

Putting the "community" into community corrections

A Toronto school auditorium is packed with 500-700 concerned citizens ready to "discuss" the proposed opening of a new community correctional centre in their neighbourhood.

At the front, a table has been set for a panel of three or four representatives from the Correctional Service of Canada. Their task this evening is not for the faint at heart. They will listen to the concerns of these community members and at the same time try to convince them that this opening will be a good thing for both the offender and the community.

The discussion begins but quickly deteriorates. Accusations fly, catcalls like "get out of town - we don't want you in our neighbourhood" that started as whispers explode into loud echoes (prime footage for the 11 o'clock news). Emotions fear, anger, frustration - run high.

A few community members have come to listen to the arguments for and against the proposed opening, but feeling outnumbered, they say nothing. The meeting ends. Some walk away with a sense of having won the battle, but have they? This is an all-too-common scenario for those of us who work in community corrections. Anyone who has ever been involved in this type of forum agrees that it is not an effective way to share information or solicit constructive feedback from the public. Why doesn't it work?

To answer this question, we must evaluate how the Correctional Service of Canada has communicated with the public, the growing and changing needs of the public, and the means of dealing with these challenges. A negative public perception The Correctional Service of Canada's top priority is the protection of society. In the community; the Service accomplishes this by closely supervising and helping offenders reintegrate into their communities by helping them find jobs, upgrade their education, work on family issues or deal with substance-abuse problems.

To achieve these goals, the Service must rely on the cooperation of the community. However, although information campaigns have been organized in the past, they have been shortlived because of lack of time and resources.

Correctional Service of Canada communication with the public can, therefore, essentially be described as reactive - the Service responds to individual requests and situations.

The problem with this approach is that the public has formed the perception that the Service is a closed and inaccessible organization. Even more damaging, the Service is often seen as unwilling to share information or disinterested in gathering input from the community.

At the same time, the community has dramatically increased its criticism of the criminal justice system. Why? A big reason is that many people think that crime has become rampant. You just have to pick up any of Toronto's daily newspapers to read another article alleging that crime rates are skyrocketing and our communities are unsafe. Citizens feel powerless to deal with this threat and are angry about their governments' inability or unwillingness to "clamp down" on the individuals responsible for this crime wave.

Add to this the public's general confusion and lack of knowledge about the criminal justice system, and it is no surprise that the community takes an adversarial stance toward corrections. Immediate challenges
The first and most important challenge is changing how the Service communicates with the public. This isn't an easy task, but it is manageable.

Communities demand more information about correctional policies and procedures and expect the Service to seek their opinions in a more meaningful way and to consider these opinions when formulating new initiatives or policies. The Service must, therefore, establish communication links with communities to meet their demands for dialogue.

The media, the policing community, provincial corrections, provincial crown attorneys, the judiciary, victims' groups and minority communities are all important groups to include when initiating "public dialogue on a vision of what's possible instead of what's wrong."⁽²⁾ How to do it The Service must move from reactive to proactive communication strategies. Public consultation has been used as a communication tactic for many years, but its effectiveness has been questioned. In the past, "consultation" was used primarily after decisions had been made and as a response to community outcry. However, true public consultation is effective only if it is undertaken in good faith as a mechanism to open discussions with the community

To that end, two Correctional Service of Canada representatives spent the last year and a half in public consultation with 35 representatives of a Toronto community about plans to reopen a community correctional centre. Although the centre was not reopened, there was a general consensus among the participants (including those opposed to the reopening) that the consultation process was very worthwhile and should be repeated in the future. As one participant explained, "it was the first time we really felt part of a process where our opinions were taken seriously by corrections staff."

A precedent-setting result of this consultation was a formalized contract signed by representatives of the community and the Service. The contract sets out how future public consultations in this area will be handled. Mandates, roles, responsibilities and, most important, accountabilities were painstakingly outlined. This type of result goes a long way toward rebuilding relationships between local and correctional communities. Toronto initiative In 1989, the Toronto 27 Group (made up of representatives from the community; volunteer organizations, federal and provincial corrections, national and provincial parole boards, and police) was given a mandate to educate the community about the criminal justice system.

Since that time, the group has organized numerous events, its most successful being Reels for Justice, an innovative criminal justice "video day" addressing youth. Along with showing videos, guest speakers talk about street gangs, drinking and driving, prostitution, violence in dating relationships, and freedom of expression.

Five video days have been organized for the Greater Metropolitan Toronto area, and more than 2,000 grade 11 and 12 students have participated. The demand for this type of crime prevention and awareness program is so great that the group is now preparing a "how to" manual for teachers who want to organize

similar events in their own school. Moving forward The correctional system is not the creation of a few select individuals. It is a societally developed system, and for this reason it is vital that the community remain involved in the development and implementation of policies and procedures. Community corrections must continue to move forward by emphasizing more positive working relationships with the public, starting with education and true public consultation. Lest we forget, "community" is the key word in community corrections.

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(2)D. Theman, *A Proposed Regional Consultation Strategy*, (Kingston: Correctional Service of Canada, Ontario Region, 1993).