

Changes needed at prison, union says

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A B.C. corrections officer is going to be killed on the job unless meaningful changes are made to prison operations, a union representative said Wednesday.

Those changes should include a rotational lockdown system, regulatory change to define inmates as hazards and arming officers with pepper spray, the BCGEU said.

The union met Tuesday with WorkSafeBC representatives to discuss the rise in violence against staff in B.C. corrections centres, including KRCC. There were 17 assaults at the Kamloops centre last year and the number so far this year is on track to match that.

"We have emphasized the importance of moving forward quickly with the enforcement strategy as corrections officers are being violently assaulted regularly," said Dean Purdy, chair of the BCGEU component that includes corrections.

"If meaningful changes are not made to the system, someone is going to be killed on the job."

An officer-to-inmate ratio as high as one to 60 is partly to blame for the increase. In Kamloops and at four other regional centres, the ratio is about one to 40.

"Prior to 2002, those ratios were capped at one to 20," Purdy explained. "Any time you had more than one to 20, two staff were required."

Government cutbacks in 2002, when 10 jails were closed and 550 staff were laid off, were followed by an increase in the inmate population between 2003 and 2005. As a result, more than 80 per cent of B.C. inmates are double bunking.

"We're seeing what we call the 10-year effect."

Within the last five years, staff have had to deal with more inmates with gang affiliations and others with a greater propensity for violence, factors that compound the risk of violence, Purdy said.

A rotational lockup system is one measure that could be adopted without any additional cost to government. B.C. Corrections already uses the system for its special handling and mentally disordered offenders unit.

The union also wants Work-SafeBC to define inmates as a hazard in its workplace regulations. That would enable better compliance through the agency, Purdy said.

Pepper spray is already provided to staff at federal penitentiaries as a line of defence.

"We're hoping to get that to better protect officers on duty and prevent the assaults we see."

Two years ago, the provincial government rejected the idea of arming corrections officers with spray or batons.

Rich Coleman, solicitor-general at the time, said there would be too much risk of an incident in which a weapon could be stolen and turned against an officer.

He also said most prisoners are serving less than two years and are relatively low-risk.