

Drug-related death in overcrowded Maple Ridge prison prompts probe

BY ANDREA WOO, VANCOUVER SUN OCTOBER 21, 2010



Overcrowding at Fraser Regional Correctional Centre in Maple Ridge has made it increasingly difficult to effectively monitor all inmates, Dean Purdy, chair of corrections and sheriff services at the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union, said

Photograph by: ..

METRO VANCOUVER - BC Corrections has launched an internal investigation following what is believed to be the drug-related death of an inmate on Tuesday night.

Ridge Meadows RCMP was called to the Fraser Regional Correctional Centre in Maple Ridge at around 7 p.m. to attend to a 32-year-old male, according to Cpl. Alanna Dunlop.

The BC Coroners Service also attended and will be performing an autopsy to determine the exact cause of death.

A BC Corrections spokeswoman confirmed to The Vancouver Sun that an inmate died on Tuesday but would not provide further details.

"Consistent with standard practice, BC Corrections will be completing an internal investigation of the circumstances of this individual's death," said Marnie Mayhew.

It is expected to be completed within a month.

Dean Purdy, chair of corrections and sheriff services at the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union, said overcrowding at the prison has made it increasingly difficult to effectively monitor all inmates.

Fraser Regional is also the temporary holding area for hundreds of Sri Lankan asylum-seekers who arrived aboard the MV Sun Sea in August.

"The Fraser Regional Correctional Centre is a maximum security jail that was built for 254 inmates," said Purdy. "With the addition of the Tamil migrants, the count is over 800, so you can imagine the conditions that our correctional officers have to deal with."

He estimated there is a ratio of 40 inmates to one staff member at Fraser Regional.

"Conditions within our jails are bad enough with overcrowding and inmate-to-staff ratio," he said. "When you add drugs and other contraband into an already tense situation, it makes the conditions that our correctional officers work under very difficult."

In March 2008, 20-year-old Kyle Wigham of Chilliwack died of a heroin overdose at Fraser Regional Correctional Centre.

In his report, Coroner Vincent Stancato found that a prison guard did a visual inspection of his cell three times before realizing Wigham was unresponsive even though he had foam coming out of his mouth.

The previous guard working earlier that morning also failed to follow standard operating procedure and inspect cells every 30 to 60 minutes. Instead, the guard conducted checks "sporadically."

Stancato made two recommendations after his investigation: revise the current criteria for determining the health of an inmate during visual cell inspections to include observation of breathing and consider regular retraining or testing of employees to ensure they are aware of the standard operating procedures regarding "non-daylight hours" visual cell inspections.

awoo@vancouversun.com

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