

B.C. to close two female young offender units

Montreal Gazette
Jonathan Fowlie,
January 18, 2012

VICTORIA — The British Columbia government said Wednesday it will shut down two female youth detention facilities.

Dean Purdy, chairman of the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union's correctional and sheriff services section, accuses the B.C. government of "robbing Peter to pay Paul" by closing two women's youth detention facilities.

The move comes at a time of low occupancy rates in the province's female youth detention centres, the government said, adding it will close facilities in Prince George and in Victoria and move all young female inmates to a facility in Burnaby.

"We have fewer and fewer youth incarcerated in B.C. — a credit to our system and our services," Minister of Children and Family Development Mary McNeil said in a written statement issued Wednesday.

"This now allows us to enhance rehabilitation services for youth at all three centres in the province."

But the union that represents workers at the two facilities says the move is a sheer cost-cutting measure, meant to help fund other services.

"They're getting a \$2.5-million savings out of this and some of it's going to be reallocated to special needs," said Dean Purdy, chairman of the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union's correctional and sheriff services section.

"What we think they are doing is they are robbing Peter to pay Paul. They're just shuffling money around when we think they should be keeping it where it is and leaving those girls' units open so that there isn't an impact on the families that have kids in jail."

Purdy said families in the northern part of the province, and on the Island, will now have to travel to Burnaby to visit their daughters in jail.

Purdy added his union is in contract negotiations and was surprised by the announcement early Wednesday morning.

"For them to blindside us while we're at the bargaining table is unacceptable to us," he said.

"It's the elimination of six positions at the Prince George custody centre and 17 in Victoria," he added.

"They're going to get layoff notices effective (Wednesday)."

In a news release, McNeil did not address the job cuts, but did say the move is meant to enhance services.

"With B.C.-wide occupancy currently at 65 per cent, B.C. Youth Custody Services can operate more efficiently by centralizing all girls' services in Burnaby, reducing operating levels in Victoria and Prince

George, and redirecting savings to expand rehabilitation services at all three centres," said the news release.

"The very small numbers of girls in (the) Victoria and Prince George centres — sometimes only one or two at a time — has not allowed for the development of sustainable female-oriented programs in those centres," it added.

"The centralization of girls' services in Burnaby will create a larger grouping of girls and permit the development and enhancement of programs that, for example, address addictions and trauma typically experienced by girls."

The news release also said government has set aside money for a girls' family visitation program in Burnaby, and for special female sheriffs' escorts to expedite the transportation of girls to Burnaby from courts in outlying areas.

Purdy said Wednesday he expects about 12 young female inmates will be moved as a result of the closure.