

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2025-26 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne – Wednesday 4 June 2025

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

Richard Welch

**WITNESSES**

Enver Erdogan MLC, Minister for Corrections; and

Kate Houghton, Secretary,

Emma Catford, Deputy Secretary, Corrections and Justice Services,

Larissa Strong, Commissioner, Corrections Victoria, and

Samuel Ho, Chief Financial Officer, 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 2025–26 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 made outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and it is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The broadcast includes automated captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during the hearings and anything you say may be picked up and captioned, even if you say it quietly.

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

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

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

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Thank you, Chair. Let me just begin by saying what a pleasure it is to be back at PAEC this year; I think it is my third time here. I will begin the same way I did on previous PAEC appearances and just acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. It is fantastic to be here, and to anyone watching online as well, thank you for tuning in this afternoon.

**Visual presentation.**

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I might go to a bit of an overview of our system. You can see on the screen over there we currently have 5700 people employed in our corrections system across a range of roles. That includes custodial staff working on the front lines of our prisons, clinicians, program staff, those supporting health and policy functions and staff delivering community corrections services across our state. There are more than 6400 adults in prison. That is an increase of about 400 since the last time I appeared at this committee. We currently have about 40.5 per cent of the prison population on remand. In addition to the 6400 in custody, we have got 8400 in the community being supervised. That is lower than what we have had in recent years, so we have seen a reduction there, although those in custody has gone up. We also have 34 community correction locations throughout Victoria; many of your local communities will have one. We service a large range of areas and people on a variety of orders.

Next slide. This year's budget does make significant investments into our corrections system: over \$1.6 billion for prisoner supervision and support, \$279 million for community-based supervision orders and total expenditure, as you can see there, in terms of capital expenditure, of an additional \$90 million. What we are seeing is that we are expanding the system. Western Plains, our new maximum-security prison, our state-of-the-

art prison, will be open from next month as well. I think that will be a significant change to the configuration of our system, and obviously we have got further announcements in this regard.

In terms of our adult corrections system, \$727 million is our community safety package that I had the honour of announcing with the Premier and police minister only a few weeks ago at the Western Plains prison out in Lara. That announcement will mean we can operationalise an additional 1000 beds and 400 roles in adult corrections as well. I think there will be a big upscaling and ramping up of the system.

Our budget also invests money into rehabilitation to support a safe and effective corrections system. Employment hubs are a big part of that, and also \$90.5 million in that is for the employment pathway broker service to link people on community corrections orders to local education and employment services. The Aboriginal health unit, to provide a culturally safe space for Aboriginal women, is part of that too. And we have a number of other investments we are making that are in this budget, including the women's justice diversion program, Inside Access legal and financial services and living free from violence. I was proud to announce this year something that this committee had raised with me a number of times as well: we are halving the cost of phone calls for those in custody.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Thank you for the chocolates, Minister.

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I am glad you like them, Mr McGowan.

I think this is really probably the most important graphic in terms of my presentation. People in this committee always ask me about performance. Well, here are some performance stats for you. Victoria has a low imprisonment rate of 114.9, much lower than the national average of 202.9. We have average out-of-cell hours of 10.1, compared to the national average of 9. Our participation rate in employment – I must admit we are leaders in this area. We have the highest employment engagement in the nation, at 94.8 per cent, and we have been recognised internationally. We have higher-than-average participation in education as well. When you look at the indicators, Victoria is definitely kicking goals.

Reducing reoffending – I think that is another stat where we are ahead. Recidivism is one of the factors and a key KPI for us in corrections, and we are at 39 per cent. The national average is 43 per cent. And the trend is down – this year we are expecting to come in closer to 37 per cent. That is a good sign that people, once they leave prison, within two years are reoffending less. I think that is a key goal. We can see corrective service orders as well. It was 11 per cent in 2023–24. The national average is 25. Again, that has gone lower as well. So people, once they complete those orders, are not reoffending. I might just leave it there because I know that many of you will have some tough questions for me. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. We are going to go to Ms Benham.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister. I might direct my first few questions to the Commissioner, though, if that is okay, with regard to the announcement in June last year that Western Plains would initially open with 600 beds. I understand from the presentation that 1000 beds are due to come online, so there must be that other 300 coming. Can you confirm when those beds will be available?

**Larissa STRONG:** Western Plains will open in July. It will ramp up to the 665 beds over a four- or five-month period, and then we will turn on the other remaining two communities to get to the 312, so by the end of this calendar year.

**Jade BENHAM:** By the end of this year all 900 of those beds will be online?

**Larissa STRONG:** The 665 and the 312, yes, if that adds up.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. Is Western Plains correctional facility fully operational? How many inmates are being housed and when did Western Plains first start taking prisoners?

**Larissa STRONG:** Western Plains does have some prisoners that are there temporarily. It is a gazetted prison. We moved some men from the management unit, Olearia, at Barwon Prison to Western Plains in early April in response to concerns about Olearia and the unit in Olearia, while we undertake thorough testing. We do have 20 men at Western Plains that will return to Barwon when that unit has gone through the investigations and we have addressed the recommendations coming out of that. We did on Monday move 41 men from the

Hoya protection unit to Western Plains just while we put in new heating – that was maintenance that needed to be done – and the advice was we could not install the heating safely with men in it because the crane had to deliver the heating unit. They will be due to return to Barwon on Friday.

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Ms Benham, you may be aware Langi Kal Kal was also used during the fires in Beaufort, so we transferred people in and out. That was a much bigger exercise than Barwon, which is across the road. It is being used, and it is being used as a training facility as well.

**Jade BENHAM:** So is it fully functional at the moment as far as phones and prisoners having access to their property? Is it fully functional?

**Larissa STRONG:** Yes, the men in Olearia have phones. They have access to their property. They have their Zoom visits. Olearia men are on a separated regime, so it is a restricted regime. The men that are coming from Hoya have access to the services in Western Plains for the five days.

