

Ashley Smith: Right move on inquest

The prison documents that Ashley Smith desperately wanted to see have finally been released, three years after her death. What they show is the deplorable treatment of a mentally ill teen. That's why the inquest into her death should be as broad as possible.

In a welcome ruling on Friday, Ontario Deputy Chief Coroner Bonita Porter agreed to expand the inquest beyond the time Smith spent in Ontario. The inquest will now not be limited by "her age, geography, date or nature of the institution," states the ruling.

It is shocking that at age 19 Smith was allowed to choke herself to death with a piece of cloth while Kitchener prison guards watched. But it is just as disturbing that a troubled teenager incarcerated at 15 for throwing crabapples at a postal worker could be shunted between prisons for years without ever getting the help she needed.

Smith's 17 transfers in 11 months must be scrutinized, as well as her heartbreakingly long periods of isolation and anything else that contributed to her suicidal despair. That's the only way we can take steps to ensure that no one else suffers as she did.

Smith was labelled as a problem inmate by corrections officials. But according to Kim Pate, executive director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, Smith's prison files show that her requests for counselling and medical support while in federal custody were ignored. As well, the documents show that Smith's self-harm escalated when officials drugged her and put her in segregation cells, says Pate, who continued the fight to access Smith's prison files.

All of these factors should be thoroughly probed by the expanded inquest. Smith didn't just suddenly wake up on Oct. 19, 2007 and strangle herself to death. Her treatment in the years leading up to that day determined her fate.