

The reintegration of federally-sentenced women: A commentary

Kristi Squires¹

Women Offender Sector, Correctional Service of Canada

On April 8, 2003, the Auditor General report on the reintegration of federal women offenders was tabled in the House of Commons. The audit was comprehensive, and covered all aspects of the Correctional Service of Canada's (CSC's) reintegration activities for women offenders.

The report commenced by acknowledging the gains CSC has made in the area of corrections for women over the past 13 years, including the construction of four new regional facilities and an aboriginal healing lodge, the closure of Prison for Women and the development of women-centred rehabilitation programs. Progress notwithstanding, the Auditor General noted that further challenges remain and that additional advancement is necessary.

The report examines and makes recommendations on issues such as classification, case management, program delivery, release mechanisms, employment training, accommodation, and community programs and services. At the time of the report's tabling, CSC concurred with each of its recommendations, and committed to take necessary action to address them.

The following article provides a brief overview of the report's main recommendations and outlines action that CSC has initiated, or is initiating, to respond to them.

Classification instruments

The Auditor General expressed concerns regarding CSC's classification measures for women offenders. In light of a more recent recommendation made by the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, CSC will be working with experts to develop a gender-specific initial security classification scale for women. Until this instrument is fully implemented, the Custody Rating Scale will continue to be used as a guide for decision making regarding initial security level. Although not specifically developed for women inmates, the Custody Rating Scale has been validated by CSC for this group.

Given the impact that reclassification decisions have on an offender's rehabilitation, the Auditor General recommended that the Service increase its efforts to implement the newly developed reclassification tool for women offenders.² Field test validation of this scale is now complete and data has been analyzed. It is anticipated the scale will be implemented in 2005.

Case management

In her report, the Auditor General raised concerns about delays in completing correctional plans. It was recommended that CSC determine the underlying causes for such, and endeavour to complete these plans in a timely manner. The Service acknowledges that timely completion of correctional plans is imperative, and has committed to monitoring correctional plan completion rates on a monthly basis. For the period commencing April 1, 2003 and ending September 30, 2003, 95.1% of all correctional plans were completed in a timely manner. This represents an increase of 27.8% for the same period in 2002.

In an effort to better prepare women offenders for parole at the earliest possible date, the Auditor General recommended that CSC review how it delivers programs to women offenders. In response to this recommendation, the Service adjusted two of its primary programs for women offenders (the Women Offender Substance Abuse Program and the Dialectical Behaviour Therapy Program) to allow for open entry participation. Other programs have been adjusted to allow for small group and/or one-to-one intervention. Program schedules have also been adjusted to ensure programs are delivered at the earliest possible date. These changes are resulting in a reduction of the time offenders spend waiting to enrol in programs, and are better preparing women offenders to be released on parole earlier in their sentences.

Substance abuse programming

The Auditor General recommended that CSC implement its proposed gender-specific substance abuse program for women offenders without delay. Since release of the report, the Women Offender Substance Abuse Program³ has been implemented in each of CSC's regional facilities. This program empowers women to make healthy lifestyle choices through the experience of a comprehensive, integrated, and gender responsive program for recovery. A Relapse Prevention/Maintenance Module has also been implemented, on a pilot basis, in eleven communities across the country.

Release mechanisms

It was recommended that CSC increase its use of temporary absences, work releases, and Section 81 and 84 arrangements. CSC has since examined issues that have hindered use of temporary absences and work releases, and is working to increase their application on a case-by-case basis. The Service is also engaged in discussions with a number of Aboriginal communities to raise interest in participating in the correctional process, and to initiate Section 84 arrangements. Ten Aboriginal Community Development Officer positions have been staffed across the country to assist in this regard. CSC will continue to work actively with Aboriginal communities to initiate culturally appropriate release arrangements for Aboriginal women.

Employment Training

To better prepare women offenders for future employment, the Auditor General recommended that CSC develop and implement a Women's Employment Strategy that includes certification of marketable skills. To respond to this recommendation, the Service launched a survey with incarcerated women and women on conditional release to obtain an enhanced understanding of their work experience, training and skills before and during their incarceration, as well as their perceived employment competencies and suggested strategies for overcoming impediments to obtaining and maintaining meaningful work in the community. Data collection and analysis will be complete in the fall of 2004. Results of the survey will serve as the basis for the development of a national employment strategy for women offenders.

An Employment and Employability Program is also being implemented at each of CSC's women's facilities. This program is designed to enhance the employability of offenders through institutional work experience. Between April 1, 2003 and February 22, 2004, a total of 437 women held a full or part-time institutional work assignment. This represents a 10% increase over the previous year.

Accommodation

The Auditor General recommended that CSC develop an action plan to meet alternative accommodation needs of women offenders in the community. The Service concurred with the recommendation and agreed to seek alternatives

such as private home placements and satellite apartment initiatives in areas where larger facilities are not practical. While there is currently sufficient bed space to meet the residential accommodation needs of women in the community, CSC continues to work with its partners to expand and strengthen these and other residential options for women on release in the community⁴. CSC has since increased its residential accommodation capacity for women offenders by 37 beds. This represents a 15% increase over the previous year.

Action plans have been developed in each region to assist in meeting future alternative accommodation targets. CSC is also working with its partners and stakeholders to raise the community's understanding of, and support for, residential accommodation options.

Community programs and services

The Auditor General recommended that CSC examine factors that contribute to the high number of women whose conditional release is revoked without offence. Analysis reveals that the highest proportion of revocations are statutory release or accelerated parole release cases. With implementation of the Women Offender Substance Abuse Program and the Structured Living Environment houses (which address the needs of women with mental health problems), CSC is working to ensure that women receive the help they require prior to release. It is hoped that these programs will contribute to the reduction of overall revocations, though it will likely take a couple of years for them to impact upon reconviction rates. Implementation of the Substance Abuse Maintenance/Relapse Prevention Program in the community is helping to ensure that women are acquiring the support they need while on conditional release.

The Correctional Service of Canada welcomes the feedback it receives from the Auditor General of Canada, as recommendations included in such audit reports help to improve the efficiency and performance of our programs and services for women offenders. ■

¹ 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, ON K1A 0P9

² See Blanchette & Taylor in this issue of FORUM.

³ See Hume in this issue of FORUM.

⁴ See Loiselle in this issue of FORUM.