**Jade BENHAM:** The 20 men that came from Barwon, was that because of alleged gas leaks within Barwon Prison?

**Larissa STRONG:** That was because of concern about staff not feeling well in Olearia over about three different incidents and us needing to evacuate the unit and thoroughly check what was going on in Olearia. We are still awaiting a report from the occupational hygienist who has been doing that investigation.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. So you cannot expand on what the other issues were?

**Larissa STRONG:** It was to do with concern about the unit and staff reporting not feeling well, hence getting the occupational hygienist to review.

**Jade BENHAM:** When is all that due to be rectified?

**Larissa STRONG:** We hope to get the report within the next week, and then we will work through with the workforce and WorkSafe about what we need to do in terms of recommendations before we move people and staff back into that unit.

**Jade BENHAM:** Is the medical centre at Western Plains operational?

**Larissa STRONG:** Health staff – GEO health from Barwon – are providing health care to the men that are at Western Plains.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. How many corrections staff were employed to secure Western Plains prior to prisoners moving in or before it was populated?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think it was being ramped up. I know we initially had a few dozen and then went to 100-plus, and then obviously in the last few months, because we were ramping up, I made an announcement in January – I am not sure if you are familiar. That is when I announced, ‘Middle of the year, it’s ready to go.’ So now we have got hundreds of staff, because obviously we are getting ready for, in a few weeks, a full opening, really, in July.

**Jade BENHAM:** So how many staff were there to secure it when there was no-one there, before the phase of ramping up?

**Larissa STRONG:** That specific question I will take on notice, but we have sufficient staff at Western Plains right now to operate two communities, so 312 men. We also had the staff from Barwon go over to Western Plains given they knew the men being transferred, to support Western Plains staff as well.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you. Going to the metro remand centre, 400 beds at metro and allegedly some at Barwon have been left to rot and are uninhabitable due to some toxic mould. Will these be rectified as part of the \$727 million package?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I might be able to take that on, Ms Benham. I think you are talking about the prison infill program. We had an infill program to modernise some of the facilities across our prisons. It was at five

sites. Two of those sites were completed – Marngoneet and Middleton. Those were beds being used; they are in the system. MRC is one of the sites where the contract is effectively not complete or not complete to the quality you would expect, so there is a bit of ongoing – so it is not part of the community safety package. The community package safety package is about ramping up beds obviously at Western Plains and other sites as well. MRC, the beds you are talking about, where there was reporting of mould – that is not part of this announcement.

**Jade BENHAM:** But the reports of mould are valid?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Like I said, they are not complete, so the issue with that upgrade is still being worked out. To be frank, the department – and the Secretary, who is with me, can pull me up. But I will say we have got legal representation, and we are working through that. We need to be careful what we say, because it is not my intention to waive legal privilege today here, but what I can confirm is that we expect those projects to be completed to the quality set out in the contract.

**Jade BENHAM:** And when will they be completed?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Well, they are not yet complete. So Marngoneet and Middleton are complete; MRC is not complete, and we are working through those contracts. We have engaged lawyers, so obviously it is a legal matter now, but let me repeat: it is my expectation that it be completed to the quality in the contract.

**Jade BENHAM:** But when, Minister? There will be a ramp-up. With new bail laws coming in, there will be an increased need for remand beds. Do we have a timeline on when we can expect –

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think we have, like I said, physical capacity in our men's system. We are well placed. There are beds at other sites as well, you know. Even our private prisons also have an ability to ramp up as well as our public prisons. So we have the physical capacity. It is about making sure our announcements about getting more staff to work in the system, having the right people in the right posts – that is what I am focused on, and that is why the announcement was key. I do not know if many of you would have seen – an \$8000 sign-on bonus to work in public prisons is a big factor. The department tells me there has been a lot of interest already.

**Jade BENHAM:** So have those beds been written off? And with the increased need that is on the cards, have there been discussions with the police association or Victoria Police about using in-station remand for overflow?

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Ms Benham. We are going to Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. Minister, the government has got a comprehensive approach to addressing crime, and that includes our new bail laws. I saw on page 158 of BP 3 some initiatives there around effective management of prisoners and offenders. How are these initiatives complementing the government's approach to crime and the bail laws?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Thank you, Ms Kathage. Thank you for your question and for the opportunity to talk about the work we are doing in preparation and in putting in place our new bail laws and about our focus on holding serious repeat offenders to account. It was earlier this year, as we all recall, that the Attorney-General made an announcement about the need to prioritise community safety as the overarching obligation and duty of bail decision-makers. I think that was important, and since that time we have seen a gradual increase in the remand population, and we need to do the work to prepare for that. It will have an impact on the custodial system, and the Premier has been clear that as a result of these tough new laws we need to increase our capacity and ramp up. That is what the \$727 million will allow us to do. It does mean an additional 1000 beds in the corrections system that will be operationalised, with 88 beds in youth justice. And it is not just about beds, it is about supporting staff – like I said, having the right people on the right posts.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** There has been a bit of talk so far about the 1000 beds. How can you bring 1000 beds online without building a new facility?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think across our prison system, if you have the privilege – like I have had and some in this room have had – of visiting our sites, you will see we have a very modern system. Western Plains is about

making use of our most modern and best facilities. But across our prison sites – even Middleton and many others that I have been to, Dame Phyllis Frost and many of the other prisons, Langi Kal Kal – there are different, separate, brand new units that we have invested in. This is not just something we have decided today. Progressively since 2014, since getting elected, the Andrews–Allan governments have focused on making sure we have the most modern facilities in the nation. We have capacity. We have some units that are at the moment dormant because we had a decrease in the prison population, especially from February 2022 to now. The prison population is about 20 per cent down in Victoria. Obviously it is going back up now; the trend is back upwards. But we are doing that work. We are preparing to get the settings right and making sure the investments are targeted.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. That Western Plains facility and opening that: how is that supporting community safety?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I am pleased that we will be able to open Western Plains from July. That was a goal we set in January, and there were obviously challenges. We are in a very competitive employment market. Employment in Victoria is in the low 4 per cents – and that is a good sign. I think that shows that Victoria's economy is growing and the success of our government in providing employment opportunities and also improving community safety. It is about jobs – there were 600 jobs initially, and now there are going to be a few hundred more jobs through this announcement at the Western Plains site. It will be a state-of-the-art prison using the latest technology. There is even some facial recognition technology with the cameras there. Because it is a maximum-security prison, access to different parts of the building will be crucial in managing the transfer of people in and out of different parts of the facility. But it is about community safety at its heart, and we need to have this prison up and running, because there is an increased demand.

