

Fraser Valley Institution for Women

Stephanie Deschene

My name is Stephanie Deschene. I am a 26-year-old, third-time Indigenous federal prisoner currently serving time in Fraser Valley Institution for Women (FVI). I was incarcerated in September 2016 for property related crimes, at which time I was approximately 20 weeks pregnant.

During my time in a remand centre in Prince George I made the decision to transfer down to the Lower Mainland in hopes that I could be a part of the Mother-Child Program at Alouette Correctional Center for Women (ACCW). The morning I departed for ACCW (at 28 weeks pregnant), I was made to wear both leg-shackles, as well as hand-cuffs. When I gently protested, I was subsequently called very rude and derogatory names, and told to shut up.

When I arrived at ACCW I was met by an official in upper manager who proceeded to ask me questions related to an incident that happened, at that time, eight years ago where I had been involved in a staff assault and was unlawfully at large. She asked me questions like “why would you even bother coming here, don’t you know we will just make this an uphill battle for you?” and “are you forgetting what happened last time you were here?” Now, I understand the seriousness of what happened and I did take full responsibility. I was sentenced to more time for those charges and now, many years later, they were still trying to punish me further by denying me the opportunity to be with my child after he was born.

Three days after I arrived at ACCW, I put in an application for the Mother-Child Program (MCP) in medium-security. Two days after I submitted the application, I had a programs staff bring it back to me telling me “why bother? It is just going to be denied”. I submitted it anyways and had my application “disappear”. I felt so alone, and frustrated. I could not understand why I would not be allowed this chance.

Due to my lack of forward progress in ACCW, I decided to plead out early in hopes that I could go to a federal penitentiary where I would be more likely to keep my son once he was born. I arrived at FVI at 34 weeks pregnant with a five-year sentence. I was shocked, but not surprised, that FVI decided to place me in maximum-security as well. I was placed in maximum-security for reasons such as having an *allegation* for assault in October 2015 and being in an abusive relationship, of which my baby’s father was the aggressor.

The institution and my case management team could have made an executive decision to allow me an opportunity to be in medium-security with a behaviour contract based on positive behaviour and obvious dedication to

changing my life for the better in hopes of not being separated from my child once he was born. There are options offered to women here that go in and out of segregation (e.g. for fights, drug involvement, suicidal behaviours, etc.) that would have been appropriate given my circumstance and would have mitigated any alleged risks my case management team identified. Yet I was not offered any such options.

Prior to my son's birth, I asked to have my friend send me a couple things for my son for when he left the hospital and was told by the institution that I was *not allowed* because I was quote "not in the Mother Child Program (MCP)". It is the understanding and direction of the Correctional Investigator that *I am* in fact in the MCP, just not the *residential* portion and should be treated as such. To this day, I have still not started working with the MCP co-ordinator.

I went into labour on 13 January 2017. The day after the birth of my son the staff received direction that I was to be shackled and cuffed. How was I supposed to breastfeed, hold, and cuddle my son safely? Their lack of compassion baffles me.

I was informed by my social worker and the institution that once my son was born I would be able to pump breast milk and send it out to him. However, the day after I returned from the hospital I was pulled into a meeting with my Institutional Parole Officer (IPO) and informed that, in fact, I would *not* be allowed to provide breast milk for my son due to the possibility of "contamination", along with the fact that the ministry would want weekly periodic urinalysis (due to past involvement back in 2012, in the institutional drug subculture), which CSC would not provide me with. It is my understanding that women in the MCP could be provided such testing when required, yet FVI was and *is* still treating me as if I am not a part of the program.

Due to the lack of knowledge and co-ordination between both the institution and the Ministry of Children and Family Development on how to deal with mothers who are incarcerated in maximum-security, I have seen my son only *three* times since he was born two and a half months ago. It is a very good thing that I had supportive women living on my unit during this time, because if I become depressed there is no actual psychological help for women to access unless they are suicidal, due to lack of funding. Women who are trying to work past trauma and create healthy outlets are told they will be put on a waitlist. Should we not be *preventing* suicidal thoughts and actions not *treating* them once they happen?

I had to request my six-week post-partum medical check-up. The good news is that I am supported by my social worker to have my son here once I get to medium-security and apply for the residential portion of the MCP. At the time of writing, my security review had been in the works for two weeks. Yet due to ridiculously long-time allowances to complete such reports (i.e. 30 days), I must wait. Every day spent not having that report finished is another day I am away from my son, and another day that I lose to bond with him.

During this federal sentence, I have not received any bad logs, warnings or charges. I am involved with many pro-social activities in the institution, yet they treat me as if I still do not deserve to be in medium with my son. Keeping my child with me is not only the best thing for me and my son's relationship, but it is best for my family and my community as having him here with me means it is less likely that my son will end up in the system like so many other children of Indigenous prisoners. Not only would there be less chance that I re-offend post release, but there would be less chance that my cycle of drug abuse and crime will repeat itself in the next generation.

It has been my understanding that incarcerated pregnant women ought to be in a safe and supportive environment where they feel encouraged to be a good parent. The sad fact is that I do not feel as if I was supported or encouraged in my parenting role very much at all. I was not offered any of the basic courtesies that mothers in medium or minimum are afforded. I believe that CSC should ensure all its staff are familiarized and well-informed regarding all aspects of the MCP, as it is such a vital program to women prisoners. Pregnant women and women intending to have custody of their children should be managed according to the least restrictive measures as it relates to *relevant* safety and security concerns of the institution. In the case that another pregnant woman be made to stay in maximum-security I believe it is imperative that CSC staff be trained on how to respectfully deal with pregnant and post-partum women prisoners in *all* situations and security levels, not simply medium- and minimum-security women.

It is important that programs staff, upper management, and the identified MCP co-ordinator be trained on the non-residential portions of the program that, in fact, apply to women such as myself (i.e. non-residential portions of the MCP that provide different means to maintain the mother-child bond during incarceration such as the use of ETA or UTA for family contact/parental responsibilities, private family visits, recording of stories, pumping and storing of breast milk, etc.). *All* women should be given equal opportunity to be with and maintain healthy bonds between themselves and their children.