



NEWS RELEASE

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BC First Nations Justice Council
British Columbia Assembly of First Nations
Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs
First Nations Summit

COVID-19 in prisons stands to be a death sentence for overincarcerated Indigenous peoples Indigenous leadership demand proactive response from governments

(xwməθkwəy̓ əm (Musqueam), s̓k̓w̓x̓ wú7mesh (Squamish) and sə́l ilwətaʔt̓/sél ílwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh)/Vancouver, BC – First Nations leadership across BC is united in calling for immediate action to protect incarcerated peoples amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 outbreak at the Mission Institution is now the third largest outbreak in the Province of BC, with the first inmate tragically passing away on April 15, 2020.

Senior health and corrections officials have verified that almost 40% of the confirmed cases of COVID-19 at Mission Institution are among Indigenous inmates despite Indigenous people making up just 5% of the population in BC.

Doug White, Chairperson of the BC First Nations Justice Council calls the situation an urgent crisis and a ‘ticking time bomb.’ “Indigenous people are vastly over-represented in prisons and carry more than our share of the burden of health issues and chronic disease. These men were sentenced to a term of years, not to death. The duty of care that is upon the Institution in the midst of this crisis requires immediate and comprehensive action to avoid further tragedy. This situation requires extra-ordinary efforts and collaboration.”

The BC First Nations Justice Council, BC Assembly of First Nations (BCAFN), the Union of BC Indian Chief (UBCIC), and the First Nations Summit (FNS) call on the Government of Canada and the Province of BC to urgently implement the following safety measures:

- Immediately test all inmates and staff at the Mission Institution;
- Increase safety and screening measures for workers entering and exiting the facility;
- Enhance medical surge capacity onsite via mobile medical units to effectively treat emerging cases;
- Enact isolation protocols which ensure that inmates who test positive are isolated in health facilities with regular monitoring and as much comfort as any other individual, along with meaningful human contact compliant with social distancing;
- Increase access to counselling and mental health resources in every federal facility in order to mitigate the psychological and emotional consequences of isolation measures and reduced social contact;

- Develop release plans for as many people as possible, prioritizing those with pre-existing health conditions who are at increased risk due to COVID-19, and immediately release anyone classified low risk with a home in community where they will be able to self-isolation;
- Include among release criteria a plan for secure housing, financial aid, and community safety, and provide support in meeting these criteria; and
- Test and isolate all individuals for 14 days before re-entering community.

What leaders are saying:

Grand Chief Stewart Phillip - President, BC Union of Indian Chiefs

“Inaction or insufficient action to immediately reduce the numbers in federal facilities and implement necessary health protocols to deal with COVID-19 is unthinkable. A staggering 1/3 of the inmates in federal custody are Indigenous. If Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the Government of Canada continue to ignore urgent calls for action in Canadian prisons, it will represent one more administration using institutionalized negligence as a weapon of genocide against Indigenous peoples.”

Terry Teegee, Regional Chief, BC Assembly of First Nations

“Many people who are currently behind bars are there due to racism inherent in the justice system, for being poor, non-violent or lesser drug related offenses. Releasing low-risk non-violent offenders will create much needed space for social distancing in correctional facilities. Doing so in a safe and well-planned manner will ensure those released aren’t released into streets with nowhere to go, putting them at further risk.”

Lydia Hwitsum, Political Executive, First Nations Summit

“Last month we were witness to the signing of the BC First Nations Justice Strategy, a strategy which commits BC and Canada to addressing the harms of over incarceration of Indigenous peoples. Lowering the risk of COVID-19 infection to the inmate population is a clear opportunity for us to act collectively and decisively to stop harm, protect Indigenous people and change the course of history”

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