

April 2023

# Minister's Brief

## Peace River Corrections Centre Releasing Inmates Into Homelessness in Downtown Peace River and the consequential impacts



TOWN OF  
PEACE RIVER  
ALBERTA

# Issue: Peace River Corrections Centre releasing inmates into homelessness in downtown Peace River and the consequential impacts

April 21, 2023

## Summary

Inmates remanded into custody at the Peace River Corrections Centre (PRCC) are being released without transportation home; they are therefore being transported by corrections staff to downtown Peace River, where they are dropped off.

The frequency of these instances, and the number of inmates being released into homelessness in downtown Peace River, is increasing at an alarming rate — in part because of increased numbers of remand cases, bail reforms, PRCC staffing shortages, and government policies.

Immediate action by the GOA's Ministry is needed to address this distressing issue, and to ease the social and economic burdens being disproportionately placed on our businesses and residents, as the number of inmates PRCC knowingly releases into homelessness in the Town of Peace River's downtown core continues to rise.

*Town Council respectfully requests that an interim directive be issued, mandating that all PRCC inmates being released without a means of transportation through family or friend, be escorted home or to a city where social services and supports are available, as was the protocol throughout COVID-19; and further, that the October 2022 directive no longer allowing PRCC to hold an inmate for 24 hours following release (the time required to arrange for inmate escort) be temporarily rescinded.*

## Background

- PRCC is Alberta's most northerly correctional centre, operating as a correctional and remand facility, and accommodating adult males serving a sentence or remanded into custody.
- Though PRCC has a capacity for 263 inmates, it currently operates below capacity.
- PRCC is located 486km from Edmonton and 198km from Grande Prairie, based on driving distance.
- Currently, one bus operates per day, departing at 07:30h from the Town of Peace River for the City of Edmonton.
- Inmates originate from communities throughout the province.
- Between 75% and 80% of PRCC inmates are under remand, and 20% to 25% are serving a sentence.



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## PRCC Release Protocols

**Sentenced inmates** have planned release dates, and are given access to support services while being incarcerated and following release. Planned release dates enable a scheduled transfer from PRCC to a facility closer to home, or to a major city, by Alberta Sheriffs while still in custody. Sheriffs are restricted to transporting inmates only while in custody, as regulated by the province.

**Remand inmates** have unknown release dates, and because of this uncertainty, they are not provided access to any support services during custody or following their release. Release is at the will and time of the courts, often without notice, leaving staff unable to schedule a transfer from PRCC by Sheriffs prior to release. If not picked up from PRCC at the time of release, and in instances in which corrections staff are unable to provide escort, released inmates are dropped off in downtown Peace River.

Currently, there is no legislated requirement for correctional or remand facilities to provide transportation to inmates upon release. Inmates are released with the clothes and belongings they had in their possession on entry into remand. This means that if they had no cash in their pockets upon arrest, they have no cash in their pockets upon release. The same holds true for clothing.

*Between February 10, 2023 and April 8, 2023, release statistics provided by PRCC show that 127 inmates were released. Of those releases, 89 were unplanned. These unplanned releases have had damaging effects on the Town of Peace River, with 47 inmates released into homelessness in our downtown core over the span of just 57 days.*

Aware of the overwhelming impact on the Town of Peace River, PRCC staff have begun collecting release stats to quantify the volume of inmates being released in town. Should this practice continue, based on the current trend of 47 inmates being released into town over 57 days:

- 300 inmates or more will likely be released into homelessness in downtown Peace River each year — equivalent to 4.38% of our population.
- These figures are projected to increase should PRCC inmate levels increase to full facility capacity.



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## Community Impact

- Nearly all downtown businesses have been harmed financially and emotionally from the significant increase in nuisance or criminal activity taking place in direct correlation to inmates being released into downtown Peace River. Such activity includes breaking and entering, theft, loitering, vandalism, trespassing, petty theft, and ongoing intimidation of staff and customers.
- RCMP are spending exorbitant hours responding to calls for service in the downtown core, often involving the same individuals, multiple times per day.
- Demonstrations of inappropriate behaviour; business entrances being blocked by persons who are unconscious (passed out); disrupting gatherings; and intimidating actions or outbursts on our downtown streets have become commonplace.
- The downtown core no longer feels safe.

Recognizing that these problems are not necessarily solely driven by the release of inmates, there is an undeniable increase in crime and homelessness that appears to be correlated to PRCC (post-COVID) release practices, through which inmates are no longer escorted home, but rather transported to the Town of Peace River's downtown core. Unplanned releases into the community are not new; however, this practice has only recently become detrimental to the community, largely for a number of key reasons:

**1. *Post-COVID release protocols.*** Throughout the pandemic, released inmates were given escorted transport from PRCC. In October 2022, PRCC staff were directed to no longer hold an inmate for 24 hours beyond release time. Prior to the new directive, the hold period is what had enabled PRCC staff the opportunity to arrange for escorted transport.

**2. *Increased remand population.*** The number of Alberta's inmates under remand has exploded, with reports suggesting an increase of more than 70% — most of which result in an unplanned release.

**3. *Increased levels of violence among remanded inmates.*** Bail reforms, and the level of violence demonstrated by inmates remanded into custody today, has increased when compared to those facing similar incarceration in the past. Remand cases have evolved to include those accused of more serious crimes, while crimes that previously resulted in an accused being remanded into custody are instead resulting in conditional release or house arrest.

**4. *Transportation service availability.*** Regular bus service departing from Peace River to points beyond nearby communities (such as Grimshaw, High Level, Fairview, and Grande Prairie) no longer exists. Limited bus service to Edmonton departs daily at 07:30h.



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**5. Northern-most correctional facility.** Unlike all other Alberta provincial corrections centres that are situated within major cities or urban centres, where support services are available and which are financially supported by the GOA through various grants and other means, PRCC is located in a remote northern hub with limited to no services of this sort. The nearest city with services is Grande Prairie, which is around a 198-km drive from Peace River.

**6. Staffing shortages.** PRCC is operating at roughly a 32% staffing vacancy rate, with 20 unfilled FTEs, combined with extended, sick, and vacation leaves. This results in less opportunity for correctional staff to escort inmates from PRCC. Job opening advertising is centralized, meaning that PRCC management is restricted from advertising available job opportunities. Application intake is digital, which requires high-speed Internet — a luxury that very few Albertans residing in northern rural communities enjoy. The application process is convoluted and the hiring process is drawn out.

## THE POPULATION OF ADULTS ON REMAND HAS INCREASED AND NOW SURPASSES THE NUMBER OF SENTENCED ADULTS

IN 2015–2016, ADULTS IN REMAND ACCOUNTED FOR 59% OF THE CORRECTIONAL POPULATION IN PROVINCIAL AND TERRITORIAL FACILITIES, UP FROM 26% IN 1990–1991\*.

To begin to address these amassing issues that are beginning to overwhelm our downtown core, Town of Peace River Council respectfully requests:

1. That the current practice of releasing inmates into downtown Peace River stop, and that Executive Director Crystal Wierl **mandate PRCC staff to provide all inmates given unplanned release without means of transportation an escort from PRCC** to their home or to the nearest city that has social supports and wrap-around services available, as was protocol during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. That the direction given to PRCC staff in October 2022, removing their authorization to hold an inmate 24 hours beyond their release time, be reversed. This 24-hour provision enabled PRCC staff time to arrange for escorted release of inmates given unplanned release, and who had no means of transportation home.

*\*Remand admissions have consistently surpassed sentence admissions over the last ten years; Bail Violations, AOJOs and Remand – JustFacts (justice.gc.ca)*



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3. That the Public Services Commission (PSC) implement a targeted recruitment strategy, including a retainment strategy uniquely applicable to the PRCC, and that those strategies be shared with the Town of Peace River administration to further advertising and promotion.

4. That PSC initiate mandatory placement of new corrections hires into Peace River, with preferential transfer location options after serving two years, until such time as the PRCC is fully staffed.

5. That the PRCC be designated as a training location for corrections staff.

Council, and the Town, feel these measures will have a tangible impact in bettering the situation we currently face, through which our downtown core has become less safe. With an increase of crime and homelessness, businesses have been negatively impacted, and effects are reverberating throughout the community. If projections hold true, this problem will consistently worsen in a very short period of time, carrying potential short- and long-term economic and social implications for the Town of Peace River, many of which may prove difficult to reverse or irreversible.

Thank you for your consideration,

**Elaine Manzer**  
Mayor

**Barbara Miller, CGA, CPA, CLGM**  
Chief Administrative Officer



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