

Development of an Aboriginal Offender Substance Abuse Program

David D. Varis,¹ Virginia McGowan² and Peggy Mullins³

Addictions Research Centre and Special Populations Research Division, Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada

This article describes the development of a national Aboriginal Offender Substance Abuse Program (AOSAP). The AOSAP is in demonstration, involving both research and development activities and field testing in five institutional sites, one in each of the Correctional Service of Canada's five regions. The project will culminate with the AOSAP added to a host of culturally based programs being offered to Aboriginal offenders by the Correctional Service of Canada.

Recent studies report that Aboriginal offenders are over-represented in Canada's provincial and federal prisons, especially in the Western provinces. Census data from 2001 indicate that Aboriginal people represent 3.3% of the Canadian population,⁴ but account for an estimated 18% of the federally incarcerated population.⁵ Demographic trends, including a relatively young population and increasing urbanization, suggest that the number of Aboriginal admissions to federal institutions will continue to increase over the next few decades.⁶

Substance abuse is linked to increased rates of criminal offences, incarceration and recidivism in the general population, and this association holds true among Aboriginal peoples as well. As more than 90% of federally sentenced Aboriginal offenders have an identified substance abuse problem,⁷ the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) is developing a new national substance-abuse treatment program specific to that population: the Aboriginal Offender Substance Abuse Program (AOSAP). By providing a culturally appropriate program, CSC seeks to reduce the risk of relapse to substance abuse and re-offending among Aboriginal men in federal custody, in part through improved program completion rates. Aboriginal offenders who complete programming are more likely to be released under the auspices of Section 84 of the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act*.

Developing the program

Since the spring of 2003, the Addictions Research Centre (ARC, a division of the CSC Research Branch) has had lead responsibility for development of Aboriginal substance-abuse treatment programming. To develop AOSAP, the

ARC has been working in partnership with the Aboriginal Initiatives Branch and the Reintegration Programs Branch (Aboriginal Programs unit) of CSC to design a culturally based program.

The new substance-abuse treatment program was developed during the spring and summer of 2004 for pilot testing and refining during a demonstration phase. The Aboriginal firm Ancestral Visions of Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory in Ontario, working with the Prairie region's Aboriginal Substance Abuse Program, provided CSC with a revised program curriculum that incorporates both contemporary approaches to substance abuse treatment and traditional Aboriginal teachings.

Five demonstration sites were identified for the first cycle of testing of the program: Mountain Institution (Pacific region), Stony Mountain Institution (Prairie region), Joyceville Institution (Ontario region), Cowansville Institution (Quebec region), and Dorchester Penitentiary / Westmorland Institution (Atlantic region). In the Pacific, Ontario and Quebec regions, the venue for the second cycle was moved respectively to Mission Institution, Kingston Penitentiary and Drummond Institution.

In September 2004, five Aboriginal correctional program officers and five institutional Elders, one from each region, participated in program training for the demonstration phase of this project. Training continues as changes are made to the manual and as new facilitators and Elders join the demonstration project.

The first cycle of the 16-week program was completed in the spring of 2005 in all of the regions with approximately 40 offenders participating. A second cycle began in May 2005 at two sites; the remaining three sites began their second cycle in the fall of 2005. A third, and final, cycle will begin in the fall of 2006.

Program characteristics

While under development, the demonstration AOSAP is co-facilitated by a program Elder and a facilitator and offered as a high-intensity program

for male Aboriginal offenders. Aboriginal men who require programming of moderate intensity may also be referred to this program as an alternative to the moderate-intensity National Substance Abuse Program.

The AOSAP responds to the needs of Aboriginal men (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) by taking a holistic approach, ensuring that the impact of addiction is examined through physical, mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions. Currently, the needs of Aboriginal women offenders in relation to substance abuse treatment are under review, and research on the AOSAP will be highly instructive as to future directions for the Aboriginal women offender population.

The specific objectives of the program are as follows:

- Awareness: develop awareness of linkages between substance abuse and criminal offending;
- Motivation: develop opportunities to engage and motivate participants in a positive change process;
- Skill enhancement: develop skill base to promote an alcohol-and-other-drug free lifestyle (physical, mental, emotional and spiritual); and
- Spiritual connection: introduce cultural activities as a means of healing.

The program consists of four modules:

Module I presents the foundation of culture, with specific emphasis on introducing participants to the program, the power of the circle of wellness, safety and self-care strategies, and those traditional values and goals that are fundamental to Aboriginal culture and healing.

Module II is an introduction to the impact of trauma and how substance abuse was, and still is, a means by which Aboriginal people tried/try to cope with its effects. Participants are introduced to the triggers associated with substance use and addictions. Issues of shame, anger and lateral violence are discussed in the context of behaviours borne out of the historical trauma and experiences of Aboriginal peoples. The final session of the module, *Telling our Story through Masks*, is a powerful exercise that allows offenders to safely reflect on their own experiences so that they can establish and maintain healthy responses to trauma symptoms.

