

The Life Line Project

A long time ago (the sixth century to be exact), a Benedictine monk, who would be known as St. Leonard, was assigned to visiting prisoners. He found men, tortured souls, long forgotten, who had been imprisoned long enough and did not need to remain in prison any more. He went to the King and begged for their release. The King, being a good politician, knew that it was not politically acceptable to let criminals go free. So, he made their release conditional upon St. Leonard's taking them to live in his monastery. Some stayed awhile, some stayed permanently. A synthetic kind of family developed and, in time, there were more released prisoners in the monastery than monks.

The dream of a specialized halfway house for lifers was inspired by St. Leonard's example of men living together, in the service of others. Today, a life line, anchored in the Windsor community at St. Leonard's House, is being thrown to nearly 700 men and women in penitentiaries throughout Ontario who are in danger of drowning in an ocean of time, apathy and despair. We are carrying on the work of St. Leonard by giving lifers new hope in the form of support, programs and eventually a halfway house designed to be known as Life Line.

As far back as 1982, St. Leonard's House Windsor recognized that the alarming increase in the number of lifers serving extremely long sentences was a problem, a new phenomenon to be addressed. The introduction of the 25-year life sentence for those convicted of first-degree murder resulted in unprecedented growth in long-term incarceration. Prior to 1976, there were 750 inmates serving life sentences in Canada who were eligible for parole after seven to 10 years. Currently, there are 1,848 lifers in prison in Canada, with 400 of these facing 25 years before even being considered for parole. At the same time, there are 1,000 lifers serving their sentences in the community under parole supervision.

The response to this situation varies dramatically. The public's fascination with convicted murderers ends with sentencing. The politicians to meet their basic needs. The project are happy with the 25-year sentence as a political trade-off for abolishing the death penalty. Reformers criticize the government for regressive legislation and inordinately long sentences. The Correctional Service of Canada, not surprisingly, grapples with the question of what to do with inmates serving 15, 20, 25 years. Lifers, after being told to put their lives on hold for the next 15 to 25 years, feel abandoned to stumble blindly through most of their sentence, resigning themselves to the deep freeze of endless time. When the release system kicks in at the magic parole-eligibility dates of 10 or 25 years, we are not releasing a violent or dangerous individual, but an institutionalized inmate poorly equipped to deal with independence and likely to be a liability to the community.

Ours is a common-sense approach. One out of three lifers is currently in the community. More are coming. Involving them in worthwhile institutional programs and assisting them in their return to the community improves the likelihood of their success and better protects the community.

Life Line is the first systematic attempt to address the needs of lifers both on the inside and during their transition back to the community. The work of Bill Palmer, a psychologist at Warkworth Institution in Ontario, and later studies by Dr. Mary Lou Dietz of the University of Windsor, laid the groundwork for the Life Line Project. A grant from the Donner Canadian Foundation enabled St. Leonard's House, with

the Correctional Service of Canada and the National Parole Board, to develop an innovative program for long-term inmates. John Braithwaite, who originally challenged St. Leonard's to do something for the 25-year lifer, guided this cooperative process to articulate the three fundamental elements of the Life Line Project:

1. the In-Reach Program, designed to work with lifers in institutions (this program is discussed in the next article);
2. the Life Line Centre, a residential and resource centre designed to provide gradual and supervised reintegration into the community; and
3. the application of the Life Line Project to other communities across Canada.

It is obvious that a program aiming to increase the success of lifers on parole must start in the institution. The Life Line Project started with the In-Reach Program, which was designed to make a positive impact on the lifer in the initial stage of the long sentence. The first In-Reach worker, Tom French, entered Millhaven Institution in January 1991. This was a fitting starting point because Millhaven is where lifers enter the correctional system in Ontario. Initially, many are engulfed with a sense of shock and despair. Lifers want to take a sleeping pill for the next 15 or 25 years to escape their lengthy sentences.

The first challenge is to instill a sense of hope so that despair does not deteriorate into suicide. Tom, himself a paroled lifer, is a reminder to all lifers that there is "life after life." He promotes responsibility, initiative and participation in programs to enrich what would otherwise be mere existence.

The fact is that the majority of convicted murderers will be released into the community, and that time is upon us. Fifteen years have passed since the introduction of the 25-year sentence, and the earliest examples of this new breed of lifers are being considered for release through the Judicial Review process. Are they ready? Are we ready?

Community acceptance of paroled lifers is the cornerstone of the Life Line Project, and a house dedicated for lifers remains a primary goal. There is strong evidence to support the notion that early release is best for both the rehabilitation of the offender and the protection of society. The Life Line Centre, to be located in Windsor, Ontario, will provide a residential program for lifers for up to three years - in other words, for the full period between eligibility for day parole and full parole.

There is no such thing as a single, generic lifers' program, but there are recognized problem areas including institutionalization, sexual relationships, life skills, substance abuse, employment and the need for "reconciliation" through community service. The long period of residence in the Life Line Centre allows individualized programs with graduated levels of participation to challenge the lifer with increasing levels of responsibility and independence over time. Community service will be an integral part of the Life Line Project.

However, inspiring the City of Windsor to embrace the challenge of rehabilitating convicted murderers truly tested the tolerance of the community. A front-page story in the Globe and Mail in April 1990 introduced the Life Line Project with the headline "Windsor Chosen for Halfway House Devoted to Killers." The local media and politicians had a field day. It was a long week for Life Line supporters. The

NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) syndrome represented the dominant message from the opposition. "Why Windsor?" was the rallying point for most issues as civic leaders feared that Windsor would take on the image of the national capital for convicted murderers. However, after intensive community consultation, Windsor seems willing to assume responsibility for its share of paroled lifers. But the community is now asking, "Why Windsor alone?"

Why indeed? There are 1,000 lifers currently in community programs across Canada. This growing number of lifers returning to the community is a national issue. The Life Line Centre in Windsor is conceived of as a pilot project, a model for consideration in other communities. The success of Life Line as a community resource hinges on the willingness of other communities to be moved by fact rather than fear. It is hoped that other communities across Canada will assume responsibility for establishing similar programs that contribute to the success of lifers but, more important, create a safer community.

As Sandra Atkin, the victim of an attempted murder, explains: As a victim, I view Life Line as a viable program to assist lifers to reintegrate into a society totally foreign to them. Success for lifers is not only being able to stay out of prison but being able to become productive members of society who can contribute and give back to society. Life Line will hopefully be a program that will assist these [individuals] in developing themselves positively so that once released on parole, they will not re-enter society and create more victims, but, instead, will...contribute to the communities they live in. We can provide effective rehabilitation programs that extend into the community, or we can continue to ignore the problem and hope for the best. The choice that is made will say a great deal about our values, our society and ourselves.