

## Creating choices through community consultation and partnerships: The site-selection process for the Edmonton federally sentenced women's facility

It is no longer possible, nor is it desirable, to build a new correctional facility without involving members of the local community. Today's public demands that they be closely involved in all government decisions affecting their lives.

At the same time, the Correctional Service of Canada has a mandate to enhance public understanding of and support for, the Service. To fulfil this mandate, we must ensure that we are a positive presence in the community and contribute socially, culturally and economically to our host neighbourhoods.

Creating Choices: The Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women<sup>(2)</sup> *also advocates this philosophy of community correctness, stating that one objective for the Service is to become a "good corporate citizen" contributing "positively to the environment, to the neighbourhood and to the social service sector."*

*This article chronicles the establishment of the federally sentenced women's facility in Edmonton, a process in which openness and public consultation were much more than a public relations exercise - they were key elements in the decision-making process.* Miscommunication In December 1992, Edmonton was chosen as the site for a new federally sentenced women's facility. On April 2, 1993, Correctional Service of Canada officials met with a large number of Edmonton community representatives to explain the site-selection process, to introduce me as the newly appointed warden of the facility, and to ask for assistance in arranging public consultation and information sessions.

The community representatives were advised that a federally owned site (Griesbach Military Base) was considered a preferred location, as it was the only one of seven federally owned properties in the area that met all the site-selection criteria. However, those present were assured that this was only a preferred site and that the important criterion of community acceptance had yet to be measured. At this point, the community representatives present appeared very pleased with the site.

Unfortunately, the local media inaccurately reported that Griesbach was the **chosen** site, leading the public to believe that the promised opportunity for public input had been denied.

As a result, opposition to the proposal mounted quickly. A large and vocal group known as the North Edmonton Taxpayers Association organized quickly, distributing hundreds of pamphlets containing erroneous information. Ten thousand petition signatures were also collected to "stop the prison."

In the face of mounting opposition, the Service, in consultation with local community leaders, determined that the planned public information sessions were now even more important than before. Six public meetings were held in an effort to respond to the fears and concerns of the local residents.

As anticipated, the concerns included community safety and a potential reduction of neighbouring property values. More surprising, however, was the overwhelming public conviction that the decision had already been made and this was not genuine public consultation.

Responding to the concerns about the decision making process, the Solicitor General of Canada announced that the site-selection process would be expanded to include a review of all federally, provincially, municipally and privately owned land in the area.

A site-selection committee made up of citizens from each of the city's six municipal electoral wards was also established, and this grass-roots committee worked diligently to assess 60 properties against the established selection criteria, finally submitting a short list of six sites for further consideration. Committee members then participated in 18 public meetings, working with the Correctional Service of Canada to reassure the community that the level of public acceptance was being measured fairly and impartially.

On October 25, 1994, the site selection committee unanimously recommended a site (a different site in the west end of the city) to the federal Commissioner of Corrections. Not coincidentally, this was the same date as the federal election, further depoliticizing the process - the committee didn't know what the results of the election would be and, therefore, could not be accused of favouring one property over another for political reasons.

Soon after, this recommendation was accepted and announced publicly. Since then, there has been virtually no expressed opposition to the project. Elements of success No one element led to the successful conclusion of the Edmonton site selection process. One significant factor, however, was that when the public felt angry and disempowered there was a demonstrated willingness on the part of the Correctional Service of Canada to compromise and change the process.

Another contributing factor was the early appointment of a warden and my close involvement in the public consultation process. This put a face on a large, impersonal government organization. People knew they had an individual to contact if they had questions or concerns before and, perhaps more important, after the facility opened.

Another element of success was that this was a grass-roots exercise. The early involvement of the community in the site-selection process was extremely effective, as is the ongoing commitment to the establishment and maintenance of an effective Citizens' Advisory Committee.

However, for the Correctional Service of Canada to enter into true community-based consultation, it was necessary to empower members of the community. Therefore, it was important to ensure that the process was community driven and that a Correctional Service of Canada agenda would not be imposed on the volunteer participants. The Service had to be willing to compromise and to act on the suggestions of the community, even when those suggestions changed the facility's direction somewhat. The community representatives had to become part of the team, recognized individually and collectively as having a level of expertise.

Perhaps most important (and not surprisingly), communication was a key factor in generating community support. In Edmonton, the Service made great efforts to enhance media relations and to enlist the media's assistance in communicating factual information. It is also important that the Service communicate

regularly and effectively with federal, provincial and municipally elected officials. These officials are routinely contacted by their constituents and, therefore, need to be informed participants in the process.

The development of new and nontraditional partnerships also paved the way to improved community relations. Early in the process, it became apparent that a number of different interest groups strongly supported the establishment of the facility. Such groups included our traditional partners (such as church groups and police agencies) and some nontraditional supporters, including the Chamber of Commerce, business organizations and women's groups. Coordination of these diverse interest groups expanded our information network, and our support base grew significantly.

Finally, one has only to look at the design of the new facility to see how community involvement is being encouraged. At the front of the property, there will be two sports fields designed for joint community and facility use. The public will also be able to easily access all program areas, such as the chapel, gymnasiums, meeting rooms and classrooms - without having to enter the inmate living areas. The benefits of community involvement Although the spin-off effects of community involvement are too numerous to list, there are several notable perks. One important benefit is that the community has shown a willingness to share the costs of facility development and program delivery, which enables the facility to offer a larger range of opportunities to the federally sentenced women than originally envisioned.

Along the same lines, a strong network of volunteers will greatly increase program availability, and the willingness of the business community to enter into joint ventures will have long-range positive effects on employment opportunities for federally sentenced women.

This very public initiative has also captured the attention and interest of the academic community, resulting in our involvement in a number of research projects - the results of which will be put into practice in the new facilities for federally sentenced women. The Correctional Service of Canada stands to benefit greatly from this research, particularly in areas where the Service currently lacks expertise (such as feminist approaches to treatment or programming for victims of abuse).

Perhaps one of the most important benefits has been the generation of creative and innovative program ideas. The combination of different areas of expertise has had an enormous impact on the overall development of the Edmonton facility. For example, programming focusing on volunteer opportunities for offenders is generating great enthusiasm and could eventually involve pairing offenders with lonely seniors or troubled teens. Inner-city hot-lunch programs would provide another opportunity for offenders to put something back into the community. A new beginning It might appear that community consultation is no longer required now that the problems related to site selection and municipal rezoning have been resolved. However, this milestone is actually a new beginning. The facility's continued success requires ongoing community consultation. We now have the foundation on which to build a community-based facility. The future is, of course, uncertain, but the Edmonton experience has proven that community consultation can and must be much more than a public relations exercise.

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