

Community outreach by the Correctional Service of Canada: Engagement activities and initiatives

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Involving Canadians in the creation of safer and stronger communities has been a priority of the Canadian government since 1997. The federal government continues to encourage public, private, and voluntary sectors to work with all citizens to enhance the quality of life for future generations. In fulfilling its mandate, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) contributes to a just, peaceful and safe society by carrying out sentences imposed by the courts through the safe and humane custody and supervision of offenders and by assisting the reintegration of offenders in the community as law-abiding citizens through the provision of programs in penitentiaries and in the community.

The Mission of CSC directs the organization to engage members of Canadian communities as a key element of the correctional process. It further recognizes the benefit of communities in facilitating offenders' successful transition to society, thus supporting and assisting offenders upon release. CSC has been involved in outreach in the community for years with various individuals, groups and organizations. Although some of these outreach initiatives have been of a formal nature, the majority tend to be informal and individualized.

This article provides an overview of community outreach and engagement activities and initiatives undertaken by CSC during a one-year period, from May 2001 to May 2002. The article presents a snapshot of how the Service is conducting outreach to engage Canadians and communities, where and how activities and initiatives are occurring, reasons behind the activities, and who is involved in them. The results help identify new ways to engage communities in fulfilling the Service's mandate of building safe and stronger communities to serve Canadians.

Methodology

A questionnaire was administered to gain a clearer picture of existing community outreach and engagement activities and initiatives undertaken at all levels of the organization. The questionnaire examined: respondents' opinions and perceptions about community outreach and engagement; community outreach and

engagement initiatives underway; and, information about the operational unit and sector that responded to the questionnaire.

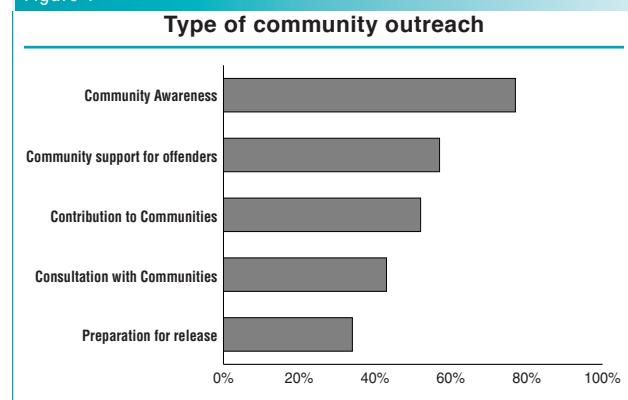
A web-based application was developed by the Research Branch in order to facilitate data entry and analysis. The questionnaire was sent to District Directors, Wardens, Regional Deputy Commissioners, and Sector Heads at NHQ via e-mail. One hundred and thirty seven respondents, representing 153 operational units, provided input into the inventory, resulting in a response rate of 91%. Twenty-five units within NHQ and 128 operational units within the regions provided responses.

Results

Engaging the community

Respondents were asked what they thought were the main benefits of community outreach and engagement². The most important reason given for community outreach and engagement was to raise community awareness by increasing confidence and encouraging community involvement in the correctional process. The second most important reason was to increase community support for offenders. Other benefits include: gaining support for reintegration, gaining support for corrections in general, and enhancing community safety.

Figure 1



Respondents were requested to describe community outreach and engagement initiatives in which they were involved. A total of 347 outreach and engagement activities were

reported by respondents within a one-year period. The initiatives fall under five strategic areas. As illustrated in Figure 1, more than three-quarters (77%) of the community outreach and engagement initiatives involved providing information to raise community awareness³. A further 57% of the activities involved working with communities in supporting offenders' efforts to reintegrate successfully once they have returned to society, and 52% were considered to contribute to communities by enhancing public safety and/or providing a social, cultural or financial benefit. A further 43% of the activities involved community consultation, namely interactive exchanges with community members based on mutual respect and understanding by involving communities in the identification of options and solutions to assist CSC's decision-making. Finally, about one-third (34%) of the activities were said to involve the community in enhancing offenders' social and work skills needed to prepare and plan their release.

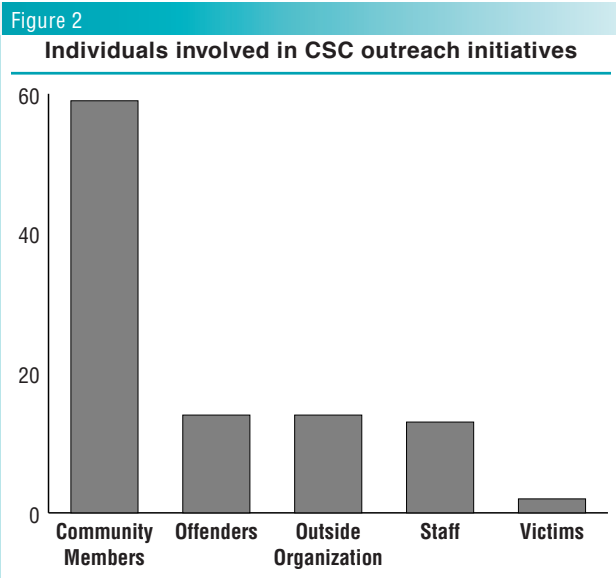
More than 29,000 individuals were involved in the 347 reported community outreach and engagement initiatives. It should be noted that this may be an underestimate of the number of people involved due to the difficulty in tracking the number of participants in some outreach activities such as Community Forums.

