



Carole Chen, Warden
Fraser Valley Institution for Women
33344 King Rd, Abbotsford, BC V2S 6J5

Re: May 2026 Advocacy Visit Follow-Up

June 5th, 2026

Dear Carole,

We want to thank the Institutional Management Team (IMT) at Fraser Valley Institution (FVI) for taking the time to meet with our Pacific Regional Advocacy Team on May 29th, 2026. This letter details the overarching issues at FVI that were reported to The Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS) during our advocacy visit on May 28th and 29th, 2026. It also includes our summary of the discussion that took place during the meeting mentioned above, relevant laws and policies, and CAEFS' recommendations.

As of May 29th, the total incarcerated population at FVI was 99 across all three security classifications, including three individuals in the Structured Intervention Unit.

1. Physical Conditions of Confinement- Fire in Living Unit on Main Compound

Description: Advocates received reports that a fire broke out in the kitchen of a living unit on the main compound late one evening during the week of May 25, 2026. Individuals incarcerated in the affected unit were reportedly evacuated to the E'Lam House (Pathways House), a unit designated for medium-security individuals participating in Indigenous spiritual and cultural programming. It was reported to advocates that the fire was caused by a toaster. Following the fire, several individuals expressed concern and anxiety, noting that they have the same make and model of toaster in their living units. Advocates also received reports that, following the evacuation, personal hygiene items such as soap and shampoo were not immediately made available to those relocated to the Pathways House. As a result, individuals reportedly relied on institutional hygiene products or borrowed items from peers. Although the fire was reportedly contained to the kitchen area of the living unit, individuals indicated that personal belongings stored in their cells, including clothing, were not returned immediately following the evacuation. Instead, these items were reportedly transferred to the penitentiary's Admissions and Discharge department, where individuals suspected their belongings would be searched and compared against their "cell effects" inventory, which records institutionally approved personal property. Individuals directly affected by the fire reported that activation of the sprinkler system resulted in significant water damage to personal property, specifically paper-based materials such as Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) documentation, legal materials, and personal notes and records.



Advocates also received reports that individuals evacuated from the living unit because of the fire were not offered physical or mental health follow-up services following the incident. Those impacted by the fire described feeling frightened, shaken, and emotionally distressed. Some also reported experiencing physical effects associated with smoke inhalation.

Discussion: IMT advised that the investigation into the fire in the living unit remains in its preliminary stages and that, at this time, there is no evidence to indicate that a defective toaster was the cause of the fire. IMT further reported that individuals affected by the incident were seen by Health Services the day following the fire. Advocates and IMT also discussed the potential benefit of issuing a communication or memo to the population once the investigation is complete and the cause of the fire has been determined. This communication could help address concerns and alleviate fears related to the safety of kitchen appliances, should the investigation determine that a faulty appliance was not the cause of the incident.

Law/Policy:

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, section 8: Everyone has the right to be secure against unreasonable search or seizure.

Corrections and Conditional Release Act (CCRA), section 4(f): Correctional decisions are made in a forthright and fair manner, with access by the [incarcerated person] to an effective grievance procedure.

Corrections and Conditional Release Regulations (CCRR), section 83 (1): The Service shall, to ensure a safe and healthful penitentiary environment, ensure that all applicable federal health, safety, sanitation and fire laws are complied with in each penitentiary and that every penitentiary is inspected regularly by the persons responsible for enforcing those laws.

CAEFS Recommendations: CAEFS appreciates FVI's responsiveness to the fire in the living unit on the main compound. Increased communication with peer-led committees and the medium-security population following emergency incidents can help ensure individuals are aware of available supports, address concerns, reduce uncertainty, and provide timely information regarding penitentiary responses and follow-up measures. More broadly, CAEFS encourages the CSC to prioritize the safety, wellbeing, and immediate needs of incarcerated people following emergency incidents. This includes ensuring timely access to personal belongings and essential items, particularly where individuals have been displaced or affected by an emergency, rather than treating such incidents as opportunities for search and seizure.

