

Young female offenders in B.C. to be housed at one facility instead of three

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VANCOUVER - Young female offenders at correctional facilities in Prince George and Victoria will be moved to a unit in Burnaby in an effort to centralize services, says the B.C. government.

The Children's Ministry said Wednesday the money saved from having all the 12 to 18-year-old girls at one facility instead of three will help expand rehabilitation services such as for mental health and addictions counselling.

"The very small numbers of girls in Victoria and the 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," the ministry said in a news release.

The government said it will provide money to allow the girls' families from Vancouver Island and the north to visit them at the Burnaby centre.

Dean Purdy, a spokesman for the B.C. Government and Services Employees Union, said the girls' rehabilitation efforts will be hampered because they won't be near their families while the government is trying to cut costs.

"For a government that's supposed to put `families first' they're now making families with young girls travel far distances from the north and the Island to visit their daughters in Burnaby," he said.

He said the closure of the girls' units will put 23 youth custody staff out of work over the next 90 days but the government provided no notice of the change in the midst of contract negotiations with the province.

"To blindside us with this while at the bargaining table is unacceptable and we think that with proper consultation this could have been achieved with attrition," Purdy said.

"This will also have an immediate impact on our sheriffs who have to transport kids further around the province when we already have an overburdened court system."

Steve Bayes, executive director of the of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver, said that while the centralized youth custody centre will be farther away for many families, it will promote the use of alternatives to custody.

Note to readers: This is a corrected story. An earlier version incorrectly reported that 23 sheriffs would be out of work.

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