

Inquiry into Weeroona Girls' Training Centre, Public Service Commissioner, Tasmania

1973 – 1974

Details

The Inquiry into Weeroona Girls' Training Centre by the Public Service Commissioner, MJ Jillett, took place in 1973. It followed a statutory declaration made by the former utility officer at the Home alleging that girls were hit by members of staff and kept in the secure unit for long periods of time with nothing to do, insufficient bedding, and inadequate supervision. The Inquiry was not open to the public. However, the Minister for Health and Social Welfare tabled its terms of reference, recommendations, and some comments by Jillett in the House of Assembly in March 1974.

In October 1973, the former utility officer, WC (Bill) Vandendool, contacted the Launceston *Examiner* to call for an inquiry into Weeroona Girls' Training Centre. He believed that the corporal punishment received by the girls and long periods of time they spent in the secure unit contravened the standing orders set up after a 1965 inquiry into the home. In particular, Vandendool believed that the punishment for absconding was too 'severe':

It has always seemed atrocious to me that an adolescent girl, sometimes as young as 13, could be locked in a dingy, bare and depressing cell 7 ft x 9 ft and kept in strict confinement and isolation for up to six weeks because she was justifiably frightened or upset and had run away from the home ... Sometimes the girls were simply homesick and in extreme cases wanted to complain to somebody – even the police, as they succeeded in doing on several occasions.

Following Vandendool's allegations, a number of former employees and residents made statements to the *Examiner*. One of them said:

The secure units are always referred to as cubicles, but don't let anyone fool you. They are cells with thick, heavy doors and small observation windows...when visitors are coming, they are quickly decked out with curtains and bedspreads, but for most of the time they contain one bed, a small table and primitive toilet facilities.

The Minister for Health and Social Welfare, Dr Allen Foster, described the allegations as 'mischievous and malicious'. Even so, he agreed to a departmental inquiry. After receiving a statutory declaration from Vandendool that set out the allegations, he accepted the need for an inquiry by the Public Service Commissioner, MJ Jillett, who had carried out the 1965 inquiry.

Jillett found that the allegations were 'baseless'. Although officers were not on duty in the secure unit during the day, they visited often. There was always adequate bedding unless the staff feared that a girl might commit suicide. The corporal punishment was in the form of 'open handed slaps usually on the side of the face' which Jillett considered to be 'mild'. For a period of seven or eight days, two girls in the secure units did not have anything to read or do. He recommended modifying the standing orders to take into account the fact that staff were not always on duty in the secure unit and that 'mild' corporal punishment took place.

According to Jillett:

To say the least of it, it was most unfortunate that such unwarranted allegations should have been made. The principal and his staff have a difficult task at any time, but their task is made even more difficult when they have to contend with public allegations of the kind made recently. Moreover, such allegations must have a disturbing effect on the parents of children committed to the staffs care. It is pleasing, therefore, to be able to reassure the public and their parents in particular that there is no cause for concern over the treatment of girls at Weeroona.

More info

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Related Events

- [Inquiry into the Conditions at Weeroona Girls' Home, Public Service Commissioner, Tasmania \(1965\)](#)
- [Select Committee Inquiry into Weeroona Girls' Training Centre, Tasmania \(1965\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Weeroona Girls' Training Centre \(1959 - 1979\)](#)

Resources

- Swain, Shurlee, [History of Australian inquiries reviewing institutions providing care for children](#), October 2014

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