

More Vancouver trials delayed over staff shortages

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Less than two weeks after 34 sheriffs' positions were cut, five Vancouver trials were delayed Wednesday because of staff shortages and security concerns.

One B.C. Supreme Court judge decried the lack of sheriffs as she shut down the third day of a home invasion trial for accused Duck Yoon in a newly-built high-security courtroom at 800 Smithe Street in Vancouver.

And a few blocks away in Vancouver Provincial Court, four scheduled cases had to be adjourned because there were no sheriffs available.

The Trial Lawyers Association of B.C. condemned the cuts to sheriff services and resulting impact on the justice system.

Association president Azool Jaffer-Jeraj said "courtrooms should not be empty when there is a backlog of cases to be processed. Just like judges, lawyers and court clerks, sheriffs are a very important part of the system."

Lawyer Richard Fowler, who is representing Yoon and on the association's executive, said the situation is deplorable.

"It is such ineptness at the government level. It really, really is," Fowler told the Vancouver Sun later Wednesday.

"The judge pointed out it is kind of ironic we spent all this money on the new courtroom and now we don't have the staff to run it."

Fowler said they are going to try to continue Thursday morning, depending on the staffing levels.

"This is a desperate and devastating situation," he said. "Things have to change immediately. Justice and the people of the province are suffering severe harm by this sad state of affairs."

Fowler said the cuts have come at the worst time, when there are more and more demands on sheriffs who must escort an increasing number of in-custody suspects to and from court.

And with cuts to legal aid, there are more unrepresented accused in court, increasing tensions and security concerns generally, Fowler said.

"Rather than the premier out lighting the Olympic torch, she should be in a room with [Attorney General Barry] Penner saying how can we properly staff the courts," Fowler said.

The union representing B.C. sheriffs is demanding a meeting with Penner to discuss the growing problem.

On May 27, auxiliary and part-time deputy sheriffs had their hours cut by up to 90 percent, amounting to the elimination of 34 full-time positions.

Dean Purdy, of the B.C. Government and Service Employees Union, said he didn't expect recent government cuts to have such a dramatic impact so soon.

"We were kind of shocked that it has happened so quickly after the cuts," Purdy said Wednesday.

"If this isn't a wake-up call for the attorney general, then I don't know what is. We just think that this is going to spread and start to happen across the province on a regular basis."

Penner was not available for an interview Wednesday, but provided an emailed statement about the court closures.

"I am concerned about recent scheduling challenges that have led to some judges delaying court proceedings in Vancouver today. Although this is unfortunate, the safety and security of our province's courthouses and the people in them remains our first priority," Penner said.

"We are working to streamline court procedures and proceedings to help reduce pressures without increasing costs to taxpayers. Wherever possible, we will deploy our existing sheriffs within the appropriate staffing guidelines and use auxiliary sheriffs as our budget permits."

Even before the recent cuts, judges in Kelowna and Victoria had temporarily closed their courtrooms because of a lack of sheriffs and spoke out about how the shortages were impacting the system.

New Democrat MLA Mike Farnworth said the problem is only getting worse as indicated by the closures "now coming down to the Lower Mainland."

"It shows it is not just isolated. It is affecting the province as a whole and that is bad for justice in British Columbia," Farnworth said. "People expect trials to go ahead and they expect criminals to be prosecuted. They don't expect for them to be delayed or to be thrown out because of a lack of sheriffs."