

Inmate sick with virus; Prisoner at Okanagan Correctional Centre tests positive for novel coronavirus

Penticton Herald (Print Edition) · Joe Fries

CA|April 03, 2020·07:00am

Edition: Final · Section: News · Page: A1 / Front · Word count: 530

Photo credit: Herald File Photo

Photo caption: An inmate has tested positive for COVID-19 at the Okanagan Correctional Centre, located at the Osoyoos Indian Reserve, near Oliver.

An inmate at the Okanagan Correctional Centre has tested positive for COVID-19, officials confirmed Thursday, leading a Penticton lawyer to suggest it's time to consider releasing non-violent offenders.

Provincial health officer Dr.

Bonnie Henry during her regular briefing Thursday described the case at the 378-cell OCC as the second confirmed infection by community transmission, following an outbreak at Bylands Nurseries in West Kelowna earlier in the week.

BC Corrections said it learned of the inmate's test result late Wednesday.

"At the onset of symptoms, this individual was isolated under medical observation and tested. This person's symptoms were mild. No one else on this individual's unit is symptomatic at this time," BC Corrections said in a statement Thursday.

"Following provincial health guidelines, an investigation into direct contacts is now underway to identify anyone who may have had exposure to this individual, and appropriate measures will be taken as directed by public health officials."

BC Corrections has already implemented safety measures in response to the pandemic, including enhanced medical checks for new inmates, who are being isolated for 14 days before going into the general population.

Staff and contractors who have travelled outside Canada are now banned from entering jails, as are visitors, and other steps are being taken to maintain physical distancing during meals and group sessions.

BC Corrections has also reduced the provincial inmate population from 2,184 on March 15 to 1,860 as of April 1, but didn't say how it shed those prisoners.

The head of the union that represents provincial jail guards said she'll be pushing BC Corrections to maintain the safety measure and provide her members with personal protective equipment.

"We've actually been working (with BC Corrections) right from the beginning of the pandemic. We know that jails are particularly vulnerable, not dissimilar to longterm care homes, because

there are vulnerable populations within the jail system," said Stephanie Smith, president of the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union.

"Ideally we had hoped to put in enough (measures) to prevent a case from getting there. Now we have one, so we have to look at what is the outbreak protocol, what do we do to ensure it doesn't spread."

Smith said she wasn't aware of COVID-19 in any other B.C. jails.

James Pennington, a veteran Penticton defence lawyer, said he heard about the COVID-19 case at the OCC from a client on Thursday morning and supports early release for some prisoners.

"I think it is something they will need to consider simply out of sheer necessity. Most inmates are double-bunked, which makes physical distancing impossible," Pennington said in an email.

"Keeping the inmate population at current levels will turn the institutions into giant incubators endangering not only the inmates but also staff and their families and, of course, the greater communities — which includes you and I."