2. Access to Substance Use and Harm Reduction Supports

Description: Advocates continue to receive reports regarding limited substance use and harm reduction supports at FVI, particularly from individuals in the medium- and maximum-security populations. Individuals advised advocates that substance use counselling is currently provided by a single Behavioural Interventionist and reported that existing supports do not adequately meet the needs of the population. While group-based substance use programming is available, individuals reported that these programs primarily focus on sobriety and abstinence rather than harm reduction approaches, which are widely recognized as best evidence-based practices in community for supporting people who use substances. Individuals also expressed concerns that group programming, including substance use programming, does



not always feel sufficiently confidential, safe, or conducive to healing. Several individuals identified access to one-on-one, trauma-informed counselling as an important and necessary support for those experiencing substance use challenges.

Advocates also received reports that several Narcan kits located in medium-security living units had expired. Peer-led committees at FVI recommended that refresher Naloxone/Narcan training be provided within each living unit on the main compound to ensure individuals remain prepared to respond to overdose emergencies. In addition, advocates were informed that the naloxone/Narcan kit in the Structured Living Environment is only accessible upon request to a correctional officer or Behavioural Interventionist. Individuals reported that this restricted access could delay access to life-saving medication during a medical emergency, and that immediately involving penitentiary staff in overdose responses may increase the likelihood of security-related interventions, which could discourage individuals from seeking timely assistance.

Discussion: IMT shared that several group-based substance use programs are available at FVI, including Wellbriety, SMART Recovery, Narcotics Anonymous, and Alcoholics Anonymous. IMT informed advocates that Behavioural Interventionists provide individualized interventions and plans informed by Dialectical Behaviour Therapy principles. In addition, IMT stated that individuals have access to substance use counselling through the Common Access List, which provides toll-free support services at no cost to incarcerated individuals. IMT indicated they were not aware of expired naloxone kits in the medium-security compound living units but would follow up and replace any expired kits if necessary. IMT also shared that the naloxone/Narcan kit is now accessible to the population in the SLE and is located in the back of the building.

Law/Policy:

CCRA, section 3(a): The purpose of the federal correctional system is to contribute to the maintenance of a just, peaceful and safe society by (a) carrying out sentences imposed by courts through the safe and humane custody and supervision of [incarcerated people].

CCRA, section 5: There shall continue to be a correctional service in and for Canada, to be known as the Correctional Service of Canada, which shall be responsible for (a) the care and custody of [incarcerated people]; (b) the provision of programs that contribute to the rehabilitation of offenders and to their successful reintegration into the community.

CCRA, section 86(1): The Service shall provide every [incarcerated person] with (a) essential health care; and (b) reasonable access to non-essential health care.

CAEFS Recommendations: Given CSC's responsibility to provide safe and humane custody for individuals in federal penitentiaries —where they rely on staff and contractors for health services, referrals, and emergency care— CSC must look for additional measures to ensure the dignity and well-being of those in its care. CAEFS advocates for the provision of substance use healthcare in community by harm reduction community organizations as the penitentiary environment prioritizes security over the health and well-being of incarcerated people.

3. Access to Indigenous Cultural and Spiritual Programming in E'Lam House (The Pathways Unit)



Description: Advocates received reports that limited Indigenous cultural and spiritual programming is currently available within FVI's Pathways Unit. Individuals reported that no sweat lodges, healing circles, resolution circles, talking circles, or one-on-one counselling sessions with the Pathways Elder are presently being offered, despite these supports being identified in the Pathways Unit Contract included in the Pathways Unit application and consent document.

Advocates also received reports that the Pathways Elder had disclosed personal information about incarcerated individuals to other individuals living in the unit. Individuals described these incidents as recurring and expressed concern that such practices may contribute to lateral violence among peers. Several individuals reported feeling reluctant to raise reported concerns directly with the Elder or through the CSC grievance procedure due to fears of negative repercussions, which they believed could affect their access to existing Indigenous cultural programming and supports at FVI.

Discussion: IMT encouraged individuals to use the grievance process to address concerns related to the Pathways Elder and Unit and noted that CSC Elders are supervised through Regional Headquarters. IMT also reported that morning smudges occur daily at FVI, that sweat lodges are currently suspended due to the British Columbia fire ban, and that a recent ceremony was held to honour Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQI+ people.

Law/Policy:

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Articles 11 & 12: "Indigenous peoples have the right to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs."; "Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies".

CCRA, section 4(g): Correctional policies, programs and practices respect gender, ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic differences, sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, and are responsive to the special needs of women, Indigenous persons, visible minorities, persons requiring mental health care and other groups.

