

Minister's response to Chief Justice inadequate

Mental Health Minister Helen Morton should not have been so quick to dismiss the recommendation of WA's Chief Justice Wayne Martin for more justice reinvestment, says Civil Liberties Australia.

"The Chief Justice pointed out that the WA taxpayer – facing higher charges for everything from car registrations to electricity – is saved over \$111,000 every time an offender is sent to residential drug or alcohol rehabilitation rather than prison," says CLA WA State Director Rex Widerstrom.

"Yet as he and every other judge in WA knows, there aren't enough places in the 11 such facilities, and waiting lists can run to many weeks or even months. People from regional areas are of course the worst affected. Faced with a guilty person likely to reoffend unless they address their addiction, a judge will understandably err on the side of community protection and send them to jail, where all will be punished but few rehabilitated.

"Certainly some people – including, it seems, the Barnett government – won't care whether the prisoner overcomes their addiction," Mr Widerstrom said. "But what they fail to understand is that someone who's released without having overcome their dependence is at a far higher risk of reoffending, which then victimises even more people. So by failing to rehabilitate, the government is failing to do all it can to protect its citizens.

"The Minister dismisses existing services as 'adequate' when clearly they're not; and one indicator of their inadequacy is the number of people appearing in our courts who have drug and/or alcohol addictions, as the Chief Justice and every other judge in the state knows. Yet the Barnett government has just spent \$150 million on a prison near Derby and is spending another \$232 million on a new prison in the Eastern Goldfields; while in 2012, NSW prisoner numbers dropped by 8% and the NSW government closed three prisons. We could double the number of drug and alcohol treatment centres in WA and still have change from \$382 million.

"Clearly the Barnett government thinks 'justice reinvestment' is raising taxes to build more prisons," Mr Widerstrom said. "It's not, and Helen Morton's dismissive response to the Chief Justice demonstrates this government's wilful failure to listen to experts who are consistently telling it that its justice and corrections systems are a costly failure – costly not only in monetary terms but also in creating new victims of crime, who are then robbed a second time – by the Treasurer to build more prisons."

ends

For further comment: Rex Widerstrom