

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022-23 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Wednesday, 18 May 2022

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Danny O'Brien—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr Gary Maas

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr James Newbury

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Ms Natalie Hutchins MP, Minister for Corrections,

Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Secretary,

Ms Larissa Strong, Commissioner, Corrections Victoria,

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

Ms Carly Edwards, Associate Deputy Secretary, Policy, Strategy and Offender Outcomes, 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.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their elders past, present and emerging as well as elders from other communities who may be with us today.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2022–23 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, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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.

We again welcome Minister Hutchins, this time in the corrections portfolio, and officers of her department. We invite you to make an opening statement, which will be followed by questions from the committee.

Visual presentation.

Ms HUTCHINS: Thanks, Chair. I too would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respects.

In terms of corrections, we employ more than 6000 people in the corrections system, including staff operating our custodial facilities and those delivering services in community corrections services across Victoria. Our staff support more than 6500 people in prison and more than 9000 people on community corrections orders. Of those individuals in prison as of 9 May, 44 per cent were unsentenced and on remand. Across Victoria there are 11 publicly operated prisons, three privately operated prisons—that includes Fulham, Port Phillip and Ravenhall—and one transitional centre. The transitional centre is the Judy Lazarus centre, which provides supervised pathways back to community for selected prisoners nearing the end of their sentence.

To provide some further information on the scale of the corrections portfolio, the total output for corrections in the 2022–23 budget is \$1.826 billion. This budget provides \$75 million for the corrections portfolio for initiatives to reduce future justice demands and keep the community safe; I will go into some detail as we get through the slides. As you are aware, a key recent priority has been keeping the corrections system, including staff and people in custody, safe from COVID-19, with a \$54 million commitment provided in this budget for these costs. This is on top of the \$24.6 million that was provided in the 2021–22 budget update for COVID surveillance testing in the corrections system, and I have previously spoken about the significant infrastructure investment that we have made as well. We have \$2.1 billion worth of prison investment projects that are currently underway and being delivered to make sure that we have modern and fit-for-purpose infrastructure underpinning community safety.

Since the start of the pandemic the population of our prison system has declined. This is largely due to the impacts of COVID-19 and of course the investments of our crime prevention strategies. We have seen also a

decrease in court cases. From the end of March 2020 the number of Victorian prisoners decreased from more than 8000 to around 6700 in early May 2020. That is a reduction of 17 per cent. This was largely due to a decline in sentenced prisoners and a decrease in police-reported crime during the stay-at home restrictions, along with changes to police and court operations over the period of COVID restrictions. It is interesting to note that the number of unsentenced prisoners has remained steady since the start of the pandemic and it is the number of sentenced prisoners that has actually dropped. The combination of this change and substantial capital investment by the government over the last five years means that the corrections system is well positioned for the next decade.

I would like to turn to some of the detail that is in the budget. The government has committed funding to corrections through the 2022–23 budget for initiatives aimed at reducing offending and improving responses to priority cohorts. Key initiatives include rehabilitation and reintegration, support for prisoners, personal care support for ageing people in prison, continuing the successful prison disability support initiative and planning and design of a youth forensic mental health service in corrections centres. In addition, funding has been provided to continue improved oversight of people on community correction orders. Funding for the Western Plains correctional centre will secure and maintain the facility and prepare for operation after construction is complete.

Corrections responded strongly to the risk of COVID-19 in the prison system through the introduction of quarantine arrangements, testing, vaccinations, and prisoner welfare and other measures. These measures have minimised the spread of COVID-19 in our prisons and have seen a completely different story to what was seen in prisons in other parts of the country and overseas in that we have not yet lost a prisoner's life to COVID.

Funding will continue into the Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility over the next two years. This facility provides short-term transitional accommodation and services for men who would otherwise be at risk of homelessness upon leaving prison.

The government is committed to reducing offending recidivism and over-representation and addressing drivers of imprisonment. The corrections system plays a critical role in this. Our expected outcome for recidivism measures published in the budget papers is 5.9 points below last year's and also below our target. Some of this change is due to bringing our methodology in line with some other states to provide national comparability of this measure, along with updated operational practices in our sentence management. The decrease is also due to the impact of COVID-19 on criminal activity. Our commitment to reducing offending is reflected in our budget outcomes, including funding for rehabilitation and reintegration support for sentenced prisoners to support their successful transition back into the community.