As well as additional prison capacity, additional supports will be available. Employment, education and health programs – they are key as well. The facility even has other rooms for prayer and faith services and other services that are essential for people's rehabilitation.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** With the facility having that health, education, 'more than just beds' focus – and you mentioned different faiths or different opportunities for people to express their religion – how do you ensure that there are modern and humane corrections facilities or services available? How do you make sure it caters to the needs of the people that are there?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** At Corrections Victoria we pride ourselves on making sure we do have a system that is balanced and that does focus on community safety, but community safety means not just short-term but also longer-term safety. That means improving the recidivism rate, and you do that through investing in programs. Education is one of them, employment is another – but also cultural wellbeing and health outcomes. Since I have come in we have new health contractors in place across our adult system. Across the male system we have got GEO. Across the women's system we have got Western Health. At Dame Phyllis Frost in particular we have made improvements, with Aboriginal wellbeing officers at most of our public prisons now. We have got direct engagement with the TAFE sector – centres of excellence that are about providing people pathways to get the skills and training they need to get employment at the end of the process.

I think a key issue that we do have is that housing and employment are crucial factors for successful reintegration of people. Maybe in the past there may have been significant stigma for employers to take on people with a criminal record, but we are finding in a tighter labour market there are more opportunities for people. There are many in this room who would be familiar with the fact that in our communities we have got good, strong partnerships where people, when they leave the corrections system, can walk right into a job. That provides stability not only for themselves; understanding that people that are in our corrections system have family and loved ones on the outside, it provides some security for them as well.

That is why part of that humane system is the phone calls issue. It was an issue that was raised with me when I appeared at Yoorrook. It was raised in this forum by members of this committee in the past as well. We have halved the cost of phone calls, but as well as halving the cost of phone calls we have invested in other technologies, so now there are free options like Zoom – face to face. That is important because not everyone can go visit our prisons. Some of our prisons are in regional locations, so they could be geographically challenging to get to, especially when you have got working families across our state. Having the Zoom option has been popular since we have implemented that. The pandemic brought that about – brought it forward – but

now we have tried to roll it out as much as we can. We have made investments to make sure that people can stay connected to family and community, which is, again, a crucial factor in their rehabilitation. That is not all – there is a lot more we are doing – but I do know that my time is limited today. Thank you, Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Kathage. We are going to Ms Benham.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you, Chair. Another one for the Commissioner: I just want to go back to the issues within Barwon Prison. It was reported on 9 April that staff were evacuated because of gas leaks. Just for clarity, is that true? Or are you saying that it is untrue that the staff were evacuated and those 22 men were moved to Western Plains zoo?

**Larissa STRONG:** It is true that we evacuated staff and the men on that date, and because of staff concerns, not feeling well, and concerns about potentially a gas leak, carbon monoxide in particular and carbon dioxide, it has been a little bit – the occupational hygienist is actually going through that in terms of that testing and what those findings were. We do not have the report yet. I am not sure that is what the issue was, but absolutely, we have been investigating that in terms of that building.

**Jade BENHAM:** Is Barwon Prison safe?

**Larissa STRONG:** Olearia is a very standalone unit. It was built relatively recently – I think in about 2015. It is separate from all the rest of the units at Barwon Prison, so it is a standalone. All its systems are completely different. So yes, the rest of –

**Jade BENHAM:** So yes?

**Larissa STRONG:** Yes.

**Enver ERDOGAN:** It is a management unit, so it is –

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. Thank you. I want to move on to Port Phillip Prison now. Minister, given the 1117 adult bed Port Phillip Prison has been closed, why are we reducing prison capacity by around 300 to 600 beds? If you do the math, there will be a reduction in total beds when that closes and Western Plains is open in between there being –

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I do not really accept that, Ms Benham. I think Western Plains is a larger prison than Port Phillip Prison, so we will have additional beds.

**Jade BENHAM:** It is only 600 beds for a start.

**Enver ERDOGAN:** But it is going to be ramped up, and it has got physical capacity for 1200. Without compromising too much of the security, the numbers in Port Phillip at the moment are much lower as we are gearing up to close Port Phillip. We have got a brand new state-of-the-art prison. We are looking to improve community safety and reduce recidivism, so we are making use of our best facility. I think it is important that we focus on Western Plains and make sure we ramp that up. Like I said, that has got the capacity to go up to 1200-plus, so there are a lot more beds.

**Jade BENHAM:** When will it be ramped up to that 1200? By the end of the year as well?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** By the end of the year, I think the Commissioner has kindly shared with us –

**Jade BENHAM:** That was the 900, though.

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Exactly. And if we need more, we will open up more beds. I think at the moment, where the men's system sits at, we are sitting at about the low 6000s. We have many more beds than that, so the physical capacity of the system is there – ramping up and having the right people in the right posts. So as part of that using the modern facilities makes sense, and we are going to continue to do that work.

**Jade BENHAM:** So you are fully confident in our prison system not having any overflow whatsoever? We will not be pushed to capacity at any time?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think in the men's system definitely we have the physical capacity to manage the population. Obviously we need to make sure we have the staff. I think that is the real challenge in this job market, as we know across frontline services, not just in my portfolio but across government and even in the private sector. Read the *Fin Review* and you will see that it is a challenge to get qualified staff. We take these roles seriously and the people that work –

**Jade BENHAM:** Are there plans to use police cells for remand?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** We have room and physical capacity in the adult men's system, so I am very confident

**Jade BENHAM:** Have you had the conversation with Victoria Police?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Like I said, we are ready to open up Western Plains in a few weeks in July, so we will have the capacity in the men's system to accommodate people as they come in.

