

Federal crime legislation, continued overcrowding puts pressure on province to build two new jails

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VANCOUVER, Sept. 23 /CNW/ - Federal crime legislation passed into law earlier this year will likely mean the provincial government will have to build two new jails, according to the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union (BCGEU), which represents correctional officers in the province's jails.

The union makes the claim based on information it has received in a response from the provincial government to the union's inquiry about the impact of federal legislation on correctional facilities in the province.

"The Deputy Solicitor General says the number of inmates could increase to approximately 271 because of Bill C-25," said Darryl Walker, BCGEU president. "To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time the provincial government has given an indication of how many new inmates there may be because of the federal legislation."

"The number of inmates is expected to increase because prisoners will have to spend more time in provincial remand facilities," said Walker. "Bill C-25 eliminated the "two-for-one" provision that allowed inmates to get the equivalent time off their record for time spent in remand."

Other federal legislation such as mandatory prison for drug-related crimes, changing conditional sentencing, and ending automatic statutory release after two-thirds of a sentence will put additional pressure on provincial jails.

"The number provided by the provincial government basically means building another prison in B.C.," said Walker. "When you consider the other federal legislation under consideration this number may be quite low. We also have the ongoing problem with overcrowding."

Other problems keep prisoners in jail. Recent news reports indicate that a shortage of judges in the province is delaying trials and in some instances, cases are being thrown out.

The provincial government says the number is "speculative" due to a number of issues, including the lack of data held by Corrections B.C. and the possibility that the courts may proceed in a way that reduces the number of inmates.

The federal government is planning to build 2,700 new spots in federal jails to try and accommodate the inmates once they go through the courts.

"Overcrowding in our jails continues to be an ongoing problem," said Dean Purdy, chair of the union's correctional and sheriffs component. "For example, the North Fraser Pre-Trial Centre was designed for 300 inmates but averages 650 and has held more than 700. The Kamloops jail was built to hold 168 inmates but averages in excess of 300 and has held as many as 389. Overcrowding leads to more staff assaults and problems for our staff and the system. Something is bound to give."

"Combined with overcrowding and federal legislation the provincial government is going to have to start planning for at least two more jails right now," said Purdy.

"The maximum security Wilkinson Road jail in Victoria is an example of a jail that was built for 206 prisoners and now holds 350 - 400 inmates. This is probably the size of each jail the province will have to build," Purdy said.

"We supported the government's decision to expand the Surrey Pre-Trial facility, but it won't be built until 2013 and will only have 180 cells and hold 360 inmates with each cell double bunked," Purdy says.

Purdy is currently in Ottawa attending a meeting of his union counterparts from across the country. He will be comparing B.C.'s situation with that of the other provinces. He is hoping to meet with federal MPs from the three parties in the near future to discuss the impact of federal crime legislation on already overcrowded jails. The meeting in Ottawa is being hosted by the National Union of Public and General Employees, which the BCGEU is affiliated to.

The BCGEU represents 1,500 correctional officers and 450 sheriffs in the province.

Note: A copy of the Deputy Solicitor General's letter is on the BCGEU web at www.bcgeu.ca.

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