Figure 2 illustrates the types of people involved in CSC outreach initiatives. Community members make up 59% of the total number of people involved in outreach initiatives. The number of community members involved attests to the principle of community outreach in that CSC initiatives engage large numbers of community members to maximize the successful

return of offenders for safer and stronger communities. The level of participation of offenders (14%), CSC staff (14%), and various outside organizations (13%) are similar. The proportion of victims involved (2%) is substantially lower than other categories. It is difficult to say exactly why there is an under-representation of victim involvement. One might postulate that there is a lack of initiatives designed specifically for victim involvement or that victims may decline to participate in CSC outreach and engagement initiatives.

The location of community outreach and engagement initiatives plays a role in the level of involvement of individuals. For instance, offenders and staff are more often involved in community outreach and engagement initiatives when they are held in an institution. The participation of offenders is almost non-existent when conducted in a parole office, rural community centre, school, church or police station. CSC staff are more engaged in initiatives undertaken at CSC operational units rather than in various community settings. Victims appear to be more involved when community outreach initiatives are held in community centres than other locations. Interestingly, initiatives involving greater numbers of offenders were associated with a significantly greater involvement of victims. The majority of initiatives reported involving victims, resulted in a partnership and for the most part centered on restorative justice.

There are numerous ways that CSC community engagement and outreach initiatives have engaged Canadians. Figure 3 demonstrates that Canadians are engaged through multiple approaches. Most of the methods of engagement focus on the provision of information and communication, and consultation with the community. Two exceptions relate to recruiting



volunteers and providing training, which can be classified as methods to increase participation and citizen involvement with CSC.

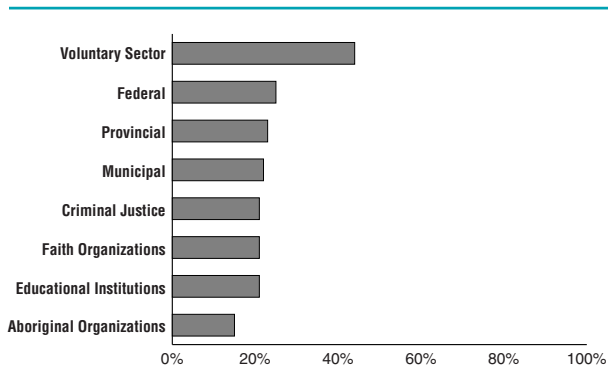
Only 89 respondents (58%) reported using community outreach tools when engaging Canadians. This included the use of information on CSC web-sites and CSC publications. Interestingly, despite the wealth of tools available, many respondents mentioned using customized materials to engage citizens and communities.

Partnerships

In order to expand outreach capabilities, CSC relies on the assistance of traditional and non-traditional partners to reach target audiences and engage citizens. Partnerships bring particular strengths, perceptions, abilities and expertise and are viewed as one approach to ensuring that CSC's outreach endeavours have a long life-span. According to the respondents, 228 of the 347 initiatives resulted in one or more partnerships. As illustrated in Figure 4, multiple partnerships emerged from the initiatives. Overall, 70% of partnerships involved some level of government, including federal (25%), provincial (23%) and municipal (22%) governments. Further, 44% of partnerships were with the voluntary sector.

Figure 4

Type of partnerships developed through community outreach



At the institutional level, more partnerships are forged when community outreach activities focus on preparation for release. Initiatives that focus on contributing to communities and providing community support for offenders also tend to result in partnerships. Likewise in the community, partnerships are more often created when initiatives focus on the offenders' preparation for release, consultation with communities and supporting offenders upon release.

Conclusion

This first CSC inventory provides basic information on the scope and nature of existing community outreach and engagement activities undertaken by CSC. The reported outreach and engagement initiatives fall under more than one strategic area. The largest proportion of the organizations efforts are in the areas of community awareness, followed by community support for offenders, contribution to communities, consultation with communities and offender preparation for release. This inventory provides the Service with important information for present and future outreach and engagement activities and initiatives.

A second administration of the inventory, or the development of an interactive database for ongoing input by operational units and sectors at Regional and National Headquarters, would likely yield a greater number of community outreach and engagement initiatives. A "live" inventory would serve as a valuable management and operational tool to gain an occasional snapshot of local and corporate endeavors in the area of community outreach and engagement. CSC could build on existing activities and initiatives undertaken and foster new opportunities for enhancing working in partnerships with Canadians and communities. ■

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² Respondents were able to give more than one response. Therefore, the percentages do not add to 100%.

³ Each activity may have more than one purpose. Therefore, the percentages will not add to 100%.