**Jade BENHAM:** So you will not need to use Victoria Police cells for remand?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I do not believe we will, no.

**Jade BENHAM:** Commissioner, what is planned to be done with the Port Phillip prison facility once it does close?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think the Port Phillip –

**Jade BENHAM:** Sorry, to the Commissioner.

**Larissa STRONG:** I think that is actually a matter for government.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Benham, I know it is the first PAEC that you have been on, but you can ask the question, and if the minister or the other witnesses at the table have a response to that question we do hear that response.

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think Port Phillip is a fantastic site. For those MPs that represent the west, they will know it is in the heart of the west, a very central location, not too far from Ballarat Road. I think we will definitely, like other government assets, look at the options for utilisation. I can see many purposes for it, but I do not want to speculate. At the moment we are focused on, obviously, decanting the prison population to Western Plains and other sites across the state, on getting that right first, and then we will do the planning for the future of that site. But obviously we will need to consult across government first because I am sure there are other government agencies that will be keen to utilise that site. But I think there may still be a justice use for it.

**Jade BENHAM:** In December 2020 the government announced \$20 million to double the hospital at Port Phillip to 40 beds. What happens to that facility now, given it is only five years old?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think there are subacute beds there, across the system, and following these changes we will have options to support the prison network. We have subacute beds at Western Plains also as part of the community safety package. The St John's unit – we are still in discussions with them as well. They are operational until the end of the year as we speak, but we are still assessing our options. But it is a great facility, and I think there is a role for it in our system.

**Jade BENHAM:** So you are going to keep the hospital open?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think we are going to look at our options. Right now I do not want to pre-empt decisions of government, but I think we have a large budget and we want to make sure, as the population of prisoners increases, we have the support for them, as we have always said. That is why I have upgraded health services in our corrections facilities.

**Jade BENHAM:** And that is what we are getting at, the cost. If you have got this \$727 million package, a lot of that is going to be eaten up in things that already exist, like the hospital. So how much is it going to cost to keep that hospital open?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** We have subacute beds at Western Plains, so I think we have beds across the system. St John's is obviously another option that we could scale up and down. But we are going to look at where the prison population is and ramp up accordingly. We are seeing a gradual increase in the population; we have not seen a spike as yet. We will have to see and be able to respond and be agile, and that is the work that is being done as we speak.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you, Minister. Commissioner – I have trouble saying this – Dhurringile Prison was closed in August last year. Since then, how much money has been spent staffing an empty prison?

**Larissa STRONG:** The specifics I would have to take on notice, but Dhurringile was closed, as you said, back in August. We have had to decommission the prison. There was a lot of property at Dhurringile. We had to take out some equipment and accoutrements that we had – records, for example, old computers – and make sure the computers were clear. The decommissioning process has finished. We are responsible for maintaining the site until there is another –

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We are going to Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister and officials. Thank you for joining us. Minister, you have already touched on the work that the very hardworking corrections staff do day in, day out to support the system and to support rehabilitation of prisoners. I note that under budget paper 3, page 158, in the output item 'Effective management of prisoners and offenders and provision of opportunities for rehabilitation and reparation' there is significant funding invested for those purposes. Minister, how will this funding support the staff that make the prison system operate?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Thank you, Mr Galea. And thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about our corrections staff. From the outset I want to thank our dedicated staff. Every prison I visit I am always genuinely blown away by their passion and dedication to the role. A lot of the staff that work in our corrections system have been in the system for a long time because they are passionate about community safety and passionate about making a difference to the people in the custodial facilities as well.

I think this funding, the \$727 million that I had the honour of announcing with the Premier and police minister only a few weeks ago, will mean we can employ an additional 400 new corrections staff across our system in our state. All up we are aiming to recruit 1200 more frontline corrections workers by July 2026. So 400 more in corrections – that is in addition to the 600 new that we are aiming for at Western Plains that was funded last year, so 1200 in total by July 2026. That is a large number of people, but we are on target at Western Plains, as I stated earlier. There will be additional roles with that – it is not just about additional staff – and funding for programs as well. So in a variety of roles – not all of them are necessarily in the secure management units, but some are support staff that come with that. We have roles, like I said, like Aboriginal wellbeing roles, where we have a variety of other programs that we run – educational programs. The people that are really attracted to those roles come from all walks of life. That was what was most amazing, Mr Galea. You would be familiar with a lot of retail workers, people that have worked in hospitality – they have taken on the challenge of working in corrections. People from education, teachers, former tradies, former nurses – they are looking for a different career shift. We are looking for people that are mature, that are responsible. These roles are very important, and it is important we have the right people in these roles. Up until now we have had good success. I think our \$8000 sign-on bonus is attracting more people, and I am looking forward to being able to ramp up the system in the coming months.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Minister. You have spoken about the increased demand as well that will be placed on the system as a result of recent community safety reforms. The initiatives, such as the \$720 million, is that what will fundamentally be used to support the corrections staff to enable them to meet this increase in demand?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Yes. I think having more staff gives more flexibility to the system, and we are operationalising more units. I guess with the prison population being 20 per cent down from pre-pandemic levels, we had the opportunity to close down and mothball some units that we are now re-operationalising. So we need the right people in the right posts, and this money will allow us to do that – to hire more people and do that work. But we need to make sure that we have already got money for enhanced training for staff, particularly focusing on tactical options. Staff safety is a big priority for me, and I know the Commissioner

could talk about the safe prison strategy that was announced in February. When I am out at prisons – and only a few weeks ago I was at Langi Kal Kal, I was at Dame Phyllis Frost and I have been out at Western Plains. These were all in the last few weeks. I will continue to visit prisoners. You know, I will be going out to the MRC. I will visit, you know, MAP and many other prisons. I try to get out and about. I think it is important to hear direct feedback from staff. There is always more we can do in terms of staff safety, and I like to have that direct feedback from staff so we can make improvements. We have made a lot of improvements and a lot of investments in technology, such as our body scanning technologies at many of our prisons. But there is always more work to do, and as someone who was a personal injury lawyer, it is definitely a passion of mine.

