

The role of Citizens' Advisory Committees in Canada

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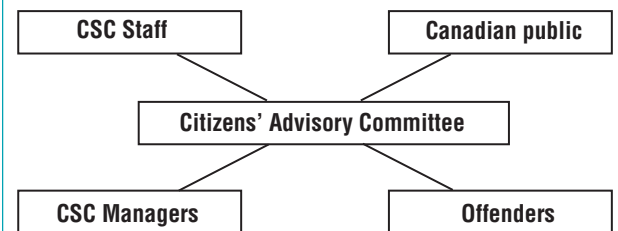
At the current time there are over 80 Citizens' Advisory Committees (CACs) in Canada, involving approximately 500 Canadians. Every prison and every major parole office in the country has the benefits of CAC input in their operations. CAC regional and national committees are also active in coordinating the work of local committees and in voicing the views of CACs in regional and national forums.

In 1977, Justice MacGuigan advanced a proposal for one of the most ambitious and comprehensive exercises in citizen involvement yet attempted by any level of government in Canada or the world. Building on a number of local initiatives that dated as far back as 1965, the MacGuigan report proposed that every institution and parole office in the federal correctional service have in place a committee of unpaid citizens whose role it would be to give all the partners in the correctional process the benefit of their independent and impartial observations and advice². Their mission was quite simply to contribute to public safety by helping to improve the correctional system. To support this work, Justice MacGuigan proposed that committee members be given unprecedented access to every part of the facility they served and that they be invited to communicate their ideas regularly to correctional staff, offenders and their fellow citizens. To the credit of the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), the recommendation was supported and acted upon so that, at the current time, every federal correctional institution and regional parole office in the country now has a Citizens' Advisory Committee (CAC) attached to it.

The roles that CACs are asked to carry out are clearly challenging. To be effective, they must be competent and informed observers, good communicators and able advice givers in one of the most complex and emotionally charged environments in our society. To succeed, the CACs across the country have had to build strong and constructive relationships with the four constituencies most involved in correctional issues: the CSC management, the offender population, CSC front line staff, and

the Canadian public. Figure 1 illustrates how these committees find themselves at the nexus point of these constituencies.

Figure 1



Each of these relationships presents CAC members with a number of specific challenges. The relationship that committees form with the CSC managers of their facility is vital to it carrying out its mission given that these managers are the ones that will receive and possibly act on the advice the committee will offer. Since this advice is meant to be persuasive but not binding, CACs have an interest in keeping their relationship with managers as healthy as possible. On the other hand, managers also need to be attentive to this relationship given that the CAC will be giving an account of their work to the broader community. Therefore, it is advantageous to both groups that CAC members be as well informed as possible about the workings of the facility they serve. In this way, managers can be confident that the quality of their work will be accurately represented to the public and CAC members can feel more confident in making the recommendations they advance.

The second challenge that the relationship between CSC managers and CAC members presents is that of "finding the right distance". This phrase alludes to the need that CACs have to ensure that their relationship with managers is not so close that they can be perceived as being simple spokespersons for CSC. To some degree, CACs are protected from this by being obliged to develop relationships with other groups such as inmate committees or union representatives. Committees, however, need to

be ever attentive to the actual and publicly perceived distance between themselves and CSC managers, since their credibility as impartial observers rests on their finding the right balance.

The relationship between CAC members and offenders requires just as much work even if the relationship is somewhat more clearly defined. CAC members must remain in regular contact with representatives of the offender population to hear their stories and take into consideration their view of the correctional system. Offender accounts always provide a powerful counterweight to the views presented by managers and are, therefore, exceedingly important for CAC committees. The challenge in this relationship is to avoid the perception by managers, staff and the public that CACs are just another group fighting for the rights of offenders. To avoid this, committees have had to work hard to repeatedly reiterate to all four of their key constituencies that their mission is not to speak out for offenders or to defend CSC staff. It is to improve the correctional system and hence the security of Canadians.

