

Auckland South Corrections Facility let down by its staffing issues

20 February 2019

The Chief Ombudsman says staff shortages at one of New Zealand’s largest prisons are causing prisoners to spend extended periods of time locked in their cells and prisoners’ rehabilitation needs are not being met.

The Chief Ombudsman, Peter Boshier, has today released his first inspection report into the treatment and conditions of prisoners at Auckland South Corrections Facility (also known as Kohuora).

“I am most concerned by the prison’s practice of locking prisoners in their cells for extended amounts of time—across all parts of the prison—as a way of managing staff shortages or rostering issues,” Mr Boshier says. “My concern is that prisoners do not have sufficient time out of their cells to promote mental wellbeing.”

Mr Boshier found that the facility was well designed and maintained, operating on a Responsible Prisoner Model - promoting increased self-responsibility as part of a prisoner’s rehabilitation.

Prisoners had access to a phone and computer system that allows them, from their cells or communal areas, to look up information, make medical appointments, and sign-up to programmes.

“While the operating model is commendable, I found that it had been undermined by the prison’s staffing situation,” he says. In the 12 months before the inspection, staff turnover was 21 percent.

He found an over-reliance on the ICT kiosks and in-cell systems as a means of communication with prisoners. “Unfortunately not all prisoners were familiar with the technology, nor was it always in working order,” he says.

Staff shortages also negatively impact on the quality of the case management prisoners experienced, the professional relationships between prisoners and staff, and contributed to problems with the prison’s complaints process and misconduct system.

“I appreciate that increased prisoner numbers, coupled with fluctuating staffing levels, creates tensions. I acknowledge that the prison is actively working at recruiting and retaining staff. I am however disappointed to find that, occasionally, staff used non-approved techniques to control prisoners and on some other occasions, force had been used to control and restrain prisoners who were not at that time presenting a threat.”

The prison’s record keeping and paperwork relating to the use of force incidents was not satisfactory. There were several incomplete records and the review process was not consistently completed in a timely manner. All of these issues could, in part, be attributed to various staffing issues.

“I do acknowledge the good practices in place at the prison—the employment and horticulture workshops are impressive, the good quality food, and health care services that are provided. Overall, the prison appeared to be genuinely intent on being culturally responsive to its high numbers of Māori and Pasifika inmates.

“However, the prison’s potential has yet to be fully realised due to a number of operational issues, which negatively influenced prisoners’ day-to-day routines and sentence progression,” says Mr Boshier.

“I am heartened by the fact that the facility has accepted, or partially accepted, all but one of my recommendations. I believe this reflects our mutual desire to strengthen protections against ill treatment and improve conditions of detention.”

This is my first inspection of the Serco-run prison. The inspection took place over nine days in August 2018. This report identifies what my inspectors found at that point in time, and makes 36 recommendations for improvement.

The Chief Ombudsman’s report on Auckland South Corrections Facility is available on www.ombudsman.parliament.nz/newsroom.

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More about our function

New Zealand signed up to the United Nations’ Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT) in 2007.

The Chief Ombudsman is a ‘National Preventive Mechanism’ (NPM) under OPCAT, meaning he monitors prisons and other places of detention (like health and disability facilities) to ensure they meet international human rights. When appropriate, he makes recommendations to improve the treatment and conditions of detainees (including prisoners).

Prisons, and treatment of prisoners, are examined against six criteria: Treatment; Lawful custody; Decency, dignity and respect; Health and wellbeing; Protective measures; and Purposeful activity and transition to the community. Reports are written on what is observed at the time of inspection.

A copy of the NPM’s provisional findings and recommendations was forwarded to the facility and the Department of Corrections to check factual accuracy and completeness of evidence. Their comments are included in this report.

Find out more about the Chief Ombudsman’s role in examining and monitoring places of detention, and read our other OPCAT reports, at: www.ombudsman.parliament.nz. You can also follow us on Facebook: @ombudsmannz.

More about the facility

Auckland South Corrections Facility (also known as Kohuora) is located on Kiwi Tamaki Road, Wiri, and opened in 2015. The prison is operated by Serco New Zealand under a Public Private Partnership between the prison's consortium SecureFuture and the Department of Corrections. It accommodates up to 960 sentenced male prisoners, with security classifications ranging from minimum to high.