

## Redesigning corrections for federally sentenced women in Canada

Historically, female federal offenders have been one of the most neglected segments of the Canadian correctional system. The sole prison for women was located in Kingston, Ontario, forcing many female offenders to be incarcerated far from their families and communities, separated not only by walls and bars, but by a great geographical distance. In a sense, these women were exiled.

Further, although this was a prison for women, most of its organization, structure and programs merely reproduced those designed for prisons for men.

In a nutshell, the correctional system was attempting to meet the needs of generic offenders, not female offenders, and clearly that was not sufficient.

In 1990, action was taken to address this failing. The Solicitor General of Canada announced that, based on the recommendations of *Creating Choices: Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women*, *the Prison for Women would be replaced by five correctional facilities for women all focusing on community-based programs.*<sup>(2)</sup>

*Featuring the new Atlantic regional facility, this article examines how the new facilities will attempt to provide treatment, programs and, in essence, a correctional experience relevant to and appropriate for women.* Where will the new facilities be located? Using approved location-selection criteria, the Correctional Service of Canada carefully chose the sites for the new facilities. In the end, the following communities were chosen:

**Truro, Nova Scotia,**  
for the Atlantic regional facility;

**Kitchener, Ontario,**  
for the Ontario regional facility;

**Joliette, Quebec,**  
for the Quebec regional facility;

**Edmonton, Alberta,**  
for the Prairies regional facility; and

**Maple Creek - Nekaneet, Saskatchewan,**  
for the Healing Lodge for aboriginal women.

The Burnaby Correctional Centre, already in existence in **Burnaby, British Columbia**, will serve as the Pacific regional facility. Profile of federally sentenced women Identifying the needs of federally sentenced women was our first priority. *Creating Choices: Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women* provided the following profile of federally sentenced women.<sup>(3)</sup>

There are approximately 300 women incarcerated at any one time in Canadian federal and provincial institutions, serving sentences of between two years and life. Their ages range from 19 to 74. Approximately 15% are aboriginal women, and two thirds of the women are mothers - often the sole supporters of their children.

The women have a limited education and few marketable skills, and they either are receiving social assistance or have low-paying jobs.

An appalling majority of the women have been victims of sexual and physical abuse (75% of non-aboriginal offenders and 85% of aboriginal offenders), two thirds were misusing alcohol or drugs at the time of their offence, and 59% have engaged or are engaging in self-injurious behaviour. The suicide rate of this population is considerably higher than average - there were seven suicides in the last three years at the Prison for Women (within an average population of 115).

Perhaps most importantly, the majority of the women are serving their first federal sentence - more than a third have no previous convictions. Operational model To meet the unique needs of the women described by this profile, the Truro Federal Women's Facility has developed an innovative program model. Programming, and the entire facility for that matter, will be community-oriented, holistic, woman-centred, culturally sensitive, supportive of autonomy and self-esteem, and oriented toward release.

The facility will provide both on-site and off-site programming, with the emphasis on participation in off-site programs - when the offender does not pose a risk to the community. Overall, programs will be aimed at helping women learn to make informed and meaningful decisions about their lives. Treatment programs Treatment programs will focus on the areas of physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse, suicide prevention and the prevention of self-injurious behaviour. Additional programs will address parenting, prenatal and postnatal care, personal development, and other needs identified as the facility grows and progresses.

More traditional programs will focus on living skills, spirituality, education, employment, vocational training, and recreation or leisure.

The objective will be to have the women's daily living experiences mirror, as closely as possible, life in the community. Children's program Perhaps one of the more innovative and controversial aspects of the new facility is the multi-faceted children's program: some children will have temporary visits with their mothers, while others will actually live with their mothers at the institution.

Child care for children living in the facilities will permit the mothers to continue participating in programs.

The primary criterion for admission to, and ongoing participation in, the children's program will always be the best interest of the child.

We also hope to work in partnership with the community and appropriate government agencies to develop an active foster-home network for those children not living in the facility but wishing to live

near their mother. Security The facility will have a 21-bed capacity (phasing up to 30), and the security practices will always be a balance of supervision and sound programming within a supportive environment. Security will be essentially dynamic; therefore, all staff will be correctional staff.

In general, the security policies and procedures will be based on the fact that few of these women are high-risk offenders. Conclusion The challenge will be to provide the women housed in the regional facilities, particularly in the smaller regions, with all the required programming, despite their small numbers. If we fail, they could end up more disadvantaged than they are now, and this is certainly one of their fears.

These new facilities will help the Correctional Service of Canada meet the many needs of federally sentenced women. The challenge is to put theory into practice.

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(2)*Creating Choices: Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1990).

(3)Creating Choices: Report on the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women.