

Ombudsman Investigation leads to improvements to food distribution in Provincial Youth Custody Centres

In British Columbia, the Ministry of Children and Family Development (the “Ministry”) provides support and services for youth who are involved in the youth justice system. The Youth Justice Services division of the Ministry provides both community youth justice services and youth custody services.

There are three youth custody services centres in BC:

- Victoria Youth Custody Services
- Burnaby Youth Custody Services
- Prince George Youth Custody Services

Youth who have complaints about youth custody services are encouraged to resolve their complaints internally with youth custody staff. However, at any time, youth can make a complaint about youth custody services to the Office of the Ombudsman.

The Ombudsman’s office gives priority to complaints about services to youth, including youth in custody. Ombudsman staff regularly visit the province’s three youth custody centres as part of the Ombudsman’s mandate to ensure fair treatment by public agencies in British Columbia.

When the Ombudsman’s Office investigates complaints from youth we look to ensure that the youth was treated fairly. We focus on the way decisions are made including whether the youth had an opportunity to be heard, was provided with reasons for a decision, and was provided with information about any appeals or opportunities for review. We also look to ensure that the public agency complied with the laws that govern it and with its own policies and procedures.

During our visit to Prince George Youth Custody Centre, youth complained to Ombudsman Officers about the quantity of food at the centre and about the process followed for distributing extra food at mealtime. Our investigation of these complaints led to improvements to food distribution in all three provincial youth custody centres.

Food quantity

Young residents complained to Ombudsman staff about the quantity of food they were receiving at the centre. They explained that the programming at the centre is active and they were hungry between meals. They told us that when they raised their concerns, staff told them that the food at the centre is nutritious and meets Canada Food Guide standards.

We investigated the adequacy of the centre's response to the concerns raised by residents about food quantity. We questioned what steps Prince George Youth Custody Centre was taking to ensure that the young people in their care were receiving enough food.

In response to the complaints the Ministry decided to conduct a review of food services in the province's three youth custody centres. At the conclusion of the review, the Ministry informed us that the food provided at all three custody centres met or exceeded the Canada Food Guide Standards. However, in order to address the concerns expressed the Ministry implemented the following changes:

- Staff at all three custody centres now have access to food that they can provide to residents when requested. This change in provincial policy is being incorporated into the Provincial Youth Custody Programs Manual of Operations and will be included in the orientation booklets provided to each young person admitted at a centre.
- Prince George Youth Custody Centre added an additional snack in the afternoon of fruit cups or granola bars to bridge the gap between lunch and dinner.
- The exit survey completed by young people who were in custody for more than 30 days was amended to add specific questions about food quantity to the existing questions about food quality.

As a result of the steps taken by the Ministry to address the concerns raised, we considered the complaint to be resolved and we closed our file.

Practice of distributing extra food

Meals at Prince George Youth Custody Centre are served, for the most part, on pre-portioned food trays. Some items such as soup and milk are served in larger containers and sometimes there is extra left over after each resident has received a portion.

Residents complained about the way extra food was being distributed. They complained that extras were being distributed to young people with the highest points rather than to any young people who indicated they were still hungry after finishing a meal. Points are awarded for good behaviour.

We initiated an investigation to consider the fairness of the process used by the centre to distribute extra food at meal time. We wanted to ensure that Prince George Youth Custody Centre was complying with provincial policy and not using food as a reward for good behaviour. We wanted to ensure that young people at the centre had fair and equal access to food at meal time.

When we discussed the complaint with staff at the Prince George Youth Custody Centre they told us that they used this system to distribute extra food because they were concerned that youth could intimidate or bully others to give up their share or retaliate against those who requested extra food.

We learned from staff at both the Victoria Youth Custody Centre and Burnaby Youth Custody Centre that they distribute extra food to youth who request second helpings at meal time. We enquired whether staff at these two centres had concerns about the potential for bullying or victimization in the distribution of extra food. Staff informed us that they monitor for victimization, but that food is available in good supply and they do not perceive bullying for food to be an issue.

As a result of our investigation into the concerns raised, Prince George Youth Custody Centre discontinued the practice of distributing extra food to residents with the highest point levels. Prince George Youth Custody Centre has implemented a new process which gives the supervising staff person the ability to distribute extra food items as requested and where it will not contribute to victimization or otherwise compromise the safety of youth.

As a result of the steps taken by Prince George Youth Custody Centre to address the concerns raised, we considered the complaint to be resolved in a satisfactory manner and we closed our file.

Acknowledgements

We applaud the young people who spoke to us about a situation they felt was unfair, which led to positive change for all residents.

We acknowledge the co-operative work of Ministry of Children and Family Development Youth Justice staff in addressing these concerns to ensure that youth in custody centres are treated fairly.