

Conditional release supervision standards revisited: An examination of compliance in Ontario Region

The 1990 introduction of the Correctional Service of Canada conditional release supervision standards marked an important milestone in the evolution of parole supervision of federal offenders.⁽²⁾

The standards affirm many traditional supervision practices but transform these procedures into publicly acknowledged performance criteria. They introduce standardized methods of risk assessment and case planning, promote uniform decision making, and clearly define areas of discretion.

In addition, the standards restructure the task of supervision to address growing public safety concerns and to reflect the reinforced risk-management perspective outlined in the (then) recently released Correctional Service of Canada Mission Statement.

Perhaps most important, the standards clarify personal, collective and corporate responsibility for neglect or omission in conditional release supervision. Publicly acknowledging performance standards is the initial step in improving the Service's craft and accountability. The application of standards, subsequent critical review and sanction, and collective responsibility for competency are vital to preserving the integrity of supervision and promoting a professional ethic.

This article examines in detail a recent review of Ontario Region's compliance with these standards - one way of encouraging the competent application of standards and, therefore, of promoting good supervision. Method of review The first nationwide review of the Correctional Service of Canada conditional release supervision standards was conducted by the Audit and Investigation Section of National Headquarters in 1992.⁽³⁾ This review prompted a further examination of compliance with these standards in Ontario Region.

The Ontario Region review exercise consisted of four separate audits of the 40 case-management related standards examined in the National Headquarters review.⁽⁴⁾ The review was undertaken by audit team leaders, two area directors, and the director of a community correctional centre.

An audit inventory was created and compliance criteria were set for each standard (in accordance with the nationally established protocol).⁽⁵⁾

The audit was essentially a detailed file review, with follow-up discussions with relevant staff where necessary. A random sample of direct, active cases was selected from each of the supervision offices, and results were tabulated in a computer spreadsheet that produced immediate compliance ratings at the office and case level. Overall compliance ratings were also determined for the region and its districts, as was the distribution of cases by compliance level.

The four audits were conducted at 6-month intervals over an 18-month period. The first audit, conducted by the local supervision managers, was a "self-audit" of randomly selected cases. This was followed by an independent re-audit by four audit team leaders. Twenty-six trained case-management officers (selected from both community and institutional operations) then assisted the independent auditors in both a follow-up audit and a final audit.

It was agreed that factors that could hamper full compliance with the standards (such as some standards not being under the control of an office under review and the potential for auditor error) should be considered in judging the compliance ratings. Therefore, while Correctional Service of Canada policy expects full compliance, it was agreed that office compliance ratings of 90% or higher would be considered "full compliance" with the standards, as would ratings of 75% or higher for individual cases. Does Ontario Region meet the standards? A total of 1,077 offender files were examined in the four audits. The individual audit samples represented between 14% and 22% of the potential candidates for each of the audits. The sample was drawn from 19 supervision offices, three community correctional centres, and the Team Supervision Unit. The number of files sampled from each district was proportionate to that district's percentage of active files in Ontario Region.

The regional and district compliance ratings on the self-audit were all in the low- to mid-80% range, but these numbers fell dramatically on the re-audit conducted by the independent auditors (see Table 1). All but five of the area offices had their ratings fail, many significantly enough to raise serious questions about the value of self-auditing.

Table 1

Region and District Compliance Ratings					
	Compliance rating				Net gain
	Self-audit (May 1992)	Re-audit (Nov 1992)	Follow-up audit (May 1993)	Final audit (Dec 1993)	
District					
Western	85 %	67 %	88 %	93 %	26 %
Central	81 %	66 %	80 %	88 %	22 %
Eastern and Northern	86 %	72 %	84 %	87 %	15 %
Regional average	83 %	68 %	83 %	89 %	21 %
Number of cases	230	234	351	252	

In fact, the dramatic drop in all three districts' compliance ratings after the self-audit raised concerns about the priority given to the standards, the interpretation of the standards, and local quality assurance and accountability. In response to these concerns, Ontario Region senior management publicly and forcefully reasserted the Service's commitment to the standards and established accountability mechanisms. Audit team leaders also visited supervision offices to provide training, to correct misinterpretations, and to scrutinize office routines.⁽⁶⁾

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, a team of auditors representing community and institutional case-management officers was trained to participate in future audits. This was to provide front-line staff with consistent leadership in the interpretation of the standards, to acquaint them with audit practices, and to expose them to different office routines.

