

The Daily News (Kamloops)

Jail crowding overlooked

Tue Oct 8 2013

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Source: The Daily News

Kamloops Regional Correctional Centre is not unlike the corrections system as a whole - for the vast majority, what's out of sight is too often out of mind.

Yet every day, men and women, friends and neighbours go to work at that institution on the hill with grave concerns for their health and safety, as well as for the health and safety of their charges, due to overcrowding.

WorkSafeBC has issued six orders to improve conditions for guards, inmates and visitors at the prison, all of them basic safety issues. The orders are based on an audit done in late September. Corrections B.C. has promised to follow through this time; an order given five years ago was ignored.

Sadly, they do not go far enough. The underlying issue of prison overcrowding - too few guards for too many inmates - is not included in the safety recommendations.

The problem stems in no minor way from the sweeping cuts made by the Gordon Campbell Liberals in 2002 shortly after they came to power.

In what amounted to the most comprehensive restructuring in B.C. Corrections history, the government closed 10 provincial facilities, including Rayleigh Correctional Centre, Bear Creek Correctional Centre near Clearwater and the High Valley youth facility near Logan Lake (ironically, the government bought back High Valley eight years later as it scrambled to make up for a social-housing deficit).

While Rayleigh was old and outdated, both of the latter two facilities were modern, well equipped and purpose-built. The closures left many locals scratching their heads.

With closure of minimum and medium security facilities, all inmates were centralized in maximum security institutions. This became the No. 1 contributing factor to health and safety problems at KRCC.

After a few years, a few elections and a change of leaders - presto. Premier Christy Clark unveils an "action plan," with more than 300 cells added to the maximum-security centres and construction of the Okanagan Correctional Centre in Osoyoos. The plan means 800 new cells across the province in total, the government boasted.

What it didn't mention is that it had previously closed more than that.

Overcrowding is a systemic issue. That is, it can only be addressed through the corrections system as a whole and the Okanagan Correctional Centre will help when it opens. That means another three years of dangerous conditions at KRCC.

We Say editorials represent the viewpoint of The Daily News and are written by publisher Tim Shoultz, city editor Tracy Gilchrist or associate editors Dan Spark and Mark Rogers.

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