

Correctional program and site accreditation in Canada

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For more than a decade, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) has been developing research-based programs designed to reduce the likelihood of offenders committing new offences following release. These programs have become one of the key interventions used by CSC to “actively encourage and assist offenders to become law-abiding citizens”.²

Institutions and Parole offices all across Canada now offer these programs to offenders. Research conducted or commissioned by CSC supports the conviction that these programs are achieving their intended goals with many offenders. It is important, at this time, to ensure that the programs and the manner in which they are delivered are of the highest possible quality.

In order to fulfill its mandate of the protection of the public through safe reintegration of offenders, CSC must ensure that the interventions that it uses are effective and be able to demonstrate to the public and its partners that the programs are “state of the art”.

Background

Program Accreditation is an approach originally developed by the Offending Behaviour Programs Unit of Her Majesty’s Prison Service of England and Wales (HMPS) in the mid-1990s. It originated as a means to demonstrate the accountability of the Chief Executive to the Minister. Amongst the Chief Executive’s Key Performance Indicators is one dealing with the number of offenders completing Accredited Programs. The main themes of the HMPS approach seem to be an emphasis on theoretically sound programs and a penchant for strong empirical evidence of effects on recidivism.

Program Accreditation was adopted and adapted by the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) shortly thereafter. Their thrust for Program Accreditation seemed to have come from two sources: a means to demonstrate the Chief Executive’s accountability, and, a means to introduce and disseminate higher quality system-wide programming.

Based upon our understanding of the design and experience of both the HMPS and SPS Accreditation processes, a proposal was made to a group of International experts³ who met at CSC invitation in Québec City, Canada in October 1997. The proposal, which was endorsed by the panel,

called for an approach for Accreditation within the Correctional Service of Canada that would involve two separate phases:

1. Programs would be accredited through the use of International Experts Panels that would utilize criteria derived from the HMPS.
2. Teams of CSC staff, using standards that would be approved as part of the Program Accreditation, would conduct the audit of the program delivery sites.

The Québec City panel felt this approach was more in keeping with the realities of the CSC context without diminishing the rigour of the process. It was also felt that the HMPS criteria required some modification in order to be more consistent with Canadian terminology and the broader programming strategy of CSC.

In February 1998, the Executive Committee of CSC approved the proposals endorsed by the Québec City Panel for a two-phased approach. The responsibility for the Accreditation process was assigned to the Assistant Commissioner, Performance Assurance in order to demonstrate an “arms length” independence from the Programs Branch.

Accreditation process

Therefore, a Program Accreditation process has two equally important but quite different components. Part one involves assessing the quality of the program design, including elements such as staff training and support, provisions for after program learning supports and evaluation and research plans. Part two involves the assessment of the quality of delivery of the program, including adherence to the design, adequacy of management support and linkages to the overall management of the offender’s case. In all aspects, one of the key elements for success is transparency — that is that all involved or affected by the process are knowledgeable about the process and its operation.

Assessing the quality of a program’s design begins with the development or selection of criteria against which to evaluate programs. Program accreditation attempts to use criteria generated from research literature. We also need to define effectiveness in terms of outcomes rather than outputs. Historically,

our performance measurement approaches have focused on outputs — for example, are policies in place. Effectiveness must be outcome measured by looking at things like reduced reconviction, reduced seriousness of offences and longer periods of crime-free living.

Accreditation criteria

Following consultation with the Québec City Panel and ongoing dialogue with the Accreditation Managers of HMPS and SPS, CSC borrowed the ten criteria used by HMPS and with advice of our expert panel members and experience, modified them to the current set of eight criteria:

The first three criteria require a well-articulated theoretical justification for the program:

1. Explicit, empirically-based model of change
2. Targeting criminogenic need
3. Using effective methods

The next two criteria are used to assess essential elements of the program design and content:

4. Skills oriented
5. Addresses responsivity issues

The two following criteria address issues of integration related to the offender's constellation of needs related to criminal behaviour and subsequent portions of the offender's sentence:

6. Program intensity
7. Continuity of care

The finale criterion addresses issues related to continuous review:

8. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation

Once the criteria to be used have been decided, the next important question is who will be the assessors? CSC decided that for the process to have credibility both inside and outside of the organization, there were four important criteria for choosing panel members: expertise, independence, balance and internationalism.

