

Lock Talk



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Where is the Ombudsman now?

Union calls into question Ministry handling of riot

The ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services decision to not charge the inmates involved in the Sept. 8 riot at the Toronto Jail was a short-term fix that will have long term negative effects on every institution in the province.

With assaults on officers now reaching an average of two per day (the highest in Canada), the union fears this latest disturbance will not be the last in inmates feel they can riot without consequences.

“To promise inmates they won’t be charged to end a riot is absurd,” said Dan Sidsworth, chair of the Corrections MERC. “If police handled crime the same way, we’d have complete chaos in the streets.”

Riots in the Toronto Jail and Central East Correctional Centre are just the latest in a series of violent incidents that have been sweeping across the province. Niagara, Elgin-Middlesex, Sarnia and Thunder Bay Jail have all experienced what the Ministry calls “disturbances,” a weak attempt to categorize these incidents for what they really are: riots.

“When staff are hurt or threatened, when property is destroyed, when articles are set on fire, that’s a riot,” Sidsworth said. “The ministry can downplay it if they want, but it doesn’t change the facts: Incidents like these are increasing, they’re growing worse, and it’s inevitable that someone will be gravely injured or worse.”

Interestingly, the Ontario Ombudsman is staying silent so far. While quick to condemn correctional officers on any alleged wrongdoings, he is less inclined to speak out when inmates are out of control and the Ministry’s response borders on ludicrous. In the meantime, progress on factors that lead to these situations is almost non-existent.

“We continue to demand that the Ministry take real steps to address inmate overcrowding, understaffing and deteriorating conditions in our facilities,” Sidsworth said. “We also need the proper tools in place to either prevent these incidents from occurring, or lessening the violence if a riot does break out.”

The MERC and Provincial Health and Safety Committee has just recently signed an agreement that will allow officers to carry handcuffs and pepper foam while on duty, something the union has lobbied the Ministry on for past three years. This equipment will be gradually phased in across the province beginning in October.

“Officers on the front lines know that a reasonable and measured show of force will often prevent incidents from occurring in the first place,” said Warren (Smokey) Thomas, OPSEU President. “Also, inmates are less likely to act out if they know that repercussions in the form of charges and additional jail time could be the result. This is why the Ministry’s latest action or, more accurately, inaction does a disservice to

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every correctional officer and could endanger lives.”

The Corrections MERC continues to hold discussions with Ministry officials about the Toronto Jail situation, including a demand that front-line officers be involved in the investigation if a riot occurs.

“We know the job, we know what works, and we know what’s safe,” Thomas said. “It has only been due to the incredible work of our officers that has prevented deaths or serious injuries. We want to personally thank not only the officers at Niagara, EMDC, Sarnia, Thunder Bay, Central East and Toronto Jail, but every officer in every facility in Ontario for continuing to perform heroic work in often horrible conditions. You make a difference, and your union salutes you.”

Escort officer platoon approved at EMDC

The MERC and the Local 108 Executive have reached an agreement with the Ministry for a seven-member outside escort platoon at the Elgin-Middlesex Detention Centre.

Under the agreement, these positions will be additional complement to the extra positions agreed to previously. It is anticipated that the escort platoon will lessen overtime costs and reduce the incidents of understaffing when inmates are transported outside the institution.

There are already escort platoons in place at Central East Correctional Centre, Central North Correctional centre, Maplehurst Complex and Toronto West Detention Centre.

Filling vacancies moving forward in community corrections

The process for filling vacancies in Probation and Parole with lateral transfers and rollovers is moving forward as per the current Collective Agreement.

This process has been very successful on the institutional side of Corrections, and is now expanding to P&P.

Authorized for distribution:



Dan Sidsworth, MCSCS MERC Chair



Warren (Smokey) Thomas, President