

B.C. court clerks fill sheriffs' shoes

Union sees security gaps, stresses lack of training

By Rob Shaw
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Court clerks in B.C. say they're being assigned the responsibility of courtroom security because of a shortage of sheriffs.

A new government policy, dated earlier this month, asks court clerks to fill out a security threat assessment form when sheriffs aren't physically present in a courtroom.

Among the items clerks are told to look for are highly frustrated people, anyone unwilling to accept the court's authority, a disruptive gallery and a person displaying unusual interest in a case.

Clerks are already considered key to courtroom proceedings. They ensure testimony is properly recorded, judges' instructions and orders are documented and evidence is safely and securely presented in court.

"Once they get over the shock and astonishment . . . our member court clerks are afraid of what the consequences of this could be," said Sandy McLean, chairwoman of the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union component that represents roughly 200 court clerks across the province.

"They say over and over this is not work I'm trained to do. How do I do this on top of everything else I'm supposed to do?"

B.C.'s Ministry of Attorney General is under fire from critics for courtroom cancellations and delays because of a shortage of sheriffs to secure prisoners and ensure courtroom security.

The ministry has raised the idea of pooling sheriff services and floating officers between courtrooms, leaving clerks in charge of security while they are gone. The idea has been opposed by judges.

Shifting security responsibility onto other staff is an attempt to "fill the gaps" caused by underfunding sheriffs, said McLean. But court clerks don't receive anywhere near the training sheriffs are given as peace officers at the Justice Institute of B.C., she said.

The new government policy outlines how court clerks, and even judges, should call for help, including the use of a panic button, a telephone code word and visual cues to alert security personnel.

Dave Maedel, the superintendent in charge of sheriff services, said the new policy has "been misunderstood" by staff.

"This is nothing to do with the sheriff shortage," he said, adding that the guidelines have been in development for a year.

It's mainly to clarify procedures in courtrooms where sheriffs aren't usually present, such as civil proceedings, he said.

"It's not asking court clerks to do anything more than they've done in the past," he said.

The security form also contains a box for clerks to alert superiors when a member of the media is present in the public gallery.

Maedel said that's an "intelligence-gathering tool" to help sheriffs understand which court cases may have a high profile and be of interest to the public.