

## **Arm prison guards with pepper spray, says union**

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Provincial prison guards want the same tools as their federal counterparts and are calling on the government to arm them with pepper spray.

The demand by the union representing B.C. correctional officers was made this week and comes on the heels of a spate of attacks on guards.

"We play for keeps inside the jails, and you've got an overcrowded environment where inmates are vying for resources," said B.C. Government Employment Union spokesman Dean Purdy. "You get clustering, you get gang-type mentality and you get more violence and that just leads to inmate-on-staff violence."

Public Safety Minister and Solicitor General Shirley Bond was not available for comment. Ex-solicitor general Rich Coleman in December agreed to tour North Fraser but was removed from the public safety portfolio in February's cabinet shuffle.

Purdy cited four assaults against corrections officers at Vancouver Island Regional Correction Centre in the past month, while tensions remain high at North Fraser Pretrial Centre where 75 guards have been assaulted since 2009.

Across the province the current inmate to corrections staff ratio is roughly 60 to one, according to Purdy. Prior to 2002 the ratio was 20 to one.

Purdy said provincial government, which is responsible for nine prisons, must address overcrowding issues as the federal government passes more tough-on-crime legislation.

"The offer will be on the table to look at our concerns and see what we're talking about," Purdy said. Correctional Service Canada equipped guards at medium- and maximum-security prisons with pepper spray canisters in August 2010.