

## Do the Best We Can

An incredulous offender, having received an impossible sentence, exclaimed, "I'll never be able to do it!"

The learned judge responded, "Just do the best you can."

The growing number of long-term offenders - especially lifers - challenges corrections, the community and offenders to do just that: the best we can.

This is certainly a growing challenge. There are more long-term offenders serving longer sentences than ever before.

Throughout this century, the number of long-term offenders has been growing, most dramatically, as a result of the abolition of the death penalty. Prior to 1976, lifers with commuted death sentences could anticipate parole consideration in seven years. Today, similar offenders must serve between 10 and 25 years. It is doubtful that justice is now better served or the public better protected. (This is not to imply support for a return to the death penalty, to which I was unalterably opposed for all the usual rational arguments, augmented by the emotional impact of my early experience working with those condemned to death.)

The challenge is: how can long-term offenders best be managed in corrections? Recognizing that the offender has the potential to live as a law-abiding citizen, how can we better achieve Strategic Objective 2.3 of the Correctional Service of Canada's Mission: "To provide programs to assist offenders in meeting their individual needs, in order to enhance their potential for reintegration as law-abiding citizens."

It is almost presumptuous to comment in an issue that features Jean-Claude Perron's *Report of the Task Force on Long-Term Sentences*, 1991. Recommendations of the Report are on target and warrant the support of Correctional Service of Canada management and staff, offenders and the public. This precedent-setting report defines the challenge and the means to meet it.

With a growing number of long-termers - 27.7% of the federal offender population serving 10 years or more and almost one out of every six inmates serving life - new perspectives and initiatives are needed. The Perron recommendations should be implemented. New perspectives and programs should be characterized by:

- **Hope**

Life is dependent on hope - the anticipation of and faith in something better. Programs and relationships must sustain hope to keep the offender alive and deter offenders from becoming apathetic or aggressive. Hope is a catalyst that generates adjustment to reality and personal development.

- **Opportunities**

The value of a program is frequently in the eye of the beholder. Increased program participation would occur if long-term offenders were more responsible for the development of programs. Indeed, many current, innovative and community-service oriented programs owe their longevity

and success to long-term offenders. In addition, new roles or "correctional careers" for offenders should be envisioned and explored.

- **Participation**

The evolution of better programs will require greater understanding and participation on the part of the public, ex-offenders and voluntary agencies. The ultimate success of any program is dependent on a nurtured and effective alliance between the offender, the Correctional Service of Canada and the community. In this regard, Life Line is an exemplary manifestation of this concept, but its full potential, like those it serves, has barely been tapped.

- **Evaluation**

As we innovate, experiment and experience, we must document and evaluate the results. Documentation without experience is academic, but experience without evaluation means hard-won lessons are lost.

In facing the growing challenge of long-term offenders, we should be encouraged by the realization that there is ample opportunity to do better.

The challenge is real; it is upon us and it is growing. It must be met now. Growth, development and hope must be nurtured. Relationships need to be developed, opportunities made available and responsibilities accepted.

New roles and new sustaining programs are needed to give purpose and meaning to life, even when life is within the walls of an institution. These are all part of the challenge.

It is a challenge that, despite the current emphasis on reintegration, cannot and must not be addressed only at the time of the Judicial Review or parole eligibility. These are milestones along the way - they are not the journey itself.