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Corrections workers frustrated and angered by Ministry's response to escaped inmate

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Following a March 30 incident in which suspected murderer Braidy Chase Vermette escaped from two unarmed corrections workers escorting him, the Ministry of Justice's response has been underwhelming and misleading, according to SGEU.

Corrections workers are frustrated and upset that government appears to be pointing a finger at them, saying staff could ask for a police escort when staff have never been made aware that this was an option.

Contrary to what Ministry spokesperson Drew Wilby has reported in the media, the Ministry policy does not state anywhere that corrections workers can request a police escort when accompanying inmates off correctional centre premises . nor have staff been told that they can make such a request. Corrections workers do contact local police forces to notify them when they are bringing an inmate into specific community on a humanitarian escort, such as to attend a funeral.

The Ministry underestimated the potential danger these workers could face, said SGEU President Bob Bymo. Any time workers have to accompany inmates out into the public, it has the potential to be dangerous. The ministry needs to keep this in mind when doing its policy review.

Mr. Wilby reported that corrections workers carry batons at all times, which is untrue. The two corrections workers escorting Vermette were not carrying batons, as this has never been a standard practice at the Prince Albert Correctional Centre, nor is it a policy requirement. In some facilities in the province, corrections workers who escort inmates into the public, as part of their duties, have not received baton training.

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The Ministry should be correcting these false statements, said Bonnie McRae, Chairperson of the Legal, Inspection and Regulatory Component, which represents provincial corrections workers in Saskatchewan. This misinformation shines a negative light on corrections workers, who are put into dangerous situations without adequate protective equipment, or up to date training.

During Vermette's escape, he was assisted by two additional people . one of whom had a shotgun, and another who sprayed bear mace at the escorting correctional workers. On April 8, Wilby reported that the Ministry will not consider arming correctional workers with firearms.

We are not asking that all corrections workers carry guns, said McRae, We want to sit down with the employer and discuss what better protection and safety protocols for corrections workers might look like. Sheriffs from the courthouse and corrections officers from Saskatchewan penitentiaries carry firearms when escorting inmates into the community. Why does the Ministry feel provincial corrections workers on escort duty cannot be trained and equipped to the same standard?

Provincial correctional centres hold inmates charged with dangerous crimes on remand while they await trial or sentencing. If given sentences of two years or longer, these inmates are sent to federal penitentiaries, where the federal correctional officers who escort them are equipped with firearms. Provincial correctional workers are responsible for escorting these same inmates, but do so while unarmed.

While we're relieved that Vermette is back in custody, the bottom line here is that the Ministry needs to learn from this dangerous incident, and commit to a serious system-wide effort to improve safety standards, says Bymoan.

The Ministry is conducting an internal investigation. SGEU is calling for a complete safety and security audit of all protocols and procedures, facilities, and staffing levels in the provincial correctional system, to prevent incidents like the March 30 escape.

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The director of the Prince Albert Correctional Centre has been meeting with some staff over the incident.

The Ministry has informed us that it is reviewing its policies,+said McRae.
It's imperative that we are part of that review to ensure it meets the needs of the staff working at these institutions.+

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