

National thematic workshop on corrections: Addressing substance abuse through collaboration¹

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The use and abuse of drugs and alcohol in correctional settings is a major challenge in all correctional jurisdictions, including federal, provincial and territorial systems in Canada as well as correctional systems around the world. In Canada, at the federal level, nearly 80% of offenders are identified as having a problem with the use of alcohol or drugs when they enter a penitentiary. Nearly one quarter of offenders entering penitentiaries are serving sentences for drug offences.³ The use and distribution of drugs and alcohol contribute to violence within the prison environment. In addition, the use of drugs poses health risks for both inmates and the general public as serious, and potentially fatal, diseases (like HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C) can be transmitted through the sharing of drug use paraphernalia, sexual activities and tattooing.

Canada has embarked on the development of a national framework to address the challenges posed by problematic alcohol and drug use within the Canadian population. The outcome of this work is the National Framework for Action to Reduce the Harms Associated with Alcohol and Other Drugs and Substances in Canada.⁴ Health Canada and the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) have co-lead the development of the National Framework through extensive consultations across the country. One objective of the consultations was to obtain input for the National Framework by key stakeholder groups, such as the corrections community.⁵ The national thematic workshop on corrections was designed to develop input for the Framework.

Background

The need for the thematic workshop was identified in a decision by the Heads of Corrections.⁶ The Correctional Service of Canada's Addictions Research Centre organized the event with assistance from Health Canada and CCSA. The two-day workshop was held at the Addictions Research Centre in Montague, Prince Edward Island.

Objectives

The thematic workshop was designed to achieve three main objectives:

1. To review the issues and challenges related to treating substance abuse within the Canadian adult offender population, both in custody and under community supervision;
2. To set priorities and directions for treating substance abuse within the Canadian adult offender population; and
3. To network and learn about the different approaches and initiatives used across jurisdictions – federal, provincial and territorial.

In addition, the workshop was held to ensure that correctional issues and priorities formed part of the National Framework and to initiate cross-jurisdictional discussions that might lead to co-operative and collaborative activities.

Participants

Nine of the 14 correctional jurisdictions in Canada were represented at the meeting; unfortunately, two of the largest, Ontario and Quebec, were not. Each jurisdiction was asked to send two representatives. Participants included senior managers, researchers and line staff, all of whom had a strong interest in addressing the problem of substance use in their correctional systems. The meeting was also attended by representatives of CCSA and Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada.

Key issues

At the start of the meeting, participants were asked to identify what they saw as the most significant issues or needs with regard to substance abuse in their correctional setting. Participants noted that they had observed an increase in the prevalence of drug use and

addictions in correctional facilities. Linked with this was a change in offenders who were “sicker,” more likely to have co-occurring disorders, and who had started using drugs at an earlier age. The offenders were identified as being younger, and gang affiliation made work with them more difficult.

It was suggested that substance abuse issues should be framed in terms of health within a public safety context. There was frustration expressed over the changing priority assigned to substance abuse challenges and the negative impact these shifts in priority had on the resources that were available. In addition, participants identified the need to obtain political and public acceptance of harm reduction approaches that would benefit offenders.

Participants identified the need to develop more consistent approaches to treatment that can be supported by research to demonstrate its effectiveness. Collaboration was seen as a way to promote effective interventions and to ensure that resources and best practices are shared across all jurisdictions.

Challenges were identified in obtaining treatment for offenders in the community. Often, treatment options are limited and may not fit with the needs of offenders being released from prison or under supervision in the community. Access to methadone maintenance treatment was identified as one area requiring particular attention.

Rural and small communities were described as facing particular problems with the limited accessibility of services in jurisdictions that have large geographic areas. Where treatment was available, there was a shortage of resources and an inability to follow-up on cases. The issues of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and inter-generational addictions were identified as targets for reducing the cycle of addictions that is often observed.

The over-representation of Aboriginal peoples in both correctional settings and addictions was identified as a unique challenge requiring specialized programming. In communities where funds were limited, it was often difficult to fund the needed activities.

There was general agreement among participants that all jurisdictions were working to facilitate change and provide support for offenders. Consistently, participants identified public safety

as an extremely important issue, and saw treating substance abuse among offenders as part and parcel of the effort to improve public safety.

