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# Jail guards protest provincial tactic

## Old, overcrowded facilities cause illness, union official says

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Jail guards want provincial negotiators to recognize working conditions that lead to increased sickness and a lower life expectancy.

Jim Mitchell, president of Local 616 of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, said the North Bay Jail is old and overcrowded like many Ontario facilities.

Mitchell and about two dozen colleagues protested Thursday afternoon outside the constituency office of Nipissing MPP Monique Smith, who was not in the city.

Union representatives for Ontario's 5,500 jail guards say the province wants to change the sick benefit clauses of their contract.

The Canadian Press quoted an OPSEU negotiator that the province wants employees taking more than five sick days to be switched to a private insurance carrier.

But the reason for high absenteeism is due to the illnesses and stress that breeds in old and overcrowded facilities, Mitchell said.

Modernized jails would lower the number of sick days, he said, adding that North Bay's average number of sick days was cut in half after new managers addressed intolerable conditions" in the past two years.

He said about 90 per cent of the 37 full-time and 19 part-time corrections workers in the city are below the current threshold of 11.5 sick days that triggers an interview with management and attendance support" programs.

Mitchell said conditions here would improve if the jail was replaced with a larger facility, noting it was originally intended for fewer than 60 inmates and often goes over its two-per cell capacity of 119.

He also said the jail business is booming" as economic hardships take their toll on society, adding there were about 130 inmates one night about two weeks ago.

Mitchell said his union also wants to negotiate for early retirement opportunities similar to police and firefighters, based on their average life expectancy of 58 years.

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Stewart McGetrick, a Community Safety and Corrections Services spokesman in Toronto, said the province is building two new facilities in Windsor and Toronto to address capacity issues provincewide.

McGetrick said the North Bay Jail's capacity is 102 inmates. There were 80 on the population list for Thursday.

He said there was an over-capacity day Feb. 6 when there were 109 inmates and more inmates spend weekends at the jail to serve out intermittent sentences.

That was the same day North Bay Police Service and Ontario Provincial Police announced 46 arrests as part of an undercover operation of drug dealing in the area.

McGetrick said there are an additional 2,200 inmates per day in Ontario compared to the average of 7,600 recorded 10 years ago.

Most of the hike is caused by an increase in remand" inmates awaiting sentencing, trial or other court process and not yet convicted of a crime, which accounts for 64 per cent of inmates compared to 40 per cent in 1999.

The jail guards gave their union a strike mandate in January, after most of the 35,000 other members of OPSEU had already reached an agreement with the government. Both sides remain at the bargaining table.

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