

# The national drug strategy for the Correctional Service of Canada

Michel Roy<sup>1</sup>

Corporate Development, Correctional Service of Canada

**T**he fundamental purpose of Correctional Service of Canada's (CSC) Drug Strategy initiative is to address and promote two key messages: to control the supply of drugs in our institutions and to reduce the demand for drugs among federal offenders through prevention and treatment.

## Canada's Drug Strategy

In brief, drug related problems were posing a long-term and serious threat to the health and well being of Canadians. During the 1980's a concerted effort to address substance abuse emerged and several federal government departments, including Correctional Service of Canada, united their efforts in a partnership to raise awareness and educate the public about the problems associated with substance abuse. The Canadian drug strategy reaffirms its non-tolerance of illicit trafficking and positions substance abuse primarily as a health issue rather than an enforcement issue; with the view that prevention through education and awareness being a more realistic and effective strategy.

## Correctional Service of Canada's National Drug Strategy

There is a growing national and international recognition of the need for alternative approaches to address the human and financial costs of substance abuse. Since 1995, there has been a general acknowledgement that focusing primarily on enforcement has not worked.

In this context, Canada's Drug Strategy (1998) promotes a more balanced approach to not only control the supply of drugs but also to reduce the demand for both drugs and alcohol. Substance abuse is viewed from a public health perspective rather than a criminal perspective.

CSC clearly specifies both drugs and alcohol as part of its strategy, since most of society view alcohol use differently from other drug use. This is due primarily to the fact that alcohol use is not only legal but also socially acceptable. However, an analysis of offender intake data for admissions in the past three years found that the majority of offenders have problems with both drugs and alcohol (45%), than with alcohol alone (13%) or drugs alone (18%). Only 24% do not have a problem with drugs or alcohol.

Substance use and abuse is a serious problem for federal offenders. Approximately 70% have some identified level of problems with drugs and/or alcohol, and approximately 56% were intoxicated while committing their current offence.

Correctional Service of Canada research indicates the relationship between substance abuse and crime increases dramatically as the severity of offenders substance abuse problems increase. More than 50% of offenders with low severity problems used alcohol or drugs on their present offences compared with over 90% of those with serious problems. A similar pattern is evident across offenders' criminal histories. About 25% of the crime committed by offenders with low severity problems is associated with substance use, compared to over 80% for offenders with severe substance abuse problems.

The presence of infectious diseases among federal offenders poses a serious threat not only to staff and other offenders, but also to their families and communities on release. Each year, approximately 5,000 offenders are released back to the community.

The number of federal inmates known to be living with HIV or AIDS reached 200 for the first time in April 1999 — an increase of nearly 100 percent since 1994. The rate of Hepatitis C is estimated at between 25% to 40% of the offender population.

CSC undertook several evaluations of detection and intervention initiatives during the 1999/2000 fiscal year: search and seizure operations; the urinalysis program; core substance abuse programs; and Phase I of the Methadone Maintenance Treatment Program. In addition, the Correctional Service of Canada Task Force on Security addressed aspects of security operations that impact on the effectiveness of efforts to control drug trafficking and the use of drugs and alcohol by offenders. The results of these studies will be incorporated into policy and standard operating practices.

CSC has been recognized as an international leader in the research and treatment of addictions in a correctional context. Two of CSC's core substance abuse programs — the *Offender Pre-Release Substance Abuse Program* (OSAPP) and the community-based *Choices* program — have been accredited by an international panel of substance abuse experts.

CSC's national substance abuse programs are showing positive effects in assisting offenders to change their behaviour. A recent study<sup>2</sup> of the Offender Pre-release Substance Abuse Program (OSAPP) indicated that, compared with a matched group of offenders who did not take the program, program participants yielded **reductions** in overall readmission rate, new convictions and violent offences.

Other CSC data indicate that while most offenders choose abstinence, offenders who completed OSAPP with the goal of moderating their use of alcohol and other drugs were reconvicted at a significantly **lower** rate than those who were attempting to abstain completely from all intoxicants.

Correctional Service of Canada continues to actively pursue identification of "best practices" from provincial/territorial correctional systems as well as from the international corrections community to address both substance abuse and health-related issues.

The service has also collaborated with five Federal/Provincial/Territorial committees, under the leadership of Health Canada, to develop a federal government response to the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network Report on "Injection Drug Use and HIV/AIDS: Legal and Ethical Issues". This work examined issues around needle exchange programs, methadone maintenance and other public health interventions for offenders.

### Conclusion

Within a framework for action, Correctional Service of Canada's strategic position and priorities in concert

with Canada's Drug Strategy is an initiative that must be carried forward with due care and diligence. Our strategies and policies must complement the balance advocated by federal government strategies, while working within the current legal framework.

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Correctional Service of Canada is in a unique position to play a key leadership role in developing strategies, which complement both federal government strategies and community initiatives to address drug and health issues for offenders. Much is known about the offender population. There are different types of traffickers (generally with links to gangs and organized crime), pushers in institutions, and drug users. Within the group of drug users, there are recreational users and those with moderate, severe and chronic substance abuse problems. These differences necessitate a range of responses.

Extensive collaboration with communities, criminal justice partners, staff and offenders will be essential to achieving commitment to developing strategies that work. It is also important to recognize that what works in other countries or in other communities may not be directly transferable to the Canadian or CSC environment. All stakeholders must be engaged in the progress to ensure that all-possible

options, opportunities and barriers are identified and addressed. ■

<sup>1</sup> 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9

<sup>2</sup> T<sup>3</sup> Associates (1999). *An outcome evaluation of CSC Substance Abuse Programs: OSAPP, ALTO, and Choices, Final Report*. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

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