The impact of these strategies was immediately evident in the follow-up audit results. The regional rating improved by 15%, and district rating improvements ranged between 12 and 21%. At the local level, six offices reached the 90% competency level (compared with none in the re-audit), and while two offices did suffer marginal losses, the remaining 20 demonstrated compliance improvement of as much as 58%.

Having returned to their self-audit levels on the follow-up audit, regional and district compliance ratings continued to improve, falling just short of the 90% success mark on the final audit. The overall gain in regional compliance was 21%, and the district net gains ranged from a high of 26% in the Western district to a low of 15% in the Eastern and Northern district. In all cases, the sharpest increases occurred between the re-audit and follow-up audit.

At the local level, all offices increased their compliance rating after the re-audit, with 14 offices ultimately achieving ratings of 90% or higher and 5 others reaching the mid- to high-80% range. Case-by-case analysis Although the overall compliance results were largely encouraging, the credibility of conditional release supervision often hinges on the sensational failure of one poorly managed case. Therefore, the distribution of cases by compliance rating was also examined (see Table 2). As mentioned, 75% was adopted as the minimum satisfactory rating of individual case compliance.

Table 2

Distribution of Cases by Compliance Rating				
Distribution of Cases				
Compliance rating	Re-audit	Follow-up audit	Final audit	Net gain or loss
0-64%	35 %	8 %	4 %	-31 %
65-69%	9 %	6 %	3 %	-6 %
70-74 %	6 %	7 %	3 %	-3 %
75-79%	17 %	11 %	5 %	-12 %
80-84%	12 %	14 %	7 %	-5 %
85-89%	12 %	21 %	16 %	+4 %
90-94%	6 %	15 %	20 %	+14 %
95-99%	6 %	15 %	26 %	+23 %
100%	0	5 %	16 %	+16%
Number of cases	234	351	262	

The proportion of cases failing to achieve the 75% compliance rating fell from 50% of the re-audit sample to 21% of the follow-up sample and to just 10% of the final audit sample. Although the number of cases failing to meet the minimum compliance standard is a concern, this number was significantly reduced.

At the same time, the proportion of the sample with a rating of 950/o or higher rose from 3% in the re-audit to 20% in the follow-up audit to 42% in the final audit, with 16% of the final audit sample achieving 100% compliance. Case-management components The conditional release standards were also grouped into seven case-management components, and regional compliance with these components was examined (see Table 3).

Table 3

Case-management Component Compliance				
Compliance rate				
	Re-audit	Follow-up audit	Final audit	Net gain or loss
Component				
Receipt of information	75 %	68 %	74 %	-1 %
Initial interview	67 %	80 %	83 %	+16 %
Standard profile	89 %	97 %	85 %	-4 %
Correctional case plans	60 %	84 %	90 %	+30 %
Risk/Need Management Scale	77 %	87 %	93 %	+16 %
Case work records	65 %	87 %	93 %	+28 %
Sharing information with offenders	63 %	80 %	91 %	+28 %
All components	68 %	83 %	89 %	+21%
Number of Cases	234	351	262	

Steady and substantial improvement occurred for five of these seven components, and the final compliance rating exceeded 90% for four of them. It is encouraging that components that engaged the offender in the case-management process (such as correctional plans, case work records and risk/need management) were among those with the highest ratings or those that underwent the most improvement. Impact The review indicates that major compliance gains were achieved at the regional and district levels and in nearly all supervision offices. However, measures must be taken to sustain compliance gains - complacency cannot be tolerated.

In general, the review reemphasized the importance of the standards. Support systems were reinforced to meet the interpretations of the standards established by the audit teams, and quality assurance and accountability structures were strengthened.