Workshop participants identified a number of significant and pervasive challenges that needed to be overcome nationally if we are to effectively address substance abuse issues. The most important of these challenges was the lack of co-ordination and national consistency in approaches, including in the area of assessment. Participants felt that having shared priorities and expectations was important in the quest to find more effective solutions. Prevention and early intervention activities were seen as needed to address problems before they became serious. It was argued that there has been a lack of political will and commitment to truly collaborative approaches. Finally, the need for effective and available community aftercare was cited as an important need.

Strategies

The over-riding message coming from the workshop was that there was a need for consistent or standardized approaches. To address this issue more effectively, participants divided into groups to discuss consistency and standardization in four key areas: 1) assessment, 2) intervention, 3) interdiction and 4) research.

Assessment that is standardized would ensure a common language across jurisdictions, allowing comparisons and more effective analyses of differences. It would also provide for a more seamless sharing of information, more credibility for the assessment tools used, and the ability to share assessment tools and approaches.

Interventions need to be client-centred and holistic, taking account of gender, culture and age, and contribute to the promotion of safety for the public, clients and employees. Interventions that address the full length of the sentence and include all staff associated with the offender will provide the greatest benefit. Of course, any changes in approach will require training and development of the correctional workforce.

Interdiction is an area where sharing of knowledge and experience could be particularly beneficial. Interdiction activities from the basic (non-contact visits and searching) to drug detection dogs, drug testing and ion scanning could be improved by jurisdictions sharing information on protocols and standardizing

procedures. There is a need to have a national repository for results and protocols for implementation and application to ensure consistent results across jurisdictions.

Collaboration in research could best be achieved by identifying an organization that would be able to take a lead role and provide both co-ordination and guidance to all jurisdictions. Collaborative research would ensure that research evaluations are conducted on new programs being offered in each jurisdiction and provide for national surveys and the identification of best practices. It might also lead to the setting of program standards and the development of methods for ensuring program integrity. To achieve the best outcome, a governance structure would be needed that would ensure sharing of both resources and management responsibility for the research that is conducted. It was suggested that this area could be used as a demonstration for collaboration as many of the components already exist, and only the will to move forward is required to co-ordinate activities.

National Framework

The key message from the workshop for the National Framework was that corrections needs to be part of the framework and jurisdictions are willing to work to ensure this happens. Addressing the substance abuse needs of offenders will help to increase the safety of Canadian communities and will reduce the negative impact of drug and alcohol abuse on families and communities. Persons who serve prison sentences ultimately remain part of communities, and their needs must therefore be

addressed by the National Framework.

Correctional agencies, working with some of the most difficult and resistant clients, have the potential to make a significant contribution to addressing Canada's challenges in substance use and abuse.

In the end, the National Framework for Action to Reduce the Harms Associated with Alcohol and Other Drugs and Substances in Canada does include corrections and offenders as one of its priorities.

Next steps

There is a need to continue meeting and encouraging ongoing collaboration. It was recommended that the momentum created at the workshop in the areas of assessment, intervention, interdiction and research be used to begin collaborative work. There was also a call for a follow-up meeting once membership in a national committee is defined and established.

The workshop focused only on correctional agencies and adults. Other significant stakeholders were identified, and another meeting is needed that will bring together the larger group of stakeholders. This group would include non-governmental organizations, the police, community treatment agencies, the judiciary, the education sector, social and mental health service organizations, victims' groups, and representatives from Aboriginal, First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities. The National Framework foresees co-operation across all levels, and corrections needs to strengthen these relationships. ■

¹ The opinions and ideas expressed are those of the participants at the workshop and are not necessarily those of the author or the Correctional Service of Canada. Hopefully, I have captured the essence of what was discussed.

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³ Motiuk, L. & Vuong, B. (2001). Profiling the drug offender population in Canadian federal corrections. *Forum on Corrections Research*, 13 (3), 25-29.

⁴ *Answering the call: A national framework for action to reduce the harms associated with alcohol and other drugs and substances in Canada.* (2005). Ottawa, ON: Health Canada and the Canadian Centre on Substance

Abuse. For more information on the National Framework, visit www.nationalframework-cadrenational.ca.

⁵ More details on this work are available in the article by Michel Perron and Beth Pieteron included in this issue of *Forum on Corrections Research*.

⁶ The Heads of Corrections is an organization that meets semi-annually to discuss issues of mutual concern. It is made up of the head of corrections for each of Canada's 14 correctional jurisdictions (10 provinces, 3 territories and 1 federal corrections agency).