



**RIVER RIDGE YOUNG OFFENDER FACILITY**  
**FORT SMITH, NWT**

**REASONS FOR REPORT:**

In March and April of 1993 a number of questions were asked of the Minister of Justice as to the proposed change to triple designation of the River Ridge facility. The change saw the facility switch from a secure custody facility to one holding secure, open and remanded young offenders.

Concerns were expressed that the redesignation may fly in the face of the legislation and the Minister was asked for reassurance that steps would be taken to review or modify current security procedures so as to allow the institution to handle all types of offenders. Concern was also voiced as to the ability of staff to treat different classifications of young offenders differently.

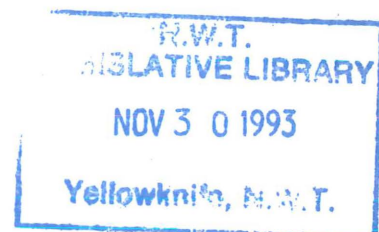
Due to controversy generated by the change and concern expressed by some members of the public, the Minister was asked to provide a written status report on the facility.

**RATIONALE FOR CHANGE:**

In April 1993, both Hay River Secure Custody Facility and River Ridge Secure Custody Facility, were operating at fifty percent of their capacities. Between the two of them, only twelve to fourteen young offenders were housed. The system was faced with trying to place more open custody young offenders than secure custody offenders but the restriction on designations made it next to impossible. With extra bed space and budgetary restraints on its hands the government made the best possible use of existing resources. On April 05, 1993 River Ridge Secure Facility commenced operating as an open custody facility and all secure custody young offenders were housed at Hay River Secure Facility.

**REACTION TO CHANGE:**

The initial feeling of River Ridge staff to the change was that the two year old facility, designed and constructed in 1990 as a place for offenders sentenced to secure custody, did not lend itself to open custody. Staff had gone through extensive training exercises concentrating on methods of dealing with secure custody offenders. Staff argued that they had been given no training in dealing with all three types of custodial charges at one time in one facility and were not prepared for the change.



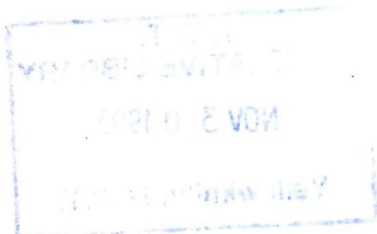
To help ease concerns, a number of meetings were held with River Ridge and headquarters staff to discuss the new set up. To further help the staff adjust, River Ridge's Manager, Program Coordinator and a Child Care Worker were sent to the Strathmore Young Offender facility in Alberta to see first hand a triple designated facility in operation. It was a good experience. Staff were introduced to the methods of operation of a primarily open custody facility and learned that in some areas Strathmore was stricter in its operating procedure than was River Ridge. Strathmore staff made River Ridge staff realize just what could be accomplished with the open custody designation. River Ridge staff drew upon Strathmore's operating policies,(as well as Ontario's open custody policies and other NWT open custody policies) as useful reference materials. These policies were reviewed by River Ridge staff in helping to redirect the facility off a route which was strictly secure to one which was multi-custody oriented.

Consequently, River Ridge staff returned with a more positive attitude and a better understanding of how to best provide young offenders in a multi custody setting with effective programs reflecting a diversity of needs. Staff agreed to attempt to provide suitable programs for remanded open and secure custody sentenced youths. Before long most youth workers had adjusted to dealing with predominantly open custody youths.

#### **OPEN AND SECURE DESIGNATIONS:**

Federal legislation defines open and secure custody as those places so designated by the Lieutenant Governor in Council. These definitions are not restrictive. In Re F and The Queen et al. (1984), 16 CCC (3d) 258, it was held that a particular cottage in a youth centre may be validly designated as a place of open custody, even if entrance to and egress from the centre itself is controlled by double locking doors, which are electronically controlled. The definition of open custody includes "any other like place or facility" and secure custody means custody, as designated, for the secure containment or restraint of young persons and includes a place or facility within a class of such places or facilities so designated. The territorial legislation, as well, provides leeway for custodial placement. While the definition of open custody provides for a number of different places which may be included the definition is not limited to those places.

Typically, those youths found guilty of committing fairly serious indictable offenses, most often the repeat offenders, receive secure custody sentences while those youths without lengthy criminal records who commit minor offenses receive open custody. With the redesignation staff were ready to adjust their approach accordingly. But, since the change to the triple designation, staff have seen absolutely no difference between those youths who are at the facility under a disposition of open custody and those in under secure custody dispositions. Most recently, in fact, some youths completing open custody dispositions proved to be more dangerous to others in and outside the facility than those youths serving secure dispositions.



From an operational standpoint the difference between open or secure custody is in the area of programming and the level of supervision and security which is provided. Secure custody programming focuses more on supervision and tighter security. Open custody programming concentrates more on what happens with and for young offenders outside the facility. The change at River Ridge has emphasized community involvement; there are Temporary Releases for such things as attending the local school, Arctic College (Trades Program) work release and community work. The increased exposure to the community has meant that the open custody youths are out in the community much more frequently.

