

TOUGH ON CRIME?

The Harper government's "tough on crime" campaign negatively affected many basic aspects of incarceration. Suddenly, earned pay levels were dropped because a prisoner would not "confess" to a crime, even if appealing it and therefore the prisoner would be deemed "not accountable". There were also severe cut backs to health and dental care. Even important, minor privileges were removed like the ordering out for food, paid for by the prisoners themselves and the use of the barbeque every weekend was reduced to once a month. There are no longer any full-time librarians to help with the needed legal research, obtaining books or even the stocking of new, necessary books, and the librarian's hours were reduced to the equivalent of one day a week. Instead of being able to order necessary supplies from the community so that the variety and the prices were much better, prisoners can only order from a national catalogue that has a very limited stock and does not meet their needs. The prices are also exorbitant. Fundraising has become so restrictive with rules that do not allow viewing before buying or discretion as to what sells best (e.g. ice cream, blizzards, alarm clocks etc.). Furthermore, all food items being brought in must be pre-packaged and store bought. These are just some of the salient points. Below, I have itemized the main issues and offered a solution where possible.

Fundraisers

The fundraisers have changed so dramatically that it is virtually impossible to make a profit. The restrictions from National Headquarters (NHQ) do not make any sense, but we must adhere to them or not run the fundraiser. Items that bring in the most money, like ice cream, are not allowed to be included. This restricts the ability to make any profit. All of the fundraising items must be sold before announcing the next. This limits profits again. Pre-packaged food is all that is allowed at any social or fundraiser. This means that we do not have the fresh, home cooked food that will allow us to turn a profit for charity. There is a strict rule that there is to be "no food out" at the socials and the fundraisers. A lot of food is thrown out, instead of being sold and taken to a house. This is an outrageous waste and a huge loss of income. There has been such a reduction in fundraising monies that FVI can no longer send out money to worthy charities. The solution is to

give the discretion back to the Prisoner Committee about fundraising and about socials. Food should be allowed out of the socials or fundraisers so that profit is made and there is no wasting of expensive food.

“Accountability”

Programs officers and facilitators have now become the new judge and jury for those convicted. Prisoners have been told that they must “confess” to a crime or they cannot complete a program as they are not being “accountable”. Yet, another concern has arisen regarding programs. Recently, a prisoner was granted the right to take the program without having to confess to the crime. The discriminatory application of Commissioners Directive 730 *Offender Program Assignment and Payments*,¹ section 35 has to be changed (CD 730 is linked to CD 710-1 *Progress Against the Correctional Plan*,² Annex C where “accountability” amounts to a confession of the crime). There have been no changes to these CDs. Many prisoners had their pay reduced when CD 730 and CD 710-1 required this “accountability”. There needs to be a uniform application of these CDs. One prisoner cannot be required to confess and the next one does not. Obviously, prisoners would prefer not to have accountability linked to a confession or crime cycle. However, if it is to be linked to this, then everyone must be required to adhere to this standard. Exceptions cannot be made for one or two people. Further, the pay level should not be linked to the “accountability”. Many prisoners worked hard to raise their pay levels, only to have them reduced because they would not confess. This is patently unfair.

Dental Care

Standard dental care should be returned. Prisoners used to get cleanings once a year, fillings as needed and other dental care. Now prisoners do not get cleanings, fillings without mercury, crowns or periodontal care. Prisoners have only substandard dentists come in who are only allowed to work about 4 hours every six weeks. Lifers will be toothless soon. Basic dental care should be a given. After that, long-term prisoners may elect to pay into dental plans. This should be an option to cover most of the dental expenses.

Prisoner Pay

There used to be incentive wages of about \$20.00 a day for some construction jobs. Now we are paid well below minimum wage for every

job (approximately 41 cents an hour after deductions and hours worked). How can any of the prisoners afford basic dental care and supplements (especially for the aging population)? Prisoners must pay community prices, but are not paid community minimum wage. The solution is simply to raise the pay to a minimum level so that prisoners can take care of themselves and some of their family members. It should be noted there has not been a pay increase since the 1980s.

Libraries

In the past, there has been a full-time librarian who helped obtain legal texts and other needed books. However, now the librarian is limited to essentially one day a week. This does not allow her to help any prisoner with access to legal materials. The library does not house the necessary texts and case law so that appellate work can be done. With the severe cuts in legal aid, this raises the specter of justice denied. No one can do the legal work required or hire someone if there are no funds to do so. The solution is to pay for the necessary legal texts and case law access and the practice guides so that justice can prevail even after conviction. Having a full-time librarian is a necessary aid as well.

