

## Citizens' Advisory Committees: Allowing communities to hear and be heard

The Canadian correctional system has made great strides in recent years toward forming a closer and more cooperative relationship with communities. Canadian citizens want and have the right to know how and why the judicial and correctional systems work.

The Correctional Service of Canada has responded to this reality by establishing and recognizing Citizens' Advisory Committees as a means of interaction between the Service and the community.

These committees are made up of concerned citizens who volunteer their time and skills to inform their communities about the correctional process and to contribute to the overall development of correctional facilities and programs. More than 500 citizens are now active in more than 50 Citizens' Advisory Committees across Canada. Historical perspective There has been some level of community involvement in the federal correctional system for many years. Almost 30 years ago, some institutions were already forming various "citizen committees." In 1973, a directive of the Commissioner of Corrections provided for the establishment of Citizens' Advisory Committees across Canada and these committees were formally recognized in the 1977 *MacGuigan Report* (a parliamentary sub-committee document).<sup>(2)</sup>

The report stated that prisons belong to the public and that the people who pay for them have a vested interest in their remaining peaceful and serving the public good. The report also stated that no penitentiary service can succeed without the understanding and participation of the public.<sup>(3)</sup> This was public acknowledgment of the need for community representatives to monitor and evaluate correctional policies and procedures.

The report recommended that Citizens' Advisory Committees be established in all penal institutions, noting that correctional agencies had traditionally operated in isolation and that the general public had never been well informed about corrections or the criminal justice system.<sup>(4)</sup>

The committees were to help gain the support of the community by educating and informing the public about the penitentiary system and prison life, and were to help the correctional system by informing it of its shortcomings. It was also emphasized that the committees must represent a true cross section of society, including individuals from all walks of life, to reach the public at all levels.<sup>(5)</sup>

Today, all Correctional Service of Canada institutions and parole offices are strongly encouraged to establish an advisory committee. How do the committees work? In consultation with the elected chairperson of the local committee, each appropriate Correctional Service of Canada manager convenes a local committee meeting approximately once a month. Further, all local committees are members of a regional Citizens' Advisory Committee (one each for the Service's five administrative regions). The Service's regional deputy commissioners and regional staff must ensure that the regional Citizens' Advisory Committee members are consulted about the development and implementation of regional Service policies and programs.

A national executive committee also coordinates recommendations made by local and regional committees on policies and programs that affect the Service as a whole. These recommendations are then

presented to the Commissioner of Corrections.

In general, the committees (at all levels) have three major roles: they provide advice, they provide liaison and they act as independent observers. Advice Through open discussion with the community, offenders and the Correctional Service of Canada, the committees provide consultation and advice on the development of correctional facilities, plans and programs.

The Corrections and Conditional Release Act gives committee members access to any part of a penitentiary or parole office, any staff member or offender, and any hearing. As a result, committee members regularly visit correctional facilities and program sites and meet with managers, staff and offenders. Liaison Citizens' Advisory Committees also act as communication links between the Correctional Service of Canada and the community, simply letting the community know "what is going on" within the Service. This positive, ongoing communication has many benefits: it can eliminate popular myths and stereotypes about corrections, it opens up discussions about contradictory public attitudes, it educates the local community, and it builds support for the correctional process. Independent observers Finally, committee members act as independent observers of the day-to-day activities and operations of the Correctional Service of Canada. They assist the Service in evaluating and monitoring the care and supervision of offenders and the programs provided to them to ensure that all is in accordance with stated values and approved regulations and procedures (such as the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act*).

Further, an **independent** observer's objective report of an institutional incident can help balance public reaction and add perspective. The local committee can let community members know what is being done to correct a situation and assure them of their safety. At the same time, committee members can provide both the community and the Service with information on any dilemmas or problems related to the crisis. A corrections-community partnership To receive the full benefits of volunteer participation, Citizens' Advisory Committees must be willingly and demonstrably accepted within the Correctional Service of Canada. To be effective in their roles, volunteers must be seen and be supported by management.

A review of the committees' involvement with, and impact on, federal community corrections so far reveals that this has occurred. There has been a strong partnership between committee members and the Service.

It is also time for communities to realize that they too have a responsibility to help offenders successfully reintegrate into society. We all have a stake in making our society a safe place to live. At the same time, the community must become more sensitive to the awesome task faced by correctional systems. Citizens' Advisory Committees are ideally situated to assist in informing the community both of its responsibilities and of the efforts of the Service.

Perhaps just as important, the growing involvement of the public in setting correctional agendas reflects the increasing public accountability of the Correctional Service of Canada. Correctional work is not an isolated activity performed in a social vacuum, and the idea of locking up offenders and simply throwing away the key is now quite obsolete.

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- (1)Citizens' Advisory Committee, P.O. Box 584, Newcastle, New Brunswick E1V 3T7.
- (2)*Report to Parliament by the Sub-Committee on the Penitentiary System in Canada (MacGuigan Report)*, 1977.
- (3)*MacGuigan Report*, 1977:16.
- (4)*MacGuigan Report*, 1977, Recommendation 49.
- (5)*MacGuigan Report*, 1977:126.