

An exceptional resource for women in the Outaouais: The Josée McCann Centre

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Introduction

Where women offenders are concerned, the 1990s were rich in developments in the field of corrections. Once the new institutions for federally sentenced women had been designed and constructed, there was a need to rethink the community strategy to ensure follow-up in the services provided for women offenders. One of the main challenges encountered in developing this strategy was the fact that women living outside of the major urban centres were scattered in a variety of different locations. As well, the fact that there were few referral resources in these regions made it difficult to develop structured resources for this client group.

In Quebec, during this period of reflection the Elizabeth Fry Society (EFS) worked especially hard to develop regionalized services for both provincial and federal client groups. Its challenge was to set up a model for the delivery of flexible, affordable services that met the expectations of the various correctional groups.

In the Outaouais, Josée McCann showed an interest in developing the EFS concept, in the form of a reintegration centre providing accommodation in a group home type of setting as well as external support and supervision services for women offenders.

With the support of the Quebec provincial as well as the federal correctional services, this initiative by the Elizabeth Fry Society became a reality five years ago. This initiative, which has become a model for the delivery of such services, has proven its value and has demonstrated that providing high-quality services for women offenders is possible even in regions outside urban centres. This concept is now considered a success, and this success has a name: The Josée McCann Centre.

Objectives

The centre's objectives are:

- to promote reintegration by providing basic accommodation and services geared to this client group;
- to be a resource for intake and specific services for women dealing with the criminal justice system in the Outaouais;

- to offer an alternative to incarceration through accommodation or through services and supervision;
- to offer services that complement those provided by correctional services;
- to keep as many women offenders as possible in their home region;
- to provide liaison between correctional and community services; and
- to prevent reoffending by ensuring that members of this client group take responsibility for their own behaviour.

Resources of the centre

The Josée McCann Centre offers temporary accommodation, supervision for provincially sentenced women offenders, as well as program and consultation services. In addition, the centre offers referral and accompaniment services to other community resources in the region. Since 1999, 206 women have used these services. The average duration of use of external services is 150 days.

With extensive knowledge of all existing resources in the region that relate to the issues facing this client group, the centre offers provides services using a psychosocial approach focused on ensuring that clients take responsibility for their own behaviour.

Since she is the only worker, Josée McCann regularly accepts volunteers, as well as trainees from the various universities in the region, for whom she provides clinical supervision.

Accommodation at the centre

The centre is a specialized type of resource similar to a group home. The services it provides include accommodation, basic meals and constant supervision when the women are at the house.

Since 1999, 59 women have resided at the centre. The average length of use for accommodation has been 35 days. The success rate, as measured by the number of offenders who follow through on a reintegration plan (which entails seeking employment, finding accommodation, going back to school and arranging child care) without reoffending, is 90%

during the period in which clients are being supervised by the centre.

The centre's experience demonstrates that this type of approach is effective in meeting the needs of women offenders. The special features of this resource are as follows:

- creation of meaningful connections with the women offenders, given the limited number of beds available;
- knowledge of the characteristics of women offenders obtained as a result of the co-ordinator's training, which is not present in an ordinary group home;
- development of social skills (active participation in daily activities such as organizing and preparing meals, keeping house, drawing up and following a budget, shopping for groceries and planning menus);
- development of healthy life habits (three healthy, balanced meals a day; balance among work, sleep and recreation);
- workshops in art therapy (making clothing and creating decorations, for example).

This shared intimacy between worker and client is a noteworthy element of the clinical approach being applied here. While remaining highly professional in her relationships, Josée has agreed to live in unusually close quarters with the women and to be available to them around the clock. This approach demands considerable personal adjustment.

As well, Josée is assisted by a number of trainees and a support service that gives her a few hours of respite each week. Josée must routinely co-ordinate the follow-up she provides for women being supervised externally with the responsibility she assumes for the women residing at her home.

External services provided through the centre

The centre helps women offenders with needs in the following areas: isolation, spousal violence, addiction, suicidal tendencies, physical and mental health problems, unhealthy lifestyles, codependence, parenting skills, poverty, lack of life skills, problems with Quebec's Direction de la Jeunesse, or lack of information about their rights and the resources available to assist them.

The support services the centre offers thus relate to labour market re-entry, finding accommodation, mental health, and violence prevention. Other services are available to clients who have problems

with shoplifting, codependence, difficult intimate relationships, low self-esteem or limited social skills. In some cases, the centre offers assistance using the systemic approach for families in difficulty.

The centre is also open as a day centre during the week. Women clients can have the benefit of active listening, obtain assistance and ideas about various issues, and consult a directory of resources.

Because the centre is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, women clients receiving community supervision can reach the centre at any time. This aspect of availability, which meets a growing need expressed by women clients and increases the use made of this resource, deserves recognition.

Community supervision

Josée McCann is recognized as a probation officer by the Quebec provincial correctional service. This means that she is responsible for the direct supervision of an average of 14 women each month, and for the supervisory activities this client group requires.

Stop-Shoplifting Program

During the year, Josée regularly leads an intervention program for women charged with shoplifting and other economic crimes, such as credit card fraud. The objectives of this group program are to provide a sentencing alternative, to reduce reoffending, and to ensure that these women offenders take responsibility for their own behaviour.

Court and detention centre accompaniment service

Wishing to continue to provide the well-known assistance services of the Elizabeth Fry Society, Josée offers a variety of services to women who must appear in court and women serving Quebec provincial sentences: intake, information about the legal system, escort, comfort, listening and support.

Service agreement with the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC)

Only a few months after the centre opened in 1999, the Hull area (Quebec) drew up a service agreement so that it could be a partner in this initiative. Josée McCann's centre was recognized under the federal "private home" standards, and can therefore receive federally sentenced women who have been placed voluntarily while on Unescorted Temporary Absence, Full Parole, or Statutory Release.

The other aspect emphasized by the CSC was the development in March 2000 of an exchange of services covering direct support services for women. As a result, we have a service agreement with the centre for an accompaniment service that will promote reintegration of women offenders experiencing difficulties in their social, occupational, cultural or family lives. Under the agreement, women offenders have access to the full range of services the centre provides. Lastly, Josée McCann is also an ideal resource person for parole officers when the time comes to evaluate and put into effect release strategies for federally sentenced women.

Conclusion

In many parts of Canada, developing a community strategy for women offenders in regions outside major urban centres remains a challenge. We wanted

to introduce this resource to you in order to demonstrate the contribution that one woman can make to a regional community by becoming involved, providing humanitarian and professional standards that support this vital and necessary service.

The model used, although its structure is quite simple, calls for vision and a profound conviction that human beings are capable of change. Through her approach and the flexibility of the services she offers, Josée McCann is successfully meeting a full range of needs among this particular group of clients, thus making a commendable contribution to protecting society. ■

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