

Enhancing the role of Aboriginal communities in corrections

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The Supreme Court has recently joined the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and the Auditor General in a call to stop filling Canadian prisons with Aboriginal peoples. They have called the over-representation of Aboriginal peoples in federal and provincial prisons a national disgrace.

The Commissioner of Correctional Service Canada, Ole Ingstrup, has consistently repeated that there are far too many First Nation, Inuit and Metis offenders in the Canadian federal correctional system. While forming only 3% of the general Canadian population, Aboriginal offenders make up 17% of federal penitentiary inmates. This is a doubling of the Aboriginal federal inmate population since 1987, when the proportion was 8.8%. The situation is even worse in some provincial institutions. While Aboriginal people are over-represented in federal corrections nationally, the numbers reach critical levels in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, where Aboriginal people make up more than 60% of the inmate population in some penitentiaries. In Saskatchewan, for example, Aboriginal people are incarcerated at a rate of 35 times higher than the mainstream population. What is even more alarming, is that estimates forecast that the Aboriginal offender population in Canada and in federal corrections will grow.

The correctional systems of Canada cannot stem the tide of Aboriginal incarceration alone, but must work with other departments, agencies and jurisdictions to develop strategies and alternatives. However, it is corrections that have the task of trying to find ways to safely and successfully reintegrate the growing numbers of Aboriginal offenders into the community once they have entered the federal correctional system.

For several years now, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) has developed strong working relationships with First Nation Elders who provide spirituality, counseling and the connection back to an Aboriginal identity for Aboriginal offenders. Native Liaison Officers have been providing a bridge for a better understanding of the cultures. Federal institutions are introducing Aboriginal-focussed healing programs and curriculum. Many Aboriginal offenders who have encountered the traditional teachings indicate that serving federal time has often been their introduction to culturally appropriate programming and spirituality.

More recently, CSC has worked with First Nation communities to develop Healing Lodges and Aboriginal Corrections Transfer agreements in various parts of the country. The Service has worked with the Samson Cree First Nation in establishing Pe Sakastew Centre, a forty-bed facility for minimum-security Aboriginal offenders and those on conditional release. The Ochimaw Ohci Healing Lodge in the Nikaneet First Nation is a facility designed and programmed to meet the needs of Aboriginal women offenders. The Elbow Lake Healing Village, near the Chehalis nation in British Columbia is a minimum-security facility that is in a conversion stage to an all-Aboriginal program.

The Solicitor General, Lawrence MacAuley has recently stated that he is determined to tackle the challenges of the over-representation of Aboriginal peoples in corrections and that a key element of the strategy will be to create new healing lodges that are designed in consultation with and for Aboriginal peoples. The reintegration processes (within and outside the institution boundaries) for all Aboriginal offenders will be administered and operated by Aboriginal communities. CSC has now started working with the Beardy's Okemasis First Nation in Saskatchewan and the O-Chi-Chak-O-Sipi (Crane River) First Nation in Manitoba on their Healing Lodge initiatives.

The Solicitor General has also taken a leadership role in establishing agreements with the Alexis First Nation in Alberta and the Native Counseling Services of Alberta, utilizing the Stan Daniels Healing Centre as the medium for the transfer of correctional services to these Aboriginal communities, through Section 81(3) of the Corrections and Conditional Release Act (CCRA). This is in addition to the agreement that transferred correctional responsibilities to the (Saskatchewan) Prince Albert Grand Council (PAGC), through the P.A.G.C. Spiritual Healing Lodge in Wahpeton, Saskatchewan.

Section 84 of the CCRA provides for Aboriginal communities to become involved in the development of an Aboriginal offender's conditional release plan. Since the introduction of the policy to implement Aboriginal Parole Supervision agreements in August of 1998, 80 (eighty) community-based release arrangements have been finalized and these Aboriginal offenders are currently serving the

completion of their sentence in an Aboriginal community. The casework is currently being prepared for several more Aboriginal offenders to be released into their home or adoptive communities.

The focus for corrections now is to continue to look towards the community and achieve a better balance of offenders in federal institutions and in society. This may be done through a facility or non-facility based project. This way, offenders who want to continue their healing journey can find the tools and resources to work within an Aboriginal context and environment in their own communities.

The Service has greatly benefited from the work of the Elders and Aboriginal people whose services within the institutional walls are laying the groundwork for positive changes in corrections. There is also a growing recognition in CSC that the strength found within Aboriginal communities is the source and key element for the successful reintegration of Aboriginal offenders. The Healing Lodges provide a good example of the successes of this approach. A recent follow-up of the 412 offenders admitted to three CSC/Aboriginal Healing Lodges revealed that about 70% of the Aboriginal offenders completed the program. From this group, 6% have been returned to custody, in contrast to the national recidivism rate which was 11% in 1997/98. The relatively low recidivism rate among Aboriginal Healing Lodge participants provides an early indication of it having a positive impact.

The trend towards Aboriginal peoples developing community correctional models, and working with the Service is just beginning to gain momentum. Aboriginal communities have now started to come forth with initiatives to take over the care and custody of their peoples and offer services that are more consistent with community-based, culturally-specific methods of healing and balance. Aboriginal communities are indicating that they can do a better job at healing Aboriginal offenders than the traditional prison system will. What is most encouraging is that while these programs are operational, Aboriginal offender program participation and completion rates are increasing each year. This is no surprise for Aboriginal communities who have been involved in the restructuring and administration of similar programs in other institutions such as education, health and policing.

Aboriginal peoples are finding community correctional methods that are very different from mainstream corrections. These new approaches incorporate a shift in the correctional paradigm that include concepts such as healing, reconciliation, spirituality, respect, accountability, balance and restoration. Such alternatives to incarceration and culturally specific parole supervision activities are very important steps for federal corrections. The establishment and current credibility of the Restorative Justice models in corrections support the premise that perhaps a concerted strategy is necessary throughout the whole criminal justice system. Further community developments may also lead to the establishment of alternative sentencing and prevention options.

In addition to the initiatives to develop Aboriginal community correctional models, a National strategy was developed to address the need for increased Aboriginal programming in federal institutions. A National Workshop held in October, 1998 launched a process for Strengthened Aboriginal Programming in CSC. An international symposium was held in March, 1999 to share programming approaches with other countries encountering Indigenous peoples in their correctional systems.

The development of Aboriginal employment strategies is underway with recruitment and training as high priorities. The Service is actively seeking interested candidates for the positions of correctional officers, as well as other positions, such as parole officers and managers. Strategies have been put in place to remove obstacles to hiring Aboriginal peoples, and targets have been established for the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal peoples in the Correctional Service of Canada. As well, CSC is also working with other federal departments, provincial agencies and international contacts to further these objectives and developments.

With culturally-appropriate programs, a greater role of the Aboriginal community in corrections, and with more Aboriginal people employed by CSC, it is expected that the reintegration potential for Aboriginal offenders will be increased, enhancing the opportunities for Aboriginal offenders to be safely reintegrated into their communities. ■

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