

## Looking back at 25 years of offender programming

*The role of a parole officer was considerably different from what it is today when I was working my way into the then National Parole Service during the early 1970s. The National Parole Service was centralized in Ottawa, reports were mailed to Ottawa from area offices, and case preparation was done largely by Ottawa analysts. Specific offender cases were heard in the institutions, but by travelling National Parole Board panels assisted by local parole officers.*

*Conditional release assessments focused primarily on institutional adjustment, whether the inmate had obtained the maximum benefit from incarceration, and the degree of support available to the offender in his or her home community. A job, school participation or trade training was seen as a necessity, so institutions concentrated any programming in these areas. Problems like substance abuse were left to community programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous.*

*However, the 1990s have brought more varied programming to the forefront. Core programs now focus on factors such as living skills, substance abuse, family violence and sexual abuse.*

*This article will chronicle these developments from the perspective of a Correctional Service of Canada senior manager to illustrate the forces at play in, and the results of, these developments.*

## Employing offenders

In 1973, Springhill Institution teamed with Scott Paper to offer a four-month course in forest harvesting. This program was run in the institution and at a work site in the immediate area. The second phase of the program involved offenders spending six months on day parole in a community-based residential centre managed by Scott Paper.

This work/training opportunity allowed inmates to learn a skill and appropriate work habits on the job. It also allowed inmates to leave the institution with money to help them re-enter the community. At the time, this innovation was seen as an effective tool. Interestingly, we are currently in the process of measuring skill acquisition and its relation to employability in a Service pilot project.

## Organizational developments

In 1978, the Canadian Penitentiary Service and the National Parole Service merged to form the Correctional Service of Canada. As a result of the merger and consolidation of resources, the Service's Atlantic Region of the late 1970s and early 1980s began to experiment with both institutional and community programming.

Many of these then-experimental programs have evolved into today's core programs that deal with things such as anger management, substance abuse and sex offender programming. This era also produced the literacy programs that paved the way for today's inmate education programs.

The Atlantic Region also participated in the Service's cognitive skills pilot project in the mid-1980s. This program went on to become a Service flagship program -- in high demand and often cited as a prerequisite for other core programs.

This pilot project was a major turning point in Service program delivery. Before it began, we relied on contractors to provide programs. However, the pilot project showed us that our own staff could be trained to do the same thing. The demonstrated positive impact of this program on offender recidivism has also helped secure resources for further programming efforts.

As for community programming, the Atlantic Substance Abuse Program was established in 1988 with the assistance of the New Brunswick Commission on Drug Dependency. This portable, parole officer-delivered program was a regional forerunner to today's national Offender Substance Abuse Pre-release Program and the Choices Program.

The community substance abuse program also opened the doors to cognitive skills, anger management, family violence and sex offender programming in the Atlantic Region.

Where are we now?

The offender intake assessment process has become a tool that provides the intimate assessment needed to deal effectively with inmates, their criminogenic needs and offender management. Current assessment tools allow us to pinpoint how much remedial assistance each offender needs in stark contrast to past generalizations as to degree of need in areas such as substance abuse, sex offender programming and basic social skills.

Offender correctional treatment plans can also be used to zero in on the programs needed by individual offenders (as well as when and where they are needed), allowing for more effective and selective management of specific cases and precious resources.

In the Atlantic Region, inmate classification and the use of the Custody Rating Scale are starting to bear fruit. For example, Westmorland Institution had no inmate escapes between November 1994 and March 1996 because of staff awareness of dynamic security risk reduction through appropriate programming, appropriate case management intervention, and a supportive work placement environment. These positive changes are now beginning to filter down into community-based corrections.

Institutional and community programming efforts are also maximizing resources. For example, inmates use escorted temporary absences to participate in community-based programs. Trained volunteers deliver community-integration programs both at institutions and community-based residential centres. Other joint ventures have contributed significantly to effective inmate and parolee programming.

Joint programming efforts are also used for francophone inmates. Some have been transferred to

institutions that offer programming in French. Other francophone inmates have taken advantage of substance abuse programs offered in French in a New Brunswick provincial hospital.

## Collaboration

The Atlantic Region is making significant progress in breaking down traditional barriers to meeting offender needs through various forms of collaboration. For example, the Correctional Service of Canada is part of a Miramichi community council involving 22 representatives from the area. This council works on meeting community needs within the context of addressing offender needs.

Other joint federal-provincial projects are under way in the context of risk/needs assessment and sex offender relapse-prevention programming.

The Service has signed a three-year memorandum of understanding with Prince Edward Island community and health services to provide joint sex offender and family violence services. Efforts are also under way to open a joint community-based residential facility for Prince Edward Island offenders.

Finally, the Service collaborates with New Brunswick Probation Services, Canada Employment and the John Howard Society to help disadvantaged people in Saint John, New Brunswick. This collective effort often makes a little go a long way.

## A look ahead

As I move into my new position as a special advisor to the Deputy Commissioner (Atlantic Region), I will be working to harmonize institutional and community-based programming. The four Atlantic provinces have all indicated that they are willing to work more closely to deliver these services more effectively. We want to build on this, as well as on the groundwork laid by the projects discussed earlier.

We will also be working very closely with the National Parole Board to help increase its awareness of community-based programming options that manage and reduce risk. Such programming can be a viable alternative to treating an offender in custody.

I also want to point to a sex offender self-help group established at Westmorland Institution in 1995 that indicates both how far we have come and where we are going. These offenders have made tremendous gains in identifying their problems and coming up with ways of coping with and understanding their sentences. They also look beyond programming to a time when they will re-enter society safely.

This group has been able to help newly admitted sex offenders gain acceptance in the institution and with each other. The group has even helped some inmates in denial to come to grips with their problems.

A sex offender self-help group openly meeting in a minimum-security institution without fear of reprisal. We really have come a long way.

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