

## NEWS LOCAL

# Union head says giving prisoners needles 'ridiculous'



By Elliot Ferguson, Kingston Whig-Standard  
Friday, January 20, 2017 8:28:32 EST PM



Jason Godin is president of the union for correctional service officers with Correctional Service Canada. Steph Crosier/Postmedia Network

The president of the union for correctional service officers agrees with Correctional Service Canada management that giving clean drug-injection needles to inmates will make institutions more dangerous.

Jason Godin, president of the Canadian Union of Correctional officers, was reacting to news this week that the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network is helping lead a constitutional challenge of the correctional service's refusal to provide clean needles to inmates.

"These people don't have any understanding of what our community is like behind the walls," Godin said in a telephone interview this week.

"A needle exchange in the community is a completely different reality than a needle exchange inside a federal institution."

Godin's union represents 7,500 members across Canada and approximately 1,000 in the Ontario region, the majority of those at prisons in the Kingston area.

He said introducing needles to an institution is dangerous for inmates and staff. Godin said there have been many situations in Canadian institutions where needles have been used to threaten staff.

Godin recalled an incident a few years ago at the now-closed Kingston Penitentiary where inmates dragged an officer into the shower and attempted to stab him with a needle.

"Unfortunately, these people are completely out of touch with reality," Godin said of the HIV/AIDS Legal Network.

Needles are also considered contraband inside an institution, which increases their value, Godin said.

"Which makes it even more dangerous."

Godin cited a CSC policy that has more than 15 harm-reduction measures implemented by CSC Health Care over the last few years, but the rates of infectious diseases behind bars continue to rise, he said.

Some of the initiatives include intake and annual inmate screening, post-exposure protocol, having access to HIV and hepatitis C specialists, using bleach, condoms, dental dams, having peer education counsellors at all CSC sites, and a methadone program including substance abuse counselling.

Godin said there's not one documented case in Canada where an inmate has contracted HIV inside the walls, but infectious disease rates still go up.

"Despite Correctional Service Canada having 17 initiatives in place, it's clearly not working," Godin said. "Another initiative like needle exchange is not going to cut the rates of infectious diseases inside of our institutions. It's ridiculous."

Richard Elliott, the legal network's executive director, says the prison service's stance makes no sense since inmates already have makeshift injection equipment made from contraband items.

"What Mr. Elliot is proposing is more dangerous for inmates and staff, and that's the part he doesn't understand," Godin said.

The network, several other advocacy groups and former prisoner Steven Simons are asking the court to rule the current federal policy on needles violates Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees to life, liberty and security of the person.

Simons said he was infected with the hepatitis C virus and exposed to the risk of HIV infection as a result of a general lack of access to sterile needles, as well as another prisoner using his injection equipment.

But the office of the correctional investigator disagrees with CSC management and the union's stance on the needle exchange program.

In his 2015-16 report released late last year, outgoing correctional investigator Howard Sapers called for a pilot project on needle exchanges and safe tattoo parlours behind prison walls.

"Evidence has shown that, similar to those in community based settings, prison-based needle exchange programs have proven effective in reducing the spread of infectious blood-borne diseases that arise through needle sharing, increasing the referrals to drug treatment programs and reducing the need for health interventions related to overdose incidents," Sapers wrote.

According to the report, Switzerland was the first country to introduce a prison needle exchange program in 1992.

CSC has been studying the issue on and off since 1994. A pilot project was introduced in 2005 for safe tattoo suites at six federal institutions but was scrapped a year later.

Godin said inmates shouldn't be trusted and they would abuse a needle exchange program.

"There's certain inmates just not changing their behaviour and that's just the way it is," he said.

He added injecting drugs by needle is on the decline in Canadian prisons.

"Obviously, there's these new wonderful drugs like fentanyl. That seems to be our biggest problem," he said.

"The last thing we need the HIV/AIDS society to be doing is introducing a potential weapon and a potential underground trading tool inside of our institutions.

"Quite frankly, they have no business in our business."

-- with files from Canadian Press

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