Of course during the pandemic the challenge of keeping people safe was a huge one for not only our prisoners and our staff but the broader Victorian population, and I want to take the opportunity to thank our staff for the tremendous work that they have done across the correctional system. Our measures have been effective in minimising COVID-19 transmissions amongst custodial populations and reducing the chances of serious illness and hospitalisation. This includes onsite vaccine programs, which have delivered over 30 000 vaccines. The program has delivered two doses to 84 per cent of the prisoner population and a third dose to 84 per cent of those eligible for a third dose across the prison population. The program also had a particular focus on increasing vaccination rates for Aboriginal people in prison. I am particularly pleased to note that 85 per cent of Aboriginal prisoners have had a second dose and 83 per cent of those eligible Aboriginal people in prison have received a third dose. So vaccination rates are high, despite people coming into prison having a significantly lower vaccination rate when compared to the general community. A review of people entering prisons between 1 December 2021 and 10 April this year found that less than 47 per cent had received two doses, so it has been very much a concerted effort to make sure people do get vaccinated and that we do keep it at a minimum in our prison system. Certainly, as I mentioned before, there have been other jurisdictions that have had significant deaths due to COVID. The UK prison system recorded 157 deaths of prisoners that were suspected or confirmed to be caused by COVID, and of course numerous numbers of staff also lost their lives.

As well as measures to mitigate the risk of COVID-19, the department has taken significant steps to ensure people in custody can remain connected to their family, friends and community. A key strategy was to introduce video visits, which has been welcomed by prisoners and their families, particularly those with loved ones who live long distances away. More than 150 000 personal videos were conducted between 1 July 2021 and 9 May 2022 across public and private facilities, noting that in the same period in-person prison visits were

not allowed due to the COVID pandemic restrictions. Given the success of this approach, video visits continue to operate alongside in-person visits, providing a range of options to support people in custody to maintain connections with friends and family.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Deputy Chair.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister and team. Minister, I want to talk a bit about recidivism. According to page 86 of the department's questionnaire, the department is expecting an increase in the rate of return to corrective services within two years of discharge from community corrections orders, so it is going up from an expected outcome of 10.5 per cent to a target of 14. Why is that?

Ms HUTCHINS: Thanks for the question. Certainly we are really pleased with the rate of recidivism going down—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, that is the question, though. For community corrections it is not; it is expected to go up.

Ms HUTCHINS: I think we have to plan for a system that is based on outside-of-COVID trajectories, and that is certainly something that we are doing. Part of it is also due to, in part, the changes to the national accounting rules for these measures in the ROGS. I think you will remember that I referred to some of the accounting measures coming into line with other states. That is certainly also one of those. I think that the main thing to be aware of is that we have seen a decrease. It does not matter whether it is under the previous measurements or the new one that has been enforced on us through the *Report on Government Services* so that we can have comparisons across all of the states that are equal. But in any sense they have both been reduced, so I think that is a good outcome for Victorians.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, that did not answer the question about why the corrective services recidivism rate would go up. But since you have raised it and you mentioned it in the presentation as well, isn't it a fact, though, that the change to the accounting measure basically says, 'Recidivism is now not recorded until the person concerned is sentenced' as opposed to the old measure of them being returned to custody? It would be positive, I would agree with you, if recidivism rates were actually falling, but isn't it simply a case of this reclassification and the huge backlog of court cases we have got making the figures look better for you in terms of recidivism?

Ms HUTCHINS: I think the results for eight of the 11 performance measures within the community-based offenders supervision outputs—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, I am talking broadly now, not just corrections.

Ms HUTCHINS: Broadly, not just CCOs?

Mr D O'BRIEN: Not just CCOs, no. As you indicated, the change to the recidivism counting applies across the spectrum.

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes, and we are focused on rehabilitation and reintegration as a really big part of not only the last couple of years but going forward. But I might ask Ryan from our department to expand on the measures a little bit more.

Mr PHILLIPS: Thank you, Minister. So just confirming that the expected outcome for this year is an improvement on the previous year. The outcome rate for the rate of return to corrective services within two years of discharge from a community correction order is 10.5 per cent against the target of 16 per cent.

Mr D O'BRIEN: But the target for this year is 14 per cent.

Mr PHILLIPS: Yes, but for the previous year we have had a significant improvement—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay.

Mr PHILLIPS: and we are confident that—of course it is partly due to the changes in national counting rules after the target was set. However, we have tested whether there would have been an improvement

regardless of the national counting rules, and we are confident that we would still have met the performance measure.

