

Union: More staff at B.C. prison needed before someone gets killed

Guard seriously injured this week 29th assault in two years

BY KIM PEMBERTON, VANCOUVER SUN NOVEMBER 11, 2010



A prison guard was seriously injured in an assault Wednesday at the North Fraser Pre-Trial Corrections centre and a union representative is calling on the government to take a look at dangerously low staffing levels there before a guard is killed. T

Photograph by: Rick Wilking, REUTERS

VANCOUVER - A prison guard was seriously injured in an assault Wednesday at the North Fraser Pre-Trial Corrections centre and a union representative is calling on the government to take a look at dangerously low staffing levels there before a guard is killed.

This is the 29th assault on a guard in the past two years at that Port Coquitlam facility, which was originally built in 2000 to house 300 inmates but on average has 650 prisoners, said Dean Purdy, the chair of the corrections and services component of the B.C. Government Employees Union.

“We don’t want to be in a position where it takes the death of an officer before a change is made,” said Purdy.

He said the most recent assault on a guard at the provincial corrections centre happened Wednesday around 4:45 p.m. when the guard, who has about 10 years experience, was working alone in a unit with upwards to 60 inmates.

He said the man was punched by one of the inmates several times, then fell to the ground where he was kicked seven or eight times and stomped on. The guard was partly unconscious and suffered cuts and bruises to his face and had a concussion.

Purdy said all he would have had on him at the time was a personal alarm pager before help arrived a few minutes after the assault began.

“This has reached a point where our staff are saying they are not going to take it anymore. They want the proper tools. We want government to increase staffing levels and we think they (guards) should be equipped with pepper spray and batons when working alone or first responders (to a crisis),” said Purdy.

He said another solution to the overcrowding in North Fraser Pre-Trial Corrections Centre and the eight other provincial centres is to build at least two more jails. Purdy said in 2005 the staff ratio at North Fraser Pre-Trial was 20 inmates to one guard but that number is now one guard to 60 inmates.

“Conditions in the jail are very tense and staff are on pins and needles right now. We’ve seen violence and assaults on our staff go through the roof ... they safety of staff is paramount and should come first.”

NDP Public Safety critic Mike Farnworth said the provincial government is “clearly neglecting the safety of our correctional officers and putting them in unsafe working conditions.”

“This is extremely disturbing. The government has been warned about incidents like this would happen because of severe overcrowding. It is unacceptable,” he said.

A spokesman from the B.C. Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor-general, which is responsible for the correctional centres, was not available and a staff member from the North Fraser Pre-Trial Centre said Thursday because of the statutory holiday no one from administration was available today to comment.

kpemberton@vancouversun.com