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THE Free Press

SERVING MANITOBA SINCE 1872 PROUDLY CANADIAN

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2025

Staff's pot charges go up in smoke

Foster home admits to giving kids marijuana, is fined \$35K; employees' counts stayed

DEAN PRITCHARD

A DEFUNCT for-profit foster-care provider has pleaded guilty to providing cannabis to kids in its care and has been fined \$35,000. Spirit Rising House entered the guilty plea in a courtroom in Winnipeg Tuesday as part of a deal in which charges were stayed against the foster-care provider's four directors — John Bennett, 57, Christine Ormiston, 38, Ian Rabb, 60, and Kelli Register, 56 — and three support-staff members.

Spirit Rising House had 14 foster homes in Winnipeg, West St. Paul and St. Andrews before the province severed ties with it and it ceased operations March 31, 2024. At the time, Spirit Rising House had 34 children under its care between the ages of 11 and 17, all of them assessed as being high risk and in need of intensive support. An agreed statement of facts provided to court says providing cannabis to the children was part of Spirit Rising House's "harm-reduction strategy." "I don't think there is evidence that

the individuals who were operating the organization were intending to hurt kids," Crown attorney Alana Parishin told provincial court Judge Kusham Sharma. "I think that they went about it the wrong way, and ought to have known this was not the right way to do it." Investigators with the Winnipeg Police Service's child abuse unit began looking into Spirit Rising House in February 2024 after Southeast Child and Family Services — which had guardianship over 21 of the 34 children at Spirit Rising House homes — reported that an internal investigation prompted by a post on Reddit confirmed that the foster-care provider had been providing cannabis to youths, without a medical prescription.

Police executed search warrants at the foster homes and seized a number of electronic devices. "The evidence establishes that Spirit Rising House was supplying cannabis both illicit and from dispensaries to youth in its care to manage their behaviour and offer an alternative to engaging in other more harmful substances and activities," says the agreed statement of facts. Foster parents were told the practice had been approved by the Child and Family Service agencies that had guardianship over the children, "but this was not true," says the agreed statement of facts.

● CHARGES, CONTINUED ON A4

'I am just trying to feed my family'

Court case filed after First Nation blockades hunter

KEVIN ROLLASON

THE Manitoba Wildlife Federation is turning to the courts after a blockade prevented a Manitoba hunter from passing through a First Nations community last month.

The province's largest hunting organization filed a notice Monday against the Manitoba government, Natural Resources and Indigenous Futures Minister Ian Bushie and Bloodvein First Nation. It asks the Court of King's Bench for an interim injunction to lift the blockade before licensed moose hunting season begins on Dec. 1.

Manitoba hunter Wes Cottrell and his son tried to drive into Bloodvein First Nation on Sept. 27 when they were stopped and questioned at a blockade set up on a highway south of the community.

When Cottrell said he was on his way to hunt, safety officers at the blockade got Bloodvein Chief Lisa Young on the line.

"I am not understanding where the issue is on why I can't go down a provincial highway and enter Crown land on a waterway," Cottrell can be heard saying on a video taken of the encounter by his son. The video was provided to the *Free Press* by the wildlife federation with a lawyer identifying Cottrell, who could not be reached for comment, as the person featured in the video.

Young interjected, saying: "Crown land that belongs to the Anishinaabe people of Bloodvein River First Nation since 1876."

The chief went on to explain that the band's lawyer had "developed a law, pertaining to our traditional territory" that was sent to Bushie in collaboration with him.

"All we ask is that you obtain access into our traditional territory via float plane — and Minister Bushie was made aware of that. Minister Bushie also referred to that area as being a closure area, so we have it closed."

Cottrell noted the province's guidelines don't allow hunting in certain buffer zones near the waterways but "as long as I enter and walk in 500 metres, I am well within my rights to hunt there."

The driver said he and his son had legal permits to hunt moose. "I am exercising my rights as a Canadian citizen with a Manitoba authorized hunting licence... I'm not with the Manitoba Wildlife Federation — I am just someone attempting to feed my family."

After further back-and-forth, the hunter drove away. "I will be turned around and we will let the courts decide," he said.

The court documents, filed Monday, also take aim at moose hunting restrictions issued by the provincial government last month.

The federation also seeks a judicial review of changes made last month that exclude hunters in three game-hunting areas near Bloodvein.

● HUNTER, CONTINUED ON A2

Mayor takes plea for bail reform to Ottawa

JOYANNE PURSAGA

THE federal government must act now to ensure the bail system doesn't undermine public safety and confidence in the justice system, according to Winnipeg Mayor Scott Gillingham.

At a House of Commons committee meeting in Ottawa Tuesday, the mayor called for multiple reforms to reduce the risk of repeat offenders.

"Our justice system doesn't even acknowledge the moral possibility that releasing a habitual criminal to reoffend could be considered wrongful bail. We can't operate as if victims of preventable crimes by known offenders are just collateral damage," said Gillingham.



Scott Gillingham

The mayor has repeatedly argued change is needed to ensure the safety of the public is prioritized.

Some front-line emergency, transit, health-care and retail staff have been left reeling from threats and attacks by repeat offenders, raising the need for changes that reduce that risk, he said.

"For too many years, Winnipeg has also been a violent-crime capital. With the right laws and the right strategies, I know that we can change that," said Gillingham.

Specifically, he called for federal legislation to: increase the consideration of public safety in bail hearings; remove statutory release for repeat offenders who violate probation conditions; improve rehabilitation and bail-enforcement measures; and enhance data collection and transparency on crimes committed while on bail.

Last month, the mayor began releasing weekly bulletins about repeat offenders to highlight his call for bail reform. The first bulletin revealed a Winnipeg offender in his mid-20s was convicted of 24 violent crimes over 11 years, and violated bail or probation conditions 12 separate times.



JOHN WOODS / FREE PRESS

FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

On the fourth day of Diwali, people celebrate by lighting candles and making offerings at the Hindu Society of Manitoba's Temple. Diwali celebrates the victory of light over darkness, and is celebrated for five or six days depending on the year.

● BAIL, CONTINUED ON A2



TODAY'S WEATHER PARTLY SUNNY. HIGH 7 — LOW 1



FOOD MAKING A PERFECT STEAK DIANE / C1