Ms HUTCHINS: And I think the thing to realise is that we have had a drop from 43.6 per cent down to 40.7, which represents the biggest drop in recidivism rates in 34 years, so it is pretty significant.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, that is what I wanted to ask. If the former reporting standards had been applied, what would the current recidivism rate be?

Mr PHILLIPS: We were unable to specifically assess the exact number. We can take it on notice, but in the time available we were unable to specifically determine that. But based on the analysis we undertook, we were comfortable that it was within the target.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. You have said that. The minister has also said that, but you cannot give me a figure. So how does the committee have any confidence as to why you are confident that the actual recidivism rate is actually falling?

Ms HUTCHINS: Because both under the old rate and the new methodology they have both fallen.

Mr D O'BRIEN: But you cannot tell me what it is under the old rate.

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes, it is 40.7 down to 37.7.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, hang on—no. Mr Phillips just said that we did not actually have a number—‘We are only confident in our analysis’.

Mr PHILLIPS: I think there are two contexts. One is rate of return to custody after a period in custody. We have been able to specifically determine the number there because of the way the calculations are undertaken, so we can confidently say. And in relation to community correction orders, because of the way the numbers and the analysis is undertaken, in the time available the crime statistics authority was not able to point to the specific number. However, the advice to me was that it was within and lower than the numbers that we have reported to you today.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Chair, and thanks, Minister. Welcome, everyone. Minister, I would like to move to discussion around the Western Plains project and specifically refer to budget paper 3 at page 90 and the line item there in the output initiatives. Would you be able to outline for us how the Western Plains project is progressing?

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes. Thank you for the question. Certainly the project is running on budget and on time, and that is a major achievement in the COVID-19 environment—to be able to keep the ball rolling on the build of this. And it is quite a phenomenal build. I think if anyone has driven past it, they will see that the size of it is quite enormous. The new facility is really going to help us turn prisoners' lives around by us being able to provide not only new facilities but also new programs and an extension of both jobs programs and psychological support programs through the new facility build.

We are looking for it to open or be completed later this year—second quarter of the 2022–23 financial year. It is critical that we plan for the future and ensure that there is enough capacity in the system. I talked about numbers dropping in my presentation. That is something very much we need to take account of, but we also need to be able to pivot up and down as times change and the system changes and also population changes. So this project will deliver 1248 new maximum security beds, and we are really well placed now to make sure that we have got a safe and secure prison system into the future for many, many years to come. It has been quite a significant investment, and I am really pleased that it has managed to stay on track during a really difficult time.

Mr MAAS: Terrific. Just in terms of capacity, would you be able to outline the current number of prisoners in custody and how this compares to historical demand?

Ms HUTCHINS: As I mentioned in my presentation at start, we have gone from 8142 prisoners in February 2020 down to 6703 as of April this year, so that represents a 17.5 per cent drop on prepandemic levels. It takes our prison population levels back to where they were in 2016. We do not have a plan for prison numbers rising again, but we will be monitoring it closely, because we need to have a responsive system to ensure that we have that capacity in place should things change—should population grow, should things fluctuate. I think we are in a very good position to ensure that we can continue to provide the best community safety that Victorians deserve.

Mr MAAS: So what are the final steps? What are the steps that you need to take from here to ensure that the facility is ready for when it is needed?

Ms HUTCHINS: The handover from the construction companies involved has quite an extensive handover period. There is a range of activities, including technical commissioning with the builder, continued IT systems applications and also certainly finalisation of operation models. That does take some time. And immediately from handover the company must provide a secure facility on there but also ensure that we have got the management and exiting of all the people that have been working on this project day to day. We have had hundreds, if not—at its peak—more than a thousand people working on this project, and we have certainly had hundreds of apprentices engaged on the project as well. There is a lot to do in terms of the handover of day-to-day kind of oversight of security equipment that will come and management of alarms and so forth. The preparation for that handover work is already in play and so is the construction validation process that has to happen as well.

Mr MAAS: Great. Thanks, Minister. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister and your team, for appearing this evening. Can I just confirm the new adult prison projects underway in relation to expanding capacity? Is Barwon Prison to be extended by 196 beds, Marngoneet 36, Middleton 39, Hopkins 94—correct me if I am wrong in any of these—Ravenhall 102, Dame Phyllis Frost 106 and the new Chisholm Road prison will have a capacity of 1248? Is that all correct? Have I missed any projects there?

