

PRISONS — VOCATIONAL SUPPORT OFFICERS

451. Mr D.T. PUNCH to the Minister for Corrective Services:

I refer to the significant impact that COVID-19 has had on employment opportunities across Western Australia.

- (1) Can the minister outline to the house how the provision of 125 vocational support officer positions within WA prisons will provide more employment opportunities as the economy begins to recover from COVID-19?
- (2) How will those extra support officers support prisoners in their rehabilitation and reintegration back into the WA community?

Mr F.M. LOGAN replied:

- (1)–(2) I thank the member for Bunbury for that question and for his commitment, interest and service to corrections, particularly the Bunbury Regional Prison. The current COVID-19 crisis has meant that many prisoners have had to stop their activities outside prison, particularly section 95 prisoners. The member for Bunbury has used many section 95 prisoners to assist in environmental rehabilitation in Bunbury. Also affected has been reintegration leave, work in the community and most recreational activities. As the house knows, social visits were stopped to protect prisoners, and the ability for prisoners to engage in meaningful work has been limited. Everyone knows that education and training programs increase the ability for prisoners to rehabilitate themselves and to find meaningful employment when they leave prison, and basically turn their lives around and get a job. The department recognised that, with that limitation, it needed to introduce a number of things very quickly.

Operation Helping Hand was introduced inside the prison. Members have probably seen a couple of excerpts on TV about that. Women from the Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women made cakes for nursing staff and aged care residents who were next door at SwanCare. A clip on the news showed prisoners from Pardelup Prison Farm making furniture for underprivileged children who had to study from home. The skills applied in the prisons are basically learnt from vocational support officers. Those vocational support officers are primarily tradespeople whom we try to encourage to come into the prison system. Over the past 10 to 15 years, trying to get tradespeople to come into the prison system and impart their skills to prisoners has been very difficult. We have had to compete with the private sector. There have been a number of mining booms and people have chosen to use their trade skills in far higher paid areas, so it has been very difficult to attract highly qualified tradespeople to the prison area.

With the impact of COVID-19, and particularly the loss of jobs initially for tradespeople in this area, this was a golden opportunity for the prison industries to attract good tradespeople to change their employment, change their career path, and come into prisons instead. I encouraged the department to see that this was the time to advertise for those 125 vocational support officers, and it did. It conducted a two-week campaign comprising print, radio, digital and social media to promote those 125 VSO positions. We were looking for a series of trade areas, including baking, metal fabrication, gardening, food preparation and painting. The advertising campaign was a phenomenal success. We have had 1 134 applications, 41 of which are Aboriginal applicants and 567 are female applicants. Human relations has completed the third stage of short-listing, and the pool for those 125 officers should be finalised in mid-July. It has been a terrific advertising campaign and a terrific initiative to bring very highly skilled people into prison industries and give them a completely new career path to impart their skills to prisoners. As part of the rehabilitation process, we can help transform people's lives so that when they leave prison, they will be job ready to move straight into meaningful work.