

# Cuts will slow justice further

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The wheels of justice have never moved like greased lightning in this province but the provincial government's cutting the equivalent of 34 full-time positions in the B.C. sheriffs services threatens to grind them to a halt.

The latest cut comes on top of some 100 fewer sheriffs, or 20% of the workforce, through attrition during a four-year hiring freeze. Not surprisingly the cuts are causing havoc in the B.C. court system.

As there are not enough sheriffs for all court rooms in the province, including in Nanaimo, judges are postponing trials until sheriffs can be found to make court rooms secure.

Because of the backlog in B.C.'s court system, suspending and rescheduling a trial can mean a delay of several months to a year. This could potentially put cases at risk of being thrown out if the eventual wait is found to violate an accused person's right to be tried in a reasonable time.

Last Wednesday, a B.C. Supreme Court Justice suspended a home invasion trial because of the cutbacks to the sheriff system.

"This is the first day in these courts when sheriffs are not available to be in court to ensure the safety and security of all participants in the trial and members of the public," said Madam Justice Arnold-Bailey. "There have been many instances when the sheriffs have acted quickly to preserve the decorum of the court and to deal with unexpected security problems."

Four additional criminal cases were postponed Wednesday in Vancouver Provincial Court, said Dean Purdy of the B.C. Government and Service Employees Union.

"Deputy sheriffs couldn't be provided for security, so the judges have put all those trials off as well," he said. "We're pleased to see judges are stepping up and refusing to run their court rooms in that manner because it's unsafe."

February's provincial budget cuts \$14.5 million for court services, prosecution services and the judiciary, despite a 2010 report from provincial court judges warning more than 2,000 criminal cases risk being quashed due to excessive delays.

B.C. has 12% fewer provincial court judges than in 2005 despite rising case loads.

Problems with delays and the risk of cases being dismissed will continue to grow unless the province adequately funds the legal system, Nanaimo NDP MLA Leonard Krog told me on Friday.

Krog, the New Democrats attorney general critic, said "it's just a question of time and we've been warning the Liberal government about this since the budget was introduced.

"Both Kathy Corrigan, our solicitor general critic, and myself have repeatedly pointed this out, but the government fails to act and its going to lead to cases being dismissed. It's inevitable," he said.

The end result is criminals will be put back on the street because of \$14.5 million, a pittance given the totality of the provincial budget. For example, the Liberals can come up with \$28 million for its propaganda arm called the Public Affairs Bureau, the party's advertising wing.

As budgets set out priority spending for a government, one can only conclude that holding more photo ops in a Vancouver Canucks jersey. If ever there was a incident of penny wise and pound foolish under funding court services is among the most ridiculous.

Surely, the government can find the money from another ministry to ensure the wheels of justice continue to turn at their current painfully slow pace. If it can't, then for some victims, like the victim of the North Vancouver home invasion Madam Justice Arnold-Bailey postponed, the wheels will come to an unsatisfactory halt.