Ms HUTCHINS: I do not have the exact numbers in front of me, but it sounds about right. I certainly have the numbers for the new build.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. And they are all expected to be completed by this year—is that correct?

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes. Some of the prison infill projects—those smaller ones that you talked about—may actually continue over into next year, depending on the level of weeks that we have lost due to construction being restricted during COVID.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Thank you. Now, according to budget paper 3—I think you may have presented on this—about a quarter of men's and about a third of women's prison capacity is not being used. Then we have got 1600-plus beds to be opened very soon. When do you expect the prison occupancy rate to get to that 90 per cent target, given that we are going to have even more beds open?

Ms HUTCHINS: I might ask the Commissioner to fill in some of the details after I have just made some general comments, but certainly our numbers fluctuate dramatically around how many beds we have at any given time. I note that—in touring Ravenhall twice now—there are facilities there where we have two people to a cell, which is not always best for rehabilitation for people. So, some of this infill work that we are doing through previous budget commitments certainly goes to making that a better facility in terms of people being able to have a single space to themselves, a cell to themselves. Also, you know, there is work to decommission some beds in some locations where the facilities are no longer suitable. They are all the things that are still yet to happen. Those decisions do not get made until the completion of some of these projects, but I might ask the Commissioner to fill in.

Comm. STRONG: Thanks, Minister. I think that is correct. There is a build program underway. Some of those prison infill beds will be in the following financial year, not this financial year. The new beds do give us an opportunity to close, I guess, older infrastructure and older beds. If you look at the Dame Phyllis Frost

Centre, for example, we are building a 2 by 20-bed close supervision unit. We will demolish the previous management unit, so it is not necessarily a net gain. So the planning is really very much about the configuration within a prison, whether it is bunks or whether it is old units actually being demolished, to think that through, as well as, I guess, the continual monitoring that we are doing in terms of numbers—you know, the reduction that we have had over the last two years is related to lockdown—and what that looks like in terms of when we would need to be funded to turn on those new beds. At this point in time our planning is really around if we have a new unit, a new reception unit, that is more fit for purpose—that has, I guess, learned from modern design—we would open that and close the old reception unit.

Ms HUTCHINS: So the system has to be able to flex up and down, and we will work with our Crime Statistics Agency to—

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. Okay. Do you have any modelling on the projections for men's and women's prisoner numbers over the forward estimates?

Ms HUTCHINS: Sorry, for women's, did you say?

Mr HIBBINS: Men's and women's.

Ms HUTCHINS: Men's and women's.

Comm. STRONG: Modelling is done, but after having 10 years of stability in modelling and projections, the pandemic has meant, and the lockdown has meant, there is not a lot of—we need more time data points to be confident in that modelling. It is too soon coming out of lockdown.

Ms FALKINGHAM: We do track short-, medium- and long-term demand, but right now, given what COVID has done right across the system, it is far too early to know whether these trends are going to continue. But I am happy to take on notice and get for you from the crime stats agency their current predictions in the short term.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you. And then, just in terms of the overall prison capacity, are you saying that is a decision made once the new prisons come online, or are those decisions being made now?

Ms HUTCHINS: No, look, some of them, depending on which project we are talking about specifically, will be made when the project is completed. As flagged already, at places like Dame Phyllis Frost we know that there are some units that are not going to be fit for purpose, and we will be transitioning using the new beds.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Minister and officials, for appearing today and for the work you do as well. I would like to explore Women and Mentoring, and particularly refer you to budget paper 3, page 97. There is an item there, a line, 'bolstering the Women and Mentoring Program'. Can you please explain for the committee's benefit who are Women and Mentoring and what they are receiving funding for in this budget?

Ms HUTCHINS: The Women and Mentoring program is an early intervention program that runs independent of government, and it works to support women charged with a criminal offence or at risk of reoffending, by matching them individually with a volunteer female mentor who is trained and resourced to provide adequate support. They have had really amazing success in the work that they have done. Mentors provide court-based and longer-term support by helping participants navigate the criminal justice system and find and use community resources to undertake activities based on the participants' own goals and needs.