**Michael GALEA:** Excellent. Thank you, Minister. And you touched on the \$8000 sign-on bonus as well. Obviously we do still have historically low unemployment rates in Victoria. How are you going to be ensuring that you can actually meet those targets?

**Nick McGOWAN:** They are not historically low.

**Michael GALEA:** They are, Mr McGowan.

**Nick McGOWAN:** They are not historically low.

**Michael GALEA:** How are you going to ensure that you can –

**Nick McGOWAN:** Which history are we referring to?

**Michael GALEA:** We could have a lovely little detour.

**Nick McGOWAN:** The Civil War history of the previous minister?

**Michael GALEA:** We can go back to the US Civil War if you like, Mr McGowan.

**Nick McGOWAN:** We must have gone back to the Civil War – historically low for a Labor government.

**Michael GALEA:** In the modern era. When was the last Liberal – anyway, let us not go there, Mr McGowan. But Mr Erdogan, in terms of the ways in which you are going to recruit those staff, you did touch on the \$8000 sign-on bonus. Is that the principal means? Are there any other initiatives that you are looking at too?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Yes, I think the \$8000 is an important start, but I want to be key and clear here. It is not that you just get \$8000 from day one. We give the first half in the first six months. You complete 12 months, and you get the total amount. That was initially \$5000 at most of our public prisons. So five to eight –

**Nick McGOWAN:** It did not work?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think it is attracting more people. We are. I think there is a lot of interest. It is a very topical issue as well at the moment. There are people that are focused on community safety, and obviously you can make a real difference. Correctional environments are complex, but they are also an opportunity for you to make a positive difference in people's lives and make sure the community is safer into the long term. I think those bonuses will play a big role. We have had an increase in applications. I get that report from the department regularly, and so definitely with increased marketing, an increased sign-on bonus and increased interest in community safety, I think we are seeing an increase in applications. And that is a good outcome.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. Sticking with the workforce for a little bit, naturally the majority of corrections staff are centred in the correctional facilities. I dare say some of my constituents in the outer south-east might not be the target audience for those recruitment campaigns, but there is actually a significant role that community-based corrections staff play as well, I understand, and that is statewide work. Can you talk to me about how the budget is supporting those workers as well?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Yes. Thank you, Mr Galea. In the budget I think \$279 million is for community corrections services, and they are located generally across our state. Only a couple of weeks ago I had the opportunity to open one of our newest facilities at Frankston with the Member for Frankston Mr Paul Edbrooke. We are proud of about the facility because it is a modern working environment. It was integrated

with DFFH, and unfortunately many of the people that are in contact with community corrections services require other government support.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. We are going to Ms Benham.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you, Chair. Minister, when was the terminology of referring to prisoners changed to ‘people in our care’?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Ms Benham, I refer to them as prisoners. I am not sure where you are getting that reflection from.

**Jade BENHAM:** Commissioner?

**Larissa STRONG:** We do have it. It is a mission and vision. It is a corporate mission and vision that we did release probably a year and a half or two years ago following consultation with our workforce, which was the first time we had ever really done that. I will say, firstly, that ‘prisoners’ is the term we use all the time. ‘People in our care’ is in the vision and mission to remind us that we have a statutory duty of care, which we do have under the *Corrections Act*. But ‘prisoners’ is absolutely used all the time.

**Jade BENHAM:** Do you think it is appropriate, though? ‘People in our care’ is how we refer to our elderly or our children, and now that terminology is being used to refer to perpetrators of violent crime?

**Larissa STRONG:** Under the *Corrections Act* we have a statutory duty of care that is non-delegable, and in that context, yes, I do think it is appropriate.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. I want to move on now to lockdowns. Commissioner, the ABC has reported that since July 2024 there have been 106 lockdowns at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre. Why?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I might be able to assist you, Ms Benham, on that. I think lockdowns are necessary from time to time. I know you are asking an operational question.

**Jade BENHAM:** 106 lockdowns in less than 12 months?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think they are challenging environments. Obviously we want to make sure they are kept to a minimum, as necessary, but I think they are important as an option. I noticed the shadow minister acknowledged that lockdowns are needed from time to time as well in the system in that report, but obviously the priority is staff safety and the security of the facility and the premises. I think that is really important in these kinds of dynamic environments.

**Jade BENHAM:** Commissioner, has this got anything to do with staff shortages?

**Larissa STRONG:** What is experienced at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre at the moment is related to staff shortages. When we do lock down it is for the minimum time period possible. Anything more than 15 minutes is counted as a lockdown. At Dame Phyllis Frost Centre we have only had one full-day lockdown of the entire prison – for 23 hours – this financial year, but what we have had is partial lockdowns of a particular unit to do with staff shortages. That reflects the fact that we had not been recruiting at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre since December 2023, because we had a much-reduced population at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre. We were proposing to close some large units and we did not want to impact on staff, so we were deliberately not recruiting. Now we are pivoting, and since March we have been actively recruiting to Dame Phyllis Frost Centre to address the issues.

**Jade BENHAM:** So just in 2025, how many lockdowns have there been?

**Larissa STRONG:** Do you mean since January 2025?

**Jade BENHAM:** Across the board, if you have those numbers.

**Larissa STRONG:** I have an October to April figure. Between 1 October 2024 and 30 April 2025 there have been 129 days where an area of the prison has been partially locked down.

**Jade BENHAM:** Is that the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre or is that all prisons?

**Larissa STRONG:** That is Dame Phyllis Frost Centre.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. Do you have a figure for how many lockdowns there have been during the same period right across the state?

**Larissa STRONG:** No, I do not.

**Jade BENHAM:** Could you take that on notice?

**Larissa STRONG:** Yes.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Do prisoners accrue some compensation for a lockdown?

**Larissa STRONG:** No, they do not.

**Jade BENHAM:** Out of the figures that we have for the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, how many of those lockdowns were caused by staff shortages?

**Larissa STRONG:** That figure was due to staff shortages.

**Jade BENHAM:** So all lockdowns are caused because of staff shortages?

**Larissa STRONG:** The figure of the 129 days when we had a partial lockdown of a particular unit was due to staff shortages.

**Jade BENHAM:** All of them? Okay.

**Nick McGOWAN:** How many in total then – lockdowns – for any reason?

**Larissa STRONG:** I would have to take that on notice. Do you mean a lockdown because we had an incident? I do not have that data on me.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Thank you. You can take that on notice.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. So you do not have those figures now. Are staff leaving the prison system because they feel unsafe, which is why you have had to introduce these new sign-on bonuses?

**Larissa STRONG:** Our attrition data for custodial staff for this financial year is at 8 per cent, once I take out Dhurringile, because obviously they were non-choice. That is actually probably about what we normally do have across the prison system. Most years it is actually 10 per cent, but this year it is 8 per cent. There is nothing abnormal in terms of attrition.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. Moving on. Again, this is to the minister: given that the police commissioner was pressured into resigning by the government because police did not feel safe, why haven't you shown the same respect to our corrections staff?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think the message from the staff was clear. I think there needs to be a greater focus on staff safety. It is something I am committed to. I know I am firmly focused on supporting staff, and I hear from them and meet with them regularly. I recently had a meeting with frontline staff that work at MRC and work at Barwon. They have told me about the settings in prison, and they are challenging environments. I think we do need to listen to staff and take their views on board. I would say that this situation is a bit different from the police commissioner's role, but I think –

**Jade BENHAM:** There was a vote of no confidence in the police commissioner, the same as what has been raised with your Commissioner, and the police commissioner has moved on. It is a pretty similar situation. You are not going to make a similar move?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think it is different. I think it is important that we do have a focus on staff safety and redouble our efforts. Some of the suggestions by staff were about the use of restraints, ensuring the infrastructure settings are right around barriers, and issues about consistency and internal disciplinary mechanisms, and I have made clear to the Commissioner and to the department secretary that I would like to see the views of staff taken on board. I value their views. I will continue to meet with frontline staff. I will never shy away from that, because I think it is key. They have made their views clear. They want to see further steps. We have already made significant investments, but they want to see more and I want to see more.

**Jade BENHAM:** Staff do not feel safe on your watch. The precedent was set with Victoria Police and the sacking of the Victoria Police commissioner. So you do not agree with the police sacking and –

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think the staff want to see meaningful change on the ground, and that is what I want to see.

**Jade BENHAM:** They do.

**Enver ERDOGAN:** And I want to see that too. I have made that clear to the Commissioner and to the Secretary.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. I am going to go to Mr Tak.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Talking about change, we know that supporting people to engage in these programs – in rehab programs in prison – is an essential part of reducing the risk of reoffending when people are released. I refer to budget paper 3, page 158, and the ‘Prisoner supervision and support’ line item. Minister, how is this investment supporting rehabilitation of people in custody?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Thank you, Mr Tak. I think it is a really important question. I think a safe and secure system is one that focuses on short-term safety whilst people are with us in custody but also supports them so that when they leave they are in a better position to positively contribute to our community. What I would say is it is about long-term safety. I think we have that responsibility. When people are with us we provide the supports to address their underlying behaviour, but also we accept that when people come to prison many people have a lot worse health outcomes than what is in the public. They have a lot poorer educational outcomes than the broader public, and so we try to meet those needs, and that is why the investments we have made in new health contracts and health providers are important. The investments we have made in educational programs are important, and the centres of excellence are something – for those of you that do not listen to the Legislative Council – that I have talked about a number of times and our partnerships. The Kangan Institute is one of such partners, where we have been able to give people real skills – skills in welding, skills in warehousing, skills in a whole range of sectors – that are directly transferable to jobs on the outside, our inside-outside jobs. Some, which our Commissioner could talk about, we have been internationally recognised for. I think that an important part of the success we have had is about the investments we have made in this space.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Minister. I also hear from experts in the justice system as well as constituents in my own community that a key time of reoffending risk is immediately after someone is released from prison. How does this funding support people to safely reintegrate into the community after being released from prison?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Thanks for that question. I think there are many supports available to people as they transition out of custody, and rehabilitation really needs to begin the moment they enter custody. I think that is what we try to do with our health checks upon people’s entry into our system, including mental health, but we also want to provide the opportunity for a reset so that people can live a healthy and stable life upon release. That is why the community safety package is important. It is about ramping up the system and having more staff, but some of those staff will be dedicated to rehabilitation and reintegration roles in running the programs that we do provide. There is \$19.5 million in this budget that provides a particular focus on employment supports so that people can get a job when they leave. Dedicated assessment transition coordinators and family violence programs like Tuning into Respectful Relationships and Free from Violence will be important. We know that many of the men in our system in particular have a history of this type of violence, and it is important that when they are back out in the community the communities are safe but also that the families are safe, because unfortunately, the people they hurt are usually the people closest to them.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Minister. Getting a job – I would like to come back to that. Vulnerable communities can often be over-represented in our prison system. What programs does this budget deliver to support these communities through rehab and also to stay out of prison?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think we do have a responsibility. We have talked as a government about a commitment to closing the gap, and Victoria was the first state to have in action an Aboriginal justice agreement. I must give credit to the Bracks government, which signed that agreement. It is over 20 years now that we have had an agreement between the Aboriginal community and government to work towards addressing this over-representation. As part of that role I meet regularly with the Aboriginal Justice Caucus. Aunty Marion and Chris Harrison are important stakeholders – more than stakeholders, I would call them partners – in terms of the justice framework and the work we do. And government has really backed up our message with great investments: the Aboriginal healing unit at Dame Phyllis Frost, family engagement programs dedicated to Aboriginal families and expanding primary health services. We have our Aboriginal health check, which is equivalent to what is available in Medicare. For those of you that are not familiar, what is available in Medicare is funded through the Commonwealth, and the state obviously funds the health services within custodial settings. But we have done a health check. It is new. About 1700 people have taken it up, so most of the Aboriginal prisoners in our system have taken up that health check, which is equivalent to what is out in the community in that time.

But it is not just Aboriginal people. Unfortunately, there are many minorities that are over-represented in the system. Mr Tak, you would be particularly interested that we do have an Indochinese prisoner support program. Vietnamese women run that program. That plays an important role. We have Muslim Connect – the Muslim community as well are over-represented in our system – a partnership with ICV. It plays an important role in connecting people to faith and culture so they can get led to better outcomes. In many instances there is a stigma attached to being in a custodial setting, especially when you have a multicultural overlay as well. I think getting the community on board is important. We have an African visitation and mentoring program as well that we have rolled out. This budget funds all that work, and they are partnerships that we are continuing. Some of them were lapsing. We have continued them. They have been successful. We have seen that. This budget recommitments and does that work. I know they will be very pleased about that, and it is important for our state.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Minister. You mentioned that Corrections Victoria won an award in relation to an employment program. Can you tell the committee more about that program?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** We have employment hubs in prisons to provide job readiness for people. I think that is key. You can start from stuff such as what some of us might view as straightforward – preparing CVs and the like. It is important to actually be confident enough to write down the skill set you have – people are valuable and they have got skills, but some people just lack the confidence to bring themselves forward – but also have pathways with brokers out in the community. There are a number of partnerships across our state, across our suburbs, making sure people can walk into a job. I want to take this opportunity to thank our partners who do that work. I have had an opportunity to meet many of them, and I see how passionate they are about making a difference.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Minister.

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

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister, looking at budget paper 3, page 211, appendix B in relation to the early intervention investment framework, this budget has substantially increased investment into prison budgets, but looking at this page, there is a cut to investment in early intervention by more than a third. Minister, in your assessment, does this not contradict your commitment to this framework?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Thank you, Mr Puglielli, for that question. As a budget, what I would say is I think it reconfirms that our government is committed to our focus on community safety but our focus on preventing people coming into contact with the criminal justice system does not just end with those intervention programs. I would say, especially in the youth setting but across the board, the investments that our government makes are about keeping people out of the criminal justice system. That can start from a little child in free kinder to primary and secondary education and through to free TAFE, which is about skills and training, which is an important protective factor. I would say you cannot just take one line item and say we are not investing – we are

investing across the board, and all that work is about making sure people live happy and healthy lives away from crime.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Sure. A \$386 million cut to that figure, though – what is the rationale for that?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I dispute the premise of that. I think there are a lot of investments across the board that are focused – some of the best interventions are not necessarily in the criminal justice system, they are so that people avoid the criminal justice system – in education, in health, in early childhood. That is why I think taking just specific line items is comparing apples and oranges. I do not think it is a fair comparison to make.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. I might move on to out-of-cell hours. In the opening slides today you noted a 10.1 Victorian average, and I think 9 was the national average. Can I ask what is the actual rate for the current year of out-of-cell hours in correctional facilities? And can I ask: is this recorded by facility?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I might have to ask that of the Commissioner. Do we have that?

**Larissa STRONG:** Are you referring to the table in the departmental performance statement on the out of cell –

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Yes. But the follow-on was is it recorded by facility. Is that data available?

**Larissa STRONG:** The data comes from each prison. It goes to a central area that collates the data to then provide the total aggregated out-of-cell hours for the system.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. So if this committee wanted to know by facility what that data was, is that something that can be provided?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** We provide a statewide system to make sure that it is uniform with other jurisdictions. I think if we get into subsections, I do not think it is helpful. I think what is useful is data that is transferable and comparable to other jurisdictions, so that is what we do. The reporting is trying to be as uniform as possible across jurisdictions.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. I mean, in the interest of comparison, do you also have it disaggregated for men and women?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** As I said, we have the data on per facility, per site. The men's system is a lot larger, but for the women there are only two sites that have a custodial focus.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Can you provide that to the committee?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I am not sure if we have – do we have that information?

**Larissa STRONG:** I would have to take it on notice, but we absolutely collect information by site.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Perfect. Just moving on, I understand there is \$9.8 million listed under 'Supporting a safe and effective corrections system' – budget paper 3, page 70. From what I can see, this is the total listed in this budget for specifically reducing recidivism, which we know is a key driver of crime rates. Can I ask: why is this such a minute proportion of the total criminal justice funding?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Mr Puglielli, I think my presentation said that we are one of the national leaders in this area, with a 37 per cent recidivism rate, which is much lower than the national average. A lot of the work we already do as part of that \$1.6 billion in our custodial facilities is focused on rehabilitation and preventing reoffending, employment engagement, education engagement and better health services across our sites. I think that is key. I think, again, taking one line item is not necessarily a reflection of the whole system. I view that as a core job, to be honest. Community safety and rehabilitation go hand in hand, because that is how you have long-term community safety.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** On another matter, the gender equality budget statement, page 16, earmarks \$1.9 million for interventions that work with men who use violence, and within this figure there is a smaller, unspecified

figure for behaviour change programs for male prisoners. Can you tell us exactly which of these programs are available in which prisons?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I might take that one on notice.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Yes. That is all right.

**Enver ERDOGAN:** A very specific question, Mr Puglielli, so I will take that one on notice.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** No, I understand it, but thank you for providing it. Is there any data that is collected on how many men have completed these programs, even on a year-by-year basis?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I am happy to take that on notice and see what we can provide. I think these are important.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Can I ask: what are the facilitator qualifications for people delivering these programs?

**Larissa STRONG:** It will depend on the program, to be honest with you. Programs vary. If it is a violence intervention program then you must be a clinician, like a psychologist registered with AHPRA. If it is a parenting program, then we do training via Relationships Australia. So it does vary depending on the program.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. Just to move on, with reference to people who have recently been released from prison to the Coburg Motor Inn – this has had some attention recently – can I ask: does the DJCS provide services to people recently released at the motor inn, and if so, what services are being provided?

