

Implementation of a supervision project for federally-sentenced women in Montreal

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In the winter of 2001, Denis Méthé, Director of the Montreal Metropolitan district, authorized the creation of a team of women parole officers whose mandate is to supervise only federally sentenced women on conditional release in the Montreal area and Longueuil. That decision has enabled the team to develop supervision expertise in terms of approach, philosophy and casework strategies, and to acquire a better knowledge of the community resources that can provide these women with assistance and support services that are essential to their reintegration.

A similar experiment in Toronto

In Toronto, there has been a unit of 5 female parole officers supervising only women parolees since 1997. According to clinical assistant Susan Cummings, setting up that specialized unit has proven to be particularly effective in meeting these women's sometimes complex needs during the reintegration process. Ongoing on-the-job training, an effective working team, and good communication strategies with the client group are key elements in the unit's approach to women parolees.

The Montreal team

The Montreal supervision team comprises three female parole officers, including one officer with over 10 years experience supervising women parolees in the community as liaison officer at Maison Thérèse-Casgrain. Through her work supervising female residents at this halfway house, Carole Lemieux quickly realized that women parolees experience psychosocial problems to varying degrees: sexual and physical abuse, lack of affection, alcohol and drug addiction, mental health problems, lack of education, and little significant work experience are among the problems most often encountered in her practice as a parole officer at Maison Thérèse-Casgrain.

Aware of these women's needs and of the need to develop an innovative correctional approach geared to the reality of their lives, Carole Lemieux persuaded her management to implement a supervision project exclusively for women parolees in Montreal and the surrounding area. In 2001, Johanne Perreault, an experienced parole officer who also has expertise in managing community

programs administered by the Correctional Service of Canada, joined Carole Lemieux. With the arrival in 2002 of Renée Bray and the energy and experience she brings with her, the team is now complete.

Objectives of the team

These women parole officers state that bringing female parolees together in the same supervision unit has a number of advantages, from both an administrative and a casework point of view.

According to Carole Lemieux, that administrative decision has allowed the female officers supervising these offenders to develop greater expertise in assessing the needs of this client group; to introduce casework strategies that are suited to these women's lives, to develop alternatives to incarceration in a context that is safe and reassuring for the community, and to ensure continuity from a casework standpoint since this centralized supervision allows the same officer to retain individual clients throughout their parole. Such continuity is impossible for men, since men on parole are usually supervised by the parole office that covers the area in which they live. As a result, a change of address also means a change of supervisor.

As well, it is easier for team members to exchange ideas and share expertise, to support one another and to promote self-help since they work from the same office. This form of specialization leads to greater cohesiveness in the supervision approach. While retaining their own personalities, the officers work within an administrative framework that is more conducive to sharing their strengths and offsetting individual shortcomings. In short, this arrangement reduces the negative effects of professional isolation and burnout.

Community response

The Elizabeth Fry Society of Québec welcomes this initiative by Denis Méthé of the Correctional Service of Canada's Montreal Metropolitan District and wishes to take this opportunity to salute the pioneering work of Carole Lemieux. In our opinion, that administrative decision has already had a positive impact on the supervision of women parolees, in terms of continuity of approach and

innovative strategies for dealing with this type of offender. The team works closely with the Société's resources and is able, for example, to use Maison Thérèse-Casgrain as an alternative to incarceration when a crisis can be contained in a setting that provides guidance and support but not security measures such as those found in a penitentiary.

As well, since we work with these parole officers nearly every day, we can share our expertise regarding community resources with them, thus benefiting their client parolees.

In sum, this structure is conducive to stronger ties between Joliette Institution and the community and to the development of partnership strategies with all stakeholders working with federally sentenced women. The supervision of women parolees in Montreal is an effective correctional program because it is in keeping to the reality of this client group. It deserves to be recognized and commended. ■

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Source: Montreal Metropolitan District project on the team supervising women parolees, presented by Carole Lemieux

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