As well, the anxiety and frustration associated with failing to meet personal or corporate expectations have been replaced in many offices with a sense of confidence and pride in local achievements. What works? A number of keys to successful compliance with the standards also became apparent. The focus of successful offices was not only on achieving immediate compliance, although this was a compelling

factor, but also on entrenching fundamental practices that would survive the exercise. Preparing for the audits was less of an issue for most successful offices because sound procedures were already more entrenched.

Offices that performed well were also invariably led by managers who established clear operational standards, routinely monitored work, and rejected substandard performance. Staff commented that knowing the work expectations and tolerance margins of their supervisors contributed to meeting the standards and to a healthy office environment.

In addition, offices with a coordinated staff effort and collective focus on meeting the standards invariably made gains that may even have exceeded their compliance ratings.

To sustain gains, many of these recommended practices must be adopted and maintained. As well, periodic audits of randomly sampled files should continue, and competency criteria should be continually refined.

Parole supervision is a complex, skill-demanding endeavour, governed by publicly declared objectives and standards, and subject to vigilant public scrutiny. A body of knowledge and accepted practice has, and continues to evolve, and the audit exercises provided the opportunity to critically assess the release supervision standards. We must therefore re-orient our perspective of supervision to incorporate these principles and be prepared to continue to do so in the future. Discussion The operational demands of the standards are very specific. However, training relating to many of the day-to-day supervision tasks is haphazard. The audit team heard many requests for better training and even for refresher courses. A comprehensive training program and certification of competence would respond to these demands and would enhance the supervision process.

The audit team also found wide discrepancies between the resources and caseload demands of supervision offices and individual parole officers. While the relationship between resources and compliance is unclear, maintenance of the standards is, at least in part, dependent on ensuring a more equitable distribution of resources and on accepting the resource realities of compliance with the standards.

Finally, the audit exercise provided the Correctional Service of Canada with the opportunity to refine traditional audit practices and to explore several unique and innovative methods that, among other things, were precise enough to target corrective action at the specific case, officer or office. In the words of one area director, the audit process was "transparent ... there was no place to hide." The adaptability of audit methods should, therefore, be further explored as one means of encouraging performance.

A thorough analysis of the management conditions and office routines that relate to compliance is now certainly warranted. Such an analysis would provide the Correctional Service of Canada with the opportunity to continue to develop an empirically sound supervision model, to further refine the Service's craft, and to promote greater confidence among practitioners. The potential for improving the practice of conditional release supervision should not be underestimated or undervalued.

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- (1)Regional Headquarters - Ontario, P.O. Box 1174, 440 King Street West, Kingston, Ontario K7L 4Y8.
- (2)*Conditional Release Supervision Standards*. See c. Faulkner, *Review Manual for Conditional Release Supervision Standards: May 1990* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1990).
- (3)*Correctional Service of Canada Community Supervision Internal Audit Report* (final) (Ottawa: Audit and Investigations Section, Correctional Service of Canada, 1992), No. 378-1-036.
- (4)F.P. Luciani and D. Rowan, *An Examination of Compliance to Conditional Release Standards and Procedures in the Ontario Region: Self-audit/Re-audit Results 1992* (Kingston: Correctional Service of Canada, 1992); See also F.P. Luciani, B. Jefferson and L. Bail, *An Examination of Compliance to Conditional Release Standards and Procedures in the Ontario Region, Re-audit/Follow-up Results 1992* (Kingston: Correctional Service of Canada, 1992); And see F.P. Luciani and J.H. Lawrence, *An Examination of Compliance to Conditional Supervision Standards in the Ontario Region, Final Audit Report December 1993. Volume I: Regional Results and Analysis* (Kingston: Correctional Service of Canada, 1993).
- (5)Faulkner, *Review Manual for Conditional Release Supervision Standards: May 1990*.
- (6)J. Hudson and S. Pyke, *Office Practices Special Audit: Hudson/Pyke Administrative Audit - Ontario Region Parole Offices* (Kingston: Correctional Service of Canada, 1993).