

Offenders as resources in crime prevention

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There are very few of us left in this world. For that reason, we must acknowledge that there are no “spare” people that can be left aside and that banishment from the people represents the worst possible solution to a problem”.

Currently, on any given day, there are more than 2,227 Aboriginal people housed in federal institutions². This means that we, as Aboriginal people, collectively lose over 20 centuries of time each year due to having our people housed in federal institutions.

There is a growing recognition that possibly the most knowledgeable, yet under-utilized resources in the area of crime prevention, are offenders who have witnessed and lived within the criminal world. Many Aboriginal offenders, as part of their growing awareness of their Aboriginal culture and spirituality, have come to realize that crime and incarceration diminish the strength of Aboriginal people, as a People. They have not only turned their own lives around but want to stop the destructive cycle of institutionalization of Aboriginal youth.

The Aboriginal Corrections Policy Unit (ACPU) is examining how federal offenders can be used as educators to share their experiences with high-risk Aboriginal youth, including those with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), in programs for high-risk youth and as mentors for other offenders being released into the community. The ACPU administers the Aboriginal Community Corrections Initiative (ACCI), the Department of the Solicitor General’s Aboriginal portion of Effective Corrections, and the Aboriginal Community Corrections and Crime Prevention component of the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention. The ACPU tests and evaluates innovative, community-based, restorative approaches to healing for Aboriginal offenders.

Aboriginal Community Corrections and Crime Prevention is a policy-driven component of the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime prevention. From 2002 to 2005 ACPU will test pilots in two areas: 1) using Aboriginal offenders as resources in urban areas utilizing a “choices and consequences” based approach;

and 2) working with children and families of Aboriginal offenders to help break the cycle of offending from being passed on from generation to generation.

Whenever the ACPU looks at an issue that potentially affects Aboriginal communities, the ACPU will bring together a small group of Aboriginal community members to discuss the issue, or problem at hand, and together the ACPU and those community members will develop possible directions for the ACPU to follow. This strategy was used again in 2002 to answer the following questions about the use of released offenders as resources in youth crime prevention projects:

- Which offenders should be used for these projects and how will they be selected and trained?
- Should it be an individual or a team (i.e., including the police) involved in the project?
- How would a project target youth to be the most effective?
- How can offenders be used as mentors to support released offenders through their most difficult times?
- Should there be different approaches for male and female youth/offenders?
- Should there be different models for institutional, urban or community projects?
- How would those different models look and operate?
- How could projects be evaluated?
- What should a training manual, or manuals, include?
- What contribution should/could an institution, organization or community make?
- What would it cost to test a project?
- How could projects be adapted to become part of ongoing institutional, organizational or community programs?

The Gathering's consensus was that, as a part of their own healing journey, offenders must take responsibility for their offences. Part of that taking responsibility is seeing the criminal acts as the abuse of trust that they are. By working with young people, offenders can strengthen and give back to the community that they have harmed by past acts. The information from this Gathering was recorded, edited and released in February 2003 as part of the ACPU's Aboriginal Peoples Collection in an effort to continue the discussion beyond those who participated³.

To test this approach, the ACPU has entered into an agreement with the Nishnawbe-Aski Legal Services (NAN), a non-profit organization located on the Fort William First Nation near Thunder Bay, Ontario. NAN delivers a wide range of law-related services to the 49 First Nation members of Nishnawbe-Aski Nation including legal, public education, and law reform services.

Aboriginal Circle Healing Lodge Society is a non-profit traditional healing lodge society in Mission, British Columbia that works with offenders who have been released to the community from Mission federal correctional facility. The Society offers traditional teachings, traditional healing, life/work skills and counselling to released offenders.

These two projects will draw on the experiences of offenders through a "choices and consequences" model to empower youth-at-risk, or those already involved in the criminal justice system, to break the cycle of destruction. Using the concepts of the medicine wheel as well as restorative justice approaches, these projects will build a supportive environment for both youth and ex-offenders. These projects will contribute to the enhanced understanding of, and responses to, the needs of offenders and high-risk urban Aboriginal youth.

These projects will run over the next 24 months. With information gained from these pilot projects, together with further research and discussion about the use of offenders in crime prevention, the ACPU plans to produce a "how-to" manual for people and organizations who want to work in the area of crime prevention, offender reintegration and using offenders as resources in crime prevention.

The second element of the ACPU's crime prevention strategy involves working with children and families of offenders to break the intergenerational cycle of offending. To test this approach, the Unit has entered into a relationship with the Prince Albert Grand Council (PAGC). The

PAGC has been involved in justice and corrections on a number of fronts, including mediation, diversion, alternative measures, probation, sentencing and healing circles. In addition, they run a *Spiritual Healing Lodge*. The Healing Lodge is a 30-bed facility with a staff of fifteen, including an Elder. The focus at the Lodge is on self-healing through Aboriginal spirituality, culture and programs. The Lodge programs take care of spiritual, mental, physical and emotional aspects of healing. It provides an environment for male offenders who wish to follow a traditional Aboriginal path to healing. Given the capacity of this organization and their expressed concern about the need for more reintegration of offenders especially with families and victims, this project will build upon the existing infrastructure to help stop the cycle of offending from being passed from generation to generation.

The Spiritual Healing Lodge is the site of the "Family Reintegration Project - Building Relationships Between Offenders, Their Children and Their Families". PAGC will develop and implement a pilot project to work with children and families of Aboriginal offenders in an urban setting. Designed to stop the cycle of offending from being passed from generation to generation, this process will help support the family as a whole. Beginning while the offender is incarcerated, and continuing for six months, the process will build a supportive community environment and build upon progress that was made in healing while the offender was incarcerated. This project will contribute to the enhanced understanding of, and respond to the needs of, Aboriginal offenders and their children and families. This project will be formally evaluated and the results will be published as part of the ACPU's Aboriginal Peoples Collection in 2006.

As with all projects supported by the Aboriginal Corrections Policy Unit, these projects are designed to support policy development within the Portfolio of the Solicitor General. Further, they demonstrate ways in which Aboriginal people, through a return to traditional approaches, can begin to address the over-representation of Aboriginal people in corrections and support healthier individuals, families and communities. ■

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² Data from Correctional Services Canada, 2002.

³ 22 people from across Canada attended the gathering, representing a mix of government and community representatives from both rural and urban areas.