

Correctional officer fears writing on the wall

By IRENE GENTLE
The Champion

Saving money could end up costing lives if Ontario jails are privatized, charged a Maplehurst correctional officer.

"I think the community safety and staff security is at risk," said Mike Dakroub, vice-president of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, local 234, and a correctional officer with 10 years experience. "Someone is going to get hurt. That's my only concern."

Currently, there are about 44 jails scattered throughout Ontario. But that will soon be whittled down to three superjails.

These whopping superjails are currently under construction in Penetanguishene and Lindsay, while Milton's Maplehurst is being renovated to become a superjail.

All three will be launched at the same time, and when they are, the Penetanguishene facility will be run by a private company.

Recently, Mr. Dakroub took his fight against privatization to town council in hopes of gaining its endorsement.

The support never came, and now he fears he gave councillors the wrong idea.

"I left councillors with the impression I was worried about my job," he said. "It's a concern. No one likes to lose their job. But I won't compromise my safety by working for a private company."

He cited examples where privatization in American jails have resulted in chaos.

But security issues, such as conflict and escape rates, will be constantly monitored along with the costs at new Ontario superjails, said Halton MPP Ted Chudleigh.

Those annual records will then be analyzed to suss out the better system.

And the motivation behind American and Canadian prison privatization is too different to be likened, he said.

"Comparing it to experiences in the U.S. don't serve the debate," said Mr. Chudleigh. "They have a different system out there."

With at least one privately-run jail in place, the comparisons can begin, he said.

And in his opinion, that's just what the correctional officers are afraid of.

"They'd like not to have the competition.

"Correctional officers don't want to die so a private company can make money."

MIKE DAKROUB

Right now there's nothing to compare to," said Mr. Chudleigh. "We'd like to see a better way to do it."

But little safety extras found in public facilities, like ensuring inmates get out of town once their term is served, will likely be dispensed of with a private company bent on making a buck, said Mr. Dakroub.

"We give them a bus ticket, we drive them to the bus station and make sure they get on the bus and out of town," he said. "A private company is not going to do that."

And Mr. Dakroub characterized himself as stunned when he learned stateside private jails have a 40 per cent staff turnover rate.

"It blew my mind. You spend the first two years learning the job," he said. "No one will

know it at 40 per cent. When you have to babysit (your colleagues), it takes away from the job."

And it may jeopardize safety.

"Maybe people don't care what happens behind locked doors. We do," he said. "Correctional officers don't want to die so a private company can make money."

Prisoners are more likely be treated better in a public facility, which only benefits the community once they're released, noted Mr. Dakroub.

"They're looked after right now, somewhat, where a private company won't have it in their budget," he said. "If you treat inmates like animals, they'll come out behaving like animals."

While he expects there to be cost-savings, they'll come from the superjails themselves, not from who is running them, said Mr. Chudleigh.

Currently, housing one inmate costs about \$140 a day. But that should go down to \$75 once the mega-prisons are in place.

Mr. Dakroub rejected the Province's argument that one private prison won't necessarily lead to others. "It wouldn't make sense to privatize two and keep the third one public. We feel the writing's on the wall."

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