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Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union

# NEWS RELEASE

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## Occupational Health and Safety report confirms Deputy Sheriff job cuts unsafe

A report from the Occupational Health and Safety Division confirms that government's decision to contract out court security is unsafe for workers and the public.

"The Sask. Party government's attempt to save a few bucks by privatizing jobs has gone too far, causing unsafe working conditions and an unsafe environment in the courts," says SGEU President Bob Bymoer. "Given this report, the Ministry of Justice should immediately rehire all the Deputy Sheriffs of Court Security who were terminated."

Earlier this month, the Ministry of Justice replaced 14 Deputy Sheriffs with Commissionaires. This left a single Sheriff working with Commissionaires at perimeter screening, instead of two armed Sheriffs being assigned to that area as was previously the case.

Following that change, two Deputy Sheriffs exercised their right to refuse dangerous work under the Saskatchewan Employment Act, saying their work had become unusually dangerous without having a second Sheriff available. The Sheriffs had been trained to work in pairs to handle dangerous situations, such as controlling aggressive individuals, and Commissionaires don't have the training or equipment to replace a Sheriff in that role.

The employees' refusal to work was upheld by the Occupational Health and Safety Division, which has issued a notice of contravention to the Ministry of Justice.

"This report confirms what we've been saying all along," says Bymoer. "Deputy Sheriffs of Court Security are trained, screened, and equipped to very high standards. Replacing them with Commissionaires compromises court security and the safety of workers – and the government's OH&S division agrees."

The Ministry of Justice said in a memo that while it reviews the OH&S report "staffing arrangements will remain as they currently are."

"This is absolutely unacceptable," says Bymoer. "The current situation has been deemed unsafe by the OH&S division, and the ministry needs to take action immediately."

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Since the Sask. Party government mismanaged the province's finances to the point of a billion-dollar deficit, it has been trying to dig its way out of the financial mess by contracting out and cutting jobs.

"Government can file this report under mismanagement, along with all of its other bad decisions, such as giving \$2 billion to a corporation in France to build the Regina Bypass, adding three extra MLAs at a cost of \$700,000 per year, wasting hundreds of millions on overpriced consultants, blowing \$47 million on smart metres, and the list goes on," says Bymoan.

"This is just another poorly thought-out privatization scheme that is already costing more money," he adds.

Since Jan. 4 – after the Sheriffs exercised their right to refuse dangerous work – the Ministry has had four staff – two Deputy Sheriffs and two Commissionaires – at perimeter screening at the provincial courthouses in Regina and Prince Albert. Previously, two Deputy Sheriffs were scheduled to work in this area.

"Whatever savings the ministry thought it was going to make from these job cuts are fast becoming expenditures, just as we suspected," says Bymoan. "These courthouses are understaffed, and now the ministry is paying four employees to do the work of two Deputy Sheriffs. Where is the savings in that? This is just another privatization scheme gone wrong."

When the ministry announced the Deputy Sheriff job cuts, Minister of Justice Gordon Wyant told the *Leader-Post* that he "didn't want to give any general numbers, but [the savings] wouldn't be certainly in the millions of dollars."

"Why would the ministry turn security work over to contractors without knowing what the costs would be?" asks Bymoan. "Unfortunately, now we know the costs are high. It's time for government to stop trying to balance the budget on the backs of workers by contracting out their jobs. Time and time again, the contracting out of services has proven to cost more – both in money and in terms of safety."

SGEU calls on the Ministry of Justice to immediately rehire all of the Deputy Sheriffs that it terminated.

"If, and when, the Ministry decides to comply with this report, it won't be enough to simply move staff around," says Bymoan. "With the current staffing levels since the cuts, assigning Sheriffs from other areas in the courthouse to perimeter screening just leaves these other areas of the court understaffed. We expect employee levels in the courthouses to go back to what they were pre-privatization immediately."

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