



BRITISH
COLUMBIA

July 9, 2014

Ref: 217428

Peg Orcherton
Board Chair
Board of Education
School District 61 (Greater Victoria)
556 Boleskine Rd
Victoria BC V8Z 1E6

Dear Ms. Orcherton:

Thank you for your letter related to the closure of the Victoria Youth Custody Centre.

I first, want to reiterate that the decision to close the Centre was not made lightly, but after much careful thought. It is in no way a reflection of the dedication and professionalism consistently demonstrated by those delivering services at Victoria custody, but rather an operational decision based on the continued underutilization of custody services. We appreciate your understanding as we move forward with these changes and I am pleased to respond to your concerns.

British Columbia has historically maintained one of the lowest youth custody rates in Canada, and the number of youth in custody has been declining for many years. Despite several prior reductions in physical and operating capacity, in the past year, British Columbia's youth custody facilities have been operating at just 56 percent of capacity.

Our low custody rates are, without question, a success story; however, it is difficult to maintain quality programming when the number of youth at a given location falls below a certain capacity level. Moreover, the ongoing operating costs to maintain three youth custody facilities will compromise our ability to maintain rehabilitative programming and alternatives to custody, such as community-based bail beds and other community-based residential and non-residential programming for young offenders.

As it relates to female offenders the Elizabeth Fry Society which, for many decades, has been the leading Canadian and international organization that advocates for the rights of female prisoners fully supported the centralization of services for girls in 2012. Centralizing female young offenders ordered to custody at Burnaby Youth Custody Services has provided increased access to a broader array of gender-specific programs that, for example, will better address addictions and mental health needs (especially trauma) of girls. This has benefits for all girls but especially girls who otherwise would have historically been ordered to Prince George or Victoria and who would not have access to the same array of gender-specific programs available in Burnaby.

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Youth Custody Services' current delivery model has three centres in the province servicing 100 percent of the province which by default requires youth from distant communities to spend time away from their home when ordered to custody. These youth are some of the most challenged in our province and maintaining family and community connections are of key importance to the well-being and future reintegration of these young people, and strategies are in place to ensure those connections remain solid. These include the expansion of travel support for families visiting from outside the Lower Mainland and the increased use of technology, for example virtual visiting and video conferencing. For families from Island communities, family travel support may include ferry travel and other necessary supports to get to the Burnaby centre. As well, we will continue to ensure a smooth transition for youth moving out of custody and back into their homes and communities, including supported reintegration leaves

The best interest of children must be the primary concern as we move forward and I acknowledge the importance of ensuring all youth have a voice especially when entering a custody environment which by its very mandate is involuntary. As an organization we are committed to seeking feedback from youth and stakeholders through feedback surveys, research, complaints processes and other forums as we strive to improve our service, including exploring additional strategies and supports to maintain community linkages for those youth ordered to custody. One such example, is our partnership with the McCreary Centre Society who completed an independent follow up study of youth in custody which was reported out in "*Time Out III*" and "*Voices from the Inside II*".

In closing I want to reaffirm that our goal continues to focus on the delivery of high quality services with the emphasis on rehabilitation and reintegration.

Sincerely,


Stephanie Cadieux
Minister

pc: Honourable Christy Clark, Premier
Honourable Peter Fassbender, Minister of Education