

COURT OF KING'S BENCH OF MANITOBA

B E T W E E N:

HIS MAJESTY THE KING,

- and -

RONALD KEHLER,

) Alana M. Parashin
) Kayleigh Robertson
) for the Crown
)
) Daniel V. Gunn
) for the accused
accused.)
) Judgment Delivered Orally:
) June 18, 2026
)
) Judgment Delivered:
) June 26, 2026

HARRIS J.

REASONS FOR SENTENCE

[1] Ronald Kehler ("Kehler") appears for sentencing after pleading guilty to one count of possessing cocaine and methamphetamine of the purpose of trafficking, contrary to s. 5(2) of the ***Controlled Drugs and Substances Act***, S.C. 1996, c. 19.

[2] According to the Agreed Statement of Facts, on September 26, 2023, a search of Kehler's cell at Stony Mountain Institution ("Stony Mountain" or the "Institution") resulted

in the seizure of 555.4 grams of methamphetamine, 160.5 grams of powder cocaine, 393.6 grams of cannabis concentrate and 167.3 grams of cannabis bud with a total institutional value of \$1,258,860.00. It was the largest drug seizure ever at Stony Mountain. It was a sophisticated operation orchestrated by a sophisticated criminal organization.

[3] At approximately 5:45 a.m. on September 26, 2023, a member of the community called the Institution to advise that they had seen a drone flying in the area around the Institution. Around 7:40 a.m., correctional staff patrolling outside observed that the cell window of unit 6-H2-12 belonging to Kehler was broken, leaving it open to the outside. Kehler's cell was searched by correctional staff based on reasonable grounds that a drone delivery had taken place.

[4] Inside the cell were four empty Cheerios boxes with twine attached. These boxes had been used to deliver drugs by the drone through the cell window. The drugs were found in a large cardboard box under the bed in Kehler's cell. The drugs were packaged in over 200 packages of varying sizes. In addition to the drugs, two cell phones were seized together with a sim card, five USB and USB-C chargers and one set of Apple airpod headphones. Based on text messages, it was determined that the drone delivered the four cereal boxes with the drugs and other items to Kehler's cell on four separate occasions in the early morning of September 26, 2023.

[5] Christer D. McLauchlan ("McLauchlan"), a senior project officer with the Prevention Security and Intelligence Branch of the Correctional Service of Canada ("CSC"), was qualified as an expert in relation to, *inter alia*, drug trafficking in Federal Correctional

Institutions. His evidence was presented to assist the court to determine Kehler's level in the hierarchy of the drug organization and his role and responsibilities within the organization.

[6] McLauchlan also testified as to the impact that drugs generally, and more particularly this volume of drugs, can have on institutions such as Stony Mountain. He testified the drugs are a prevalent problem in federal penitentiaries. There are seizures every day and the amounts seized are increasing. Prices for drugs within institutions are 10-20 times the price in the community because of difficulty in smuggling drugs into the institutions and the risk associated with such activities. McLauchlan testified that if the drugs seized were distributed equally to each of the 800 inmates, there was enough methamphetamine for seven days, enough cocaine for one day and enough THC for three months. McLauchlan testified that this was a high level of institutional trafficking which could have a significant impact on the institution.

[7] In the June 2025 report "Impact Statement on Drones to Correctional Institutions" ("CSC report") authored by Michael Fraser ("Fraser"), Assistant Warden Operations, on behalf of CSC, Fraser identified consequences of drugs to the correctional environment which are additional to those seen in the broader community at p. 3:

- Deterioration of inmate health and well-being, affecting both the individual and their family.
- Serious setbacks to rehabilitative programming and treatment progress.
- The diversion of limited institutional resources to combat drone threats, reducing capacity in other critical areas.
- Strengthening of gang influence and organized criminal networks behind bars.
- Financial exploitation of inmates and their families.
- A significant rise in institutional violence tied to drug debts, enforcement, and control of supply.
- Increased risks to the safety and security of staff, inmates, and visitors.

