

THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL SELECT COMMITTEE ON ASHLEY, YOUTH JUSTICE AND DETENTION IN TASMANIA MET IN THE TOWN HALL, LAUNCESTON, ON WEDNESDAY 14 FEBRUARY 2007.

Mr DAVID JAMES REID WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED.

CHAIR - Thank you very much for coming along today and we acknowledge you are currently employed at Mersey.

Mr REID - In patient transport.

CHAIR - Okay. Your submission is number 18; thank you very much for that. I now invite you give some evidence in an informal way and then I will invite other members of the committee to ask you some questions.

Mr DEAN - Mr Chairman, I noted on here there was indication that there might have been some written evidence submitted; is that right?

Mr REID - No, there has been none. Sorry, I have been too busy. I have worked at Ashley Detention Centre for about five years. Three months after starting there I was trained into a team leader role - that in itself was sink or swim - so I have quite a bit of experience. Most of my experience there has been, as I say, as a team leader.

Mr MARTIN - Are you still working there?

Mr REID - I don't work there any more; I left about 15 months ago.

The first day I went in there I was shown around the place by a trainer and the safety security officer and at that stage I had some 15-plus years in the security industry. I used to be head of security in the Launceston Magistrates Courts and some of the practices I picked up on that day I thought were a worry - walking in through doors and just letting them shut behind them and not physically checking them. There was supposed to be a ratio of four to one staff member to youth and that quite often is not the case. I personally had been in Bronte unit with probably 10 residents, who get sent back from programs for one reason or another. Bronte is an I-shaped unit - Bronte North and Bronte West - so you had to try to stay in the office and keep an eye on both sides. There was a lot of potential there for kids getting assaulted. As you can imagine, there is a pecking order type of thing in these places. That happened on numerous occasions.

When I initially started if kids did not participate in programs they were placed in their room and that way you could just walk around the unit safely and keep a check on them through the viewing panel. The powers-that-be decided no, they go in the unit, they just sit there, they don't watch TV or play the Play Station, and trying to police that was virtually impossible. You would go out one side and switch the TV off or you could try to get up to the stores and then you would be away from watching the kids for too long and quite often that unit was understaffed. If you walked into a unit you would soon tell what the demeanour of the kids was like and whether it was ratty. I would have contract

staff and fortunately I had some lesser skilled Ashley staff. I could ask in the morning, 'Could I have another staff member?', which we were supposed to have, and many a time I was told, 'Yes, we'll get one over to you' and two hours later you are still waiting for a staff member. Then you ring up and say, 'Where's the staff member?', 'Oh, you organise it, ring such and such'.

CHAIR - Was this for a night shift or a day shift?

Mr REID - Day shift. Day shift is the busier time - the kids are out.

Mr DEAN - And that was the message you were getting from your next in line?

Mr REID - Yes.

Mr DEAN - And that is at what level?

Mr REID - That is an operation coordinator. When I first started the place ran with youth workers, team leaders and then management and, in my opinion, it ran far better then. They placed lots of coordinators above the team leaders and if you are a team leader you should have the skills and ability to run the centre after hours and during the day. Once they incorporated that position I believe they have incorporated a couple of other operations coordinators above that now to oversee the whole shift and the team leaders and what not. Communication has failed. It just came down to that. It was not going back and up and it seemed to me that it was getting stuck in the middle. I had concerns about several problems but I didn't just go with the winds, I went with possible solutions and nothing was ever acted on. It might have been 12 months down the track when it was someone else's idea or whatever.

Mr MARTIN - It changed during your five-year term somewhere, but at what stage did it get worse?

Mr REID - I guess it got really bad when they incorporated the ops coordinator positions. What I saw they overlooked some of our more experienced older staff - some of their staff trained me and they trained me very well. They seemed to get mainland managers in - John Corvin came in and made quite a few sweeping changes - I think he managed to increase our budget, which is something that needs addressing. The budget definitely needs increasing in my opinion. The professionalism of the place definitely needs improving. The training, although on paper there is plenty of training, it always seems condensed and not beneficial.

