

Issues affecting halfway houses

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On November 22nd, St. Leonard's House Windsor celebrated its 40th anniversary. People from across Ontario gathered to celebrate the vision of Reverend Neil Libby in the very hall where his foresight became reality. Understanding that imprisonment is by its very nature an alienating and isolating experience, Reverend Libby perceived a need to assist prisoners with their return to "street" society. Many lacked the very basics of support, such as: family, a residence, and three square meals a day. The halfway house would provide a stable environment during this critical transition period for the residents. It was intended to feel like home and promote good citizenship while remaining secure for those inside the halfway house, as well as out.

The halfway house movement has spread with the force of a juggernaut throughout North America. At this point, thousands have benefited from the support and guidance received during their residence. Indeed, the loss of halfway housing in Ontario for provincially-sentenced offenders was perhaps the only serious reversal in this process. I believe that a contributing factor to the ease with which this loss was accomplished was that the record of residential success had been left largely unexamined and unquestioned.

In concluding remarks at the St. Leonard's House Windsor 40th anniversary celebration, John Braithwaite (former Deputy Commissioner and current Chair of the Life Line InReach National Resource Group) challenged Correctional Service Canada (CSC) and those present to examine what works in terms of successful release. In particular, he noted that we need to discover the key factors for a successful re-entry, especially for long-term offenders. Currently, a comprehensive study of halfway housing is underway by the Research Branch of CSC, in partnership with St. Leonard's Society Canada and many other non-governmental organizations and interested parties. As we enter into this research phase, we must keep at least part of our focus on the big picture. Halfway houses are not merely platforms for the delivery of programs.

The 40-year history of house construction, occupancy, and the accretion of programs to

them, calls to mind W. P. Kinsella's dictum in *Field of Dreams* "build it and he will come". And they have, in abundance. However, the concern is that the founding intent is gradually being forgotten. Community-based Residential Facilities (CRFs) and Community Correctional Facilities (CCFs) are often perceived as mere extensions of supervision and control into the community. It is difficult to counter this argument when we witness increasing numbers of offenders on statutory release being released with residency conditions.

Lifers provide the source for another large group of residents of halfway houses. As part of the process of gradual reintegration, a period of residence on day parole is a standard part of re-entry. Many lifers benefit greatly from this, particularly those transitioning from decades of incarceration. However, it appears that every lifer over the past several years has been required to pass a period of residency in a halfway house. It seems unlikely that not a single potential parolee could pass a high enough test of risk manageability for a release directly to full parole.

Eleven years ago, I was granted full parole after completing a period of unescorted temporary absences from a medium-security institution. My release plan was well designed and included residency with a local Anglican priest and his family. I agreed with the National Parole Board and case management at that time that this was a manageable release in terms of public safety. Were we all mistaken?

Directing the use of halfway houses to accommodate high-risk statutory release offenders and low-risk lifers has led to an interesting division amongst a preponderant number of residents. Putting it simply, halfway houses are filled with: those who don't want to be there; and, those who don't need to be there.

As envisioned, a halfway house is to provide a supportive environment for the less well adapted and housing for those lacking community support. Of course, a guidance component is an integral part of the package and the many programs offered, from Choices to

Community Reintegration, have become important aspects of this support structure.

I fear that focusing the use of statutory release and day parole on the above-mentioned groups has not only contributed to a negative environment for the well motivated, it decreases the opportunities for more challenging cases to make that first tentative step into the community. Residence at a halfway house does provide for a greater degree of supervision and control than release directly to a personal residence. Risk manageability assessments should place more emphasis on this fact. The lowest risk releases should bypass residency as an inappropriate intervention (in keeping with the mandated least restrictive measures) and some slightly elevated needs clients should be considered as appropriate candidates for these highly supportive environments.

As a final issue, certain aspects of the accommodation and regulatory regime for residents should be challenged. Current budgetary limitations make provision of single rooms virtually impossible for most houses. At the same time, most, if not all, potential residents will be leaving correctional institutions where they have earned or been afforded a great deal more privacy. As the objective of all houses is to further community reintegration, placing residents in such atypical conditions for adult Canadians can only be

counterproductive. Much the same can also be said for the, perhaps necessary, but often complex, sets of rules by which the residents must abide. One of the most significant hurdles facing ex-prisoners re-entering the community is the gradual elimination of regulatory control with a commensurate emphasis on personal responsibility and decision-making. I believe that reintegrative supports need to more closely embrace this reality. Given the potential consequences for a breach of house rules, including suspension and a return to custody, remaining subject to the regulations of the residence longer than necessary fails to actively promote reintegration, runs counter to normal standards of community living and increases stress on the individual.

As we move further into the 21st century, halfway houses will remain a vital bridge for the successful re-entry of prisoners into the community. By keeping our eyes firmly focused on the prize, I believe we can more effectively realize the vision of Neil Libby and enhance the safety of all Canadians. After all, as the Executive Director of one halfway house recently said to me “we must always remember our residents are citizens, not just offenders”. ■

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