The aim of the project is to address some of the key issues relating to why that person offended. In many of the circumstances we know that some of these women have complex drivers for why they are offending, and this can relate to family violence, to homelessness, to mental health, to drug and alcohol addictions or all of the above, so by having a mentor who has some of the knowledge around the criminal justice system and how to navigate it but also how to reach out and get services for some of these women, we are seeing a reduction in incarceration rates for women that go through this program. And it is certainly a priority of this government, which is why we have actually resourced this program for a further four years with \$3.63 million. That is

estimated to support a further 100 women to go through this program. It does not have a time limit on how long the mentors work with the people in need. They can be mentors for years, and I have met with some of the women who have been through the program and certainly heard their stories firsthand of how they have been able to get their lives back on track by having someone be able to mentor them and point them in the right direction and be there to answer the phone when they need help.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Minister. I am interested in exploring and having an understanding of what some of the Women and Mentoring achievements have been to date.

Ms HUTCHINS: Certainly this program has had a really positive effect on the women who have been through and hopefully will continue to with the 100 women that are now being allocated funding to be part of this program. The rate of reoffending is very low. It has been reported at just 13 per cent, and in the last three years Women and Mentoring has accepted 218 referrals and matched, out of that 218, 65 different women with mentors. They go through a pretty rigorous process of making sure they match the right people. As I mentioned, these women come with a lot of complex issues. Ninety-five per cent of the women in the program have one or more mental health diagnoses and 50 per cent live in insecure or unstable housing. You can see there are some pretty complex issues, so mentors assist in building social connection and helping these women reconnect with their families and in some cases their children. They help them manage debt and finances, find employment and go through drug and rehab courses. The achievements through listening to the women in this program and the mentors are just so immense, and I was really pleased to be able to attend a function where we celebrated the 10 years of this program running and hear directly from some of the participants. There was not a dry eye in the room during that time, and I certainly heard firsthand accounts from some of the women who had been through that and turned their lives around. So it is proven to work.

Ms RICHARDS: That is great. Thanks so much, Minister.

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

Mr NEWBURY: Minister, WAM is a wonderful organisation, and it was a commendable budget decision. Commissioner, I am interested in some data if you have it with you on things like—do you have the total number of emergency management days provided to inmates?

Comm. STRONG: We do not do the data collection every fortnight, so what I propose is—because I knew you would ask this; I think last time it was on notice—we wait until the end of the financial year, we wait until end 30 June, and then we can give you the financial year data for the 2021–22 financial year, which we would be able to give you in July.

Mr NEWBURY: So how will you break that down? Could you give—

Comm. STRONG: In a similar format as, I think, last time.

Mr NEWBURY: Could I ask for days relating to restrictions and days for prison lockdowns? Do you have any details on the largest number of emergency management days awarded to a single prisoner with you?

Comm. STRONG: No, I do not. In terms of your request about days, we can provide you the total number of emergency management days. I think we provided that to you last time. I think we can provide you with the average across the prison population that were awarded emergency management days.

Mr NEWBURY: Have you got data on the reason why it was awarded?

Comm. STRONG: It will be awarded because each one is an individual decision, so each individual—

Mr NEWBURY: I understand that, but you would record why.

Comm. STRONG: We would absolutely know why in an individual file—whether it was a COVID-related lockdown, or there are other reasons sometimes prisons are locked down as well. I am not sure whether our data collection process would allow me to say, ‘This was an emergency management day because of COVID’ as opposed to ‘This was an emergency management day because of X or Y’, in terms of how we record that data and analyse that data.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay. Do you have any data on the number of prisoners that have been discharged early because of emergency management days—that is, the days were applied?

Comm. STRONG: From 1 July there was a change in practice, and now if you are on remand you are no longer granted emergency management days. You can accrue them for your time, but the decision and the decision process are not done until the point that you are sentenced. And that changed in July last year.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay. So the only data you have is aggregate? I mean, clearly you have it by person, but you are not able to provide data any more specific than that—than the aggregate?

Ms FALKINGHAM: Mr Newbury, we are happy to take on notice what data we can provide you within the constraints of the security of the prison system. We have always consistently and transparently provided that emergency management data at the end of the financial year, but we are also happy to take on notice whether there is anything further. I understand the questions you are asking, so I will take on notice whether there is any further data without breaching any of our security arrangements.

Mr NEWBURY: Sure. Minister, if I can take you to page 104 of the PAEC questionnaire, there are 50 fewer community corrections practitioners. Why is that the case? The questionnaire, Minister, sorry.

Ms HUTCHINS: Oh, questionnaire.

Mr NEWBURY: Yes. There are 50 fewer community corrections practitioners.

Ms HUTCHINS: I might have to take that one on notice and get back to you.

