

# PTSD high among prison workers, union says



*BETTY ANN ADAM, SASKATOON STARPHOENIX*

[More from Betty Ann Adam, Saskatoon StarPhoenix](http://thestarphoenix.com/author/betty-ann-adam) ([HTTP://THESTARPHOENIX.COM/AUTHOR/BETTY-ANN-ADAM](http://thestarphoenix.com/author/betty-ann-adam))

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For workers in Canadian prisons, seeing inmates injure themselves and others, or being attacked themselves, is part of the job — but it can take a high toll on their mental health.

“When you see something, such as self injurious behaviour, your job is to stop that and help make it a safe environment. The stress of watching somebody try and injure themselves and reacting to that continually is immeasurable,” said James Bloomfield, Prairies Regional President with the Union of Canadian Corrections Officers (UCCO).

It’s been about a quarter of a century since an Ontario study found that 17 per cent of corrections workers suffer symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) during their careers. Since then, informal surveys by the UCCO have indicated rates as high as 24 per cent, Bloomfield said.

“It’s one of the highest levels of PTSD in occupations.”

He said stress is especially great in five treatment facilities across the country, including the Regional Psychiatric Centre in Saskatoon, where offenders with “complex mental health needs” are brought from penitentiaries.

According to Dr. Kelley Blanchette, Director General of the mental health branch of Correctional Service Canada (CSC), complex cases include those with overlapping needs, such as major mental illness, personality disorder, cognitive impairment, learning disorders, substance abuse, or

combinations of any of those. Aggression is often layered on top of that, she said.

Such inmates would include Marlene Carter, who was recently returned to RPC from a forensic psychiatric hospital in Brockville, Ont.

Carter, who has severe mental illness and brain injury from habitually banging her head on hard surfaces, has been charged many times for assaulting staff. Her lawyer argued last year that she was not criminally responsible for stabbing a nurse in the neck with a pen while she was in Brockville.

Workers say gradual cuts in professional staff over the years have added to the stress.

Debi Daviau, president of the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada, said in an email that "CSC has streamlined health care and cut the number of nurses, psychiatrists, and psychologists to the point where staff who do not have training in mental health are placed in situations that could be dangerous, both for themselves and the individuals in their care."

"RPC nurses indicate that the number of nurses and staff are not always increased when these high needs individuals are brought in and thus the staff, that is already stretched, is further stretched," Daviau wrote.

CSC has implemented a national mental health model to ensure inmates receive the most appropriate level of care when they need it, spokeswoman Stephanie Stevenson wrote in an email.

The RPC is an accredited psychiatric facility equipped to treat and manage inmates with complex mental health needs, and staff are licensed and regulated by their provincial college, she wrote.

Bloomfield said tension rises throughout an institution when the highest-need inmates are housed there; other units often must make do with fewer workers when critical incidents call them away, and more sick days are used.

Workers know psychiatric patients are ill, but that doesn't make the anxiety easier to deal with, he said.

“We always feel we could use more staff.”

CSC has specialized funds available to help institutions treat and manage inmates with extremely complex needs, Blanchette said. It can be used for things like overtime staff training, extra nurses to provide one-on-one observation, therapists, or specialized assessments by an external expert.

Institutions can rotate staff assignments so workers get a break from working with complex needs cases. Managers are also permitted to substitute another worker if a concern is raised by a particular worker, Blanchette said.

CSC has a critical incidents and stress management program and an employee assistance program that provides free counselling to employees and their families.

CSC officials are “assessing PTSD as a research priority,” said Nathalie Dufresne-Meek, acting director general for the Executive Secretariat of CSC.

“That topic of discussion is happening among my colleagues and certainly I would say among the highest level of the organization. We take PTSD seriously,” she said.

CSC has recently begun rolling out a PTSD program developed by the Department of Defence. The Road to Mental Readiness is designed to reduce stigma in the workplace and address mental health and resiliency, Blanchette said.

All CSC staff will be trained in it. Sessions have already been held at some Saskatchewan institutions, Dufresne-Meek said.

“Commissioner of Corrections Don Head has stated that it’s an absolute priority for CSC to have staff and management equipped with the tools that we need to manage our own mental health, and of course that includes, first and foremost, our front line staff,” Blanchette said.

[badam@postmedia.com](mailto:badam@postmedia.com)

[Twitter.com/SPBAAdam](https://twitter.com/SPBAAdam)