

Judicial Inspection Report

Brandvlei Correctional Centre

Justice TL Skweyiya

1. Introduction

Date of visit: 15 April 2014

Participating: Justice Skweyiya, accompanied by Songezo Mabece, Andrew Wheelhouse and Cherese Thakur.

Brandvlei Correctional Facility is located near Worcester in the Boland area. It houses three centres: a maximum-security facility, a medium-security facility, and a youth facility. We were informed that a new maximum-security facility is due to become operational in April 2014, and were given opportunity to visit this site. This report summarises my observations during my visit to the Centre.

Most of our visit was spent at the youth facility, which is the primary focus of this report. We viewed the units and cells, the clinic, the staff offices, the dining room, the kitchens, and the in-house radio station.

I note that despite prior warning of our arrival, the correctional centre officials appeared to be unaware of our visit. We were kept waiting at the front entrance for approximately an hour. This, however, proved to be the result of a misunderstanding and we were eventually shown in by Ms Bathabile Mahaye (Head of Centre for the medium-security facility) and then welcomed by Mr Andile Patosi (Centre Coordinator for the youth facility), Mr Moses (Head of Youth Centre) and Mr Manual Rooms (Senior Correctional Officer), who showed us around the facility. We later met with Ms Carol Davids, the Area Coordinator. I thank them for their time and efforts in giving us an extensive viewing of the correctional centre.

1. Offender population

The youth facility holds offenders under the age of 21 and comprises four units, arranged by age. Unit A houses child offenders, though due to capacity constraints, older offenders have also been moved into this unit. They are, however, kept separate from the child offenders. Unit D houses 20 year-old offenders, although some older offenders are also kept in this unit because they are in the process of completing their education.

The current offender population is 276. We were informed that the total capacity of the facility is 348. All offenders in the facility are South African nationals.

2. Infrastructure and facilities

Units and Cells

Offenders are currently kept in rooms that can house up to 32 people. Not all rooms are full, such as the Pre-Release Unit. This is where offenders with eight weeks or less of their sentences left are housed, so that they may receive vocational and life-skills training.

The units and cells that we viewed appeared clean. There are two toilets and two showers per cell. Offenders are provided with soap, toilet paper and the like. They may purchase additional items using credit earned by working in the facility. The toilet flushing mechanism comprises of bits of chain that appear to be ineffective. The reason for this is that apparently offenders steal copper piping from the automatic flush system to make weapons.

There appeared to be one blanket per offender in the cells. We were told that extra bedding was not encouraged, as offenders used these to make “tents” which obscured them from view of the correctional officers. Offenders may request an additional blanket if they need one, and we were informed that there are enough of these in the facility. The blankets are cleaned at the end of summer.

Education

The facility offers Adult Basic Education and Training up to Grade 11. At present, 150 offenders go to school for a full day until 14h00. Most are in Grade 7 or Grade 8. By next year, the facility should be able to provide education up to Grade 12.

Healthcare

The primary means by which an offender may access healthcare is by making a complaint to correctional officers in the morning at the time of unlocking. Nurses are present at the facility from Monday to Friday, but there is a nurse on standby after hours. A doctor visits the facility twice a week. There is an emergency trolley and bed available.

Mental health concerns are accommodated by means of a nurse or medical officer on duty, who writes a recommendation that an offender should see a psychologist. Offenders who are at a risk of suicide are housed in the special-care “observation cells”, where they may be monitored and given treatment.

A variety of medical services are offered at the facility. Once a month, a medical officer visits to perform medical male circumcision on offenders who request it. There is a pharmacy to accommodate offenders with chronic conditions. Offenders undergo tuberculosis screening at admission and release, which has helped to control tuberculosis infection in the facility. Offenders are tested for HIV if they so request, and are given pre- and post-test counselling. HIV infection is prevented by educational programmes, and by giving offenders access to condoms. The facility is able to accommodate an offender in a wheelchair, though there are presently none at the facility. The nurse on duty noted that drug use is not a problem. Drug abuse rehabilitation is primarily dealt with by social workers, with treatment given within the facility.

