

Escapes at Burnaby youth detention centre blamed on security failures

BY LINDSAY KINES, TIMES COLONIST JUNE 16, 2010 6:18 AM

A series of security failures at a Burnaby youth detention centre aided the escape last year of two male young offenders -- one of whom was deemed a "prolific" criminal and a risk to public safety, an internal government review has found.

The report shows a field supervisor at the Burnaby Youth Custody Services Centre temporarily lost sight of the teenagers in an outside recreation area on Dec. 2, 2009, when he went to retrieve a jacket for another resident.

The two young men, aged 17 and 18, hopped a fence into another area of the facility, kicked in the door of a storage shed and stole a pair of bolt cutters. The tool had been moved to the shed without the knowledge of all staff, which meant some of them were "unaware of the potential for a security breach," the report said.

The teens used the cutters to slice through the chain-link security fence and escape. The report also notes that a fence motion detector had been turned off because of frequent false alarms.

Once the breach was noticed, staff issued a "code red" alert, which other staff members took to mean that there was a "man down." They began searching the grounds for a colleague

in trouble, rather than trying to find the hole in the fence. The confusion delayed attempts to recapture the escapees, the review said.

The Ministry of Children and Family Development's youth justice branch ordered the review in the wake of the escape. The Times Colonist obtained a copy of the findings using B.C.'s Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy law.

All information about the young offenders was censored from the 12-page report. But RCMP press releases issued at the time show the 17-year-old was deemed enough of a risk that police took the unusual step of releasing his name and photograph.

"[The teenager] already has acquired an extensive criminal record dating back to March of 2007 through to July of 2009 with 23 offences ranging from breach of a court order to dangerous driving," the RCMP said.

Police recaptured the 18-year-old offender Dec. 5, and the 17-year-old Dec. 8.

Kelly Gleeson, a Children's Ministry spokesperson, said the detention centre has taken steps to improve security in the wake of the escape -- the first in five years at the facility.

Gleeson said the improvements include:

- Updated training so "code red" calls are clearly identified and there is no confusion about the type of incident in progress.
- A new inventory system to track tools stored in outdoor program areas.
- More frequent field security checks, as well as additional training for staff who provide field security.
- A prohibition against de-activating alarms or sensors.
- Training updates to staff reminding them about the importance of remaining near offenders in outdoor areas and keeping them in sight.

The B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union, which represents staff at the centre, also raised concerns about a "blind spot" in the control tower cameras where the escape occurred. Union spokesman Dean Purdy noted "tension is high" inside the Burnaby centre as well as the two youth detention facilities in Victoria and Prince George. "We've noticed a rise in violence levels, particularly assaults on staff."

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