Mr NEWBURY: No problem. Commissioner, IBAC has previously found that data has been accessed inappropriately in relation to a number of individuals. Are there any other cases where that has occurred that you are aware of?

Comm. STRONG: I think you are referring to a report from IBAC on conduct between 2016 and 2018.

Mr NEWBURY: Yes.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, if that is the case, can I also ask you to relate your question to the estimates.

Mr NEWBURY: I have. I have asked whether or not there is any—

The CHAIR: It is the report from 2016–18.

Mr NEWBURY: No. I referred to a particular instance where it had happened and asked whether more recently it had happened.

Ms FALKINGHAM: There have been no current instances, Mr Newbury, that I have been briefed on or am aware of that relate to any further breaches from that IBAC report.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay. Thank you very much.

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

Ms TAYLOR: I was wondering if I could refer you to budget paper 3, page 97. Can you please outline some of the initiatives that are being funded to reduce future justice demand and also keep the community safe?

Ms HUTCHINS: Sorry, I will just get the budget paper. Really this is about our commitment to driving down demand and reducing recidivism. The government is committed to driving the numbers down by reducing offending through our crime prevention work but also by focusing on the time that we have prisoners in prison through rehabilitation and tackling the root causes of crime. That can come in many ways, and it is quite holistic in the way that we approach it. That includes imperative services, both in prison and upon release, that are tailored to the specific needs of the individual to give them the best chance of rehabilitation. This can include support for housing and employment and can enable a rebuild of family connections, which is a really important part. And I am really proud that we are delivering \$103 million over four years to fund a range of projects—this goes to a question from Mr Barton earlier, which related to the operation of the Maribyrnong

Community Residential Facility, which is being funded to run for another two years: expanding family visits support programs across the prison system; enhancing rehabilitation and reintegration support services; and of course funding the Women and Mentoring program, which I just touched on; and also continuing the prison disability support initiative, which is around coordinating, in the main, the NDIS packages that many of our prisoners need upon leaving prison; and also establishing employment hubs as a standard at minimum- and medium-security prisons across the state. That is probably a good summary to start with.

Ms TAYLOR: You mentioned the family visits support program and expanding that. What is this and why is it important?

Ms HUTCHINS: Certainly strong family connections play a really pivotal part. Unfortunately, as I mentioned earlier, more people come out of prison homeless than go in homeless, and part of that is because relationships with family members have broken down, not only because of the crime that they have committed but because of their behaviours that led to them committing that crime, which go to the underlying issues that affect why the person offended in the first place. So building connections is a really pivotal role for rehabilitation for so many prisoners and really helps in reducing recidivism, because they can come out of prison and reconnect with family members and start to get back into connecting to community through their families. That is a really important challenge that many people coming out of prison have. There can be trauma related to some of those relationships and shifting parenting roles. There is an emphasis on trying to build up the relationship between fathers and mothers that are incarcerated and their children. And also knowing how to engage when they come out by building a step to engagement while they are in and then giving them that support post release is really quite important.

Around half the people in Victoria's prison system are parents, and it is estimated that one in 20 children will have a parent incarcerated at some point in their life. Children of prisoners are six times more likely to be imprisoned themselves when compared to their peers. These are not statistics that I happily use, but unfortunately they are the realities. People in prison can become really disconnected from their families, so this is about building that back up so they can get the targeted support to repair relationships, to learn in some circumstances how to be better parents and, in addition to this, to look at rehabilitation and reintegration support that is focused around connecting with family.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Taylor. Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you. Now, can I just go back to a question following on from what Mr Newbury asked in relation to community corrections practitioners, and the Minister or the Commissioner can answer: was funding cut for community corrections programs?

Ms HUTCHINS: No. I think from my presentation you would have seen that our investment in programs has increased. Can I just ask: are you talking about community corrections or general—

Mrs McARTHUR: Practitioners, community corrections practitioners.

Ms FALKINGHAM: If I may, Mrs McArthur, the answer to the question is that there has been a reduction in the number of practitioners. That is because we are competing, during COVID, with a whole lot of other workforces—so for example, family violence practitioners, practitioners in housing support. We have a dedicated recruitment drive at the moment to try and get more community corrections practitioners. There have been no cuts in the funding, but it has literally been very, very hard to recruit and find those practitioners over the last period of time.

