



Press Release

Federal Leadership Missing in Action on COVID in Prisons

April 17, 2020 (Ottawa, ON) - Despite over a month of appeals from the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP) and other organizations for immediate action to address the threat of COVID-19 to the health and lives of prisoners in federal custody, the federal government continues to delay and defer responsibility. Families of inmates continue to fear for the safety of their loved ones and lack information and updates on their health and security.

While Public Safety Minister Blair asked prisons and parole boards to voluntarily examine risks to prisoners in March, the minister already has the authority to order Correction Services Canada to immediately begin reviewing cases and releasing prisoners under extenuating circumstances. Parliament was already aware of over-representation of Indigenous people in prisons when the Corrections and Conditional Release Act was passed, which gave the minister this authority. Failure to exercise existing authority causes delays and inaction, despite time being a factor.

CAP has heard eyewitness testimony from inmates regarding conditions in prisons, describing failures to follow social distancing protocols, lack of sanitary products, and abuse and threats against inmates. Measures being employed include long-term solitary confinement, classified as “torture” by the United Nations.

Provinces have begun to examine the issue of over-crowding and threats to the lives of inmates, as in the case of Derrick Snow in Ontario appealing for early release due to chronic health issues and the threat of exposure to infection. These measures are too late, however, for inmates across Canada who have already contracted the virus, with deaths already reported and many more at risk.

“An inconsistent, province-by-province approach without federal leadership threatens to move slowly and exacerbate inequalities among prisoners and across jurisdictions” said CAP National Chief Robert Bertrand. “Canada needs a federal government that can exercise leadership on this issue and ensure health, safety and human rights are respected.”

CAP continues to call for immediate steps to address overcrowding and unsanitary conditions in federal prisons, and to immediately release low-risk and non-violent offenders, those close to the end of sentences and those with serious chronic health conditions.

“We need federal leadership and federal resources to make sure cases can be reviewed consistently across the prison system as a whole, and make sure inmates and their families are treated fairly across the country” said CAP National Vice-Chief Kim Beaudin. “We are behind the curve in addressing the risk to prisoners, and we don’t have any more time to waste.”

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