

Former OCDC inmates launching lawsuit over 'degrading treatment'

Two former inmates at the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre are planning to sue the province over poor conditions at the jail, including overcrowding, indefinite segregation, spoiled food and frequent lockdowns prompted by staff shortages.

Their lawyer, Paul Champ, is inviting other current and former inmates to join the class-action lawsuit over persistent problems at the jail.

"It's really just a dismal existence," Champ said on CBC's *Ottawa Morning*.

Conditions were already under scrutiny when the fact that inmates at the overcrowded jail were sleeping in shower stalls was revealed this spring.

Community Safety and Correctional Services Minister Yasir Naqvi responded by launching a task force to come up with a plan to deal with overcrowding, as well as health and safety concerns at the jail, by June 1. The jail's superintendent was also replaced.

In April, 71 OCDC inmates were transferred to correctional facilities hundreds of kilometres away to alleviate overcrowding but the move also prompted concerns that cases would be delayed as inmates would have limited access to their lawyers in Ottawa.

'Completely intolerable and unacceptable'

Champ said inmates who have endured the poor conditions deserve compensation because the province neglected its jails for "over a decade." He added that 65 per cent of the inmates at the OCDC have not been convicted of a crime, and are either being held on a pre-trial remand or are immigration detainees.

Eight-by-10-foot cells designed for one person are instead sleeping three, a practice known as "triple bunking," with one inmate forced to spend the night on the floor, Champ said.

"When those kinds of conditions become normalized, when triple bunking is happening every day, when people are sleeping beside a toilet every day — we think that's completely intolerable and unacceptable, and I think the courts will agree that that is cruel and degrading treatment," he said.

Broken showers can leave inmates without an opportunity to bathe for days or even weeks at a time, he said.

"The maintenance standards there are ridiculous. The plumbing isn't working. It's cold in winter," he said.

"Basically, the province has been saving money on the backs of prisoners. They have been cramming people into that facility and maybe there are short-term saving there for the province but I think they're really overlooking the long-term human costs."

A spokesman for the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services denied a request for an interview about the Ottawa jail.

"It would be inappropriate to comment on this matter at this time," Andrew Morrison wrote in an email.

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