

Court orders Alberta prison to take steps to protect inmates from extreme heat

As the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal prepares to hear a separate case about extreme heat in prisons, the Federal Court has directed an Alberta prison to take steps to install air conditioning to protect inmates.

The court said Correctional Service Canada has failed to put an effective solution in place at the Edmonton Institution for Women's secure unit, despite complaints about extreme heat that go back two decades.

"The excessively high temperatures have caused inmates to suffer panic attacks, psychological distress, and sleep deprivation. It is a long-standing problem: CSC has known of design problems with the temperature regulation equipment in Secure since as early as 2012," Justice Meaghan Conroy wrote in the July 16 decision.

One affidavit from an inmate housed in 2018 in a corner cell nicknamed "the oven" said a maintenance worker recorded a temperature of over 40 C in her cell.

Conroy wrote that while Correctional Service Canada "says it routinely monitors temperatures in Secure, remarkably, it keeps no written records of its temperature readings."

The court directed Correctional Service Canada to record temperature readings in the unit and to ask for authorization to install air conditioning.

A spokesperson for Correctional Service Canada said an emailed statement the agency is reviewing the Federal Court decision.

The statement said the correctional service uses various strategies to deal with the summer heat, such as increasing inmate access to "cold water, ice, and cool showers throughout the day" and using spaces that are already air-conditioned, such as gyms, as cool-down zones.

The agency also uses dehumidifiers and "night-time mechanical ventilation to circulate cooler air into institutions," the statement said.

The statement said Correctional Service Canada "ensures that the health of those who are at higher risk of heat-related complications is continuously monitored."

Those vulnerable inmates are the centre of a separate complaint by the John Howard Society of Canada, which the Canadian Human Rights Commission has referred to the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal.

In his July 8 referral decision, commissioner Sasha Kiran Cragg-Gore of the Canadian Human Rights Commission wrote that Correctional Service Canada hadn't demonstrated that it accommodates inmates "to the point of undue hardship in their practices and policies to mitigate the impacts of extreme heat."

The decision noted there are other complaints from individual inmates in front of the tribunal.

It said the John Howard Society complaint goes beyond individual cases "and implicates the treatment and dignity of an entire demographic group in federal custody: the unique vulnerability of older and disabled incarcerated prisoners, who cannot self protect from environmental harms."

As temperatures rise due to climate change, the case could set a precedent regarding how federal institutions "adapt operational standards to safeguard the health and dignity of those in custody," Cragg-Gore wrote.

"It would also provide valuable guidance for broader climate adaptation efforts in health care, elder care, and institutional facilities — sectors facing parallel risks," he added.

Catherine Latimer, executive director of the John Howard Society of Canada, said the group is pleased the tribunal will hear the case.

"The effect of excessive heat can be very damaging, particularly for the elderly and for prisoners with underlying health issues. With climate change, this will only get worse unless corrective action is taken," she said in an email.

Anja Karadeglija
The Canadian Press
Jul 20, 2026