

More groups bowing out of Pickton probe a blow to commission, criminologist says

Another two withdraw after being 'deeply disappointed' by government refusal to provide funding

By Neal Hall, Vancouver Sun August 10, 2011

The withdrawal of two more women's groups from the missing women inquiry will diminish the work of the probe into serial killer Robert Pickton, a well-known B.C. criminologist said Tuesday.

"Any time that people who are key to the process withdraw their participation, that diminishes the strength of the inquiry," said Neil Boyd of the criminology program at Simon Fraser University.

"In my view, the inquiry needs more resources and it needs to be a joint federal and provincial inquiry," he added.

Boyd urged the federal government to step up to provide the resources to expand the scope of the probe to look at the deeper issue of how to keep a similar serial killer from again preying on vulnerable, marginalized women.

He was commenting on the announcement by two groups - the Ending Violence Association of BC (EVA BC) and West Coast LEAF - that they are withdrawing from the missing women inquiry after being "deeply disappointed" by the government decision not to fund lawyers to represent the groups at the inquiry, which is scheduled to begin in the fall.

"The failure to fund counsel for aboriginal, sex worker and frontline women's organizations essentially shuts these groups out of the inquiry," EVA BC executive director Tracy Porteous said in a statement. "We will not participate in an inquiry that will not listen to the voices of those who were closest to the missing and murdered women and their communities."

Kasari Govender of West Coast LEAF said: "Contrary to Premier Clarke's recent statements on the importance of aboriginal women's safety, the government's decision on funding indicates that they don't take seriously the safety of aboriginal women, sex workers and women living in poverty.

"The failure to provide adequate resources at this early stage does not bode well for the government's commitment to implementing the commissioner's final recommendations."

NDP opposition critic Leonard Krog said the withdrawal of two more groups from inquiry, bringing the total to seven, is undermining the credibility of the probe.

Last May, missing women inquiry commissioner Wally Oppal granted 13 community groups standing to participate in the inquiry.

Groups who earlier announced they were withdrawing from the inquiry because of lack of B.C. government funding for lawyers included the Native Women's Association of Canada, the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs, the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council, the Native Courtworker and Counselling Association of B.C. and the Women's Equality & Security Coalition.

The attorney-general will only provide legal funding for the families of Pickton's victims.

Last Friday, the inquiry announced it was going to hire four new lawyers to represent the interests of first nations women and Vancouver's Downtown Eastside community.

The inquiry will hold community forums in nine northern communities Sept. 12 and formal hearings in Vancouver on Oct. 11.

It will probe the conduct of the RCMP and Vancouver police between Jan. 23, 1997 and Feb. 5, 2002, when Pickton was arrested and charged with murder.

The inquiry will also investigate the 1998 decision by the Criminal Justice Branch to stay attempted murder charges against Pickton.

Pickton was convicted in 2009 of killing six women. After exhausting all his appeals, the Crown elected not to proceed on a second trial involving another 20 murders.

nhall@vancouver.sun.com

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun