



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Update Regarding Ramadan Accommodations for Muslim Prisoners at OCDC

25 May 2020 (Algonquin Territory / Ottawa) – Eid Mubarak to all Muslim people on Turtle Island and beyond.

During the Islamic month of Ramadan, many Muslims – including people behind bars – observe daily fasts, abstaining from all food and drink from sunrise to sunset, including medications. Since at least Ramadan 2019, the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre (OCDC) has failed to consistently distribute medication to fasting Muslim prisoners during their non-fasting hours, despite numerous requests by prisoners. This is discrimination on the basis of health and creed.

On 28 April 2020, the Jail Accountability & Information Line (JAIL) hotline wrote to OCDC’s Acting Superintendent relaying prisoners’ concerns (attachment 1). When OCDC failed to provide a substantive response, legal counsel to the Criminalization and Punishment Education Project (CPEP), Fathima Cader, wrote to the jail’s administration on 7 May 2020 requesting they accommodate Muslim prisoners on an urgent basis (attachment 2). CPEP stressed that OCDC should not be forcing people to choose between their faith and their health.

CPEP’s legal letter was endorsed by sixty civil society organizations and supported by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC). CPEP shared its letter with signatories, the media, and the general public.

To date, OCDC has not responded to CPEP directly. Instead, on 13 May 2020, the Ministry of the Solicitor General sent an email to then OHRC Commissioner Renu Mandhane (attachment 3) responding to an article that *Muslim Link* – a local newspaper – had published about OCDC’s failure to accommodate Muslim prisoners. In this email, an Assistant Deputy Minister admitted that OCDC had failed to accommodate the Muslim prisoners on at least five days, but asserted that this was no longer the case.

Throughout Ramadan, the JAIL hotline continued to track medication delivery at the OCDC. Prisoners have reported that after CPEP issued its legal letter, OCDC began providing Muslim prisoners with their medications during non-fasting hours. While we count this as a success, some issues continued:

1. OCDC’s accommodation of fasting hours involved delivering medication at around 10:00pm and 2:00am. This leaves only a 4-hour interval between dosages. However, during Ramadan, Muslims have an approximately 7-hour window to eat, from sunset to the following sunrise. Several prisoners have independently reported experiencing harmful side effects as a result, which they linked to the short interval between dosages.
2. On 8 May 2020 a Muslim prisoner who had stopped fasting for one day due to extenuating personal circumstances asked OCDC, verbally and in writing, to be returned to the Ramadan meal schedule (redacted attachment 4). OCDC refused, with at least one guard calling the prisoner a “whiner” for their self-advocacy. On 15 May 2020, the JAIL hotline wrote to OCDC demanding they reinstate the prisoner’s Ramadan meal and medication schedule and end its policy of *de facto* refusing to reinstate prisoners to Ramadan meal and medication schedules. This prisoner has since reported that OCDC reinstated them to the Ramadan schedule effective 15 May 2020. This caller also indicated that the institution provided them a prayer mat shortly after accommodating their Ramadan schedule.

With the conclusion of Ramadan this year, the JAIL hotline remains committed to monitoring OCDC’s treatment of prisoners, including next Ramadan and beyond. We stress that the discrimination Muslim prisoners face is not isolated to them alone. OCDC routinely fails to accommodate the creed-related needs of Indigenous prisoners and the health needs of ill prisoners. Systemic discrimination at OCDC on the basis of identity is the norm, rather than the exception. OCDC’s longstanding history of human rights abuses and the abject failure of all sites of human caging to meet their stated objectives point to the need to move away from systems that reproduce harm and to build communities rooted in solidarity and love.

For Media Interviews Contact:

Souheil Benslimane

Lead Coordinator, Jail Accountability & Information Line

jailhotline@gmail.com / (819) 592-6469