Ms HUTCHINS: And I think some of those services were difficult to deliver during our COVID shutdowns. Some of those services we tried to pivot online, and some prisoners did not want to participate in an online environment with some of the supports that we were offering.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. Thank you. Minister, the Victorian corrections system is one of the worst in the country. It costs more than \$500 per day per prisoner to run—easily the most expensive in the country and 31 per cent higher than New South Wales despite having half the number of people in the system. We spend more than any other state on community corrections, yet the staff-to-offender ratio is high and outcomes are

comparatively worse. Ten per cent of prisoners are seriously assaulted each year. Minister, how can you possibly justify your government's record with such a highly expensive and poorly performing corrections system?

Ms HUTCHINS: Well, I absolutely disagree with your assessment of our system, and in fact I congratulate our system on the fantastic delivery of keeping our community safe, our prisoners safe and our workforce safe throughout COVID. Certainly our investments in the behaviour programs, in training, in education and in employment are some of the best in the country, and certainly I think we have the highest engagement in employment programs in prison and success rates upon leaving prison and engaging in employment in the entire country. So I disagree with your assessment. And certainly when you look at our recidivism rate falling dramatically in the last 12 months in one of the biggest drops we have seen, I would say that that is not a fair assessment that you are making. Certainly our COVID measures have cost us in the last two years—and that is a cost that has been borne by the government as a whole but also by our department of justice and our corrections division—and certainly they are just the realities. We have also seen a drop in numbers, and we have done our best to maintain staff. We have had really high numbers of staff furloughed at different points over the last two years; that has been an additional cost to our system. I think in the month of January we had—how many hundred?

Comm. STRONG: On average a day, 79. Oh, in the month of January? I was thinking May, sorry.

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes. It was pretty high in January.

Comm. STRONG: It was about 200, yes.

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes, 200 staff were furloughed due to their contact in the community and within their families and themselves getting COVID. These are all things that have borne some pressure on the system. But certainly we have still managed to get some of the results of rehabilitation, and that has been shown through our reporting through our national standards.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Minister. According to pages 67 and 68 of the questionnaire, the per prisoner expenditure by the state on the Ravenhall and Port Phillip correctional facilities will increase by 10 per cent within three years. Can you please articulate what improvements Victorian taxpayers will see as a result of this increased spend?

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Unfortunately you have run out of time.

Mrs McARTHUR: Perhaps you can take that on notice.

The CHAIR: I pass the call to Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, department officials and Commissioner, for joining us today. I want to turn to the topic of employment hubs—I think you mentioned them before, Minister, briefly—and I refer to budget paper 3, page 293. There is a performance measure that sets benchmarks for the proportion of eligible prisoners in employment. And whilst I understand it refers to employment whilst on a sentence, are you able to explain for the committee's benefit how the Victorian government is investing in employment opportunities for prisoners once they leave custody and how important this is also for addressing recidivism rates?

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes. Thanks for that question. Certainly this is one of the big success stories of our Victorian corrections services. It is certainly our focus to reduce offending, and rehabilitation of our current prisoners is certainly centred around not only all the programs that we run but our real focus on making sure our prisoners are either engaged in employment or learning, or both, in our prison system, but then also going the extra mile of making sure that we have the transitions available as they leave prison to have the best opportunity to go into employment. We know that those first few weeks when a prisoner leaves prison are the most risky for them reoffending. If they are engaged in employment, we see a massive drop in reoffending. So certainly one of the biggest steps that we can make is a transition back into employment out of prison to make sure that they keep their lives on track. This budget delivers on providing this by establishing employment hubs at minimum- and medium-security prisons at all stages of the employment journey for prisoners and increasing the number of employment pathway brokers as well within the system.

Forty-eight per cent of people are unemployed when they enter prison—that is just a fact—and a lack of prior employment skills coupled with the impact of gaining a new criminal record or additional criminal charges makes it extremely difficult to compete in a job market. So people with criminal histories certainly have multiple barriers in securing employment, including low levels of literacy—not just their criminal record—and educational attainment. So really giving them that work experience in prison in an area that they are interested in and then trying to do that transition work upon leaving prison is one of the most important things that we can do.

Mr RICHARDSON: So turning to the nuts and bolts of the funding and what it will deliver, I am wondering if you can elaborate a bit further on that for the committee's benefit.

Ms HUTCHINS: So the new funding that is in this budget looks at a 24-month pilot at two centralised onsite employment hubs, one at Mangoneet Correctional Centre and the other at Loddon Middleton, and really enhances as well the employment pathway broker service, making sure that we have got those connections as people leave. So people in prison will have wraparound support at all stages of their employment journey in preparation for release to better maximise and optimise their opportunities for getting a job when they leave.