Module III focuses on the history of substance abuse within Aboriginal communities, and its effects and impacts. This module can be

described as core to understanding alcohol and other drug abuse and addictions. Woven throughout is a central theme of how devastating substance abuse and addiction can be to individuals, families and communities, but how changing this behaviour can result in the restoration of health, pride and culture.

Module IV is a presentation of relapse prevention and planning. Grounded in best practice addiction work, the module targets increasing an offender's understanding of managing risk as well as providing him with the necessary skills to manage future risk by employing relapse prevention strategies. The final activity in this module is entitled *Celebration*. It provides participants with an opportunity to reflect on their experience in the program and to celebrate their commitment, journey, teachings and new beginnings.

Research

The Research Branch at CSC national headquarters has been hosting annual research gatherings with Aboriginal Elders, agencies and community partners for several years now. This reflects CSC's on-going commitment to engage Aboriginal organizations and stakeholders in Aboriginal corrections, with the primary goal of contributing to safe and healthy communities.

Over the last five years, there has been increased research activity in CSC regarding Aboriginal offenders and the treatment programs offered to them. The main purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of the needs of Aboriginal offenders and inform the development of the best programs possible. Ultimately, these research findings will go a long way toward ensuring that the Service meets its corporate objectives while meeting the needs of Aboriginal offenders in ways that contribute to a reduction in incarceration rates.

The AOSAP demonstration project incorporates a comprehensive research component to examine program effectiveness and provide necessary information for further refinement of the program. The Aboriginal community is directly involved in this research: program facilitators and Elders contribute to data collection, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation and Waseskun Healing Centre researchers conducted a process evaluation, and Aboriginal experts have formed a research advisory group to provide guidance to the research process.

In early February 2005, the Addictions Research Centre, in collaboration with CSC's Aboriginal Initiatives Branch and the Reintegration Programs Branch (Aboriginal Program unit), hosted an Elders' Consultation and AOSAP Research Advisory Group meeting in Abbotsford, B.C. The purpose of the meeting was to build respectful relationships with the Elders and experts, identify the critical issues to take into account, and obtain direction for research during the demonstration phase of AOSAP. The meeting served also to update the group on all Aboriginal correctional programs, seven in total, that have been developed over the last six years. The Elders who participated comprise the *Program Elder Advisors Committee*, as they are formally known, which has been providing guidance to the Reintegration Programs Branch for many years in the development and implementation of Aboriginal programs.

The AOSAP Research Advisory Group was formed specifically to guide research for the AOSAP during the demonstration phase, and includes the Elders who carry the Sacred Bundle for the project as well as representatives from CSC, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the National Crime Prevention Centre, Native Counselling Services of Alberta, Community Health Representatives of B.C., Waseskun Healing Centre, and Nechi Training, Research and Health Promotion Institute. The Elders and AOSAP research advisors provided invaluable advice and direction during this four-day gathering under the guidance of Dr. Joe Couture, Aboriginal Elder, CSC psychologist, and Chair of the Research Advisory Group. Participants guided the CSC team on cultural issues, brain-stormed about what research processes and measures would be best suited for an evaluation of this Aboriginal program, and discussed how best to refine the program.

The AOSAP Research Advisory Group continued its work into the fall of 2005, helping the research team deal with complex cultural issues and develop strategies for research during a three-day meeting at the Friendship Centre in Winnipeg. The Research Advisory Group will convene its third gathering in October 2006 at Waseskun Healing Centre in Quebec.

Several other important research activities related to the project include development of new culturally appropriate research tools and methods; preparation of a comprehensive report on the risks and needs of Aboriginal offenders in federal custody; a process evaluation of the AOSAP; a critical review of research evidence about culturally-based substance abuse treatment programs for Aboriginal peoples; and a final report on analyses of data collected during the demonstration phase.

Conclusion

The research and development activities associated with the new AOSAP, as well as the operational commitment to field testing, have been an enormous undertaking. There are several more steps in the process, however, each of which are intended to ensure the highest quality program possible. While revisions to the program manual were made over the winter of 2005 and completed in early summer 2006, the work is not complete. Plans continue for the next phases in AOSAP development, including the third and final cycle of demonstration in fall 2006 and the development of a strategy for national implementation.

As part of the overall project plan, it is also intended that the program be externally reviewed, prior to national implementation and separate from program accreditation. This will be the ultimate test to ensure that the program meets the standards required. ■

^{1,3} Addictions Research Centre, Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, 23 Brook Street, Montague, Prince Edward Island C0A 1R0.

² Special Populations Research Division, Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9.

⁴ Statistics Canada. (2001). *Census Catalogue: Aboriginal Peoples of Canada Highlight Tables*. Ottawa, ON: Government of Canada.

⁵ Trevethan, S., Moore, J.-P., & Rastin, J. (2002). A profile of Aboriginal offenders in federal facilities and serving time in the community. *Forum on Corrections Research*, 14 (3), 17-19.

⁶ Boe, R.E. (2000). Aboriginal inmates: Demographic trends and projections. *Forum on Corrections Research*, 12 (1), 7-9.

⁷ Moore, J.-P., & Trevethan, S. (2002). Profiling federally incarcerated First Nations, Métis, and Inuit offenders. *Forum on Corrections Research*, 14 (3), 25-27.