[8] Fraser also reports that the increased contraband through drone deliveries has intensified the underground economy within correctional institutions, creating a significant financial burden on inmates and their families. Inmates who are unable to pay their debts suffer the loss of property, threats and acts of violence and in many cases, the need for protective custody or transfer to other institutions. In some cases, families are targeted – threatened, coerced, or extorted into sending money or smuggling contraband during visits.

[9] In *R. v. Lamirande*, 2002 MBCA 41, our Court of Appeal has shared the concerns about drug related violence in prisons that were raised in *Fieldhouse v. British Columbia*, 1995 CanLII 1978 (BC CA), 98 C C C 3(d) 207:

16 ... management problems associated with drug-related assaults, intimidation, underground (the market place) and overdoses leading to death; the power exerted by those who control the drug trade, the extent to which property and sexual favours are exchanged for drugs, tension both staff and inmates; beatings, requests for transfers to protective custody, pressure on visiting family members to import drugs, younger and weaker inmates being converted to mules for transporting drugs. And the litany goes on.

(See also *R. v. Vandebosch (K.A.)*, 2007 MBCA 113, at para. 78.)

[10] The risks to the operation of the Institution and the safety of the staff and inmates of this volume of drugs cannot be overstated. In her unreported decision of *R. v. Hastings*, Garreck PCJ stated “[d]rugs in institutions foster violence and criminality creating an unsafe environment for inmates and staff.” (Transcript of Proceedings, dated April 8, 2019, p. T3 lines 38 and 39).

[11] There is a hierarchy of drug traffickers in penitentiaries. A high-level dealer deals at the multi-ounce level; a mid-level dealer works at the level of 1-2 ounces dividing those

amounts into gram levels; and low-level dealers will purchase a couple of grams for sale at a time. There is no doubt that this operation was at a very high level.

[12] McLauchlan testified that drones are now responsible for the bulk of drugs being introduced in the Institution and other federal institutions. This is also the most sophisticated method because it requires someone in the Institution making the arrangements for a drone operator, arranging for the drugs and packaging, identifying someone to receive the drugs, and a network to distribute the drugs.

[13] The drones themselves are sophisticated, costing thousands of dollars, having a long range, high pay load capability, piloted by GPS coordinates and special licensing for the operators. They require after-market additions to suspend and release the product remotely. They are operated from three to eight kilometers away from their destinations, making detection more difficult. Many use cameras as well.

[14] The most common method of drone delivery is simply dropping the contraband to inmates in the areas to which they would have access, such as the exercise area. In this case, the drone flew to Kehler's broken cell window. McLauchlan noted that drone drops are the most sophisticated methods of getting drugs into the Institution. Delivery directly to the cell is even more sophisticated.

[15] In the CSC report, Fraser says that illicit drone payload deliveries have significantly undermined the safety and security of their institutions, creating an environment of heightened risk, unpredictability, and operational disruptions that negatively impact CSC's ability to fulfill its mandate.

[16] The maximum sentence for the offence to which Kehler has pleaded guilty is life imprisonment, signalling that denunciation and deterrence are the primary sentencing objectives. The Crown seeks a sentence of 10 years. Kehler says that a sentence of four to five years is more in line with his level of involvement which, he says, was taking delivery of the drugs for a person referred to as "Larry Bird".

[17] The circumstances of the offence are serious. This was the largest seizure of drugs at the Institution with a value in excess of \$1.2 million, 10-20 times the price of the same drugs in the community. There was a very high level of organization with several people involved in coordinating the acquisition of the drugs, the drone and drone operator, the delivery and the intended distribution of the drugs.

[18] The assessment of proportionality for a drug sentence must reflect the magnitude of the individual's participation in the illicit activity (see *R. v. Lecapoy*, 1974 ALTASCAD 50). The more significant the offender's role, the greater their degree of moral culpability; the converse is also true for those less criminally implicated (see *R. v. Smith*, 2019 SKCA 100, at para. 46).