CCRA, section 80: Without limiting the generality of section 76, the Service shall provide programs designed particularly to address the needs of Indigenous [people].

Commissioner's Directive (CD) 726 (Correctional Programs), section 5(b): The Institutional Head/District Director will: provide a secure and appropriate environment for the delivery of correctional programs, including a culturally appropriate environment for the delivery of Indigenous correctional programs

CAEFS Recommendations: More than 50% of people incarcerated in federal prisons designated for women are Indigenous, making it imperative that the CSC prioritize meeting the needs of Indigenous people in custody. CAEFS is of the view that, in responding to the national human rights crisis of the mass incarceration of Indigenous peoples in Canada and in upholding the principles of *Creating Choices*, the CSC must expand and prioritize alternatives to penitentiary incarceration. Efforts should focus on reducing the number of Indigenous peoples in custody and advancing pathways to decarceration, particularly for Indigenous women and gender-diverse people.

4. Access to Physical and Mental Healthcare: Delays in Care and Medication Management



Description: Advocates received reports that individuals at FVI are experiencing wait-times of approximately four to six weeks to see the penitentiary's general physician and six to eight weeks for an appointment with mental healthcare. The individuals that advocates met with reported these timeframes to access physical and mental healthcare do not currently meet the needs of the incarcerated population at FVI.

Advocates also received reports regarding changes to prescribed medications. Individuals reported that medications were modified or discontinued without their consent to changes in their treatment plans. Some individuals perceived that medications considered "popular" within the population, for either medication trading or recreational use, were more likely to be altered and expressed concern that treatment decisions were being influenced by penitentiary security considerations rather than health and wellbeing and decisions of healthcare professionals.

Discussion: IMT reported that FVI's general physician is on-site two days per week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays. IMT indicated that wait times to access health care are generally approximately four weeks and stated that this timeframe is comparable to community standards. IMT further advised that health services are delivered using a triage model, with urgent cases prioritized for more immediate care and individuals on the waitlist generally assessed as having low or non-urgent health care needs. IMT shared that most individuals incarcerated at FVI are working with a mental health clinician.

Law/Policy:

CCRA, section 4(g): Correctional policies, programs and practices respect gender, ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic differences, sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, and are responsive to the special needs of women, Indigenous persons, visible minorities, persons requiring mental health care and other groups.

CCRA s. 86 (1): The Service shall provide every [incarcerated person] with (a) essential health care; and (b) reasonable access to non-essential health care.

CD 800 (Health Services), section 2: The Regional Director, Health Services, will ensure: (a) the provision of health services to [incarcerated persons] in Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) institutions and in the community, in accordance with relevant legislation, professionally accepted standards, CSC policies and practice directives; (b) implementation of procedures to monitor and evaluate the quality and timeliness of health services and in a manner that promotes patient safety and quality improvement.

CAEFS Recommendations: Federally incarcerated people must rely on the CSC for access to all essential and reasonable non-essential mental and physical health care. Given that people in federal penitentiaries are disproportionately impacted by systemic inequities that contribute to higher rates of physical and mental health concerns than those experienced by the general population, and recognizing the adverse effects that the penitentiary environment can have on health and wellbeing, CAEFS encourages the CSC to increase healthcare provision with specialists in community to ensure the unique healthcare needs of federally incarcerated women and gender-diverse people are met.

5. Impacts of CSC Search Practices



Description: Individuals in the medium-security population continue to report on the psychological impacts caused by the strip searches conducted during last month's section 53 exceptional search. Several individuals described the strip-searching practice as re-traumatizing, particularly for those with experiences of sexual violence, and shared that they feel it should no longer be a legislated right of the CSC.

Individuals in the Minimum-Security Unit (MSU) reported an increase in strip searches upon their return from temporary absences, including escorted temporary absences (ETAs) and medical ETAs. Advocates learned that some individuals are considering declining approved ETAs due to concerns about being strip searched upon their return. Individuals in the MSU described the CSC's strip-searching practice as anxiety-inducing, re-traumatizing, and degrading, and expressed concern that it undermines their healing and reintegration efforts.

