

A network of support for offender families

The Canada Committee of the International Year of the Family recently affirmed that the family is still universally recognized as the basic unit in society and continues to be the preferred structure for providing and receiving emotional and material support.⁽²⁾ Further, despite its problems, the family still generates the greatest degree of personal satisfaction among Canadians.⁽³⁾

The permanence of the family is recognized by caregivers everywhere. For example, health-care systems recognize that the family is a primary caregiver in society. A similar understanding must drive our response to criminal activity. The family is a primary delivery point for personal growth and change. Even where family relationships are unhealthy, it is better to see the relationships as dynamic factors to be worked with than as chains to be broken.⁽⁴⁾

This article, therefore, identifies some of the pressures placed on offender families and highlights a network of programs that try to provide some measure of support to this vital component of offender rehabilitation. Prison - a negative family experience We seldom think about the family until there is a crisis. Prison is such a crisis and the incarceration of a family member severely affects the rest of the family. Researchers have identified eight areas of primary concern for the families of incarcerated men:

- money;
- raising children alone;
- general loneliness;
- fears related to the offender's release;
- housing;
- hostility from friends;
- isolation within the community; and
- fears related to the offender's treatment while incarcerated.⁽⁵⁾

However, the negative impact can be best expressed if personalized. For example, one family member described the correctional system as unresponsive to requests for information, unconcerned about dirty washrooms and gum stuck to the floor, indifferent to worn-out furniture in private family visitation areas, intolerant of criticism and likely to take out anger against a complaining family member on the offender.

Whether the description is accurate or not, it reveals how one family member views the correctional experience. Family members generally experience prison as a hostile and complicated environment. Isolated from others in similar situations, they tend to feel that their difficulties can't be solved. They are in need of, and often open to, support. Family support areas There are six potential family support areas:

- increase the resources generally available to families;
- provide assistance to particularly vulnerable families (such as helping pay the phone and/or travel costs of an offender family on welfare);
- help improve the capacity of family members to fulfil their responsibilities;
- provide supplemental services and supports (such as child care);

- assist family members through transition stages (such as when the offender is released into the community); and
- strengthen available community supports.⁽⁶⁾

The Canadian Families and Corrections Network The Canadian Families and Corrections Network was developed to promote the empowerment of offender families.⁽⁷⁾ Empowerment refers to a family taking control of the management of their lives and future.

The network is made up of community-oriented citizens, volunteer groups, private agencies, inmate committees and penitentiary administrations - all committed to improving the well-being of offender families. Alone, these groups have unequal resources and are seldom in contact. Together, they have the opportunity to make a real and long-lasting difference.

Its constitution describes the network as "united to encourage leadership, the sharing of resources and the development of policies, practices and programs that enable inmates and their families to build holistic family and community relations."

The network's basic goal is to promote the recognition of the potential contribution of families within the criminal justice process and to allow their voice to be heard through relevant research, policy and program initiatives. Above all, however, the network strives to promote communication among its members.

Offender family members play an important role within the network. Some are on the network's steering committee and all may participate in the network's meetings and projects. Most decision making is also by consensus.

The network hosted the fourth North American Conference on the Family and Corrections in Quebec City in October 1993. Consultation sessions on offender family policy were held in Alberta in February 1995. The enormous energy behind, and potential of, work with offender families is dramatically illustrated by the work of some of the members of the Canadian Families and Corrections Network. For example, Bridge House (Kingston, Ontario) provides a place for out-of-town families to stay while visiting an incarcerated member of their family. Offender family members and former inmates are heavily involved in the operation of the organization, which now manages two residences with an annual budget of \$400,000. A similar program is in operation in British Columbia.

The Women in the Shadows program (Fredericton, New Brunswick) allows the wives of inmates to meet weekly for fellowship and support. The meetings vary from "game nights" and picnics to focusing on specific common struggles to spiritual centring. Confidential emergency help (such as money, food and clothes) is also available through local religious organizations.

The Salvation Army Relink program (Ottawa, Ontario) is a series of programs that cover topics such as awareness of the criminal justice system, transportation, family support and parenting, life management (cognitive skills training) and using the library. A reintegration retreat for reunited offender families is also available.

Another example is the Working Group for Families of Prisoners, which was formed in 1990 to give a voice to families of offenders in Kingston-area federal prisons. The group's first project was a workshop for inmates, family members, corrections staff, community agencies and the network's steering committee on the specific needs of offender families. As a follow up, the group has developed workshops on maintaining positive "couple" relationships.

As well, the John Howard Society (Winnipeg, Manitoba) has organized institutional staff, volunteers, offender families and former inmates to offer support to offender families in Winnipeg. The goal is to heal any damage caused by crime and the prison experience. A spiritual footnote If you just scratch the surface of many of the groups working with offender families, you will find many communities that give freely of their time and resources so that these families may experience fullness of life, healing, freedom and growth. Empowering the family and freeing the spirit are comfortable partners, and both are forever.

- (1)Chaplaincy, Correctional Service of Canada, 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9.
- (2)A. Ruffo and R. Couchman, *Canadian Families* (Ottawa: The Vanier Institute of the Family, 1994): iii.
- (3)Ruffo and Couchman, *Canadian Families*: 1.
- (4)Workshop presentation, North American Conference on the Family and Corrections, Quebec City, 1993. Proceeding transcripts may be obtained by sending \$10.00 to Canadian Families and Corrections Network, 333 Kingscourt, Kingston, Ontario K7K 4R4.
- (5)A.A. Estrin, "Family Support and Criminal Justice," *Putting Families First*, S. L. Kagan and B. Wessbourd, eds. (San Franciso: Joey-Bass Publishers, 1994): 166.
- (6)Ruffo and Couchman, *Canadian Families*: 17-19.
- (7)The Canadian Environmental Network was an early model for the Canadian Families and Corrections Network.