The experts who met in Québec City offered to play a continuing role in implementing Accreditation in CSC. Therefore, it was decided that Correctional Program Accreditation Panels would be comprised of three members from that original group and three members who were experts in the subject area of the programs being reviewed; for example, substance abuse programs.

Program assessment

The next issue was method of assessment. Due to the large numbers, and fairly wide range of programs operated by CSC or contracted from program providers, it was decided to create separate accreditation panels for each of the largest program areas: Cognitive Skills, Substance Abuse, Violence Prevention, Family Violence and programs for Sex Offenders. Consistency of approach is maintained by having the same person serve as chairperson of all of the panels, by using the same criteria for all program types and by having some members serve on more than one panel.

For each program being reviewed, Panel members are allotted a minimum of four hours to read the case file and materials. It is the responsibility of the sponsor of the program to prepare a "case file". The case file should basically cover three things: a description of the way the program works; a description of how the program meets each of the eight criteria; and, literature citations used to answer the previous point. The sponsors must also submit its program manuals, participant's manual, staff training manuals, assessment tools and results of all evaluations and research conducted about the program.

At the conclusion of the reading period, the chairperson leads a discussion to identify any questions or issues that the panel members may have. In order to enhance the approach, it was decided to build in a period of time, for each program reviewed, wherein the panel members could ask questions of the program's sponsors. Whenever possible, panel sessions will also include an opportunity for panel members to visit program delivery sites. Following the discussion with the program sponsors, panel members meet privately and score the program against each of the eight criteria. There are three possible outcomes:

- Accredited;
- Not accredited, but creditable;
- Not accredited.

Once scoring has been completed, an oral feedback and detailed written report is then provided to program sponsors.

When a Panel grants accreditation, a certificate is issued indicating that the Accreditation is valid for five years.

The opportunity to consult such experts on new program concepts is an important part of the process. In sum, a typical panel will be of five days' duration and will review three to four programs and will be consulted on one or more new programs.

How are Program Delivery sites accredited?

As we said earlier, Accreditation is a two-stage process. The first stage is the accreditation of a program. The second stage is the accreditation of sites — either Institutions or Parole Districts — where the program is delivered. Even if the program is delivered at only one location, it is a two-stage process.

If a program is accredited, it moves to stage two — Site Accreditation. If the program fails to sufficiently meet the criteria, the sponsors make the required changes and resubmit the program at a future panel or CSC decides to cease the operation of the program. The integrated program standards found in criterion 8 are to be used to assess the quality of the delivery of the program. These integrated standards form the basis for site accreditation.

CSC decided to use Site Accreditation as an opportunity for staff development and to expose its program staff to program delivery in other parts of Canada. Review teams are led by a member from Performance Assurance Branch at CSC Headquarters. The team also includes two team members who are experienced Program Officers from different geographic regions of the country.

The team spends up to two days at the site. Prior to the visit, a significant part of the document is collected via our automated offender management system. Once on site, the team refers to offender files, program documents, interviews with staff and offenders to assess the site against the standards. At the end of the visit, they brief the Site Managers on the results and submit a report to the National Site Accreditation Panel. Should the Audit team not be supporting accreditation, the local manager must prepare and submit a corrective Action plan.

National Site Accreditation Panels

Since there were a number of teams conducting site accreditation reviews, CSC decided to establish an internal panel entitled National Site Accreditation Panel (NAP) to ensure consistency of application of standards and to review and accept or require change to Action plans. This group has the same Chairperson as the Correctional Program Accreditation Panels. Its members include the two senior officials in CSC with responsibility for programs plus the Director Audits and Accreditation and the Manager Program Accreditation.

