at the bail and remand court and providing an option to house some men on CCOs who are leaving prison who are at risk of homelessness. This was something we really had to stand up quickly about and tackle through the COVID pandemic, particularly during lockdowns, ensuring that as these men were leaving the prison system they were not going straight into homelessness. So we are very committed to the effective management of community-based offenders and also breaking the cycle of offending by reducing crime overall through our crime prevention strategy.

Mr RICHARDSON: I understand, Minister, that this builds on significant earlier reforms that are being rolled out as well and investments in the CCS by the Victorian government across budgets, so are you able to outline this a bit more for the committee’s benefit?

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes, sure. We have made significant investments in this space, in the community corrections space, and it has been addressed through multiple budgets to improve safety. Prior to the commitment that I just mentioned before, the 2016–17 budget recorded funding of \$233 million to provide additional community corrections staff and build new offices as well, or engage new officers. This funding built on the \$89 million in the 2015–16 budget for an additional 147 community corrections staff, taking the total number of staff to more than 300, an increase of about 40 per cent. That happened two years ago now. So these new staff and the officers are now in place delivering the new service model. What we have found we need to do is to step up that intensiveness around the high-risk offenders, and we are doing that by putting this investment in place.

Mr RICHARDSON: You have outlined for the committee that a component of this funding will go towards housing people on community corrections orders or exiting prison. Can you please elaborate on this and tell the committee more about what the government is doing around housing for those in contact with the justice system?

Ms HUTCHINS: So obviously with more investment in public housing in general, more opportunities open up for more Victorians but also those who are trying to get their lives back on track after offending and either having served a community corrections order or having been incarcerated. We know that safe and stable housing helps to provide an opportunity to break the cycle of offending and get people back on track. We know that more roofs over heads means less offending in the community and fewer victims—and greater safety for communities. So one of the examples of what we have done is the Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility, which opened in June last year.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Richardson, and thank you, Minister. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of the corrections portfolio with you today. We thank you, Commissioner and Secretary, as well for your time here today. We will follow up on any questions which were taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee’s request.

The committee will now take a short break and resume consideration with you of the youth justice portfolio at 4.25 pm. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.