

Residential program for lifers: Six keys to success

by Edward Graham¹

Residential Program, St. Leonard's House

St. Leonard's House in Windsor, Ontario, is the only facility to offer a Life Line Residential Program in Canada. Life Line evolved from a desire to better meet the challenge of a growing number of lifers in our institutions and released on parole to our communities. In 1976, the death penalty was abolished and replaced by life imprisonment without any consideration for parole for 10 to 25 years.

However, as everyone who works in corrections knows — at least in Canada — a life sentence rarely means imprisonment for your natural life. Nevertheless, a life sentence is forever, whether it is served in the institution or in the community on parole. The indeterminate sentence requires creative responses from both policy-makers and practitioners in prisons and the community. The challenges associated with successfully engineering the reintegration of the lifer, particularly one, who has experienced decades of institutional living, are many. With close to one-third of Canada's 3,500 lifers on supervised parole in the community, St. Leonard's dedicated Residential Program for lifers is a common sense approach to the community reintegration needs of a growing lifer population. As we experience, experiment and document, St. Leonard's has identified six key features that have contributed to a successful program for paroled lifers.

Community understanding, support and involvement

Community acceptance of paroled lifers is the cornerstone of a residential program for lifers. However, inspiring communities to embrace the challenge of reintegrating convicted murderers truly tests the tolerance of a community. “*Halfway House for Killers Coming Here*” was the headline on April 10, 1990 that informed the citizens of Windsor, that St. Leonard's was planning to start a halfway house for lifers.² A leading columnist probably summed-up the feeling of the ordinary citizen:

“The most humiliating aspect of this black-eye project is that it apparently originated right here in Windsor. The concept is good — but the location stinks. Its proponents should be told to hit the road!”³

Instead, our board of citizen volunteers “*hit the streets*” and, for over two years, held meetings in church halls, union halls, City Hall and met with neighbours, victims of violent crime, editorial boards and the community at large. The project, which became known as Life Line, withstood the proponents of the NIMBY (*Not In My Backyard*) syndrome and endured by consulting with interest groups and listening

to community concerns. As one editor observed, “*St. Leonard's succeeded by meeting the community's fears halfway*”.⁴ The number of lifers was scaled-down to ten, and violent sex offenders were excluded. The Life Line Residential Program would be housed in the existing facility and an Admissions Committee would include representatives of the police, victims and the neighbourhood.

Intensive screening and selection

Obviously, any program to help lifers has to start in the prison, and thus the In-Reach Program was created to work with lifers throughout their prison sentence. The program recruits paroled lifers who have been in the community as productive members who return to institutions to motivate newly admitted lifers and to assist in their eventual reintegration back to the community.

The long-term relationship of the In-Reach worker with the inmate lifer ensures an accurate assessment of the individual's readiness for release. The Agency Residential Manager, working along with the In-Reach worker, also visits the applicant throughout his/her sentence to assess suitability for the Life Line Program. The Community Admissions Committee, which includes representatives from the police, victims and the neighbourhood, determines the level of support the community is able to offer the lifer after reviewing the file information provided by the Correctional Service of Canada and the National Parole Board.

Society acknowledges, for some lifers, that justice has been served by a long period of incarceration; however, community acceptance is not given lightly, but earned by demonstrating remorse, addressing the behaviours that resulted in the taking of a life, and providing solid evidence that meaningful change has occurred.

Longer residency — progressive living arrangement

The reality is that the time has come to pay for longer sentences. A quarter century has nearly passed since the introduction of the 25-year life sentence in 1976, and the first of this new breed of lifers are being considered for potential release. Lifers, by the very nature of their sentence, require a long re-entry time and decompression after a prolonged period behind bars. The Residential Program is designed for high-

need lifers who require a strong support system and an array of interventions.

