

Women in jail to see improved conditions

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By Mia Rabson

FEMALE inmates in Manitoba will get more contact with their kids and more appropriate programming, thanks to a mediated settlement between the provincial government and the Elizabeth Fry Society.

But it will be at least another two years before a new jail is built to replace the dilapidated Portage Women's Correctional Facility, a justice official told the *Free Press* Thursday.

The conditions of that jail and the lack of programming offered there sparked two complaints the Elizabeth Fry Society filed with the Manitoba Human Rights Commission more than five years ago.

The complaints alleged discrimination against the inmates at the women's jail on the basis of sex, race and disability. The century-old jail was falling apart and lacked the recreational space and programming offered to male inmates at provincial jails, such as a gymnasium and access to elders for aboriginal inmates, the complaints said.

The Human Rights Commission found merit in the complaints and had the two sides sit down for a mediated settlement. That agreement was released to the public Thursday, and includes pledges by the province to provide better programming to meet the specific needs of women, such as providing physical, mental and nutritional care for women who are pregnant, facilitating contact for inmates with their kids and better meeting the needs of women with disabilities.

There will also be better spiritual and cultural programming and supports for aboriginal women, who make up more than two-thirds of the inmate population at the women's jail.

Other changes will include abuse and trauma counselling and library and recreational enhancements.

Debra Parkes, president of the Elizabeth Fry Society board, said it's been a long time to get the agreement in place, but said she is generally quite happy with the result.

She said she is specifically happy with the mandatory human rights training for prison staff and inmates, and that management will be held accountable for ensuring human rights are met.

As well, the agreement provides for a women's program advisory committee to monitor progress implementing the agreement and ensure women inmates continue to be treated fairly and equitably in the future.

The committee will be made up of justice officials and community representatives, said Parkes.

Reg Forester, executive director of adult custody for Manitoba Justice, said the committee is one of the best things to come out of the mediation.

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