

Regional News *Quebec Region*

An American Experience

By Myra Pelletier de Simini, Program Officer, Montreal-Metropolitan District

While on unpaid leave for two years, I had the idea of using my spare time to go and take a look at the correctional system of the State of California, particularly San Mateo, located in the southern part of the San Francisco Peninsula. My goal was to learn about their programs, share my professional experience and to see how corrections ran elsewhere.

Unlike Canada's, the American correctional system is administered by local counties. As I did not have U.S. citizenship, I had to be recruited as a volunteer by San Mateo County to be able to deliver a Correctional Service of Canada program, the Reasoning and Rehabilitation (R&R) Booster Program to participants of the Bridges Program, an alternative to incarceration.

The Bridges Program

The program consists of two phases. The first requires participants, both men and women, to report to a halfway house every day between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. to take part in substance abuse discussion groups, individual counselling and computer and job search courses. Each participant must submit to urine tests. Full participation in the program is rewarded by more lenient parole conditions. After they finish the first phase participants must serve as mentors to new recruits for six months during phase two.

The R & R Booster Program

The purpose of this phase is to review the skills taught during the Reasoning and Rehabilitation Program. Focus is placed on acquiring self-management techniques to encourage self-control, self-discipline and self-efficacy. The program combines self-assessment techniques with the use of cognitive skills in everyday life. Offenders are asked to control their thoughts and behaviour on a daily basis. They must also do exercises and



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homework between sessions to hone the skills they learned in the classroom. Each session must be somehow related to the problems they are experiencing. I, therefore, used learning strategies such as role-playing, individual exercises, lectures and group activities to help offenders practice the various social skills they acquired during the program.

Participants showed great interest. They attended twice a week as part of their parole plan. The R & R Program is now very much embraced in the United States because it helps to shed new light on reintegration.

A Rewarding Experience

Facilitating a mixed group was a rewarding experience for me. In addition, my experience as a volunteer gave me the opportunity to attend the trials of offenders who soon became participants in my program. In the courtroom I felt like I was on an American

television show. Chained to one another, the inmates wore orange jumpsuits. The judge's words were so effective that the inmates remained silent throughout.

All in all, I enjoyed my stay under the California sun, but I am really happy to be back home. ■