
MEDIA RELEASE

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MENTAL HEALTH UNIT FOR FEMALE OFFENDERS OPENS AT SILVERWATER

The first purpose built high-dependency women's mental health unit in Corrective Services will be officially opened at Silverwater Women's Correctional Centre today.

Minister for Corrective Services John Robertson said that the 19 bed Mum Shirl Unit would help provide secure and safe housing for female offenders with complex personality, developmental, psychological and/or psychiatric issues.

"The State Government's \$5.9 million investment in the Mum Shirl facility will enable Corrective Services to provide intensive treatment and support to women with severe personality disorders and mental illness in custody," said Mr Robertson.

"Female inmates are far more likely to have a mental illness, personality disorder or other health complication than men on arrival at a Correctional Centre.

"A 2003 study of mental illness among prisoners found that around 57% of women in custody suffer from a personality disorder as compared with 40% of men, and that women are far more likely to have a substance abuse problem.

"More recent statistics collected in 2008 and yet to be published, reveal that women in custody are more likely to have been sexually assaulted as an adult, been in a violent relationship, attempted suicide or had a history of self harm.

"The Mum Shirl Unit will enable us to more effectively treat and manage high risk female inmates with complex psychological histories, and mental and physical health problems."

The Mum Shirl Unit is split into two distinct areas; Part A is an eight bed facility designed to provide crisis support and psychiatric assessment and stabilisation for female offenders in the short term. Part B is an 11-bed unit equipped to provide long term therapeutic support for women in chronic crisis and with ongoing complex treatment needs.

"All women in this specialised mental health unit will be on structured therapeutic treatment plans including daily risk assessments to monitor changes in behaviour and mental wellbeing," said Mr Robertson, "and all cells in the Mum Shirl Unit are safe cells with 24 hour observation capabilities."

"Placement into the Mum Shirl Unit will be based on referrals from across the system – including new inmates, prisoners on remand and long term inmates."

The new Mum Shirl Unit is situated within the Silverwater Women's Correctional Centre which is a 228-bed maximum security facility. The Mum Shirl Unit is the latest component to be completed of a \$52.75 million upgrade of the Silverwater Women's Correctional Centre that commenced in 2004.

The Unit is named after Aboriginal woman Shirley Smith – better known as Mum Shirl - who began visiting Aboriginal people in prison in NSW after one of her brothers was jailed. Her nickname came from her habit of replying "I'm his Mum" whenever officers questioned her relationships with the offenders she visited. Mum Shirl passed away in April 1998.

"Mum Shirl was extremely well respected, known and loved in the Aboriginal community and this centre is a tribute to her amazing contribution to the lives of prison inmates," said Mr Robertson.

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