3. Staff

Correctional officials noted that there is a shortage of staff, which is currently the centre’s biggest concern. This shortage makes it difficult to run programmes beyond the core ones. This

problem will potentially be exacerbated when the new maximum-security facility becomes operational, as that facility has many sub-divisions that require more staff to manage.

Offenders may lodge complaints against staff with independent prison visitors who visit regularly.

4. Rehabilitation and training

Work

As this is a farming correctional centre, offenders are given opportunity to work in agriculture and in the raising of livestock. The centre is self-sufficient and some of its produce is sold externally. There are also three permanent work teams responsible for the premises. They are “paid” for the work by means of a cashless credit system, where credits may be exchanged for additional food, toiletries, and the like.

Recreation

There are a number of recreational programmes that are run by the centre. Within their unit, offenders also have access to a library. There is a television in each cell, but it was noted that many of them were broken by offenders. Offenders may also bring in radios.

Offenders may participate in choir competitions, debate competitions, and dialogues. Sport, such as rugby sevens, soccer and cricket, allows offenders to participate in tournaments locally, regionally and nationally. There are also skills development programmes, including woodwork, metalwork, pottery and computer training. We were shown their in-house radio facility, where offenders are trained in broadcasting, a programme that appears to be popular and effective both as a means of rehabilitation and of communication between offenders and staff.

Religious service

Religious service is provided by a church in the community as well as the facility’s own religious official.

Visitation

Visitors are permitted on weekends. Family days are arranged annually, which are noted to be well-attended and beneficial to the offenders.

5. Safety and security

There have been between one and five incidents so far this year. We were informed during our visit that an incident had occurred the day before, where an assault occurred due to gang rivalry. The incident was handled by separating the offenders involved, including moving them to the observation cells. The correctional officials noted that cases of violence are more likely to occur when new offenders arrive at the centre in large numbers.

6. Catering

Food is prepared centrally for the entire Brandvlei Correctional Centre in the new maximum-security facility by trained offenders from the medium-security facility. We were able to view the food preparation area, which appeared to be hygienic and neat. Menus are determined centrally and are on a rotational system to ensure variety. Special dietary needs are catered for via recommendation by the medical officer. Dietary requirements for religious reasons are also accommodated.

The main meal is at lunchtime. The evening meal is a light meal that offenders may take back to their cells. Staff shortages prevent a larger meal from being served in the evening.

7. Conclusions

Overall, the facility seemed to me to be well-run with a strong concern for the rights and well-being of offenders. The correctional officials with whom we interacted appeared to highly value their role in the rehabilitation of offenders. They seemed committed and competent, and are concerned to ensure that offenders who leave the facility do not return to crime. The radio

broadcast programme is an example of an initiative that creates a means to entertain and educate the offenders within the facility, while equipping the participants with marketable skills.

There are a number of areas of concern, however. From my observations, these are as follows:

- I. Staff shortages seem to be the centre's greatest problem. The lack of staff results in fewer programmes being available to offenders, an earlier lock-up time, and in offenders having to take a lighter meal in the evening than at lunch time. Ms Davids informed us that the shortfall was due to the allocated posts being insufficient for the optimal running of the facility. This has been communicated to higher correctional authorities, but has not yet been resolved. The opening of the maximum-security facility is anticipated to exacerbate the problem, as its various sub-divisions require more staff.
- II. Education remains an important tool to prevent recidivism, particularly among youth offenders. It is of concern that offenders are unable to complete their schooling up to Grade 12 within the facility. However, we were told that this would soon be rectified. The change is welcomed.
- III. Although the number of incidents is generally low, there is evidence of violence between offenders in the facility. This appears to be related to gang activity. Though there appears to be a system in place to reduce violence, this may require further attention to prevent further incidents. The fact that a major incident, resulting in the hospitalisation of one offender, had occurred the day before our arrival was of great concern.

Justice Thembile Skweyiya