

PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS:



June 18, 2024

To Premier Tim Houston, Justice Minister Barbara Adams, Community Services Minister Brendan Maguire, Health Minister Michelle Thompson, NS Health CEO Karen Oldfield:

I am following up with you, on behalf of a coalition of health and prison justice organizations in Nova Scotia, including East Coast Prison Justice Society and PATH Legal, to request a response to our invitation to **meet with us in early July of 2024**, or at your earliest convenience.

When we last wrote, on June 4, 2024, we noted with concern that the five deaths in custody in Nova Scotia jails from January 2023 to the date of our letter was an unprecedented number of deaths in provincial custody in such a short period. We have since learned that on the very day we sent our letter, there was yet another death in Nova Scotia's provincial jails – the sixth since January 2023, and the fifth involving a person held at Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility (Burnside jail).

We are asking you, again, to please meet with our members, who are engaged in community-level supports for criminalized and incarcerated persons, helping them meet needs relating to housing and other social determinants of health, deal with substance use issues in community and during the dangerous transitions to and from jail, and more. We wish to discuss what immediate actions and long term solutions may be taken to address the jail conditions that we understand to have contributed to these deaths -- in particular, actions in support of decarceration.

We will not repeat the precise dates and limited information shared on the now six deaths of persons held in provincial custody since January 2023. Of the incidents where some details are known to us, we believe these deaths to have been preventable. We are reaching out as citizens and professionals who were engaged closely with those who died and/or others who we understand to be at risk of meeting a similar fate.

As noted in our last letter, we convened a Month of Action on deaths in custody earlier this spring, featuring four public panels addressing a range of topics of relevance to the recent fatalities in Nova Scotia jails. These included sessions involving family members, community leaders working with criminalized individuals with mental health and substance use issues, and those with expertise on the legal and health implications of institutional lockdowns. We placed

a constructive emphasis on institutional transparency and community supports as alternatives to the current situation in our overcrowded, health-impairing jails.

Backing each of the four panels was a letter expressing concerns regarding the recent deaths of individuals incarcerated in provincial correctional facilities. Across the four letters, we had amassed, by the date of June 4 when it turned out another person died in your jail system, a total of 347 signatures.

We repeat our four calls to action:

Call to Action #1: Mandatory Public Inquiries for Deaths in Custody

The public deserves to know the causes and circumstances of the four deaths in custody in the past twelve months and what measures are being taken to prevent similar tragic deaths. We are calling for (i) transparency around the processes of inquiry that are or are not occurring regarding these recent deaths, and (ii) reforms to the *Fatality Investigations Act* to make public, transparent, procedurally rigorous review of deaths in custody mandatory in Nova Scotia.

We repeat our call to ensure that inquiries into Indigenous deaths in custody, like those of Sarah Rose Denny and Peter Paul, are Indigenous-led and informed by community concerns and protocols.

Call to Action #2: Take Immediate Action to provide community-based housing and health supports and services to keep people out of jail

We are calling for more investment in community-based supportive alternatives to criminalization and policing responses to health and substance use problems.

Call to Action #3: Take Immediate Action to provide mental health programming and support inside provincial jails

The increase in prisoner deaths in recent years cannot be separated from unacceptably harsh conditions of confinement, including lockdowns and a lack of culturally safe mental health services and harm reduction programming to support rehabilitation, release and reintegration.

Call to Action #4: Take Immediate Action to End Illegal Lockdowns and provide community supports and services to keep people out of jail

Lockdowns and their harmful effects on prisoners are the most serious and frequent concern raised by prisoners to staff at ECPJS and PATH Legal. In January 2024 a Nova Scotia superior court ruling recognized the deep human cost of the ongoing lockdowns at the Burnside facility – the site of five of the six deaths since January 2023 – and declared those lockdowns illegal, i.e. lacking in reasonable justification.

We urge government to work with our organizations to find ways to sustain decarceration, recognizing that conditions in provincial jails are not conducive to the rehabilitation or

community reintegration of individuals, but conversely result in acute physical and psychological deterioration.

Thank you in advance for the opportunity to meet with you. We look forward to working with you to address the real and urgent issues of illegality and harm arising daily in our province's correctional facilities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sheila Wildeman', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Sheila Wildeman, Co-chair, East Coast Prison Justice Society, Associate Director, Dalhousie Health Justice Institute (on behalf of a coalition of health and prison justice organizations)

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