Additionally, people reporting on parole will be connected to employment and educational opportunities to help them overcome some of the barriers they might have in finding employment. So it is all about investing in driving down those core reasons that people offend in the first place, giving people purpose. I do not think we should ever underestimate the value of work to someone's self-esteem.

Mr RICHARDSON: And obviously that then complements existing work experience and training that is in place. What are some of those programs that get prisoners job ready?

Ms HUTCHINS: Oh, God, we have got a lot a lot in place at the moment. I might just make the point, though, the proportion of eligible prisoners engaged in employment is 94.3 per cent, which is the highest of any state or territory, and we have got a really, really strong record. They go across the board from metalwork opportunities to a construction hub that we have, where men in particular are getting access to learning some of the tricks of the trade and the basic skills in the construction sector, also everything through to laundry and even food preparation as well.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Richardson. Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Moving you from prison employment, budget paper 3, page 283, lists income for the department. I am interested in the revenue that comes from prison employment programs. Businesses that contract prisons to provide workers, is this included in the 'Other income' category, and what is the exact amount?

Ms HUTCHINS: Sorry, did you say 283?

Mr BARTON: Page 283, budget paper 3.

Ms HUTCHINS: I think it is fair to say that all of our profits go back into our corrections system, but I can certainly pass to the Commissioner for more detail on that.

Mr BARTON: Commissioner?

Comm. STRONG: Sure. Without having the budget papers, I think I understand your question to be about when prisoners are employed in prison industries and prison industries that have contracts to supply to the community. Is that the heart of your question?

Mr BARTON: Yes.

Comm. STRONG: The minister is absolutely right. The funding actually goes back into a trust fund, a prison industries trust fund, and supports the management of prison industries. There is a big investment in industries. When we have over 90 per cent of prisoners working across the prison system there is a lot of

equipment, and the equipment needs to be maintained. It supports the wages that prisoners are paid, so it goes into a trust fund that supports the running of the prison system.

Mr BARTON: Part of it does not get put into a trust fund for the prisoner when he is released so there is little bit over—

Comm. STRONG: Prisoners earn a wage, and a percentage of their wage is retained for them so that when they are released they have what we call withheld funds. I would have to check—I think it is about 20 per cent that is withheld. So they earn a wage; a percentage is withheld for them to support their release.

Ms HUTCHINS: But it is not a percentage of profits.

Comm. STRONG: No. It is not connected at all to the trust.

Ms HUTCHINS: It is not shared.

Mr BARTON: Thank you. Aboriginal wellbeing officers and the justice report recommendation 80—funding for Aboriginal wellbeing officers. Is it proportionate with the number of Aboriginal people in our prisons, given that Aboriginal women are the fastest growing cohort of incarcerated people?

Ms HUTCHINS: And you are asking—sorry, can I just get you to clarify. Is it why do we have so many, or do we not have enough?

Mr BARTON: No. Is it proportionate? Well, I guess I should say: have we got enough rather than—

Ms HUTCHINS: I am happy to take that on notice in terms of proportionate. Certainly we have them at all of our facilities. Our biggest challenge has been retention around these roles, and certainly they play an absolutely critical role. We are working on how we can recruit further positions. I am pretty sure we have got some vacancies currently. We have also stepped up our staffing model to make sure that there is a senior role as well, which helps with retention. Certainly at the moment we have 27 across the system, and we are in the process of filling around about 10 vacant positions currently. Unfortunately the turnover in this area is high, and we want to get to the bottom of the pressures that are on the individuals that fill these roles and make sure that they are well supported. They play a really important role in our prison system.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Minister. Recommendation 84 from the justice report: where is the new strategic plan for corrections? The last one ended in 2018, and the offender management framework has not been updated since 2016.

Ms HUTCHINS: These are questions based on the parliamentary inquiry?

Mr BARTON: From the justice report recommendations, I am being told.

Ms FALKINGHAM: Mr Barton, we are in the process at the moment of developing a whole-of-government response to the justice inquiry's report and the important recommendations that are before us, including taking you through every recommendation in terms of what the status is, what work is underway and what more work we need to have done. That will be released obviously following extensive consultation right across the justice system.

Mr BARTON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Barton. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of the corrections portfolio with you today, thank you, Minister. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee will now take a 15-minute break before returning to consideration with you of the youth justice portfolio. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.