Mr WILKINSON - Can I run this one past you? We have had a lot of comment - we know what happens in Risdon at the old prison - it seems to me that since the Youth Justice Act came into vogue in 2000 or thereabouts what occurs now is that Ashley Detention Centre is a primary school and Risdon is the high school. Is that the way it is now? It is more for detention, more for punitive sentence, as opposed to a rehabilitative sentence?

Mr REID - On paper I guess it appeared it is more rehabilitative but in reality when the place is full you don't get time to do youth work, like rehabilitative work. You do youth work -

Mr WILKINSON - What numbers are you talking about?

Mr REID - If you get high 30s and 40 and above, you are struggling to meet their basic needs. Quite often we would have staff doing doubles, have a lot of contract staff and because of the lack of support from management, we had a lot of absenteeism - people just gave up. I have seen a lot of good people leave there in the time I was there. They were burnt out. They try to improve things, take it to management and nothing happens. Every couple of years they would send out a bit of paper asking what skills you have. You would list them and detail how they could be utilised in programs, but nothing ever happened.

Programs are vital to that place but I think a lot of the programs at present are just time fillers. They're not constructive; they're not working on rehabilitative things.

CHAIR - In your opinion are they more about filling in time than teaching the kids life skills. Is that a fair comment?

Mr REID - Yes, in a lot of cases. There has got to be a balance of course. Some of it has got to be recreational but I think with a bigger budget and some skilled people they could take staff aside and really teach them the importance of good programs. We could have fewer reoffenders, less recidivism. If we could teach things like manual handling to kids. A lot of those kids aren't going to be office workers. The country is crying out for farmers. We have a farm there. That is utilised to a minimum. That should be utilised a lot more.

Mr WILKINSON - Who is in charge of the farm?

Mr REID - Phil Skipper controls that.

Mr MARTIN - Who is that?

Mr REID - Phillip Skipper, the safety and security officer there.

Mr WILKINSON - So you are saying he leases part of it?

Mr REID - Yes, I am not sure what the set up is there. I have been out with kids doing farm work but, as I said, it is a resource that is wasted. We had access to Bernacki Lodge. Most of that could have been a fantastic resource. The best time to do youth work with these kids and try to rehabilitate them is when we get them off site. A while back I went on holiday to Perth and I visited a couple of centres over there. They haven't had escapes but they have great big concrete walls the size of these walls and they don't let the kids out. They have an incentive scheme that they work towards so they can get off-site and do things normal kids do - go to the pictures, go bushwalking and fishing. That is vital because when you are taking a few kids out they can let their guard down, you can open lines of communication, build the rapport and hopefully point them in the right direction. They get a bit of knee-jerk reaction there sometimes and shut all off-site trips, whereas I think we should be encouraging it. But you could put other things in place such as ankle straps so that kids can be tracked.

We have escapes from time to time - and quite a few of late. After each major escape I suggested that we should be having staff meetings and saying, 'This is what occurred. Anyone got any thoughts? How can we prevent it? How can we do it better in the future?' I suggested that the area around there be divided up into zones, that we have a training day once every couple of months, get people out and show them where zones are, put them on high points where they can view and recapture these kids. Nothing sends a better message if we can catch them straightaway.

I used to have my own fencing business for a couple of years and I do not know what rules and regulations they were working under with that fence but I believe it has to be open so they can see through it. I reckon I could fix that fence fairly cheaply. It is not going to stop it completely -

CHAIR - David, in your view, do you think the fence ought to be there? We have had evidence to say that maybe the fence ought not be there and that there ought to be a totally enclosed secure unit.

Mr REID - I reckon the fence should be there. As I say, I could think of a way fairly cheaply - I would say that for well under \$100 000 I could fix that fence and make it harder to get out. You could also make it harder to get in, because we have had people get in of a night and drop drugs.

I did not think management was serious about keeping the drugs out. I used to do quite a few room searches to get rid of contraband. That is currency and kids were getting assaulted for it.

Mr MARTIN - What sort of drugs are coming in?

