

Tuesday, July 3rd, 2007

Shamed to act

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IT has been 16 years since the province was first told to tear down the women's jail in Portage la Prairie and build from scratch a corrections facility that can deliver humane, modern programs to female inmates. A human rights complaint has forced the provincial government to extend basic privileges and rights to the inmates, who continue to sit in antiquated, decrepit conditions.

The provincial government says a new jail should be ready in 2009 but, responding to a complaint from the Elizabeth Fry Society, the inmates have begun to see improvements to basic services, such as free telephone calls to their lawyers (most of whom require a long-distance call) -- one-on-one counselling and visits with their children. The visiting area is a bench at the 113-year-old building's entrance, where people pass all day long. Most of the women in the jail, many of whom are mothers, are aboriginal, struggling with addictions and histories of sexual or physical abuse. The addictions counselling and therapy programs are a shadow of what is available to the male inmates at Headingley and Stony Mountain, where cultural programs and private family visits are routine.

The government says it takes time to design and build a corrections facility, but the speed with which capital decisions can be made in the run-up to elections or in mid-campaign attests to the fact that inmates have little political currency. After repeatedly being hounded to build modern women's jail, the Doer government committed in 2002 to do that, then appointed in 2004 a panel of advisers to determine where it should be built and announced two years later that a facility would be built in Headingley. If the walls are up in 2009, as predicted in a news release last year, it will have been after more than five years of planning. In that time, the government will have expanded the floodway, constructed two new emergency rooms at the Health Sciences Centre, funded the construction of a few new schools and seen Manitoba Hydro's new high-rise office tower in the middle of downtown Winnipeg. A jail, with adequate facilities for cultural and counselling programs and family visits, cannot be any more complicated than most of those buildings. The real difference is that most of those other projects were politically popular and highly visible to voters. The government had to be shamed into showing basic respect for the dignity of female inmates hidden from the public eye.