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Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union

NEWS RELEASE

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Increasing violence in provincial correctional centres putting worker safety at risk

Braidy Chase Vermette, 28, escaped from lawful custody late Wednesday. He is facing a charge of first degree murder in the death of Troy Cecil Napope in 2015.

The remand inmate was being transported to the Prince Albert Victoria Hospital from the Prince Albert Correctional Centre when two masked people approached the escorting correctional workers. One assailant had a shotgun, the other bear mace. The bear mace was used on the correctional officers.

This incident follows a destructive riot on March 29, 2016 at the Saskatoon Correctional Centre (SCC).

“Frontline corrections workers have been reporting an increasing level of violence in the prisons, including more frequent fights between inmates and physical assaults on staff,” says SGEU President Bob Bymoén. Inmates are exhibiting increasingly violent and unpredictable behaviours. While incidents that pose safety threats occur on a daily basis in all centres, there have been a notable number of major occurrences across the province.

There have been four major disturbances at the SCC in the last year, and one at the Prince Albert Correctional Centre involving a fire, which affected four staff and resulted in one worker needing to seek medical attention.

On March 18, an email was sent to all staff of the Prince Albert Correctional Centre by management advising that a piece of razor was found in an apple that was in the staff lunch room. Management has advised staff to take extra precaution when consuming food for their own safety. An investigation is currently underway at the centre.

Earlier this month, a hostage-taking involving two inmates at the Saskatoon Correctional Centre brought out the centre’s Emergency Response Team.

These incidents are the latest in a series of disturbances in provincial prisons that can be linked to overcrowding, lack of programming and under-staffing says Bymoén.

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“Overcrowding in jails means that there is no safe place to move inmates who pose threats and no way to separate gang members. Reduced programming for inmates means less opportunity to reduce tensions,” adds Bymoer. “The reality is that high-security inmates are being housed in low-security settings. This puts corrections staff and inmates at risk on a daily basis. This is not acceptable, and government needs to respond more effectively to the overcrowding crisis.”

“Some new units have been added to the correctional system, but the pressing need is for single cells, where high-risk inmates can be separated from the general population when needed, not double-bunked cells or dorm-style rooms,” Bymoer notes.

Despite the increasing challenges facing correctional staff, corrections workers are not getting the up-to-date training they need. In some centres, mandatory training has been cancelled because there are not enough staff available to cover shifts.

The centres face a staff recruitment and retention problem, putting even more strain on staff who are sometimes unable to take much-needed breaks, such as vacation leave.

Bymoer is calling on government to conduct a complete safety and security audit of all protocols and procedures, facilities, and staffing levels.

“Management must address the crisis in correctional centres. Explosive situations are becoming more frequent, and levels of violence are escalating on a daily basis. It is time to act – before there are more injuries and possibly deaths,” says Bymoer.

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