

B.C. cuts sheriffs positions despite judges' security concerns

by Kim Bolan
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Judges in Kelowna and Victoria have refused to run their courtrooms because of a lack of sheriffs

The B.C. government has just cut the equivalent of 34 sheriffs positions despite some judges saying they have been forced to close courtrooms because of a lack of staff to provide security.

And the union representing B.C. sheriffs says the government is "playing Russian roulette with the safety of everybody involved."

Several sheriffs protested the cuts, which were announced internally Friday, outside the New Westminster Law Courts on Wednesday.

In most cases, the cuts come from auxiliary staff who were just hired and trained having their hours reduced to just 10 per cent of what they were working, said Dean Purdy, of the B.C. Government and Service Employees Union.

Over the last few weeks, judges in Kelowna and Victoria have refused to run their courtrooms because of a lack of sheriffs. And they have spoken out about the shortages and the difficulties they are causing the judicial system.

Purdy said that another courtroom was closed in Kamloops on Friday because there weren't sufficient sheriffs.

And the Greeks gangland murder trial in Vancouver, which is being held in the high-security courtroom built for Air India, has no screening gate set up for those entering the courtroom. There are several sheriffs sitting near the five accused men.

Purdy said he has no idea why a case as high-security as the Greeks is not taking advantage of the screening system that is available.

Sheriffs running a security gate for the murder trial of serial killer Robert Pickton seized 2,000 prohibited items -- including knives, other weapons and drugs -- in a six-month period, Purdy said.

"What is it going to take? Somebody walking into a courtroom and a major incident occurring for them to do anything?" Purdy said Wednesday.

"The threat of violence is growing in all Canadian courthouses and more needs to be done to protect the people, the court workers, the sheriffs, the judges and the public."

Last month, two judges at the Kelowna Law Courts temporarily closed courtrooms and slammed the provincial government for funding cuts they said had created the sheriff shortage.

Judge Jane Cartwright said she could not continue with potentially volatile family court hearings without sheriffs.

And Judge Robin Smith delayed a trial because no sheriff was available to sit in the courtroom.

In April, Victoria provincial court judge Ernie Quantz told the Times-Colonist about the difficulties the sheriff shortage was creating in the courts.

"We don't have enough sheriffs to service the courts," Quantz said. "Even with the reduced complement of judges, there's no longer enough sheriffs to handle the inevitable variations in scheduling court cases."

Attorney General Barry Penner was asked about the sheriff shortage in question period last month and said it remained a top priority to have enough sheriffs for the courts.

But he also said there wasn't additional resources available to deal with the shortages that existed before the most recent reductions in sheriffs' work hours.

"Where is that money supposed to come from?" Penner said. "There is an alternative approach. It's to live within a budget and look for other ways to address delays in the justice system, other than just always spending more money that comes at the expense of taxpayers."

Sheriffs have a range of duties, including escorting prisoners to and from courts for their appearances, providing security within the courtrooms and throughout the courthouse and running search gates for high-security cases like the Pickton, Air India and Surrey Six trials.