

Vancouver community groups seek sobering centre

BY GERRY BELLETT, VANCOUVER SUN NOVEMBER 29, 2010



Surveillance video images of Police officers manhandling an intoxicated native Frank Paul, 47, to a jailhouse elevator, then dumped outside in near freezing weather, December 6, 1998, in Vancouver. He passed out and died of exposure.

Photograph by: Vancouver Sun, Handout

VANCOUVER -- As plans are progressing to build a Sobering Centre in Surrey, community groups are pushing to have a similar centre built in Vancouver.

Since 2006 there have been 18 deaths of intoxicated persons in police custody in B.C.

The most infamous of such deaths occurred in December 1998, when Frank Paul died in a Vancouver alley after being arrested by police. This led to an inquiry by former B. C. Supreme Court Justice William Davies into Paul's death.

Paul, a chronic, homeless alcoholic arrested many times by police for public intoxication, died after being dumped in the alley by Vancouver Police following his arrest. He had been refused admission to the city jail and because of previous violent behaviour had been barred from the detox centre.

Among the major recommendation of the Davies Inquiry was for a Sobering Centre to be available in Vancouver where persons such as Paul could be taken instead of going to jail.

On Dec. 9, a meeting organized by the BC Civil Liberties Association will be held at SFU's Harbour Centre to discuss how to set up such a centre in Vancouver.

Participants will include the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, the Elizabeth Fry Society, the Frank Paul Society, Vancouver Coastal Health, B.C. Housing, Vancouver City Police and the RCMP.

Among the speakers will be officials from the Sobering Station in Portland, Ore., and Toronto's Seaton House.

BCCLA executive director David Eby said Health Minister Kevin Falcon's promise to open a Sobering Centre at the Creekside Health and Housing Centre by 2012 was a good start.

"But we desperately need one in downtown Vancouver as a disproportionate number of deaths occur there. Also Vancouver Island needs one and the north could do with a couple," said Eby.

A Sobering Centre would be staffed by persons trained to handle the belligerent or violent — people who wouldn't be admitted to a detox centre or would be refused admission to hospital emergency departments and, by default, end up in police cells, said Eby.

"A Sobering Centre is a secure facility like a mental health facility staffed by people who are trained to use sedation or restraint. The police use restraint but in dangerous ways because their training is inadequate," said Eby.

An official with the Health Ministry said there were Sobering Centre facilities available in Vancouver's Detox Centre.

But Eby said this was not the case.

"Because we don't have a Sobering Centre in Vancouver people are having to be held in jail cells. The police don't like it. They have a plan of their own for a centre but the province still hasn't accepted it," said Eby.

The \$21.9 million Surrey centre will also have a medical addictions and mental health clinic with 16 units of short-term stay housing and 52 supported second stage housing units. It is expected to be open in late 2012.

Grand Chief Stewart Phillip of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs said the issue of opening such a facility in Vancouver was beyond debate.

"We must organize ourselves to send a strong message to the B.C. government that they have to act immediately on one of the key recommendations of the Frank Paul Inquiry," said Phillips in a statement.

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