

# Enhancing case preparation for release decision-making

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**T**he preparation of reports for conditional release decision-makers, particularly National Parole Board (NPB) members, are in many ways the culmination of all case management activities that have preceded them and they are essential for quality NPB decision making. The purpose of this article is to contribute to an examination of means to improve case preparation for conditional release which is crucial in the National Parole Board's and the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) joint delivery of the conditional release program.

The article summarizes some of the challenges with case preparation and plans that have been developed in the past to address these long-standing challenges, and presents a number of critical success factors for the continued improvement of case preparation.

## Case preparation

The essence of case preparation is define as:

***“The total of all activity designed to prepare appropriate offenders for safe release and manage them throughout conditional release.”***

With this all-encompassing definition, case preparation could basically be seen to be everything that is done within the corrections system and conditional release process to prepare offenders for safe release and management of offenders in the community. This could include offender intake assessment; correctional planning; programming and/or other interventions in the institution and community; progress reporting; preparation of documentation for decision making; and conditional release supervision.

The responsibility and accountability for the joint delivery of the conditional release program are clearly outlined in many documents such as; current legislation; CSC and NPB Mission documents, policies, and the Administrative Agreement; and in CSC Standard Operating Practices (SOPs). These documents, particularly the legislation, provide very clear direction in NPB decision making policies; and the Correctional Service of Canada SOPs provide very clear direction adhering to the legislative criteria, content, format and timeframes of case preparation reports for the various types of conditional release. Although responsibilities and requirements for case preparation are clear, it is certainly true that completing quality case preparation has, for many reasons, become more complex and challenging over the years.

## Case preparation significance

All stages in the reintegration process are important, from offender intake assessment to supervision in the community. Case preparation for conditional release decision is one of the most important steps, if not the most important. It is also an area where there remain significant opportunities for improvement.

Conditional release decisions are extremely important decisions that impact directly and extensively on public safety and on individual freedom. As the case preparation documentation prepared by CSC staff is the main source of information used for this decision making, its importance cannot be over-emphasized. This information in a sense is a culmination and synthesis of all previous stages of the reintegration process. If it is not done in a quality and timely manner, much excellent work that may have preceded it cannot be fully considered and understood.

It has always been this author's view that a high degree of confidence between NPB members and staff, and CSC staff, at all levels is required in order to ensure the best possible joint delivery of the conditional release program. The main point of contact between the two organizations occurs many times annually as part of the case preparation and decision-making process.

## Quality and timely case preparation

Concerns with case preparation have been noted in recent years in various CSC task forces and audits, and by consultants under contract with CSC. Issues with respect to case preparation have also been raised in various Auditor General and Correctional Investigator reports, and in a recent report of the Public Accounts Committee. This has provided a further impetus to identify and address the issues.

NPB is in a unique position to obtain an overview of the quality and timeliness of case preparation, and to be significantly impacted by problems with case preparation. The thousands of case preparation documents prepared annually by CSC staff and parole offices are “funnelled” into five relatively small NPB regional offices. A small number of NPB staff in each of these offices review these reports to determine if the reports meet requirements for NPB decision making.

NPB regional staff have always indicated that there are certainly examples of quality case preparation. In recent years, staff in the Board's regional offices have estimated that between 50 to 90% of the cases reviewed lack varying degrees of case preparation information which requires them to follow up with CSC. These identified problems can include failure to address legislative criteria; poor or no analysis; recommendations not supported by the preceding narrative; missing or conflicting information; "cutting and pasting" from other reports that results in lengthy and disjointed reports; major risk factors not addressed or downplayed; failure to address results of interventions; late reports; and problems with sharing of information and/or confirmation of sharing. Follow-up on such a large number of cases has huge implications for NPB resources and for the CSC staff who must then also take further action to address the issues raised.

In recent years, discussion of case preparation issues has come to the fore-front. For example, NPB Regional Directors and CSC Assistant Deputy Commissioners have discussed many aspects of this issue for a number of years, and a wide range of follow-up action was determined. Unfortunately, widespread, lasting positive impact from this follow-up action has been elusive. It was recently acknowledged again by this group that there continue to be significant concerns that must be addressed.

### Improving case preparation

The following are suggested as some of the critical success factors in continuing efforts to enhance case preparation:

- Quality and timely case preparation must be a high priority at all levels of the organization and remain so to ensure that the desired results are achieved and maintained;
- Ensure implementation of action plans for improvement;
- Individual case managers must clearly be responsible and accountable for the quality of case preparation;
- Preparing quality documentation is a difficult task that should be done by the smallest number possible of professional staff;
- Effective and efficient staffing process for parole officers which results in the hiring of the best people without undue delays;
- Case managers must be provided with the tools to enable them to do professional case preparation

(training, coaching, feedback, adequate resources, technology). Training with respect to risk assessment and case preparation must occur prior to undertaking these responsibilities;

- There must be quality assurance by CSC staff in each operational unit with a background and expertise in, or a very good understanding of, case preparation and with the time to perform this function. A co-signature on a report must mean that legislative and policy requirements have been met and that the report meets CSC standards for case preparation prior to sending to NPB;
- Co-ordination of information processes between institutional and community staff;
- Case preparation should clearly be based on the NPB decision-making policies and present a complete, objective, accurate, concise, balanced presentation and analysis of relevant factors in the case;
- Board members and CSC staff must be provided with more opportunities (joint training) to get to know each other and understand each other's jobs and requirements;
- Periodic feedback from NPB on the quality and timeliness of case preparation;
- Daily contacts between CSC and NPB within regions and other periodic contacts such as meetings between region focusing on specific action that needs to be taken to make improvements;
- Region by region, site by site review and analysis of the situation should help to identify and develop individualized plans for improvement;
- The focus should be on identifying and addressing the most significant concerns;
- Sharing of best practices within and between regions; and
- Continuing constructive and, open discussions of this subject are required at all levels within and between both CSC and NPB.

### Conclusion

There is a shared recognition within CSC and NPB, and externally, that further improvements are necessary. CSC is continuing to take action in many of the above areas and NPB is involved where necessary and appropriate. ■