The Life Line Program is based on a minimum period of residency of one year, up to three years (the full eligibility period of day parole). Given the longer residency, St. Leonard's has provided progressive living arrangements, with graduated levels of responsibility and independence. The lifer starts off in the highly structured group living environment, graduates to apartment-style living and, upon full parole, moves to independent living in the community with the support of an aftercare service.

Individualized treatment strategies

Long-term imprisonment has been described as a "behavioural deep freeze." Frozen in time, the typical paroled lifer leaves the institution in the same emotional state that he came in with. In other words, he comes out as a middle-aged adult with adolescent urges, adult expectations, and now wants to catch-up for lost time — a recipe for failure. Frustrated by everyday activities we take for granted, he is full of fear and confusion; however, despite this generalization, we have found lifers to be a diverse group of individuals in terms of their social background, criminal history and vocational skills. Therefore, each lifer requires a highly responsive, individualized approach, anticipating personal issues in terms of self-esteem, relationships, substance abuse and employment. Life Line is not a program per se, but a process of gradual re-socialization. "Life Line," a former resident writes, "gives the resident the freedom to become self-determining individuals. I am allowed to, and encouraged to, make my own decisions and am supported more often than not, by the House. With that choice, I quickly learn that my choices have consequences, often unforeseen. I am expected to take responsibility for my actions and am afforded more freedom as I show I deserve it."

Guided social interaction

Residential staff must be trained to be sensitive to the issues of long-term offenders — the fear of going back to prison, money management, relationships with females and the "Coney Island" effects of a world of choice after prolonged incarceration.

A dedicated parole officer, who supervises all Life Line residents, is essential to the concept of teamwork, as the nature and intensity of supervision must complement the individual's plan of care. Indeed, an established partnership and communication between St. Leonard's House and the Correctional Service of Canada in conjunction with a Parole Officer ensures a consistent and stable approach to achieving the goal.

The best guide for the lifer, especially in the first months of his return to community living, is a fellow lifer. Successful lifers on full parole return to the

home and share their experiences, enabling the new lifer to anticipate future problems. Full of anxiety, a new lifer can confide in his peer without fear of official sanctions or concern. Similarly, teaming up a lifer with a volunteer gives the lifer an opportunity to test out many of his new social skills in a more normalized environment.

Prison habits, protective masks and solitude govern his life outside of prison. As one lifer explains about his failed release:

"Trust comes hard. One must drop the public façade, and disclose, in order to trust. Trust and disclosure are like a trip to the dentist's office. They are to be endured with slightly clenched teeth, and visited only when necessary; only when all else fails."

The decision to trust others and pay heed to counselling voices is a critical step for the lifer and a certain indicator of future success.

Service to the community

The concept of service to others is a major program element of Life Line. Individuals are matched with community service projects according to interest and skills. To date, the residents have participated in The Special Olympics, Charity Walk-a-Thon, Community Clean-Up Projects, as well as public speaking at schools and community groups. Jerry, a current resident, remarks "I am approaching 50 years of age, and two-thirds of my life will have passed. I am at a major transition point in my life, but 'turning the page is easier said than done.' I have come to learn that helping others improves your own life. I want to salvage something from the years I have left and not simply go through the motions. Admittedly, some of my motivation is out of guilt, but it is a means of healing and repairing the damage to my soul and psyche."

The message, in word and in deed, is that lifers can help themselves and others. This reflects the optimum in reintegration. The offender is restored as a responsible citizen, who also is relied on to help others.

Concluding remarks

The Residential Program for lifers in Windsor was set up as a pilot — a model to be duplicated in other regions across the country. More than one community must rise above community fears by throwing a lifeline to those thousands of men and women drowning in oceans of time. St. Leonard's believes that some men and women, who have taken a life, deserve the opportunity to give a life back to society — their own! ■

¹ 491 Victoria Avenue, Windsor, Ontario N9A 4N1.

² The Windsor Star, April 10, 1990.

³ The Windsor Star, April 12, 1990.

⁴ The Windsor Star, September 5, 1992.