The National Accreditation Panel has four equally important roles. Firstly, it reviews site reports to ensure consistency of assessment and to recommend, when merited, that the Commissioner of the CSC grant Accreditation. Secondly, it reviews action plans

and either accepts the plans or requires modifications. Thirdly, it serves as an appeal body so that a Site Manager who feels that their site has been unfairly assessed may appeal that assessment. Fourthly, it makes recommendations for both modification and clarification of program standards as well as the audit criteria and methodology.

Following review of the Site team report and local manager's action plan, the NAP recommends Accreditation or directs further review to ensure that the action plan is being implemented. Once an action plan has been approved by the NAP, a follow-up is scheduled. The purpose of the follow-up is to verify that the Action plan has been implemented and that the desired results have been achieved.

The Performance Assurance staff located in each region conducts this verification. The results of the verification are provided to the NAP which, based on evidence submitted, may either adjust the scores on standards or seek further evidence. This process continues until all standards are fully met. Once the Site accreditation standards are sufficiently met to merit accreditation, the NAP recommends accreditation to the Commissioner of the Correctional Service of Canada. Site accreditation is valid for three years.

When a site is granted accreditation, a formal recognition certificate is prepared and presented to the Site Manager.

Results so far

The first Correctional Program Accreditation Panel was held in May 1998. Its subject area was cognitive skills programs. Since then, ten panels have been held on various program subject matters. These panels have involved thirty-one experts from twelve different countries. These experts have been from universities, correctional services, hospitals, and private and public organizations.

The panels have reviewed 22 programs for accreditation and granted accreditation for 16 programs. In addition to reviewing programs for accreditation, the panels also are used to consult about programs that are being considered for implementation. Eight such program consultations have also been held. The guidance of these panels should increase the likelihood of successful program design and implementation.

The Site Reviews for the accredited programs began in November 1998. During 1998, five programs were granted accreditation status. Forty male institutions were identified for review by an audit team. As of December 2000, an audit team reviewed thirty-six institutions, thirty-five audit reports were presented

for review by the National Accreditation Panel and in the end, thirty-five sites were granted accreditation status for three years by the Commissioner of the Correctional Service of Canada.

Furthermore, nineteen District offices were identified for review by an audit team. Beginning in March 2000, an audit team reviewed fourteen District offices, thirteen audit reports were presented for review by the National Accreditation Panel and in the end, thirteen sites were granted accreditation status for three years by the Commissioner of the Correctional Service of Canada.

As of December 2001, Site accreditation reviews have been stopped pending a review of the program standards and audit process. CSC decided then that a move towards integrated program standards was seen as necessary for the evolution of program development and accreditation.

In April 2003, the Executive Committee of CSC approved the integrated program standards. A new audit tool was developed and pilot sites were conducted. Site reviews will re-commence next fiscal year 2004/2005. ■

¹ 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9

² Correctional Service of Canada, *Mission Statement*.

³ The expert panel group consisted of: Ed Wozniak, Director of Research and Evaluation, Scottish Prison Service, UK; Gerry Gaes, Director of Research, Federal Bureau of Prisons, USA; Larry Solomon, National Institute of Corrections, USA; Beth Grothe Nielson, Professor of Criminology and Law, University of Aarhus, Denmark; Edward Zamble, Professor of Psychology, Queen's University, Ontario, Canada; Maggie Hodgson, Consultant, Aboriginal Treatment Programs, Alberta, Canada; and Danny Clark, Her Majesty's Prison Service, UK.

Note: For further information regarding the Correctional Service of Canada's Program Accreditation, contact the Audit and Program Accreditation Branch, 340 Laurier Avenue West, 5th floor, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9, or contact the author via e-mail at: concilioau@csc-scc.gc.ca

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