

The Life Line In-Reach Program

The prototype Life Line Project, in operation now for one year; was designed to identify and facilitate a structured and individualized release plan for inmates serving life sentences in Canadian federal penitentiaries. One component of this two-phase project is now operational. In-Reach, the institutional component, has two primary objectives:

- *to identify and assist lifers in managing the course of their sentence while incarcerated; and*
- *to assist lifers in preparing for judicial review and/or parole.*

While the eventual release decision for lifers must be made by an outside tribunal, it is believed that inmates can actively prepare for the process and are capable of identifying their own needs for successful reintegration into the community.

In-Reach is based on several facts, originating from the use of life sentences in lieu of capital punishment. Since the implementation of this new sentencing provision in 1976, there has been an increasing accumulation of inmates serving life sentences in federal institutions. These inmates are now approaching the point when they are eligible for Judicial Review (after serving 15 years of their sentence) with the faint hope of access to parole. Within the institutions, these inmates tend to receive low priority by service providers because of the length of their sentence. They often become hidden behind the more strident demands posed by short-term inmates, whose release plans dictate immediate attention.

Collectively and individually, these inmates present special needs for correctional staff, professionals and the communities to which they hope to return. The Clients We Serve The profile of the average lifer is anything but the media-promulgated psychopath or serial killer, although these do unfortunately exist in our society. In 1988, statistics identified that three out of four lifers had been sentenced for first- or second-degree murder, with the remainder ranging from dangerous offender status to sentencing for manslaughter or robbery. Three quarters of these individuals had never been in a penitentiary before. In many cases, the one homicide was their only conviction.

In the majority of homicide cases, the victims were spouses or kin, estranged lovers or business acquaintances of the offender. In 40% of the cases, the apparent motive was revenge, jealousy, anger or a quarrel or fight. In almost one third of the cases, alcohol and/or drug consumption was involved. At the time of the crime, most of the offenders were young, poorly educated and unemployed. The majority were under the age of 30, 97% were male, 86% were Caucasian and 6% were native. Most of these lifers expressed remorse for their actions and a need to make amends.

While in prison, lifers are traditionally among the most co-operative inmates, avoiding violence and any identification with the career-criminal subculture. The existence of lifers' groups confirms their awareness of their unique collective identity and a shared value system distinct from the regular prison culture. What Do We Offer? In-Reach workers intend to augment and expand the services offered by the case management team and provide:

- initial and personal contact with all willing lifers, to make them aware of the program and its services;
- support to lifers in contributing to the management of their own sentences;
- participation in case conferences to establish both short- and long-term plans for the inmate, with consideration for the inmate's own objectives;
- assistance to lifers in their eventual movement from higher security to lower security institutions;
- co-operation with the case management team on behalf of the inmate in seeking escorted and unescorted temporary absences, day parole and eventual full parole;
- service as a community and institutional liaison in preparation for Judicial Review and availability as an advocate for the inmate should such services be required by the court;
- assistance in developing a comprehensive parole plan, including identification of community support services, for individuals ready to appear before the National Parole Board;
- support and guidance to the inmate's family throughout these processes;
- attendance at meetings of lifers' groups to stay aware of the collective issues presented at each institution; and
- support for developing special projects for lifers to enhance their sense of accomplishment and worth.

Where Are We Going? We are literally going into every federal institution in Ontario where lifers are incarcerated. We are going to the offices of case management teams, therapeutic professionals, security staff and wardens. We are going every place possible, including regional headquarters, to make everyone aware of our existence and of the pressing needs of the lifers we serve.

It is our hope to serve as a trusted intermediary between lifers and the system they are in, to advance the movement and achieve the specialized care required by these inmates.

It is our objective that all lifers who deserve the opportunity will have input into their own passage through the system and the real prospect of returning to the community better able to deal with the issues that led to incarceration. We hope to assist the inmate at every step of this process.

Of the 700 lifers in the Ontario region, almost half have been interviewed to collect baseline information. At present, 300 lifers are being seen on a regular basis. We know there are many more yet to be reached. Some lifers, as we have discovered, have been without any professional contact for several years, and many of them have retreated into an insular existence revolving around day-to-day routine. We hope to find these lifers and reintegrate them into the process of planning for their release. Examples of Need John was sentenced to life in 1963. He took this sentence seriously and believed he was indeed incarcerated for the rest of his natural life. No one told him that he was eligible, under the old system, for parole in seven years. He did not communicate with staff or other inmates. He is functionally illiterate. Whenever requested to make an appearance before a board or staff member, he would develop symptoms requiring hospitalization. When the In-Reach worker finally cornered him, the worker literally became his "life line" and is now the only channel through which this inmate will communicate. At this stage, we have begun to develop release plans for John.

Jim has reached his parole-eligibility date of 10 years on a life sentence. When asked by the In-Reach worker what release plans he had made, Jim responded that he did not think he should be released just yet because of the state of the Canadian economy. He thought he should stay put until the recession was over. The In-Reach worker encouraged him to engage in psychological services.

Bill was referred to the program and responded enthusiastically to the potential benefits of the In-Reach Program. He stated, however, that he did not require assistance as he was serving life, with eligibility at 10 years. Now that he had served 18 years, he said, he knew the system well enough not to need assistance. It is clear, though, that assistance was required, as Bill had not yet made parole despite being eligible for the last eight years. Who Are We? Two individuals are presently employed as In-Reach workers, both former federal inmates. Tom French is a lifer who requires little introduction in the correctional system. He has been an active advocate of inmates' rights throughout his years of incarceration and since his release.

Russ Elliott, who served 12 years in federal institutions, was recently hired as an In-Reach worker. Since his release from prison, Russ has been developing services for young offenders in the community and has established an extensive network of services for these youths in rural eastern Ontario.

Together, Tom and Russ make a strong team, dedicated to helping those lifers who are ready to return to the community.

For additional information, or to offer constructive criticism or advice, Tom French and Russ Elliott may be contacted at the following address: Life Line, Tom French - Russ Elliott, P.O. Box 246, Station A, Kingston, Ontario K7M 5E0; Tel. (613) 546-0047; Fax (613) 542-1419.