

Inmates assault guards

Union says PoCo jail is overcrowded

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Coquitlam Now With Files From The Vancouver Sun

There are more than 500 inmates at the PoCo jail.

The Fraser North Pretrial Centre in Port Coquitlam is a pressure cooker right now - that's according to an observation by the union representing correction staff at the facility.

Last Friday, two officers were assaulted at the jail, including one guard who needed to be treated in hospital for his injuries.

Dean Purdy, chair of corrections and sheriff services for the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union, told The NOW overcrowding in the prison is making it difficult for staff to manage.

"Things are pretty tense inside right now," he said, noting another minor assault occurred on a guard on Monday.

Purdy said the prison population count has been between 525 and 550, but the facility was originally built with a capacity for 300.

He said it translates to one officer responsible for every 60 inmates.

The prison is considered the most overcrowded maximum-security jail in the province.

The union is calling on the provincial government to address the issue of overcrowding before someone is seriously injured or killed inside the prison.

Purdy said ideally the inmate to guard ratio would be 20 to 1, and he'd like to see it close to that number.

"It's only going to get worse," he suggested, pointing out relief in the form of new provincial jails isn't coming for a couple years.

In April, an inmate at the facility reportedly jumped from the third storey of the building to his death.

Although there have been reports the death was a possible suicide, the B.C. Coroners Service couldn't confirm any details surrounding the incident.

Purdy said he wasn't sure if the incident is related to the overcrowding problems at the pretrial centre.

As for the most recent officer incidents, the first assault occurred about 7 a.m. when a female officer was "suckerpunched" in the side of the head by a prisoner who did not want to go to court, while the second assault occurred about four hours later when an officer was assaulted by a prisoner with gang ties.

The prisoner involved in that assault has affiliations with the Independent Soldiers, which has ties with the Hells Angels.

"This is the 16th assault at the centre so far this year," Purdy said.

"We had 39 last year. From our point of view, that's unacceptable."

He said union officials met with Justice Minister Shirley Bond last year to discuss the growing violence at provincial jails and the need to reduce the officer-prisoner ratios.

"She agreed to take a look at it," Purdy said.

Corrections officers are also facing increasing violence among rival gang members at North Fraser.

Earlier this year, two Hells Angels members facing murder charges were involved in separate fights with prisoners linked to rival gangs, including a man who is a member of the Red Scorpions.

Purdy said union officials plan to meet next week with WorkSafeBC to discuss safety concerns and violence at B.C.'s six maximum-security jails.