

MEDIA RELEASE

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Disability Justice Centre must stay where it is

WESTERN Australia's peak body for community mental health, the WA Association for Mental Health (WAAMH) together with Developmental Disability WA (DDWA) join with disability and mental health advocates today in welcoming the state government's decision to review the operations rather than the existence or location of the Bennett Brook Disability Justice Centre, following the misinformation and fear mongering about residents who absconded on New Year's Eve and subsequently returned in the days following.

DDWA Chief, and advocate for one of the men who absconded, Taryn Harvey said the political campaign against the Centre was founded on an incorrect contention that people detained under the mentally impaired accused law are inherently a threat.

"I believe the Disability Justice Centre was, and remains the correct facility for the placement of the two men who absconded," Ms Harvey said.

"It has taken 19 years for government to create a Declared Place as a custodial alternative to prison since Jim McGinty introduced the law reform in 1996.

"Residents for the Centre are selected based on recommendations by the independent Mentally Impaired Accused Review Board, chaired by the Hon. Robert Cock QC we have confidence in this process but the campaign against the Centre indicated that some don't and that is very disappointing.

"I have previously raised concerns over staffing, programs and planning at the Centre, but the government's independent review will now ensure the Centre is operating at best practice. Closing the Centre would mean returning the residents to prison where they clearly do not belong."

Judges are legally required to detain mentally impaired accused in custody unless they are satisfied it is in the interest of the person or the public to release them unconditionally.

WAAMH's President Alison Xamon said the mental health sector also supported a community based response for people unfit to stand trial due to mental illness. "Community feedback to the recently endorsed 10 year mental health services plan made it clear that there is strong support for the establishment of a community based Declared Place for people with mental illness, and there was strong opposition co-locating such a facility with a prison," Ms Xamon said.

"As it is, we have grave concerns for the mental health of those who are being detained indefinitely under this law and specifically for the residents of the Disability Justice Centre should they be returned to prison. We support the government's decision to review the Centre and retain it in the current form and location, and instead we must see reform of the mentally impaired accused law to ensure Courts have options other than indefinite custody," Ms Xamon said.

About WAAMH

The Western Australian Association for Mental Health (WAAMH) was incorporated in 1966 and is the peak body representing WA's community-managed mental health sector, with around 100 organisational and individual members. WAAMH advocates for effective public policy on mental health issues, delivers workforce training and sector development, and promotes positive mental health and wellbeing. Further info at www.waamh.org.au

Media Contacts

Taryn Harvey, CEO, Developmental Disability WA, 0488 661 277, taryn.harvey@ddc.org.au

Alison Xamon, President, WA Association for Mental Health, 08 9420 7277, president@waamh.org.au

Sarah Cooper, Public Relations, WA Association for Mental Health, 0416 228 722, scooper@waamh.org.au

Paul Jarvis, Public Relations, Developmental Disability WA, 0421 705 633, paul.jarvis@iinet.net.au

A: 2 Delhi Street, West Perth WA 6005 **T:** 08 9420 7277

E: communications@waamh.org.au **W:** waamh.org.au **Twitter:** [@TheWAAMH](https://twitter.com/TheWAAMH)