Across all security classifications, individuals reported on the conduct of correctional officers and the handling of personal property during routine and non-routine cell searches. Individuals reported that institutionally approved belongings are often moved, displaced, or scattered throughout their cells during searches, leaving their living spaces in significant disarray. Several individuals described their cells as feeling "destroyed" following searches. Given the limited access to clothing and personal possessions during federal incarceration, individuals emphasized the importance of their belongings and expressed a desire to comply with operational search requirements while having their personal property handled with care and respect.

Discussion: IMT and CAEFS advocates did not have time during the IMT meeting to discuss this reported concern. IMT said they will address this reported concern in their response to CAEFS' May systemic advocacy letter.

Law/Policy:

CCRA, section 4(c): The Service uses the least restrictive measures consistent with the protection of society, staff members and [incarcerated people].

CCRA, section 4(g): Correctional policies, programs and practices respect gender, ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic differences, sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, and are responsive to the special needs of women, Indigenous persons, visible minorities, persons requiring mental health care and other groups.

CCRA, section 70: The Service shall take all reasonable steps to ensure that penitentiaries, the penitentiary environment, the living and working conditions of [incarcerated people] and the working conditions of staff members are safe, healthful and free of practices that undermine a person's sense of personal dignity.

CAEFS Recommendations: CSC search practices can have significant impacts on the individuals in its custody. CAEFS encourages the CSC to carefully consider the potential short- and long-term psychological effects of its legislated search practices, including strip searches. The Office of the Correctional Investigator's 2020 national investigation into sexual coercion and violence in federal prisons found that nearly 70% of federally sentenced women reported histories of sexual abuse, 86% reported experiencing physical abuse, and 91% of federally sentenced Indigenous women reported having experienced physical and/or sexual abuse. Given the prevalence of trauma and victimization among federally sentenced women, and Indigenous women in particular, it is critical that the CSC consider the re-traumatizing impacts of strip searches and other invasive search practices. CAEFS further encourages the CSC to assess the extent to which these



practices align with the principles of *Creating Choices: The Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women*, including empowerment, dignity, respect, supportive environments, and shared responsibility.

6. Access to Conditional Release Opportunities- Escorted Temporary Absences in Medium Security

Description: Access to escorted temporary absences (ETAs) continues to be a concern reported by individuals in the medium-security population at FVI. Individuals reported that, despite receiving approval for ETAs from the penitentiary, they are often required to wait months before being able to access them. Advocates also received reports that some individuals have had their ETAs suspended without receiving written documentation outlining the decision or the reasons for it. Individuals reported feeling that their ability to understand, verify, or respond to the suspension decision feels limited by this lack of communication or documentation provided by their Case Management Teams.

Discussion: IMT and CAEFS advocates did not have time during the IMT meeting to discuss this reported concern. IMT said they will address this reported concern in their response to CAEFS' May systemic advocacy letter.

Law/Policy:

CCRA, section 3: The purpose of the federal correctional system is to contribute to the maintenance of a just, peaceful and safe society by... (b) assisting the rehabilitation of [people in prison] and their reintegration into the community as law-abiding citizens through the provision of programs in penitentiaries and in the community.

CCRA, section 4(f): Correctional decisions are made in a forthright and fair manner, with access by the [incarcerated person] to an effective grievance procedure.

CD 700 (Correctional interventions), section 10(e): Parole officers will facilitate the reintegration of [people who are incarcerated] into community at the earliest possible date while ensuring public and staff safety in all case management decisions.

CAEFS Recommendations: CAEFS acknowledges and appreciates FVI's efforts to facilitate consistent access to Escorted Temporary Absences (ETAs). Supporting access to the continuum of release through the timely provision of temporary absences throughout an individual's period of incarceration is consistent with CSC's legislated mandate and the principles of *Creating Choices*. As evidence consistently demonstrates that gradual, structured release is the most effective pathway to successful community reintegration, access to ETAs remains an important component of correctional planning.

Thank you for taking the time to review this letter and for your continued efforts to improve the outcomes for individuals in your custody and care. CAEFS appreciates IMT's willingness to engage in dialogue with the people incarcerated at FVI to ensure the voices of those impacted are included in institutional decisions. CAEFS encourages FVI to continue collaborating with the committees at FVI to improve the conditions of confinement and create a penitentiary environment that is aligned with law and policy, and the Principles of Creating Choices.



Respectfully,



Brianna Bourassa, Lead Advocate, Pacific Regional Advocacy Team, CAEFS

