

Fraser Valley Institution for Women

Anonymous Prisoners

Serving a life sentence, I have been fortunate to have the privilege of gaining many skills and teachings here at Fraser Valley Institution (FVI) due to my willingness and open-minded, forward thinking. I was held in a remand centre for nearly two years before I got sentenced. I then sat in max here at FVI for two years on the Lifer two-year rule before coming out to medium population. Up to that point, there was only dialectical behavioural therapy¹ and school available in the max, which were both certificate programs. I had two pipe ceremonies in the two years I was in max. I was fortunate to come into this institution culturally strong, and forwarded my teaching and our way of life to others. I had anxiety and headaches due to lack of socializing when I came out in the medium population. With the help of other ladies here I was able to overcome this.

The ladies that remain in max now feel they are not having their spiritual needs met by the Elder that is in the position to assist them. We have had changes in elders since I have been here. The Inmate Committee still receives complaints on the lack of services available from the Elder (e.g. not being available when a crisis approaches, no clear communication, stating there would be a sweat or pipe ceremony and not following through, not giving the max ladies a schedule to follow, no access to drumming or singing, making appointments and not showing up, no follow-ups, lack of respect and communication, causing the ladies to become spiritually isolated). There are ladies that are culturally strong, we make our way back to the max to do drumming and singing, as well as teach them songs and aspects of our own rooted teachings. We believe this is the turning point to become grounded and the assistance of the Elder, who is under-resourced, is detrimental.

Our population is fast becoming increasingly Indigenous, the majority of whom are culturally weak. It is hard to witness. Many ladies lack social skills. We have also noticed language barriers, which is a form of disability in mainstream approaches. This leaves the unfortunate ones in the dark and misunderstood.

We have had many complaints on the lack of awareness for the ladies regarding the mental health needs that the majority of the population have to deal with. We have also noticed the lack of approach towards dementia and elderly care. We have a number of older ladies and they are not respected in that manner.

There is peer support training that was put in effect after the Ashley Smith recommendations. This is a half-day paid position. More trades training should be available that would benefit the ladies if pursued. This would assist them to become productive members of society.

The population was not too sure on how to approach submissions for this collection that is to be submitted to parliament, as this is the very first connection we have made with our government. There have been numerous incidents that have occurred and some of the ladies are somewhat hesitant to share. Although we had the privilege to share our stories and our experiences with Kim Pate, prior to her becoming a Senator, and the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, there remains a lot that needs to be done to improve things at FVI, which have started to change since Justin Trudeau was elected our Prime Minister.

The max has changed how they allow the ladies to integrate into medium population. They used to have levels from 1 to 4. Now it is levels from 1-3. We are now seeing more ladies going on ETAs (escorted temporary absences) and day parole today than before. Section 84 which allows Indigenous prisoners to be held in community facilities² is being brought forward and explained to us.³ This was not the case in the past. We are now hearing of more work releases and limited day parole granted for treatment purposes in the community.

In the minimum that houses twenty ladies, we have heard a lot of complaints about the lack of work resources. We had ladies come back into medium population from minimum to work in the kennels and the kitchen commissary. We continuously hear of how boring it is over there in the minimum.

We are now finding our own voices and are grateful to have been heard. We become strong as we come together in solidarity.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Please see Blanchette, K., J. Flight, P. Verbrugge, R. Gobeil and K. Taylor (2011) *Dialectical Behaviour Therapy within a Women's Structured Living Environment* (R-241), Ottawa: Correctional Service Canada.
- ² The *Corrections and Conditional Release Act* (CCRA) which states in section 84, "If an inmate expresses an interest in being released into an aboriginal community, the Service shall, with the inmate's consent, give the aboriginal community (an) adequate notice of the inmate's parole review or their statutory release date, as the

case may be; and (b) an opportunity to propose a plan for the inmate's release and integration into that community".

- ³ It should be noted that According to the most recent Departmental Performance Report for the Correctional Service of Canada, CSC (2016) self-reported that "The percentage of Aboriginal offenders with CCRA section 84 release plans did not meet the expected result".

REFERENCES

- Corrections and Conditional Release Act (S.C. 1992, c.20) Retrieved from <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-44.6/section-84.html>
- Correctional Service Canada (2016) Departmental Performance Report, Ottawa: Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness. Retrieved from <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/005/007/092/005007-4500-2015-2016-eng.pdf>