

Inmate assaulted guard: union

Joanne Hatherly

Published: Thursday, March 18, 2010

An inmate attack that was as ferocious as it was sudden has put a jail guard in hospital and turned up the heat on B.C.'s overcrowded prisons, says the union for the province's corrections officers.

When a guard at the Vancouver Island Regional Correctional Centre on Wilkinson Road in Saanich opened a door in the facility's segregation unit Tuesday afternoon to release a prisoner for a one-hour outdoor exercise break, the inmate attacked without warning or provocation, said Dean Purdy, spokesman for the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union's Correctional and Sheriff Services section. Purdy said the attack lasted less than 30 seconds before other guards intervened.

The inmate was able to kick the guard's ankle with such force that the bone was badly broken, Purdy said. The guard, a 10-year-veteran, also suffered bruises, an injured knee and multiple scratches on his face and head.

Marnie Mayhew, spokeswoman for B.C. Corrections, had a different version of the attack, which she said involved the inmate lunging at the guard, causing the guard to fall and break his ankle. Mayhew noted two guards were present, but was unable to provide further detail.

The inmate, whose name was not released, was in the segregation unit for monitoring and assessment due to erratic behaviour.

The guard was rushed to Victoria General Hospital, where he underwent emergency surgery for the broken ankle.

It's not known whether drugs, alcohol or mental illness were factors in the assault. No weapons were used.

Sgt. Michael Barkley said Saanich police are investigating the assault, the second to occur this week -- the other was an inmate-on-inmate attack.

Purdy said the incident is the 63rd inmate-on-guard assault at Wilkinson Road alone since 2003, adding the prisoner-to-guard ratio has risen sharply from 20-to-one in 2003 to 40-to-one today.

"That prison was built to hold 206 inmates. It now has 370," Purdy said. "It's at the point where staff are walking on pins and needles. It's a pressure cooker."

Mayhew was unable to confirm the prisoner-to-guard ratio at the Wilkinson Road facility, noting the jail population fluctuates daily, and ratios are variable between units inside the facility. But she said there has been no upward trend in violent inmate-on-staff assaults, although she agreed the province's correctional facilities are facing significant capacity issues.

Mayhew said relief is expected when construction is completed on two correctional centres -- one in Prince George expected to open in the spring of 2011 and another in Maple Ridge at the Alouette Correctional Centre for Women. That will add a total of 120 cells, but 100 of those are allocated to female inmates, leaving little wiggle room for the male population at the Wilkinson Road jail. The Surrey pretrial centre, which will add 180 cells, is expected to open in 2013.

No new facilities are planned for Vancouver Island, which has two provincial correctional facilities, Mayhew said, although space has been reconfigured at Wilkinson Road jail to add 40 beds.