

Fraser Valley Institution for Women

Anonymous Prisoner 3

With many changes over the last decade, I have come to notice the following:

- The staff are more distant and not as encouraging;
- We have on paper, but really do not have in practice, a case management “team” to discuss where we are, what is expected and where we are going;
- We have lost our town hall meetings, which were our chance to interact with and ask questions to the warden;
- We have lost our voice and are warned that filing a grievance can have repercussions;
- We have lost triplicate request form,¹ which we once used for our protection;
- We have lost everything positive for Lifers (e.g. meetings in the community on Friday nights, links with folks who would come in to assist us with any information we needed information on, support groups, monthly meetings for Lifers, and access to newsletters like *Out of Bounds* magazine or *Cell Count*);
- We have lost recognition and ability to engage in fundraising to support different committees;
- We have lost the incentive to work and work for higher pay;
- We have lost access to regular and proper dental care, to see a psychologist, and to be able to work full-time;
- We have lost the ability to shop from a retailer and purchase magazine subscriptions;
- Work release is rare now due to (un)availability of staff;
- ETAs (escorted temporary absences) are being cut back; and
- We have lost funding for programs, recreation opportunities and staff to help with positive hobbies, a full-time librarian, and updated software on the computers.

As a Lifer doing a long sentence it is not so much the sentence that is troubling, but rather the negative, lonely and hopeless environment with day-to-day inconsistent treatment from the staff. I have personally found doing my first eight years in EIFW – Edmonton Institution for Women – often thought to be one of the worst facilities for incarcerated women in

Canada, to be the most encouraging and positive, and it taught me to stand up for myself in a positive and constructive way. I was meek, timid, shy, and scared to speak-up when I first came to prison because of the life I had led and thanks to the staff in Edmonton, they taught me how to use my voice, be assertive and stand up for myself. The staff taught me that my ideas and thoughts did matter, encouraged me to speak up for what I wanted and also that I was in charge of the path I took. Back then, I was able to meet with a psychologist regularly for my mental health and see a psychiatrist every three months to ensure my medications were helping. I was also seen regularly by a dentist and a doctor, while being encouraged to socialize through group activities such as card games held in the gym, scavenger hunts or simple hobby crafts that were held every Sunday to help us find a positive way to pass our time. There were also socials that the whole institution would partake in, bringing us all together where we could bring in our approved family and friends to show how we have grown and are working in concert. Staff would come through the houses for their regular walks, but take the time and talk with us, and ask how we were doing. They would share with us something they experienced or try to help if we had a dilemma, treating us like we are human, never looking down on us. I knew who most staff were and their position and if I had a question, I was able to ask that staff member directly. If they were unable to talk at that time, which rarely happened, I must say, they would come back in a bit, but either way you got an answer to your question rather fast and no question was regarded as less important. They also held monthly meetings in the board room to talk with a representative from each house to bring questions forward, address any issues girls were having and bring forward the problems staff were having. I speak highly of EIFW because it was an institution that strived to do its best, willing to help us to become a better individual, with staff that cared.

In 2011, I came out here to FVI – Fraser Valley Institution – where everything I had come to know, was no longer accepted. I was no longer allowed to talk with staff members as I had done in Edmonton or ask questions as I had for years. I was referred to fill out a request and it will be looked at, when they had time. I am left to feel conflicted about what I learned in Edmonton, which made me feel empowered and strong. In contrast, my whole life has prepared me for what prison has become because I am once again made to feel I have no voice, no choice and that I do not

matter. I am no longer able to see a psychologist because I am told “I am not a high need”, even though I told them I felt I need to see one because I was struggling day-to-day. I also asked and put in a request to see a psychiatrist regarding the medications I was on, but was told once again “I was not in need and the doctor would not help me”. I have to say though, the doctor – when I have seen her – has done her best to help me and I do appreciate all she has done, especially given that mental health issues are on top of all the other issues she monitors.

In the last six years, my mental health has taken a turn for the worst, where I have had many breakdowns with the feeling of hopelessness. I struggle to continue most days, suffering in silence due to the cut backs and the fact that there is no one to help me. I have come to learn I also suffer from PTSD, I have developed a tremor, but nothing more will be done other than to prescribe me another medication. I have also developed a degenerating neck C3 to C7. I am given a pill to deal with the day-to-day pain, rather than a proper pillow, which I think would be more helpful than a pill. Before prison, I was in great health and took care of myself, but how are we to take care of ourselves when we are not given the opportunities or resources? I have had a tooth ache for the last three months and I am told, once again, that I will have to wait due to the lack of funding. I have become a burden on society with my many ailments that continue to grow and get worse over time. Before coming to prison, I was a productive member of society, and I believed in the justice system and that people were treated with dignity and rehabilitated.

Since being incarcerated for many years now, I have yet to see how prisons have moved forward in helping people and giving them a fair opportunity to improve their lives, to become a better individual when getting back out into society. I get that we have a punitive system and we still resort to the old ways of “what happens here, stays here”, but we need to move past that thinking. People, who have the mentality of “lock them up and throw away the key” are doing society no favours, because how are we to get out and lead a better, more productive life without skills and training? I had worked for many years before coming to prison and have now become unemployable due to my lack of skills being away from the rest of society.

I used to feel good (i.e. in EIFW) when working to give back to society and felt like I was contributing in some way, for as they say, “idle hands do the devil’s work”. Unfortunately, I am told they do not do that out here

in FVI, due to cut backs and that they are unable to pay people. I am lost and fail to understand how even something as simple as giving back to our communities has to be taken away from us due to “cut backs” from the previous government that still persist today. We must remember that prisoners are not making a great deal to begin with and pay back thirty percent of what little is made, thanks again to the previous government. We have not had a raise in wages for decades. Yet, I know myself like many others live off what we make in here, contributing to my struggles for phone money to stay in contact with what family I have left, while trying to save money for when I get out. The prison has become a place for us to just be housed, cut-off from society to complete our core programs until our time comes when we get out.

Now we are told that the Trudeau government wants to make improvements in the federal penitentiary system and wants to make a difference. So far, the two-year rule for Lifers in max is no longer mandatory, while the use of segregation is declining. As a Lifer who has seen the loss of many things over the years, I feel the importance of a positive, encouraging and strong rehabilitation system would be more effective than what we have now. Is prison not meant to not just punish us for our crime, but to give us the opportunity to live a better and healthier life upon release? I am also hoping to see the new government put something in place for the women’s minimum. The only difference between medium and minimum right now is a fence. The minimums are segregated to a building, with nowhere to go and nothing to do, where I fail to see anything positive, all due to the loss of funding from the government for the women’s prisons. I will hope the minimum prisoners will be treated fairly, rewarded for good behaviour and encouraged to be part of the community they will be entering. I truly hope that the Trudeau government is serious about change, but that change cannot come soon enough in a system so broken.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Triplicate request form refers to “inmate requests”, which had an original copy with two color coded carbon copies, one yellow and one pink. The original would get placed on the file, the yellow would be used for circulation and the pink form could be kept by the prisoner so that they had a record of having submitted a request that is to be returned within 14 days.