

Harper government to announce more prison expansions

Rick Wilking/Reuters

There are roughly 13,500 inmates in 54 federal institutions, with Corrections Canada planning to create space over the next three years for 2,700 more prisoners.

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KINGSTON, Ont. — The number of penitentiaries listed for expansion in a \$2-billion federal prison-building boom will rise to more than two dozen Monday as Conservative MPs make announcements on eight prisons in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Quebec.

Postmedia News has learned that three minimum-security prisons in Ontario are each expected to get 50 new cells. A 96-cell addition at Quebec's medium-security Cowansville Institution is also anticipated, along with new cells at another Quebec prison. Announcements will be made related to new cells at two prisons in Saskatchewan and the maximum-security Edmonton Institution.

Christopher McCluskey, a spokesman for Public Safety Minister Vic Toews, said he couldn't give specifics. But news conferences are scheduled Monday at four locations.

Gordon O'Connor, minister of state, is expected to announce 50 more cells at the minimum-security Pittsburgh Institution in Kingston, along with 50 more at minimum-security Frontenac Institution in Kingston.

A separate news conference will be held at minimum-security Beaver Creek Institution in Gravenhurst, in central Ontario, where another 50-cell expansion is expected to be announced.

Over the past five months, the government has announced plans to expand more than 20 prisons in seven provinces. An internal Corrections Canada email distributed by a senior official in Ontario in July 2010, and first posted on the website www.cancrime.com, identified 35 prisons that would expand, including all six federal prisons for women.

In that email, Assistant Commissioner Chris Price wrote that construction would take place at institutions "in locations where we expect the greatest increases in offender population."

Ottawa is scrambling to expand the penitentiary system as quickly as possible to house a surging inmate population. One legislative change alone — the abolishment of the two-for-one pre-trial custody credit — is expected to add 4,000 more inmates to the system over the next five years, according to estimates by the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

The government is moving ahead with other proposals including tightened parole rules and more mandatory minimum sentences.

There are roughly 13,500 inmates in 54 institutions. In many prisons, inmates are already double bunked, living two to a cell designed for one. The practice contravenes international standards on the treatment of prisoners and is known to fuel tension and violence.

Corrections Canada has said it plans a “multi-faceted accommodation strategy” to create space over the next three years for 2,700 more federal prisoners. Corrections recently altered its internal guidelines to permit more double bunking.

Ottawa has already announced more than \$110-million worth of new cell construction at four prisons in Ontario.

“The government is fulfilling its promise to make criminals pay their full debt to society and to ensure dangerous crooks stay locked up as long as possible,” Mr. Toews said at a news conference in October inside medium-security Collins Bay Institution in Kingston.

“Action has a cost and it is a cost that Canadians are willing to pay because the cost to society is so much more and not just in dollars, the cost of fear, the cost of physical and property damage,” Mr. Toews said.

Opposition politicians, academics and interest groups have decried the Tory plans, claiming that locking up more criminals for longer periods will not make communities safer without expanded treatment programs and rehabilitation initiatives.

“Their whole plan is completely wrong-headed,” said Kingston farmer Dianne Dowling, who spearheads a protest movement against the shuttering of six penitentiary farms, including two in Kingston at prisons that will see expansion announcements Monday. “They’re putting more people in prison claiming it to be for public safety but they’re just warehousing inmates.”

The government said the prisoner-run farms cost too much and did not teach inmates relevant job skills. The protesters say the farms were valuable rehabilitative tools.

The prison expansions are expected to be complete in the next two to four years. Corrections managers are considering stopgap measures in the meantime, including the use of portable housing units.