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Hon Peter Foster MLC
Chair, Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs
Legislative Council Committee Office

Via email: env@parliament.wa.gov.au

Dear Chair

Petition No. 081 – Air conditioning at Roebourne Regional Prison

I wish to thank the Committee for the opportunity to make a submission on this issue.

The inhumane climactic conditions at Roebourne Regional Prison has been an ongoing issue for many years and has rightly drawn extensive criticisms by experts including the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services, Aboriginal Legal Services WA and Human Rights Watch.

In 2022, Roebourne hit a record high temperature of 50.5 degrees Celsius. The Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services, Aboriginal Legal Services WA and Human Rights Watch have made it clear on numerous occasions that by opting to not provide air conditioning, the state government is wilfully choosing to breach the human rights of those imprisoned at Roebourne – a high proportion of whom identify as Aboriginal.

This cruel and discriminatory treatment of people imprisoned at Roebourne Regional Prison is unacceptable and could be easily avoided by retrofitting appropriate air-conditioning. Yet despite net debt levels sitting at the lowest in six years, until recently the state government refused to so much as consider taking this simple action. The Minister for Correctional Services repeatedly dismissed the suffering of people imprisoned in Roebourne Regional Prison as “thermal discomfort” and claimed that prolonged exposure to extreme heat conditions can be adequately managed using electrolyte drinks (which are sold through commissary), hats, and ice machines. This is clearly neither a correct nor reasonable response.

The Minister has belatedly shifted somewhat with the announcement in April 2022 that the Department of Justice would commission a feasibility study into installing air-conditioning at Roebourne. Then on 23 November 2022, the Minister announced that the expansion of air-conditioning to include all cells would take place in the 2023/24 financial year. However, the Minister’s farcical response to the evidence-based concerns raised by advocacy groups as well as the fact it took years for a commitment to finally be made to installing air-conditioning in all cells (and even then, not until the 2023/24 financial year), amounts to a disregard for the unacceptable climactic conditions bourn by people imprisoned at Roebourne Regional Prison over the Summer months.

Any further delays in installing air-conditioning in all cells at Roebourne Regional Prison are unacceptable. It is a basic right of all individuals under state care to not be exposed to inhumane heat. Until the installation is complete, the lives of people in state care at the facility will continue to be placed in danger each summer. This problem will not go away on its own – in fact, it will only worsen over time due to climate change.

The state government must be called upon to proceed with the retrofitting of air-conditioning at Roebourne Regional Prison as an urgent priority, as called for by the Aboriginal Legal Services WA, Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services, and human rights advocates.

Thank you for considering this petition.

Kind regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'BPettitt', written over a light grey rectangular background.

Hon Dr Brad Pettitt MLC
Member for South Metropolitan