Mr REID - In my time there was a lot of marijuana. When I was leaving they were starting with a few tablets - ecstasy and things like that - but mostly marijuana. Tobacco of course was brought in. That could be easily stopped but they didn't seem to want to tackle it or did not have the backbone. If they were serious about it, they could have had police come in with a sniffer dog and search the visitors. You have parents and friends bringing in drugs and, even though they have constant vision, these kids are so quick to pass stuff. They finally got cameras in the visiting room but there are probably things they could do where, if they go up to visit, they chuck on a uniform with no pockets, but these kids are unbelievably quick. The length they will go to pull a scam and get stuff in is unbelievable. Even simply coming over the fence in a tennis ball, a stash around the fence. But, as I said, if they actually arrested a few of these visitors that would soon put a stop to it. You can't rehabilitate a kid who is stoned all the time. It is not too bad when they are stoned, it is when they are coming down off it and get aggressive. They are forcing younger kids to hold the stuff for them so that they don't get busted with it. A lot of violence is created from it.

Mrs JAMIESON - Did you see any evidence of staff bringing drugs in at all?

Mr REID - I haven't seen but I have heard of it. I believe some staff have been caught over the years.

Mrs JAMIESON - So that is drugs as well as cigarettes?

Mr REID - Yes, to buy an easy shift. It doesn't happen. I'm afraid you have to learn to say no to these kids and challenge their behaviour. I was called into the office because I wrote too many incident reports, following their standard operating procedures. They reckoned I couldn't operate in the grey. I think I did, I could bend a bit if need be. I found that if you stuck to your guns on the little things you prevent a lot of the big things.

CHAIR - Is that when you were a team leader?

Mr REID - Youth worker and team leader.

The problem with that place is that there is too much inconsistency of practice, and that is the biggest problem there.

Mr MARTIN - That is coming through a lot; can you expand on that?

Mr REID - Diversity is a great thing; it should be every where but unfortunately we have a set of SOPs - Standard Operating Procedures - and they get changed quite regularly. I have read them, though I haven't read them for quite some time. They brought out a heap of new ones and made a heap of changes to them. They don't take staff aside; they just send out a new SOP by e-mail or whatever. You sign that you have read it and understood it and quite a lot of the training was like that; it was just a backside-covering exercise. If you are going to have training then have the full thing. There are quite professional people out there, but there are people out there whom I would not want anywhere near my kids.

Mr MARTIN - It has been said to us by some people that some of the youth workers are antagonistic and abusive towards the kids.

Mr REID - Yes, I have seen it and it's terrible. I heard a case last night where a kid was threatened through the office window that he was going to kill him or smash him. This kid was on the phone and he looked through the window - he can't read or write - at a bit of paper and this new team leader went really crook at him, so much so that it made a female staff member cry to see this appalling behaviour. I have applied for the team leader position. I acted in that position for pretty well most of the time I was there but I couldn't get a full-time position. They put on people who looked pretty good on paper. In fact at one time they overlooked me and put on a team leader and he got assaulted, physically dropped to the ground, three times and got two other staff members assaulted. After a short period of time he got put in case management.

Having said that, we have some poor work practises there from staff but we have some staff who are absolutely fantastic and they are probably the ones who get a bit of controversy because they have challenged the behaviour. Others let it slide and slip into the bloody smoke; they make it difficult for everyone else trying to do the right thing.

Mr MARTIN - What training did you have to do to become a youth worker? Any qualifications?

Mr REID - To get in there in the first place, none. They do the psych test, which I really haven't got a lot of faith in. There is one particular guy there who worries me. From what I have heard he advances towards females and things like that, not just kids but staff there as well. I just can't believe he is still there but once they get into a government job it is so hard to get rid of them.

Mr DEAN - Harder to get out than to get in.

Mr REID - Yes. There was poor management support. The play station, for example, had Grand Theft Auto on it, but half the kids are in there for motor vehicle stealing and here we are providing bloody entertainment. They have the movie channel and one day I walked into our most secure unit. A lot of our kids have mental health problems, psychosis induced by drug use. I went into the TV room and there were some of our hardest youths. There was a movie on and it was a prison scene. A guy was in a prison and the cell the doors were open. Another three or four came up and he walked out of his cell and had a short conversation. Next thing, these two or three guys stabbed this bloke then threw him over the balcony to the next level and killed him. One of the kingpins at the centre said, 'That will be you one day, Reidy'.