Practically, the lines of delineation between open and secure are not that easily drawn. The open or secure "label" does not characterize a young person, nor does a building itself rehabilitate. River Ridge staff believe that young offenders cannot be categorized by the type of custody they serve but must be treated on an individual basis. And it is this idea that young offender facilities are trying to foster.

Each correctional facility in the Northwest Territories operates on an Individualized Program Planning process. Each person given a disposition or sentence is assessed on his or her own basis, and a specific program is designed to meet the needs that the individual presents. For these reasons, the switch to a triple designation facility has not seen staff treating different categories of offenders differently but instead taking each case individually. Youths are not labelled according to the sentence they are serving and the crime they have committed. Staff believe that change in a youth is brought about by himself with the assistance of careful programming by staff. This belief reinforces the desired goal of individualized programming and avoids pigeonholing offenders as a result of specific sentences.

#### **STRUCTURAL CHANGES/SECURITY:**

The change to triple designation at River Ridge has not compromised safety or security for either the offender or the public. Despite the redesignation, few physical changes have been made in the building to adjust to the new accommodation. With the open custody youths in the facility more doors are now left unlocked. Young offenders now enjoy more movement and less supervision inside the facility. There are still some restricted areas which remain out of bounds to the offenders, such as offices and staff rooms. There is also an isolation room which is rarely used but is imperative to both open and secure settings for use in emergencies. Searches are still done at random but are not as frequent as they were before the change.

Security is still in evidence despite the switch and, much to the chagrin of many of the open and secure residents the facility rules and regulations have remained pretty much the same as before. Staff use firm and fair measures and residents have to earn their privileges and prove that they can handle them in a mature manner. Immediately after the transfer from secure to triple designation, many open custody residents complained about the strictness

and sameness of River Ridge. In their opinion, they were still in a secure environment despite the open doors. However, they gradually discovered that hard work would bring them increased privileges.

At present, staff seldom hear complaints from the residents. The youths find it a privilege to have their own rooms at River Ridge as opposed to sharing dorms as is presently the case in the Hay River Secure Young Offender facility. Residents with open custody dispositions know that mature, responsible behaviour and performance warrants unescorted reintegration in the community on a Temporary Absence basis which usually implies attending school, holding a part time job and making visits to relatives and friends.

#### **RIVER RIDGE FACILITY AND HAY RIVER SECURE:**

River Ridge staff maintain that, in practice, their facility lends itself better to a secure environment than to an open one. Their feeling is that perhaps the Hay River facility is really the more appropriate setting for open custody programming. Not only does it have more beds than River Ridge but it supports a much more open environment than River Ridge. Hay River now has a Psychologist at the facility and the treatment facility on the reserve which could be used as part of the programming for the parents of the young offenders who have alcohol problems. Family counselling could then take place with both young offender and parents.

River Ridge is equipped with the tools necessary to assist the secure custody residents. It can provide good individualized program planning suitable for secure custody; the correctional psychologist can provide counselling to the residents and advice to staff. The building itself is designed to accommodate secure custody offenders. And, finally, River Ridge staff have advised that if they had to revert to a secure setting again, they could do so and could safely accommodate fourteen secure sentenced youths.

While one facility is better equipped to handle some offenders than others the fact remains that both Hay River and River Ridge can accommodate all types of youth. A triple designation for each facility allows each facility to meet the needs of each young offender.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The experiences of River Ridge staff since the 5th of April, 1993 have been positive. Staff have proven not only that the triple designation can work but that it is a better method of dealing with youths sentenced to different types of custody. Staff have proven competent in providing a therapeutic milieu and individualized programming for open custody sentenced youths. Staff are now more flexible than in the past and can handle all three types of sentenced youth equally as well. They can "flip-flop" back and forth between the open and secure designations and feel confident doing so. Most workers are challenged by and feel comfortable having a variety of youths with different needs; they are comfortable with this setting. Those staff who travelled to the Strathmore facility in Alberta concluded that the difference between open and secure custody in the same facility can in many ways be subtle but definitely manageable.

Furthermore, the designation now in place follows more closely the intent of the Declaration of Principle of the Young Offenders Act, NWT which looks for a balance between a number of different factors; between ensuring young offenders who have committed crimes bear responsibility for that transgression; the protection of society; the special needs of offenders, despite their need for discipline; rights and freedoms of young offenders which interfere as little as possible with their freedom; and finally the responsibility which parents have for their children. How better to accommodate these than in a facility which can cater to different types of custodial sentences and the different types of youth serving them.

There is no further intent to revert young offender facilities to either secure or open and in future they will all have the triple designation. The enhanced programming for young offenders and the remarkable success revealed by the triple designation of the River Ridge facility underscores that intent.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. The designation of these three facilities will stay as they are, triple designated to accommodate secure, open and remand.
2. Both River Ridge and Hay River Secure are capable of functioning as triple designated operations but Hay River will operate with more emphasis on open custody with ability to take overflow from River Ridge. River Ridge will emphasize secure custody dispositions.
3. If River Ridge encounters a high number of secure young offenders, the overflow could be transferred to Iqaluit or Hay River. The latter would be used during the final portion of the young offender's disposition when the young offender has proven to be a lower security risk.
4. It will be mandatory that all young offenders in secure custody have their dispositions reviewed internally on a more frequent basis in order to assist judicial review and subsequent transfer to open custody.









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