[19] Determining the magnitude of the individual's participation involves weighing typical markers of moral culpability: intentional risk-taking, consequential harm of the offender's actions and normative character of the offender's conduct (see *R. v. M. (C.A.)*, 1996 CanLII 230 (SCC), at para. 80; *R v Sass*, 2018 MBCA 46, at para. 39; and *R v Johnson*, 2020 MBCA 10, at para. 16).

[20] While Kehler was in the second level of the network with "Larry Bird" being above him, his involvement was significant.

[21] Kehler was a highly trusted member of the network whose responsibilities went far beyond receiving the drugs and included communicating with the drone pilot and Larry Bird and deciding whether the pilot would deliver four or more shipments. He was expecting to get six ounces back, an amount that McLauchlan testified signalled a high level of trafficking on its own. He was trusted to open the boxes and inventory the drugs and was involved in the distribution of at least some of the drugs. The text communications between the parties make it clear that Kehler was an integral part of the organization. I do not accept Kehler's assertion that his involvement was akin to a mid-level courier whose primary responsibility was to transport drugs for his boss in order to prevent his boss from being detected.

[22] While the range of sentence for a mid-level courier is three to six years, those with greater moral culpability will face a sentence in the range of five to eight years (see *R v Alcera*, 2024 MBCA 32, at para. 26). An aggravating factor is that this involved transporting a significant volume of drugs into a federal penitentiary (see *Fieldhouse*, at paras. 63, 77 and 78). The Crown seeks a sentence of 10 years while Kehler says that a sentence in the range of four to five years is appropriate.

[23] Kehler is 26 years old. His first entry into the criminal justice system was a seven-year sentence for discharging a firearm with intent. He was two years into that sentence when he was charged with this offence. As a result of these charges, he spent 29 days in solitary confinement and was kept in maximum security for an extended period of time. He has since been released from Stony Mountain and is in remand. He was not charged until 11 months after the fact and pled guilty at his earliest opportunity.

[24] An Institutional Assessment Report dated August 2025 notes that Kehler is a member of the street gang, Cash Money Brothers, and since his admission to federal custody, he had been identified as an instigator in 25 institutional incidents for a variety of matters. His offence cycle is observed as being directly linked to substance use, his association with negative peers, and his inability to link consequences to his actions. He appears to understand his offence cycle and accompanying behaviours at a moderate level.

[25] Kehler says that he did what he did because he had to. He was in prison for his first time and as is standard, he was assigned to maximum security for the first two years of his sentence. Because of the risks to his life, he was unable to say anything to the authorities about his role and his guilty plea was his first opportunity to tell anyone, through his lawyer, what happened. Kehler says that he did not arrange for the drone pilot and had no choice about his role in this matter. He says that he was stuck in his cell in a coercive environment. Based on my findings, I do not accept Kehler's explanation for his involvement.

[26] Since entering custody, Kehler has earned certificates for completing three Walls to Bridges from the University of Winnipeg, certificates from the Springfield Learning Centre for completing three different programs and his High School Diploma. I find that this demonstrates an intention to prepare himself for life beyond the penitentiary.

[27] Kehler also filed letters of support from family and community members, all of whom speak of the many positive attributes that he possesses. It is apparent that they

remain supportive of him and are confident that he can overcome the impacts of his bad decisions.

[28] In my opinion, Kehler's level of involvement increases his moral culpability. Considering that high level of involvement in a highly sophisticated organization and the aggravating fact that this involved bringing a volume of drugs into a federal institution that had the potential to seriously destabilize its operations, a sentence of 10 years, reduced to eight years and four month for totality, and consecutive to his current sentence, is fit and proper. He will receive a credit for 107 days in custody at a rate of 1.5 to 1 for a total of 160 days.

[29] There will be a mandatory DNA order pursuant to s. 487.051 of the ***Criminal Code*** and a life-time weapons prohibition pursuant to s. 109(1)(c) of the ***Criminal Code***.

J.