



## Judges go to jail

Twenty-two judges and eight judicial case managers were sent to jail on Friday October 13, 2023. It wasn't bad luck. The Okanagan Correctional Centre (OCC) in Oliver, BC, was the site of this year's annual meeting of the BC Provincial Court's Interior Region judges and judicial case managers (JCMs).

After a welcoming song performed by Kix Hall, the OCC's Indigenous cultural liaison, the group spent the morning on its regional education program, including presentations by BC Sheriffs and a discussion of artificial intelligence issues. After a nutritious lunch prepared in OCC's kitchen, they heard about the internal discipline process for inmates from Paige Samra, Deputy Director of the Investigations and Standards Office.

A tour of the facility led by Warden Debby Rempel and staff members was a highlight of the day. The tour included living units and programs offered to inmates. At the admission and discharge area, judges and JCMs learned how inmates are booked in and released from the facility. Judges were particularly interested in the video conferencing units that allow inmates to make court appearances remotely instead of spending hours travelling to court in sheriffs' vans.

The group learned that OCC is a 312,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art, high-security facility that opened in 2017. It includes 11 living units and 378 cells and was built as a Public-Private Partnership (a "P3") project. Designed and operated with the safety of surrounding communities in mind, it significantly increased BC Corrections' capacity. It houses both inmates serving sentences and those awaiting a court appearance who have not been granted bail or not been able to perfect their bail. On average, 75% of the people housed at this facility have been remanded in custody, while the remaining 25% are serving a sentence.

If someone pleads guilty to a criminal charge or is found guilty after a trial, a judge will hear submissions from both Crown and defence about what sentence is appropriate, consider the evidence and the law, and impose a sentence. In some cases that sentence will involve jail. People serving their jail sentence at OCC can take part in the programs offered there.

OCC prisoners awaiting trial can also participate in programs if their classification permits it. In BC jails, programs are usually only offered to sentenced inmates, but at OCC, they are available to all eligible inmates.

They include programs for alcohol and drug abuse (including 12-step programs), violence prevention, and work skills. The facility has a very impressive woodworking shop and a metal shop, though these have been closed temporarily for repairs. The visitors saw some exquisite

metalwork produced there, including artistic metal fire pits being donated to a local community charity. The OCC also boasts an animal care program that trains inmates to care for horses, a project operated in partnership with the Osoyoos Indian band.

Visiting the outdoor Aboriginal healing center, where those of Indigenous heritage can participate in ceremonies such as sweat lodges and other activities, was another tour highlight. There is also a fish hatchery on-site. The group had the privilege of meeting Correctional Officer Richard Henson, who has been nominated for a Premier's Award for Innovation and Excellence, to recognize his outstanding work in the woodworking shop where he supervised the construction of a beautiful canoe.

The judges enjoyed a session with OCC staff, who discussed many of the challenges within the institution, including inmate violence, smuggling contraband and banned substances, and dealing with people who are detoxifying from drug use or experiencing severe mental health issues.

The judges and JCMs returned with a better understanding of the facility and the experience of incarceration, as well as a firsthand look at the work of Warden Rempel and her staff, who play an important role in BC's justice system.

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