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NEWS - Calgary

Prisons across Prairies see 'huge spike' in fentanyl overdoses, several officers exposed

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Today at 12:45 AM

*(Photo supplied/ALERT)*

Correctional officers at the Bowden Institution rushed to the aid of one of their peers this week after a guard collapsed due to suspected fentanyl exposure.

James Bloomfield, regional president of the Union of Canadian Correctional Officers, said staff at the medium-security facility immediately applied first aid and administered naloxone, a medication used to reverse the effects of opioids. The officer had been in the process of conducting a search for suspected drugs in the institution.

"The officers that responded to this situation — they really did save this officer's life," said Bloomfield.

He added that while tests have not confirmed if the drug the officer was exposed to was fentanyl, correctional officers in Alberta have recently been dealing with the toxic opioid, through both inmate overdoses and exposure of guards to the drug.

The union representative said there has been at least one other case of an officer being exposed to suspected fentanyl in the Bowden Institution, and about four cases across correctional facilities in the Prairies region, which includes Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

Correctional officers also saw a "huge spike" during the summer in overdoses among inmates at the Drumheller and Bowden institutions, with many of them related to fentanyl. In a matter of two weeks during the summer at the Drumheller Institution, there were 21 inmate overdoses, said Bloomfield.

"Throughout the region . . . I can't even tell you how many overdoses we have come across and saved lives," said Bloomfield.

"We're having the same issues as the street does with fentanyl inside. So we're having reactions, we're having a lot of overdoses."

On Tuesday, the Bowden Institution announced that a lockdown was in effect to allow staff to conduct an "exceptional search."

Bloomfield said the institution is currently under an "adjusted routine" due to the incident involving the officer.

"We are currently under a searching protocol at the institution and trying to ensure we don't have any further drugs that we're going to be coming across, so we're taking all precautions necessary in that searching and just working our best through a tough situation," he said.

The officer who collapsed Tuesday was taken to hospital and is now recovering well at home.

Bloomfield noted the correctional facilities have various drug interdiction and searching strategies in an effort to keep the institutions drug free.

However, despite those efforts, there are "so many different ways to bring drugs into an institution," he said.

"It comes in everywhere — through visits, through getting thrown over the fences, to drone drops. Everything and anything you can imagine — when someone sits inside for 24/7 and tries to figure out how they're going to get their next hit, they come up with some pretty creative ways to bring stuff in."

Correctional Service Canada has various programs to treat addictions among inmates, including a methadone program, he added.

A spokesperson from Correctional Service Canada was not available to comment Wednesday.