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Justice

It's happened before

Nain woman not the first left naked in lockup

Alisha Morrissey

Carol Ikkusek wasn't the only woman to receive an apology from the RCMP for being held in custody without clothing.

Another woman, whose identity has to be protected, placed a grievance with the RCMP Complaints Commission after she was wrongfully arrested and held in a cell in Saskatchewan without her pants.

The Saskatchewan incident was recorded as an example of improper treatment of a person in custody in the 2004-05 annual report of the commission.

"During her first night in custody at the detachment, the female complainant had her pants removed by the female RCMP member and was not given a blanket to cover herself," the report reads.

The commission found no fault with the RCMP officer's behaviour, but pointed out that "they should have immediately been returned to her. In addition, she should have been provided with a blanket at the point at which she became cooperative."

The RCMP later agreed with the commission the woman, who was held for at least a number of hours without pants, was wrongfully arrested and should have been given her clothing back after she was no longer a risk to herself or police.

An unconditional apology was issued to the Saskatchewan woman, whose case is similar to that of Ikkusek, who was held naked in a Happy Valley-Goose Bay jail cell - with no mattress or blankets - for two days by RCMP officers who say they were concerned she would do harm to herself.

RCMP Sgt. Greg Bursey offered Ikkusek an unconditional apology last week.

The vice-chairman of the RCMP Complaints Commission, Brooke McNabb, says this type of incident is very rare, in fact these are the only two incidents on record as far as he knows.

McNabb says it's appropriate in some circumstances that people who may possibly harm themselves while held in custody are disrobed, though he refused to talk about the case in Labrador as it could still come before the commission.

In the case in Saskatchewan, he says, the problem wasn't that the woman's pants were removed to be searched, but that after the woman was calmed down she wasn't given her pants or a blanket in a timely manner.

"It was a situation where a woman had been arrested ... she was highly unco-operative and refusing to be searched and there was indications that she was tearing things up in the cell and there were concerns about her being suicidal," McNabb says of the Saskatchewan case.

"At one point, because she had refused to be searched, she had some matches on her and she actually lit her socks on fire so they ended up removing her pants at that point to do a proper search and make sure that there were no other matches or anything of that sort. So, it was a very volatile situation."

The woman was arrested after police went to interview her and her husband in relation to a car accident. The officers entered the house without permission and arrested the husband, the woman interfered and was arrested, too.

Once in the police car, she kicked at the windows and refused to be searched when they arrived at the detachment.

"What happened in the Saskatchewan case is the woman eventually calmed down and I think there was some indication here there was some alcohol abuse and there wasn't a proper facility for her to go to, there wasn't a

detoxification centre," McNabb says, adding that RCMP policy is that any person in custody is to be treated with decency, which didn't happen in this case.

In the Labrador case, Ikkusek was brought to the hospital, but a secure room wasn't available, so instead she was brought to the lock-up.

Geoff Chaulk, executive director of the Newfoundland and Labrador chapter of the Canadian Mental Health Association, says he's not surprised to hear this has happened before.

"I don't think anyone should be put through that, I don't understand that action and, you know, I can only but imagine it ends up being traumatic," he says.

"I don't understand why you would have to treat people like that or why you would have to disrobe them especially if there's a mental health crisis in play."

However, Chaulk says he does appreciate the RCMP's apology to Ikkusek and left Bursey a voice mail to that effect.

Chaulk says the issue comes back to a lack of training for officers in mental health crises.

"We want to work with the RCMP, the CHMA; we have a mental illness education program ... and you can train people over a two day period so they have a better understanding of mental illness, the signs and symptoms, experience better ways to communicate with someone who is in distress," he says, pointing out that while the RCMP were involved in developing the program the force doesn't use it to train its officers.

"They don't say yes or no, they say nothing and I think it's unfair to the officers on the front lines to not give them every training opportunity to be better able to deal with very difficult situations I mean it's the kind of work that a lot of us would never be able to do."

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