

Alleged murderer among failed escapees

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A man charged with murder is one of two prisoners alleged to have attempted a movie-like prison break from the Vancouver Island Regional Correctional Centre last month.

Andrew Jonathon Belcourt and Max Matthew Higley, both 21, each face a single count of making a breach in a prison cell after a man-sized hole in the ceiling of their cell was discovered inside the maximum security prison on July 17.

Belcourt is charged with the murder of a Victoria man who was shot dead in March 2010. During the attempted escape from prison, the public was never at risk, said Saanich police.

But a spokesperson for the corrections office said the breakout attempt had "the potential to be very serious."

"I can say that overcrowding in the living unit where this occurred possibly played a part," said Dean Purdy, chair of corrections and sheriff services with the B.C. Government Employees Union.

The prison was built to hold 206 inmates, but routinely houses 350 to 400, he said. Saanich police say the men were sharing a cell when the breach in the ceiling was found.

The Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General won't comment on the incident, but said that B.C. Corrections is conducting a critical incident review. Saanich police are also investigating, which led to the two recent charges, sworn by Crown counsel on Friday.

"There's been some back and forth between investigators and Crown, and some request have been made for further investigations in certain areas, so that's where (we) are right now," Sgt. Dean Jantzen said.

The hole in the cell led to a pipe chase - a space where plumbing and electrical conduits are kept. "There's evidence that time was spent up there by a person or persons," Jantzen said.

Belcourt was arrested on March 3, 2010 after the body of Leslie Ronald Hankel, 52, was found in his downtown apartment. Belcourt, 19 at the time, was charged with murder, break and enter, and possession of a dangerous firearm.

Higley was serving a 72-day sentence after he pleaded guilty earlier this year to uttering threats, theft under \$5,000 and breach of recognizance.

In July, when the News first reported on the escape attempt, Kathy Corrigan, NDP critic for the ministry of public safety, said the ratio of guards to prisoners needs to be improved so corrections officers don't have to deal with incidents like this.

"When you have a situation like this where you have a potential breakout and you don't have adequate personnel, I think that the possibility of a crisis situation is made worse when this ratio is so poor,"

Corrigan said. "This time, apparently a breakout was prevented, but there are potential tragedies waiting in the wings if things aren't improved."

Belcourt and Higley are both expected to appear in court Thursday on the new charges.