

A gradual evolution

Bowden Institution owes a great deal to the traditions and corporate climate created by staff during our conversion to a federal correctional institution. Bowden Institution was purchased from the Alberta government in 1974. The staff who remained with the institution had a tradition of openness and empathy -- a tradition on which we continue to build.

The original Bowden staff were joined by experienced correctional staff from other federal institutions who brought their expertise into the culture of the institution. Bowden Institution's population has also grown slowly through the years, which has allowed staff to develop consistent, high-quality offender programming in a safe and secure correctional environment.

This article examines Bowden Institution's general approach to offender programming in an attempt to obtain an institutional perspective on offender programming by focusing on the philosophy and practices of one particular institution.

A gradual evolution

Programming has evolved in all areas of the institution since 1983. For example, community resources were unable to deal with the demand for inmate addiction programming, but roughly 68% of Bowden inmates had used alcohol, drugs or both at the time of their offence. There was a clear link between substance abuse and criminal behavior.

Therefore, an institutional substance abuse program was developed, to be delivered by trained correctional staff. The success of this program can be directly attributed to departmental support and cooperation, as well as to a general understanding of the potential benefits for both inmates and staff. The program could have been derailed any number of times, but it was consistently supported. Both staff and inmates took pride in "their" program.

Trust was a major concern for inmates during the initial program planning stages. For example, inmates were concerned that correctional officers would be so security oriented that classroom discussions would not remain confidential. Both inmates and staff clearly had to take risks to develop a real communication process.

Institutional staff also worked hard to keep each other informed. Staff meetings and briefings were frequent, as were staff training sessions and social events to encourage interaction among the various institutional departments. Traditional communication barriers gradually dropped as more programs were developed. Staff-inmate interaction also improved throughout the institution.

This program served as a catalyst for other programming within the institution. Other programs were soon developed based on the same model.

The next step ...

Both life skills and anger management programs soon followed. A sex offender program and a nation-wide series of cognitive living skills programs were also added because many inmates could not be accommodated at specialized facilities.

Today, Bowden Institution is one of the largest prisons in Canada and offers a wide range of inmate programs -- all to help inmates acquire skills, correct their dysfunctions, and seek alternatives to crime when they are released.

All parts of the institution have worked together to achieve this result. One of the first priorities was to create a work environment that involved staff in assessing inmate needs and formulating correctional plans that identify criminogenic factors and encourage inmates to participate in programming to address these factors. This has been crucial to our recent success in developing and delivering high-quality inmate programming.

A coordinated approach

Bowden Institution strives for a coordinated approach to programming and treatment. Correctional plans often hit rough spots and must be revised. We rely on communication, trust, cooperation and shared responsibility to facilitate this process. No single person or department can meet all inmate needs or assume sole responsibility for intervention.

Case managers are, therefore, involved at all stages of the process and are always in contact with available resources. The goal is to provide the right programming at the right time to accommodate an individual inmate's sincere desire to change.

Obviously, this requires cooperation between inmates and case management staff. However, work supervisors, teachers, chaplains, native Elders, liaison officers and staff involved in program delivery all help form the "feedback loop" that reports back to case management staff on how individual offenders are functioning.

A long-range plan

The key to effective correctional programming is creating and maintaining a safe environment, anchored by the belief that inmates can change. Dynamic security practices can ensure a safe environment, while allowing for the risks necessary to encourage inmate change. Bowden Institution's staff and volunteers take a "can do" approach to programming. However, the inmates also understand that a certain standard of behaviour is expected from them.

This philosophy has served Bowden well. It allows inmates and staff to interact fully, break down communication barriers and create a learning environment.

Bowden Institution's major strength is its staff's ability to look beyond the prison walls and plan for what might be. Our first priority is public safety, but this is best served if the inmates of Bowden Institution actually change their lives and have effective relapse-prevention plans in place when they are released.

The greatest tribute ever given to Bowden Institution's inmate programming is a simple statement made by a former inmate now on conditional release -- "the programs I took at Bowden have given [me] my life back."

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