



Press Release

Government Policies Threaten to Exacerbate Risk of COVID-19 in Correctional Centres

March 13th, 2020 (Ottawa ON) – Coronavirus has been declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), and threatens devastating effects on Canada's Federal and provincial prison system says Kim Beaudin, Nation Vice Chief, Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP).

According Health Minister Patty Hajdu, “30-70% of the Canadian population could be infected by Coronavirus... that number depends on the scope and the scale of the response to combat transmission”.

Issues such as over-crowding, charging inmates for soap and other personal hygiene products, and health issues resulting from nutritional deficiencies and lack of medical care risk creating a breeding ground for COVID-19 across Canada's prison system.

“A pandemic in federal and provincial prisons would have devastating repercussions to the health and the lives of prisoners and staff, in particular Indigenous inmates who are over-represented and isolated from their families and support networks” says Kim Beaudin, National Vice Chief of CAP.

The following recommendations are based on Public Health Agency of Canada^[1] advisories on COVID-19, and John Howard Society recommendations to reduce over-crowding^[2].

Under Bill C-81, the Minister of Public Safety has the discretion to release prisoners early for extenuating circumstances. CAP National Vice-Chief Kim Beaudin calls for Public Safety Minister Bill Blair, and all Provincial and Territorial corrections systems, to enact the following measures to ensure access to medical care, reduce overcrowding, and limit risks to inmates, staff and the public:

- Immediately reverse policies requiring prisoners to pay for their own soap and hygiene products while incarcerated.
- Address isolation and lack of support by initiating a communication strategy, at no cost to offenders, with the families of all individuals presently in the justice system. Ensure that families are notified immediately if a prisoner has contracted the coronavirus.
- The remand system has been identified as a major driver behind over-crowding in prisons^[3]. Federal and Provincial institutions should release non-violent detainees on remand to reduce the susceptible population, and limit the use of remand detention unless there is immediate danger to the public.

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[1] <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/being-prepared.html>

[2] <http://johnhoward.ca/blog/latest-data-shows-too-many-people-in-custodyproblems-in-jails-and-prisons/>

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- Limit bail conditions imposed by the Crown, in particular any that might interfere with the need for self-quarantine.
- Ensure that proper medical supplies such and hazmat suits, surgical masks, hand sanitizers and cleaning supplies are made available to all institutions.
- Create Coronavirus (COVID-19) kits consisting of basic essential supplies such as soap, medication and personal hygiene products.
- Have health officials on hand to implement diagnostic testing for inmates and staff.
- Release elderly prisoners who are immunocompromised, living with respiratory conditions, or living with other serious health conditions.
- Return Indigenous youth presently incarcerated in youth facilities back to their families.

Federal, Provincial, and Territorial institutions must take these steps, in order to address over-crowding, provide access to essential medical and hygiene products, and ensure the safety of inmates during this pandemic.

“Corrections institutions have been weak on the policy of contact with families, particularly indigenous families,” said Kim Beaudin. “These policies will help alleviate risks to those held within Canada’s archaic prison system, and give their loved ones peace of mind.”

“We need Correctional Services Canada to stop dehumanizing our people” said Vice-Chief Beaudin, “Governments should begin the process of releasing inmates based on humanitarian grounds if they are serious about Reconciliation, and preventing a wider pandemic.”

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The Congress of Aboriginal Peoples is the national voice representing the interests of Métis, status and non-status Indians, and Southern Inuit Indigenous People living off-reserve. Today, over 80% of Indigenous people live off-reserve.