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Rights Groups React to Prisoner Death in Custody; Call for Public Inquest and Immediate Release of Prisoners to Stop Dangerous Spread of COVID-19

UNION OF BRITISH COLUMBIA INDIAN CHIEFS,
JOINT EFFORT, BC CIVIL LIBERTIES ASSOCIATION

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<https://bccla.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Press-Release-COVID-death-in-corrections-April-2020-Final.pdf>

Prisoner rights, human rights, Indigenous and civil liberties groups are reacting to the horrific news of a death in Correctional Service of Canada's custody of a person incarcerated at Mission Institution in BC. Mission Institution is the site of the largest COVID-19 outbreak at a federal institution in the country.

This death is the first reported COVID-related death of a federal inmate. A prisoner transferred from Mission Institution now serving time in Atlantic Canada knew the prisoner who died in custody. In his words, "We were good friends and I knew he was in the hospital. That could be me next."

According to Joint Effort, a community group working with women prisoners in the Lower Mainland: "We are devastated by the death in custody of a prisoner at Mission Institution. People who are incarcerated are people who we are connected to, whose dignity, livelihood and survival are in peril because of systemic inaction. We have been urgently appealing to elected and appointed government officials to release prisoners and people awaiting hearings. We warned them that their inaction would led to an exponential growth in COVID-19 infections endangering the most vulnerable, especially prisoners who are over fifty years old, pregnant, immunocompromised, sick or have pre-existing conditions that make them high risk for dying from COVID-19."

The groups are calling for an immediate inquest, as authorized by the *Coroner's Act*. Says Harsha Walia, Executive Director of B.C. Civil Liberties Association: "BC's chief coroner and BC's Solicitor General must direct an inquest into this tragic and preventable death. Amidst a global pandemic and growing concerns about the public health of people held in prisons and jails, an inquest is absolutely in the public interest and is necessary to ensure that similar deaths can be prevented. The Parole Board of Canada, Correctional Service of Canada, and provincial and federal governments must use every appropriate legal mechanism to expeditiously and compassionately release as many incarcerated people as possible and prevent further deaths in custody."

Brandon Gabriel, a member of the Kwantlen First Nation and support worker who has worked with formerly incarcerated people in addiction treatment facilities, states: "Our Indigenous communities are unfairly and disproportionately represented in the corrections system because of an ongoing colonial history. All prisoners are undergoing such duress during the COVID-19 pandemic. So much so, that the passing of a prisoner in our unceded territory has now occurred. This is unacceptable. All humans deserve basic dignity, health, and sanitation during this unprecedented health crisis."

According to Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, President of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs: "The passivity of the Government of Canada as COVID-19 spreads through federal prison populations has been an alarming display of inhumanity, and one with lethal consequences. As we mourn the death of the first inmate from COVID-19 in the Mission Institution, we demand urgent action to prevent further suffering. A staggering one-third of the inmates in federal custody are Indigenous. We demand an immediate and proactive response from Canada to stem the spread of COVID-19 in the federal prison system; anything less would be a continuation of colonial violence against Indigenous peoples who are disproportionately bearing the weight of this virus inside prisons."

"Flattening the curve of COVID-19 must include correctional facilities. All levels of government need an immediate plan to reduce the number of people in prisons and jails, and they must ensure every prisoner is able to access income assistance and social supports immediately upon release. For those who remain imprisoned, there must be full access to extended healthcare, harm reduction supplies, and hygiene necessities. We are gravely concerned that solitary confinement and lockdown are being relied on as purported health measures. With physical visitations being cancelled, family members and volunteer groups must be able to

maintain contact through phones and online platforms,” further states Joint Effort.

El Jones, a member of the national Abolition Coalition and scholar at Saint Mary’s University, has been part of a cross-country campaign calling on the federal government to act on releasing prisoners. Two weeks ago media outlets reported that federal Minister of Public Safety Bill Blair asked Correctional Service of Canada and the Parole Board of Canada to put together a plan to release federal prisoners for consideration.

“Today, tragically, the hands of our government have blood on them. This death was preventable if our governments, Correctional Services, and the Parole Board had acted in time to release prisoners. There is no death sentence in Canada. Pandemic is not punishment. Incarcerating people during COVID-19 is a human rights disaster that has now led to the death of one man, while infections grow in prisons across the country. We remind the public that prisons are never safe, and that incarceration at this time puts the health of all our communities at risk. If Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will not open the doors for eligible prisoners, more people will leave the prison in body bags,” states Jones.

The above statements represent the views of each organization.

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