

A Strategy for Community Corrections

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On the brink of the next century

Three themes run through the articles in this issue of *Forum* — the past, the present and the future. There are three other reasons why the past, present and future are on the minds of community corrections practitioners.

The first reason is that 1999 will mark the 100th anniversary of conditional release in Canada, which began with the Ticket of Leave system. There is much progress to reflect on, many pioneers and heroes to remember, and numerous accomplishments to acknowledge in the effort to provide Canadians with a humane and safe system of reintegrating offenders back into the community.

The second reason is that around 500 days from now we will celebrate the Millennium. Even now we are starting to be concerned about what the future will hold for us individually and as practitioners within community corrections. Meeting our Minister's challenge to find a better balance between our institutional and community populations, by safely reintegrating additional offenders and taking appropriate interventions to keep released offenders in the community, will give us a special reason to celebrate in the year 2000 and beyond.

Dr. Angus Reid of the Angus Reid Group delivered the third reason at the senior managers' meeting May 1998 — a wake-up call about the present. His thought-provoking description of the forces currently influencing Canadian society delivered some sharp messages for community corrections, indeed, for corrections generally. But in addition to the wake-up call, he delivered some advice that will help us build on what we have learned from the last 100 years and prepare us for maintaining our balancing of the population well into the next 100 years.

Period of paradox

Dr. Reid suggested that many of the rules that Canadians have been using to plan and live their lives have been thrown into chaos in the last 10 years. Like others, he describes this as a period of paradox where seemingly contradictory things are simultaneously true. He offers the example of growing public cynicism that science and technology can save us and the increasing public expectation that we can predict and prevent offending behaviour with greater precision and accuracy. Reading the material in this issue of *Forum* it is clear we have made significant gains in understanding the nature of criminality and what works to help offenders become law abiding.

Aging was described by Dr. Reid as being part of the explanation for another paradox the corrections field is coping with — despite decreasing crime rates there is a general increase in fear about crime. Older people have a generally higher sense of vulnerability, lower tolerance of risk, and higher fear of personal injury; they therefore may react disproportionately to actual crime rates. Dr. Reid and many others make it clear that there will be lots more older people in the years to come.

Dr. Reid described market forces that are shaping what he, and others such as Nuala Beck, describes as the "new economy." Free trade, a shift from consumer-driven to business-driven growth, globalization, and a business environment of "more, and better, with less" might seem like forces far removed from parole offices and halfway houses. But the shift in employment opportunities, growth in entrepreneurship, rising service expectation, increased need for self-reliance, growth in empowerment and rising competition that have arisen from these forces affect us in community corrections.

Can you get there from here?

In trying to build a strategy for community corrections within the Correctional Service of Canada, we must find ways to incorporate and take advantage of the changes that are arising from our past and shaping our future.

If globalization is making the world so big that people try to identify themselves with smaller, more manageable groups such as neighborhoods and social groups, we must be part of those neighborhoods and groups. At one level this can be a greater presence of our staff in the community through increased community contacts. Collocating our operations with partners is another possibility. A third may involve joining community organizations and encouraging their involvement in the reintegration of offenders.

Globalization has brought the world to our doorstep. International visitors may be seeking to learn about our most successful strategies; others can share the way they have tackled problems that puzzle us. Dr. Reid described an increasing tendency for Canadians to find themselves having more in common with the states just under their part of the 49th parallel than with some of the provinces right beside them or across the country. Whether that thinking extends to adopting the U.S. example of community corrections acts remains to be seen. But it is clear we must understand the alternatives and choose from the best among them and to share the best we have to offer.

Our international partners are looking to the Service to provide leadership in the delivery of excellent correctional services. Our community corrections strategy needs to include learning about how other countries solve their problems and articulating our strategy and techniques in vehicles such as *Forum* and the many journals devoted to community corrections. Service staff need to be involved in conferences and professional community corrections associations and take leadership in their activities to encourage dialogue on corrections issues.

Technology is but one tool

The Internet, which makes it easier for us to learn and reach out to distant partners, is one way technology has become part of our daily life and work. While we grapple with questions about how to prepare offenders to succeed in the “information economy” our strategy has to also include ways to ensure we ourselves succeed with this technology.

Efforts to extend access to our Offender Management System to our halfway house and contract supervision offices is one approach. Finding a balance between computer time and time with clients is a critical challenge, as is making sure our systems use the most efficient technology available. But an increasingly innovative and competitive market place is also offering inexpensive technology for monitoring offenders, voice verification and kiosks for reporting — complete with breathalyzer machines. We need to be continuously learning and evaluating technology, and its impact on society, so we can make the right suggestions to a public that is asking us to do more, do it better, but do it for less. If we do not advise the public, others will help the public make the choices for us.

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If we believe that human intervention is our most significant tool, we must be willing and able to accept the accountability to the public that comes with that. If I believe it is “me” that makes a difference, then the Service must be able to prove to a better informed public, victims and others why “I” am worth their tax dollars. Differential approaches to supervision need to reflect what our research tells us, and must illustrate that we tried everything we could, not just the least we could do.

A powerful part of our strategy has been to nurture and support a vibrant base of community agencies and groups, not only among our traditional partners but also among those who can bring new perspectives to the challenges of reintegration. We need to state the principles for this relationship and then act accordingly.

Value for money

Our strategy for community corrections needs to be one that average citizens can understand and appreciate as value for their money. It also needs to be inclusive and respectful of the diversity in Canadian society. If Canadians do not see themselves in our community strategy then offenders will always be outsiders and someone else's problem.

Citizen engagement and involvement in community operations is an essential component of successful community corrections. It is not *community corrections* just because it happens there, it is community corrections because that is also who can make it happen and endure.

But how do we engage a public that may not already embrace what we are trying to do? *The Community of the Future* summarizes it nicely, "We need more public listening, in processes where we come together to discover the ideas and issues that are significant to each of us. We don't have to interpret an event or issue the same way, but we do have to share a sense that it is significant."² There is no guarantee that involvement will always lead to success, but it is certain that exclusion will always lead to failure in the long-term where it really counts.

Conclusion

During the same senior managers' meeting where Dr. Reid spoke, the Senior Deputy Commissioner spoke about the past, present and future of our business. If people questioned whether we could make it where we want to go, she challenged them to look

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over their shoulder at where we have been. When we were back there, in that time, did we think then that we would have achieved what exists today?

In a similar vein, Dr. Reid challenged us not to look to recreate "the good old days" — they are gone. We need to look back at what has been and choose the best lessons from it. We need to look at the information and data we have today and learn what it tells us about what is working and what is not. And then we need to look to where the future is heading, connect to companions

who want to make the same voyage, and work out how to get there.

In the spring of this year the Community Reintegration Operations division conducted listening sessions in each of our regional areas, with Aboriginal advisors, and with offenders. Some of the ideas expressed here come from those sessions. A document of those consultations is available on request. In the fall of this year two important studies will be completed; one on the role of Community Correctional Centres and one on workload measurement in community operations. These will be combined with other material into an overall strategy for community corrections within the Service for executive management to review. ■

¹ 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9.

² Margaret J. Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers, "The Paradox and Promise of Community," *The Community of the Future*, Frances Hesselbein, editor (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997): 18.

Coming up in *Forum on Corrections Research*

The September 1998 issue of FORUM will focus on "Case Needs."