

Government closes units for female young offenders

By Lindsay Kines,
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The declining number of young people in B.C. jails has prompted the government to close two units for girls in Victoria and Prince George and cut 23 corrections jobs.

All female young offenders will now be held at a youth custody centre in Burnaby.

The Ministry of Children and Family Development, which oversees youth corrections, issued a statement today saying that the female living units in the Victoria and Prince George youth custody centres sometimes held only one or two girls at a time.

“B.C. Youth Custody Services can operate more efficiently by centralizing all girls’ services in Burnaby, reducing operating levels in Victoria and Prince George, and redirecting savings to expand rehabilitation services at all three centres,” the statement said.

The ministry plans to enhance programs in Burnaby that help girls deal with addictions and trauma.

The province boasts one of the lowest youth custody rates in the country due to its reliance on community-based programs and treatment services. The number of youth in jail has fallen 75 per cent from a high of 400 in 1995-1996 to a current average of 105.

The B.C. Government and Service Employees’ Union, which represents corrections workers, reacted angrily to the announcement Wednesday.

“To blindside us with this, while we’re at the bargaining table with the government, is unacceptable,” union spokesman Dean Purdy said. “With proper consultation, this could have been achieved through attrition months ago.”

Purdy also questioned the impact on female young offenders and their families.

“For a government that’s supposed to put families first, they’re now going to make families with young girls in custody travel far distances from the north and the Island to visit their daughters in Burnaby,” he said.

The ministry said money has been set aside for a girls’ family visiting program. In addition, special female sheriff escorts will speed the transportation of girls to Burnaby from courts in outlying areas, the ministry said.

The Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver, which advocates for women and girls in the justice system, backed the move.

Shawn Bayes, executive director, was unavailable for comment Wednesday, but in a statement included in the ministry’s release, she said the society believes girls need support dealing with their issues rather than jail time.

“While centralized female youth custody will be farther away for many, we believe it will also promote the use of alternatives to custody and decrease the number of girls sent to custody, which we welcome,” she said.

The ministry said it also plans to improve programs for the disproportionate number of aboriginal youth in custody in Prince George.

The Victoria youth jail will get additional mental health, addictions counselling and treatment services.