We have kids with mental health issues and those sorts of things fire them up. I had to play it pretty cool and calm. I can't remember what I said but I went to management with it and they said, 'You have to monitor it and, if it is inappropriate, switch it off'. Yeah, I enjoy riots. We have had plenty of riots. We do not have the resources. The remand centre just recently got trashed. These kids are full on. When I first started I was a fencing contractor; I was a lot bigger than I am now and stronger, and some of these kids made me look small. We had them up to 20 years of age, some of the nastiest kids about. What resources do we have? It is only by using martial arts that I have stopped a lot of riots and stand-offs. There are a handful of staff there who have the skills and ability in those nasty situations to control them. We do not have capsicum sprays or shields. The best we have is a mattress. These kids sometimes have to be restrained; it is a fact. There is no way around it; handcuffs and things like that have to be used. A two-person response crew has been touted from time to time about to handle those sorts of situations. They have shied away from that because they are dealing with kids, but some of these are violent young adults really, and some of the younger ones should not be in with them.

Mr MARTIN - That comment concerning the spread of ages from 12 up to 21 has been made to us quite a bit. It has been suggested that if you took out the small group at the top then a lot of the problems would be fixed.

Mr REID - They would, yes, and then you could do more rehabilitative work. Early intervention is what it is all about. The older ones, or the poorly behaved ones with aggressive behaviour, need to go out of the system and have intensive therapy.

Mr MARTIN - Where would you put them?

Mr REID - Build another one. The lay-out of that one there now is no good. You need to build another centre, more secure. If you have a kid that escapes from the first one once or twice, then that is where they go to live. They serve their sentence there. A lot of the

time kids are on remand for far too long, so we cannot get programs in place for them until we know whether they have been sentenced or not.

Mr WILKINSON - What is the average time-span for programs?

Mr REID - Case-management plans.

Mr WILKINSON - Okay; you could do a case-management plan for a person on remand, couldn't you?

Mr REID - Yes, but you can't do anything major. If you wanted to do a pre-vocational course or something like that, they might be innocent and found not guilty and are gone in two weeks, so a heap of work and resources have gone into someone who is not going to be there.

Mr MARTIN - But some remain for up to six months.

Mr REID - Yes, that is not uncommon, and that is appalling. I have not read the Youth Justice Act for a long time. I would like to have had the time to read it and give a more thorough examination - half an hour is not long enough. I could talk about this place all day and suggest a lot of improvements.

CHAIR - Are there any other main points you would like to make, David?

Mr REID - Yes, concerning the staffing there. There is a clique group there, a lot of the people from Deloraine. They talk about diversity, but I think we need a lot more different people. There are a lot of married couples, and I have found that if you are not in the clique group then you don't go anywhere. When I first started I felt I was being groomed to go up. Not that I wanted to go up. Team leader is as far as I wanted to go, because I felt I was a threat to a few people. So, yes, if you are not in that clique group you are bugged, and you don't get the managerial support you need. A bloke by the name of Tony Burgess, one of the unit managers there, was from the prison service and he was fantastic. You just don't get that these days. There was a bloke by the name of Kevin Hanson who held two degrees and got his Masters in social work or something. He was a threat to senior management. He got pushed sideways into a program and eventually they just wore him down. He had the drive, ambition and vision to run that place. They ruin good people like that because they are a threat to them.

CHAIR - Is it true to say that there are so many levels of bureaucracy within the management that it is very difficult for somebody on the ground, like a youth or team leader, to get through with their opinions?

Mr REID - Yes, it is. Another serious point is the CST, which is where they meet each week to decide what colour the kids go to. When I first started it used to be the three team leaders who went up and maybe an occasional youth workers. They have a pretty good view of what was happening out there and made decisions on the kids colours and it was a much fairer system. They had more accurate information. What happens now is that one team leader goes up, there is someone from case management, someone from management and a few others and they are making the decisions. They wouldn't know what the kids were up to.