**Larissa STRONG:** We do not release people to the motor inn, but obviously when people are released they go where they are able to go. We do supply housing in the Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility, which has 44 beds. It has been going for almost five years now and has been very successful in terms of providing a safe place for men at risk of homelessness upon release. We fund a number of NGOs to do pre- and post-release support for men and women leaving prison, and part of their role is to link people into housing. The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing also have initial assessment and planning workers in each prison that work with prisoners around public housing waiting lists and around emergency accommodation. Unfortunately, housing is very difficult to secure post release. There is a dearth of affordable, sustainable and safe housing for people. But we work with the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing's homelessness service system.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. I did have a follow-on about which agencies are contracted to provide those services, but I think you may have partially just answered that then. There were reports of a number of deaths at this motor inn. Do you have visibility of the number so that we are not relying on media speculation on these issues?

**Larissa STRONG:** I think the coroner may, because certainly –

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We are going to go to Mr Hilakari.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you, Minister. Thank you, officials, for your attendance this afternoon. I just want to go to community-based corrections. It is a considerable part of the portfolio responsibilities and your responsibilities as minister. I will take you to budget paper 3, page 158, which outlines the community-based offender supervision expenditure. I am just hoping you can talk to how we effectively manage this cohort of people.

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Thank you, Mr Hilakari. I am looking at the budget paper now. I can see there is a 4.1 per cent increase in that line item, so that is fantastic to see. We are increasing our community-based support. I think the focus of this budget line item is about managing people on supervision orders or court orders and supervision of people on parole. There are people who have been sentenced by courts to serve their time in the community, and this can be instead of a custodial setting for many of them. A second stream is also those people that are being put into these orders via parole. They go via the parole board, an independent board that decides whether people are suitable for parole. And then there is also some that are paying for effectively outstanding fines, reparation towards financial penalties, who do community work, although we have seen a reduction in that area because there has been a lot of legislative change from the Allan–Andrews government in

this regard. At the end of April there was close to 8500 to support people doing this work, 34 centres – I had the chance to go visit recently, like I said, with Mr Edbrooke out in Frankston, the new centre, which is integrated with DFFH as well, with housing close to the courts and police and so on and local amenities, so a much better location for the Frankston community than the Bayside area. But I think it is all about supporting people, making sure people comply with the orders and they are getting the support they should be getting. I think that is key. It is not about just making sure we are supervising them purely by micromanaging them. It is about making sure they are getting the help they need, and I think that is key.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** On reparations, you mentioned reparations for offending and, more broadly, community work. I am hoping you can talk to some of the types of community work that can be undertaken. Particularly you mentioned reparations for offending as something that is maybe a less prominent element of our corrections system. I am keen to understand that in a little bit more detail if possible.

**Enver ERDOGAN:** You are right, Mr Hilakari. I think making reparations to the community is about showing remorse for committing a crime and repairing damage that you have caused to the community. The most tangible element of that I think is doing community service, and community-based sentences provide that opportunity. We give people the opportunity to do work, effectively, to volunteer, so to speak, in terms of for volunteer organisations, who appreciate the support. They also benefit as well. They gain valuable skills that help them find future employment, so doing this work is important. Landcare groups are one example, and when I said ‘volunteer’, it is important work. The community needs it. These volunteer groups want more people to assist them, so people on community service orders get to do some Landcare work if that is what they choose. But there are many others. There is some work around graffiti as well. That is a big one and a popular one, I know, in communities. Councils appreciate it. The graffiti work is limited to public buildings, I might add, because I do understand that there is a lot of private graffiti happening from time to time as well. But I think it is all important work. I think it is about giving back to the community, and I know a lot of people appreciate that work, and lots of men – mainly men – in the programs do appreciate it and do gain valuable skills that set them up for other opportunities.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** You mentioned a moment ago the independent Adult Parole Board. How is this budget supporting the management of parolees as they re-enter the community?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think the parole board is important and has a big responsibility. I think I might take this opportunity to acknowledge David Fanning, the long-time chair of the parole board during really difficult and challenging times, but he did a great job. We now have a new head of the board, Judge Helen Syme. I am sure she will continue the positive work in this space. But I think parole in Victoria is tough. It is a privilege to get to be granted parole, but it is also an important part of promoting community safety, because the alternative would be that people would just be released out into the community. Parole gives us, in terms of the justice system, an opportunity to make sure people are supervised whilst they are out. There is an initial reintegration process as part of that. Supervision is then about providing structure to people on parole. There are currently about 700 people – that is the size of parole, because it is tough. Not everyone gets parole. We know that 82 per cent of parolees successfully complete their orders, so clearly that supervision, that kind of supported –

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Sorry, what was that number?

**Enver ERDOGAN:** Eighty-two per cent. So clearly that supported reintegration works for most of them – for 82 per cent it does. That time – it could be six months, it could be 12 months parole – where they are kind of getting supervised and to an extent being monitored to make sure they are doing the right thing, which they should while they are out in the community, sets them up better for when their parole ends.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** I know we have talked a little bit about recidivism, and I might come back to that in some more specific questions in a moment, but just broadly on reoffending, I am hoping you can talk to some of the programs and services that really drive down and reduce the risk of reoffending. You mentioned housing a little bit earlier. I am keen to understand about work and education as well as housing.

**Enver ERDOGAN:** I think employment and housing are probably the two most important protective factors for people in contact with the criminal justice system, and that is why as a government I was proud that we invested significant resources into the Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility. We have got a partnership with Jesuit Social Services, who lead that work, and I will take this opportunity to thank their team, because I

know they are really passionate about making a difference. Since its inception, close to 300 men have stayed there. The goal is really for them to be released. Securing housing is really difficult in this market, especially when you have a criminal record and obviously you do not have a job history, so people come there, usually for up to six months, where they can reintegrate into the community, close to amenities, and get the support, because there are still some rules. These people have ended their sentence, but there are rules to be at this facility, and Jesuits do provide that kind of guidance for them, a kind of social work, to make sure that they reintegrate successfully. That is a successful one that I do want to give a special mention to, and I want to thank the Jesuits for that work.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Hilakari. Minister and officials, thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the committee today. 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 short break before beginning its consideration of the casino, gaming and liquor regulation portfolio at 4:20 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**