

Prisoners' advocate says smoking ban could spark firestorm in B.C. jails

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A former prison inmate is afraid an imminent smoking ban in federal jails may create a "desperate situation."

"You can only push people so far before they won't take it any more," said Glenn Flett, director of a prisoners' advocacy group called L.I.N.C. "I don't know how this is going to be taken on the inside."

The total smoking ban comes into effect at prisons across the country on April 30.

But while the Correctional Service of Canada is preparing to provide smoking-cessation programs to inmates, Flett said he doesn't think that's going to be enough.

"You've got guys in places like Kent that have been smoking for 25 years and they're serving life sentences. They're not going to accept it," he said.

Flett, who spent 12 years behind bars for killing a Toronto Bay store manager during a hold-up, is also concerned about the long-term impacts of the ban. Tobacco is already used as currency in prison, he said. Banning it will only increase its value.

"It's an unmanageable idea. It's going to create a phenomenal black market."

Flett said he doesn't defend drug use in prisons, but from a "pragmatic point of view, you're just going to make the environment even more unsafe."

Vice-president of the prison guards' union John Williams said he

anticipates some "hiccups" when the ban takes effect.

"They're not going to be too happy," he said, referring to the inmates. "It's going to be a process."

But Williams said the union supports the ban, which will also affect guards who smoke. They will now have to leave the prison grounds before they light up.

"It's rough for both sides. For anybody who smokes and then quits, it makes you a little edgy. But we'll stay professional. We can't get confrontational," he said.

CSC spokesman Dave Lefebvre said inmates who want to take part in smoking cessation programs must start before April 30.

"The inmates will have to indicate they want to take part. We'll have a variety of products available to help," he said.

In addition to education, the CSC is making plans to deal with "unrest and conflict" when the ban begins.

Smoking has been banned inside federal prisons since 2006. The new rules will mean the end of outdoor smoking, and tobacco will now be considered contraband.

There has been no smoking in provincial minimum security prisons since 2001. In January, smoking was banned in medium security facilities with "no significant issues," said BC Corrections spokeswoman Lisa Lapointe.

But smoking bans have sparked prison protests in the past.

When the Fraser Regional Correctional Centre in Maple Ridge became B.C.'s first smoke-free prison in 2000, prisoners refused to work and the institution was locked down. The inmates said the ban violated their rights.

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