

Escaped prisoner eludes police; Inmate has no history of violence; public still warned to stay away

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Byline: Jason Hewlett

A manhunt for an escaped prisoner continues after an RCMP search failed to nab the culprit who walked away from a work detail at Kamloops Regional Correctional Centre on Tuesday morning.

The prisoner, Steven Michael Hodgins, 22, is a prolific offender with a history of property crime.

Staff Sgt. Grant Learned said Hodgins doesn't have a history of violence, but the public is still advised not to try to apprehend him.

"Any person providing assistance or support to an escaped prisoner is also subject to potential criminal prosecution for aiding and abetting a criminal offence," said Learned.

Not considered dangerous, Hodgins was allowed to work at a site at KRCC. A spokeswoman with B.C. Corrections said security assessments are done prior to placing inmates on work assignments and only low-risk prisoners are qualified to participate.

RCMP were notified as soon as corrections officers realized Hodgins had escaped. Police dispatched a helicopter and set up a perimeter around Kenna Cartwright Park, which borders the jail.

A ground search was conducted with the help of police dogs. RCMP also asked Dufferin residents to be vigilant and keep their doors and windows locked.

With Dufferin elementary nearby, police also contacted the school district. Assistant superintendent Karl de Bruijn said because Hodgins is not considered dangerous, a decision was made not to lock down the school.

"He's known for property offences and not hurting people," said de Bruijn.

But supervisors dressed in bright yellow and orange vests were out in force during breaks, and a heavy police presence was maintained in the neighbourhood.

De Bruijn said the school district has to balance protecting the children without causing them unnecessary distress.

"You want to be careful without causing unnecessary fear," he said.

All the activity made some residents who ventured into the park uneasy. Brianna Barnett was walking her two dogs when the RCMP helicopter buzzed low overhead.

"He was going really slow," she said, adding she hadn't heard about the escape yet.

But, with the prison nearby and her dogs growing more and more cautious, Barnett put two and two together and thought it best to hike out.

"I was up where you go through the ravines and the forested area. A guy could probably hide there," she said.

She phoned her parents on her cellphone and stayed on the line with her dad, Ian, the entire 15-minute walk back to the parking lot. Her dad drove from Westsyde to meet her.

"It eased my nerves," she said.

By then, Ian had heard about the escape on the radio and was glad his daughter phoned, he said.

Some Dufferin residents contacted by The Daily News on Tuesday didn't know a prisoner had escaped. Most said they usually keep their doors locked.

Kari Pavlovich said she and her husband took the jail's location into consideration when they looked at moving into the neighbourhood but decided to build anyway.

"It's always been in our minds, for sure," she said. The corrections spokeswoman said escapes are rare and staff will aid RCMP in the investigation as needed. The case is now in the hands of police. Hodgins is about five feet, eight inches tall, weighs 162 pounds and has short, brown hair, blue eyes and freckles.

Anyone with information is asked to phone RCMP at 250-828-3000 or Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-TIPS