Contacts with front line staff and union representatives are also important since they, like the offenders, provide a different and at times competing perspective on the information that managers will typically provide. Here again, the CACs ability to be effective rests in its ability to make its mandate as clear as possible to each group. Individual issues related to any given group become pertinent to CACs only when they affect the system's ability to proceed with its fundamental work, that of working towards the rehabilitation of offenders.

Finally, CACs are called upon to actively engage their fellow citizens to become better informed about the correctional service. This outreach role is intended to provide transparency to the correctional process, to give Canadians a better sense of how their correctional service is evolving and to give them voice regarding these developments. Each committee is challenged to develop their own public voice and to contribute positively to the public dialogue on corrections in their community. Clearly, this part of the CACs mandate is crucial. There is ample evidence to show that the more informed citizens are about their correctional service and the more accurate that information is, the more apt they are to support changes that will improve the effectiveness of their service and hence public security. The less informed they

are, the more apt they are to support repressive measures that provide short-term reassurances that lead eventually to over-incarceration, higher costs, and in most cases a net deterioration in the quality of the service. CACs are challenged, therefore, to help their fellow citizens avoid the myths and false beliefs that often surround the correctional process, to provide accurate and clear information about the correctional system and to be honest about the challenges that are still to be overcome. To achieve this in an environment where crime is so intensely sensationalized and romanticized by the media is indeed a difficult task.

In the 25 years since their inception, the success of CACs has been, by most accounts, mixed. On the one hand, their presence in the system has provided a powerful source of support for the development and offering of effective rehabilitation programs for offenders. These programs have become the cornerstone of our correctional process and Canada is now recognized widely around the world as a leader in this area. CACs have also been effective in supporting improvements in staff training and have played an important role in breaking down the traditional divide between inmates and correctional staff. They have often achieved this by adhering to the age old diplomatic principle of simply being there, of listening effectively and of giving voice to the values that are integral to their community.

Committee members have also often acted as independent observers in many crisis situations. During these times, CAC members are important contributors to the process of de-escalating conflicts and providing the public with an impartial view of events as they happen. Faith in the correctional system rests in part on the confidence that the public has in the system's ability to respond effectively and professionally in times of crisis. CACs have often been in a position to provide that reassurance or to, on occasion, challenge the correctional system to improve its response.

Where CACs have been less successful is in their ability to contribute effectively and powerfully to the public debate on corrections. Clearly, committees have often carried out interventions with the public that have been very effective. They have hosted public forums, reached out to the local media, participated in public debates and communicated directly to the public via the issuing of reports. To date, however, these efforts have not led to CACs being a visible and

important voice on the regional and national stage. Just how to develop this voice and make it effective is still the subject of reflection and debate.

The creation and development of the CAC system is clearly one of the most important initiatives in public engagement that any government has yet attempted in the area of corrections. A recent survey of correctional systems around the world shows no comparable effort being pursued in any of the almost 80 jurisdictions consulted, including those of Europe³. In pursuing this novel and bold experiment in citizen participation, the Correctional Service of Canada is setting a benchmark for openness and transparency, one that clearly enriches civic society and adds to the democratic process. In August 1998, CACs were identified as an international “Best Practice” when the program was honoured with the American Correctional Association’s (ACA) Chapter Award in the Public Information Category for Best Practices and Excellence in Corrections. The Chapter Award is the highest level of the ACA Awards categories. In January

2000, the Privy Council Office recognized Citizens’ Advisory Committees as a Canadian Public Service Best Practice. In May 2000, the International Association for Public Participation awarded the Correctional Service of Canada the “Organization of the Year” Award in the area of public participation due, in a great part, to its Citizens’ Advisory Committees program.

The last 25 years have shown, we believe, the value of pursuing this initiative. As CACs become better known to Canadians, their contribution will likely increase in importance and, if successful, affect both the quality of the service and the awareness that Canadians have of the system that is so central to their sense of personal safety and well-being. ■

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² MacGuigan, M. (1977). The Sub-Committee on the Penitentiary System in Canada. Report to Parliament, Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs, Second Session, Thirtieth Parliament. Ottawa, Ontario.

³ Personal communication, Ola Ingstrup.

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