Computers

Prisoners were allowed their own computer in their rooms. This is no longer permitted. It is important to do legal work at every hour that a prisoner can and with the necessary privacy to keep the privilege intact. The necessary safeguards on computers are inexpensive and easy to place on the computer.

Purchasing

Prisoners used to be allowed to order from a variety of stores in the community. Pricing was affordable and the necessary items available. Prisoners must now order from the national prisoner catalogue, which is understocked and overpriced. The prisoner's needs cannot be met on this basis. Some prisoners need supplements that will save their eyesight, for example, and cannot get these needed items. In the past, prisoners could get hair dyes and other hair supplies. Some institutions still allow this, but not Fraser Valley Institution for Women (FVI). At FVI, prisoners must pay a hair dresser to do the coloring and cuts. The prices are exorbitant. There is enough depression and lack of self-esteem in just dealing with the daily

issues at FVI. Prisoners should be able to purchase their own coloring supplies and apply it themselves.

Accommodation

Prisoners' room and board costs now cut into our minuscule pay that was setup to take those costs into consideration. We are also charged for telephone administration. This is a huge loss of money that has detrimental impacts on our lives.

Disciplinary Measures

The charging process has become harsher. In the past, informal resolutions were tried first. However, now prisoners are usually being charged without first a verbal warning, then a written one and finally the charge. The process should revert to the informal resolution process with a charge being at the end of the line, not at the beginning as it is in most instances.

Food

The per diem for the grocery food is still at \$36.05 after approximately 34 years, while the cost of food has risen substantially. The per diem should be raised to about \$50.00 per week. More healthy food should also be returned to the grocery list (e.g. like mixed nuts, popcorn for snacks, almond milk without the corn syrup, etc).

Medical Privacy

Medical privilege was something that seems to previously have been safe guarded. It is not now. CD 566 *Security Escorts*,³ states that guards are not to be in the operating room or in the medical office when someone is discussing her health issue with the doctor (only sight of the prisoner is required so that medical privilege remains intact). Yet, the head of FVI claims that doctors will not meet without the guards in the room. This has not been the experience of prisoners at FVI. Doctors have even asked for the privacy to maintain medical privilege and the guards have erroneously replied that they cannot leave the room. To honour the CD's intention of maintaining medical privilege, the guards must stay outside the room during consultations and leave the operating room once the prisoner is anaesthetized. Only doctors who agree to this can be hired so FVI's own rules are not violated.

Prisoner Relations

It seems that prisoners in the past were allowed to share their clothes and food. Prisoners face charges if they do that now. They should be allowed to give each other clothing, food or any allowed item without fearing charges. Many prisoners do not have money or family to help them buy clothes, canteen or health and hygiene products. The institution says it does not want this because of possible bullying. The obvious solution is to have the prisoners wishing to share, sign a form in front of an admissions and discharge staff member to make sure it is consensual. The way it presently is, the institution is the bully, and prisoners are not allowed to act humanely with each other.

Material and Entertainment

Previously, an organization named LINC, was allowed to provide televisions to those who could not afford them. Under the Harper government, this charitable and needed act was not allowed. Prisoners must now purchase a television that is about \$200.00 or more. A television is a means to stay connected to the world in such an isolated place as prison. Few want to risk being harmed by sitting out in the common areas. Further, a room is a place to get away from everything. A television in one's own room is absolutely necessary to maintain mental health and stay connected in some sense to the outside world.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious from the items discussed above that the Harper government's "tough on crime" changes created substantial hardship for those in prison. In everyday life, it is the small, continuous deprivations that increasingly take away any sense of life being fair or worthwhile. Deprivations do not create better citizens. They do not "rehabilitate". As in the community, where fair play, kindness and human decency create stronger alliances with doing the "right thing", so it is in prison. The highlighted changes that fail to do anything but increase the likelihood of recidivism must be revoked and more humane measures must be put in their place. Everyone, including society in general, will benefit greatly.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Please see: Correctional Service Canada (2017a) *Commissioners Directive 730 Offender Program Assignments and Inmate Payments*, Ottawa. Retrieved from <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/acts-and-regulations/730-cd-eng.shtml>
- ² Please see: Correctional Service Canada (2017b) *Commissioners Directive 710-1 Progress Against the Correctional Plan*, Ottawa. Retrieved from <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/lois-et-reglements/710-1-cd-eng.shtml>
- ³ Please see: Correctional Service Canada (2017c) *Commissioners Directive 566-6 Security Escorts*, Ottawa. Retrieved from <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/lois-et-reglements/566-6-cd-eng.shtml>