

## Bridging jurisdictional gaps: The Federation of Canadian Municipalities and corrections

Canadians value the safety of their streets as a distinguishing feature of our society. In a recent national survey of 687 women, respondents ranked low crime rates and safety as top priorities when choosing a community to live in.<sup>(2)</sup>

However, while public safety is paramount to defining our quality of life, there are fears that public safety is eroding. Now, more than ever, the public seems to want immediate and dramatic action against crime.

Municipal politicians are particularly sensitive to these concerns, as the impact is felt directly in their communities. Previously, these officials might simply have joined the chorus of voices and limited their involvement to criticisms - traditionally, criminal justice matters have not been within their jurisdiction.

But times are changing. Elected officials from all levels of government are mobilizing their communities and launching initiatives to reduce crime.

As part of the Correctional Service of Canada strategy to reach out and work with those interested in making a contribution to corrections, the Service has entered into a partnership with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and the National Parole Board. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities is a national organization with close to 600 member municipalities, representing 70% of the Canadian population.

The objective of this alliance is simply to improve communication and understanding (on all sides) and thus foster good working relationships between the municipal and federal governments in corrections-related matters. Community-based corrections From a community leader's perspective, community-based corrections can be viewed as empowering the community by giving it an important role in the reintegration of offenders into society.

Municipal politicians realize that most incarcerated offenders will eventually return to their "home community" upon release. Often, these are also the same communities where they committed their offence. Therefore, there is an inherent motivation for communities to be involved in the reintegration process.

Private citizens (rather than government) have already introduced several programs critical to the correctional agenda. These include parole and probation, community residential facilities and halfway houses, community service programs, and work release programs.

The simple fact is that correctional programs require the support of the community to be successful. The Correctional Service of Canada, like any large organization, risks alienating the public if it becomes out of step with changing social and political climates. Controversies surrounding the criminal justice system have never been more prominent, and there is intense public pressure to change the criminal justice system.

For this reason, a joint committee made up of representatives of the Correctional Service of Canada, the National Parole Board and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities has been established. The

committee consists of three senior Service personnel, the vice chair of the Parole Board and six municipal leaders from communities of various sizes, and meets frequently in different locations across Canada to examine correctional issues of concern to the community.

According to the committee's co-chair, Brian Mason, a City of Edmonton alderman, "municipally elected politicians are concerned about the same things all citizens are concerned about, public protection. By working in partnership with corrections and parole officials, we can more effectively convey the concerns and needs of the community" Benefits This liaison between municipally elected representatives and parole and corrections officials offers important benefits, with many leading to new initiatives. Community leaders are developing a greater understanding of the criminal justice system through their work with the committee and are sharing this understanding with their communities.

The committee also serves as a two-way communication channel between federal corrections officials and the National Parole Board and local government leaders. This is important to all participants, since constructive public participation is integral to the success of programs designed to assist in the reintegration of offenders into the community.

The members of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities realize that the joint committee is not the cure-all that will eliminate criminal elements in society. But they also realize that more traditional criminal justice partnerships are not always the most economical or effective solutions. Joint committee action While it is tempting to promote quick-fix solutions and a "get tough approach," this type of thinking is superficial, simplistic and counterproductive. The joint committee instead advocates solutions that involve the community in corrections.

As part of its agenda, the joint committee is committed to the concept of the correctional system as an integral partner in crime prevention - municipal leaders in the Federation of Canadian Municipalities want to be able to reassure the people in their communities that corrections is an integral component of community safety. Therefore, these municipal leaders want to be assured that treatment programs continue after offenders are released, that released offenders are supervised intensively and for a long time, that incarceration is used for the truly dangerous and violent offenders, and that the risk that each offender poses to the community is seriously evaluated.

To these ends, the joint committee has proposed the creation of a registry of sex offenders to alert and inform those working in potentially high-risk areas, such as schools and volunteer organizations assisting children. Additionally, the joint committee feels that the correctional system and parole officials should place greater emphasis on the victims of crime.

Another concern is adequate community support for offenders. This concept is still rather new to community leaders. As they cope with dwindling resources and mounting pressures to provide basic services for law-abiding, tax-paying citizens, the concept of providing support for offenders is, at first glance, not politically popular and difficult to defend. However, as Alderman Mason stated, "a system that would allow the cold release of offenders at the end of their sentence without any community programming is dangerous."

The joint committee has also closely examined community profiles to determine the extent of crime in

their communities, the effect it has on them, and the role that corrections can assume in this context. Other activities of the joint committee include visits to correctional facilities, meetings with corrections and parole officials, dialogues with representatives of victims' groups, and participation in mock parole hearings.

Although the joint committee focuses essentially on increasing awareness of community-based corrections, some participants have become involved in practical initiatives. The City of Calgary and corrections officials are currently exploring the possibility of establishing a work release program in Calgary that would involve minimum-security offenders performing a few hours of community service, such as road clearing, snow removal or clean-up. Discussion The members of the joint committee realize that there are no easy solutions to the problem of crime. However, the committee signifies an attempt to bridge the gap between two levels of government on an important issue that affects all Canadians in every community.

Originally, representatives of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities were apprehensive about entering into a venture with the federal government, fearing that the federal government would "download" costs and accountability to municipal governments, particularly during times of fiscal restraint.

However, committee members successfully navigated that challenge at the outset, and as Jim Davidson, a committee member from the Correctional Service of Canada (Atlantic Region), said, "responsible examination of that environment has strengthened the need for partnership and our resolve to work together to develop innovative solutions. The joint committee can hopefully contribute (positively) to the jurisdictional split dialogue that is an unavoidable reality among governments today."

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(2)L. Kay, "How Women Rank Canada's 25 Biggest Cities," *Chatelaine*, 67, 4 (April 1994): 50.