

An Open Letter to the Minister of Justice, NWT

From the Inmates of NSCC

Oct 7, 2017

Last month, the inmates of Beffin Correctional Center in Nunavut started a riot. They destroyed the brand-new facility in an attempt to get their grievances heard by their Minister of Justice. Lack of programs, gang violence, overcrowding and excessive time in solitary confinement were some of their major concerns.

At the North Slave Correctional Center (NSCC) in Yellowknife, we have our own set of issues, but we have decided to go about changing things with a letter-writing campaign. By the time this letter is published, ~~over~~^{nearly} 100 personally-written letters of grievance have been written to our individual MLAs, and we expect each Member to read them and forward these letters on to our Minister of Justice, Louis Sebet.

We understand that Mr Sebet has recently lost the confidence of the MLAs. We have also lost

confidence in him, as well as the new Director of Corrections, Bob Riches. We understand that Director Riches^{who}₃₇₁ held the same position in the Yukon, made a number of negative changes in the prison system there that are now being dismantled. We the inmates of NSCC have put together a number of recommendations to improve the state of affairs in our prison.

But first of all, why should you care? Why not just lock us up and throw away the key? Why make any effort to rehabilitate us?

Anyone involved in criminal law in the NWT will know that there is a revolving door for most ex-cons; the courts and jails see the same individuals over and over again. The NSCC alone costs the territory about \$15 Million a year, and clearly the system is not working.

Although there are some hardened criminals inside that are just waiting to get out and re-offend,

most inmates yearn for a better life, and desperately want to be clean and sober, and live productive lives. But most of the men here are up against huge barriers - many have grown up in broken homes, surrounded by drugs and alcohol from an early age. Many here have not completed High School, and some are functionally illiterate. Many struggle with abusive partners and serious drug and alcohol dependencies, and PTSD is a common issue. And all of us have to find ways to live and work on the outside with a criminal record.

In NSCC, the inmates are generally peaceful and content, and there is one shared television for each pod of 40 men, and a small library of books. But most inmates are still frustrated, because there are very

few opportunities to improve our lives on the inside. This is why we're writing to our MLAs and the Justice Minister. We have first-hand knowledge of how ineffectual this prison system is; it's just a warehouse for people to bide their time, so when inmates are released, they have learned virtually nothing. They are almost guaranteed to fail and re-offend - often because they get right back into their addictions or abusive relationship. Or they fail to comply with a condition of release. Or they go back to stealing or dealing drugs because they can't get a legitimate job with a criminal record. Or they can't get a job without a High School diploma.

During the last few months, we have noticed a number of cost-cutting measures here, as

a result of Director Riches' new policies of eliminating programs for inmates. We have lost a number of support programs, our recreation officer position has been cut, and we are forbidden to use the large outdoor fenced-in area, which was just built two years ago at great expense. The NSCC makes a profit by charging inmates 12¢/minute for phone calls, which means that some men cannot afford to call home. The only opportunity to make a small amount of money (just \$1/hour) is available to a few men in the kitchen and laundry.

No education is offered here. No textbooks has been provided, no courses available. Inmates who have requested to challenge an exam have been denied. And there is no law library, which is against our constitutional rights.

The Arts and Crafts room has recently been dismantled, and art materials limited to beading only, so inmates have a much harder time making Christmas presents for their children, or learning traditional crafts. Unlike most prisons in Canada, Aboriginal activities such as a drum circle or a sweat lodge are not available.

In a prison that is filled with 80% Aboriginal men, there are only a couple Native staff members. The staff is also overworked, so inmates don't get the care and attention they need. There are only 4 case workers to serve as many as 160 inmates at a time, and people wait for months to get their first consultation with a psychiatrist.

So, what is the solution? Clearly, harsh sentences, long remand times and the elimination

of self-improvement programs are not working. Going to an American-~~to~~ style, dollar-based, minimum sentence model is definitely not the way to go: just look at the huge numbers of convicts in the States, and you'll see that type of system is extremely counter-productive.

One only has to study the prison system in Sweden to see a working model. There, the Justice system is designed to reform criminals and reintegrate them into society. Their recidivism rate is around one third of the re-offending rate in the NWT, and they are seeing a decline in prison population every year.

It's time for change. Most inmates want to contribute to a better life for ourselves,

our families, and our communities. We will work with you to make that happen.

Give us a chance.