All these people who end up in what I call the 'bunker' - away from the kids - had all the degrees and diplomas but they had nothing to do with the kids to any great extent. What value are they in there? If they were to come out and actually work with the kids for a period, with all their knowledge and education, we could have better outcomes for the kids. They could come in occasionally and relieve the staff so the staff could get together and have meetings like they used to when I first started. They used to have team-leader meetings, occasional youth-worker team-leader meetings so that they could join the shifts together and air their concerns. The kids are very good at playing off staff and teams and everything, brilliant at it, so teams need to get together and staff need to have meetings to air their concerns and come up with better ways of doing things. But management seem to divide and conquer. We do that to the kids because sometimes it's a necessity. As I say, I have seen some violent situations since I have been there but you shouldn't be doing that to the staff, but that is what I think they do. You try and follow the chain of command but that seems too long and nothing gets done. I am sure Bill Smith is sitting up there and only half the story gets through to him. There have been some nasty incidents that I have heard of that have been investigated but nothing has ever come of it. It is cover-up it seems.

Mr DEAN - It has been suggested to us that many, many complaints are being made to team-leader level but nothing ever happens to those complaints. There is never any communication. There is never any feedback. They just disappear.

Mr REID - Yes, I have written incident reports and you get them signed if you want to make a statement; you submit them in the tray and they go missing. Kids get in there and it's gone, never seen again.

Mr DEAN - What do your standard operating procedures say in relation to the complaints? I guess they would be set out how complaints and incidents would be handled. Obviously the or the procedures aren't being followed, I take it?

Mr REID - The documents just get lifted, binned or whatever. There are three types of incidents: NFA - no further action required - it is just recorded; minor incident, not a very serious thing but it needs to be recorded so it builds a history and that may affect their colours; and detention centre offence, which is serious - staff assaults and things like that. If they don't get put in that week they get overlooked. That doesn't happen in our society. If something goes wrong they gather what they need and it gets heard at a later date. A lot of these incidents should be dealt with straightaway at team-leader level if we can. There may be a bit of agro between two kids; team leaders should have the skills to pull them aside, have a conference with them, mediate, and try and get resolution there and then. The actions are immediate.

Mr DEAN - And provide a notification to the person who raised it that that is what has happened.

Mr REID - Yes. Quite often you write an incident report but you are pressed for time because they didn't allow time at the end of a shift to write incident reports. So you would write an incident report and CST, in their wisdom, would downgrade it or upgrade it with no consultation with the person that wrote it. Not everyone is a great writer, but

to describe a violent 30-second incident could be a 10-page document. We do not have the time to actually describe the anger, the force.

There is so much more I could tell you about this but we have a short time frame, so if you get time later on down the track I would be happy to discuss this further.

CHAIR - Yes, the committee may contact you if you are happy with that again.

Mr REID - Yes, that is just the tip of the iceberg, I am afraid. There are so many other things you could implement to make it better, with better outcomes for kids. I recommend that if you got some of these people who are going to make submissions to sit down and have a general discussion, you would get a lot more valid points brought up.

Mr MARTIN - Do you have a view on the mix and use of contract workers compared to the full-time staff?

Mr REID - Yes, it should be all Ashley staff. There are some excellent contract workers, though there were some that were not up to scratch - which is the same with Ashley staff. The thing is the inconsistency for those people. I used to get them saying to me from time to time, 'Oh it's great working with you. We know where we stand. We know you'll enforce the rules and everything', and then they work with someone else and have to let things go, so they haven't got a hope. They do something expected of them and the team leader would come and say, 'Oh no, let it go', or 'Give them another phone call', and things like that. So what hope do contract staff have?

A lot of the kids who have escaped have escaped on court escorts and things like that. They don't report that in the paper. They just report 'Ashley' and dump on them, but a lot of good stuff that happens out there. There are some great kids out there. Given opportunity they could progress in our society and be contributing members. What we should be doing for these kids is providing skills so that we get them jobs, get them off the streets so they can earn their own money, instil a sense of pride. It could be a great place to work if they ran it properly.

CHAIR - Mr Reid, thank you very much, that is terrific.

Mr REID - Thank you, guys.

CHAIR - We may well get back to you.

THE WITNESSES WITHDREW.