

Guards attacked in Saanich jail

Union blames incidents on overcrowding

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The union representing corrections officers says two assaults against guards at Wilkinson Road jail in the past three weeks are symptoms of overcrowding.

The most recent attack at the Vancouver Island Regional Correctional Centre happened May 22 when a male corrections officer was punched in the back of the head as he returned a prisoner to his segregation cell, said Dean Purdy, spokesman for the correctional section of the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union.

On May 8, an officer was jumped by two inmates while guarding one of the general population living units, Purdy said. He was kicked and punched before other guards went to his aid.

All three inmates were charged with assault under the Criminal Code as well as internal charges under the Corrections Act.

The living unit was housing 28 inmates, twice as many as it was built for, Purdy said. Overcrowding can cause tension among the inmates, leading to assaults, he said.

The union is lobbying for a safe exit route in the jail's 13 living units, which would provide a door behind the guard's desk, giving an officer a quick escape route in the event of an attack by an inmate.

At present, only one of the living units has such a door.

Purdy said the union is set to meet with WorkSafe B.C. at the end of June to bring up several safety issues.

Wilkinson Road jail was rebuilt in 1985 with capacity for 206 inmates and now houses 330, Purdy said.

The guard-to-inmate ratio is one to 40, which Purdy says is double what it was in 2002 when the ratio cap was lifted.

There have been 88 assaults at the jail since 2002.

A B.C. Corrections spokeswoman said given the prison population of violent offenders and individuals with addiction and mental health issues, violent assaults can happen even in units with the lowest guard-to-inmate ratio.

Incidents in which guards are injured are investigated by B.C. Corrections and union representatives, she said.

B.C. Corrections said 240 officers have been hired to enhance supervision in correctional centres across the province.