

Drumheller Institution
Anonymous Prisoner 17

First of all, I would like to take this opportunity to thank those who are making efforts to bring positive change to how the justice system treats people convicted of an offense. I do appreciate it. In my humble opinion, there have been many changes in how the Correctional Service Canada (CSC) treats the individuals that are entrusted to their care and those changes have not been to our betterment.

The increase in the penitentiary population has greatly affected all operations within the institution where I am housed, from security to recreational activities. As the population has grown, institutions are struggling to fulfill their responsibilities in meeting the individual's needs with respect to health care, mental health care, programs, recreation and so forth. For example, when this institution had a population of four-hundred, the waiting list to see the dentist was maybe three months at the most. Now with a higher population, the waiting list to see the dentist is closer to twelve months.

While the increase in the population has resulted in the hiring of more security personnel, other resources have dwindled, including with respect to parole preparation and social programming. As the per diem that is allotted to feed us has not increased in many years, the cost of food has continually increased. This has led to a couple of issues – the quality and portions of food have decreased.

There has not been an increase in the prisoner pay system since the 1980s, yet we lose a substantial portion of our remuneration to cover our food and accommodations, which sometimes need to be shared. On top of that we have to pay for the prisoner telephone system, stated as an administration cost. I know of some guys who never use the telephone or have a phone card, but they are still deducted 8% of their pay every two weeks for this service. I have heard many guys complaining about going to sleep hungry. Less money to spend in the canteen, along with the poor quality and quantity of food serviced in kitchen, has led to short tempers with violence erupting from individuals being hungry. This has increased the number of guys being muscled for their canteen or “taxed”.

Another issue is that there is a lack of halfway houses in the communities. There are guys who are waiting anywhere from three weeks to two months before a bed becomes available for them to start their day parole that has been granted by Parole Board Canada. Here, we have part of the justice

system stating it is okay for you to be back in the community, but the community does not have the resources for this.

Where relevant, I believe that there needs to be a balance between programs to help one become an emotionally balanced person and educational opportunities to become employable. Over the years, CSC's focus seems to be to fix the individual (i.e. their emotional or addictions issues) to the detriment of training for work that will allow them to survive upon release. To me, this makes no sense – I can control my emotions, but if I cannot put food on the table, I am put in a position where I may need to turn back to crime to put food on the table, but I will be polite about it! I remember thirty years ago when a prisoner could become an apprentice in many different fields and received more than just a high school diploma.

While CSC states the community support is important, it seems that correctional and parole officers try to discourage citizens from being a support in our lives. I have heard many stories about the poor treatment visitors experience at the hands of staff, and how parole officers describe an individual (prisoner) to family and potential employers affecting those relationships in a negative way.

The central purchasing system is a monopoly and is problematic. I wonder how all communities where federal penitentiaries are located have been impacted by this, and whether local stores and employees working in them have lost income as a result of it. As a Canadian citizen, I have lost my right to choose which company I would like to support or the brand I would like to wear. To my understanding of the law, as a prisoner I have only lost my right to freedom, but I retain all my other rights as a Canadian citizen. For Conservatives who promote the free market, I ask, what happened to competition? The change was passed as a way for CSC to enhance institutional security, however, that makes no sense as everything is subject to search (e.g. by a dog) when arriving at the institution.

In conclusion, I pray and hope that this information will be helpful in correcting some of the issues federal prisoners face on a daily basis.

With many decades of life experience in the Canadian penal system, I was encouraged by others to outline my life journey with Correctional Service Canada (CSC) and the Parole Board of Canada (PBC) to highlight some of the shifts that have occurred in the federal penitentiary system over the years.

ON CONDITIONAL RELEASE

I was convicted of murder as a teenager. After a decade behind bars, I was released on full parole, enrolled in university and got a degree, got married and had a child. I started a business, but then as a result of a family dispute where I threatened court action to maintain custody of my child, I became targeted for false complaints about to my parole officers. My parole was subsequently suspended and revoked on a number of occasions. I was later told by CSC and PBC officials that this should not have happened.

At one point, I was released on day parole and several months later I was again granted full parole. This is where my life experiences with Prime Minister Stephen Harper's policies crossed paths. During my parole hearing, I admitted that I smoked a joint to help with the stress of moving from a small town to a large city, leaving my family and friends behind, and starting all over again. I was given a "substance-abuse condition" even though the rules state that conditions could only be imposed if it was a "risk factor" that contributed to my offence, which it was not. I was told by an official that the imposition of this condition was a direct result of the federal government's 'tough' stance on marijuana.

While on full parole and issue free, I was suspended for an alleged assault and I was later revoked in February 2014 without a hearing. The charges were later dropped in court as the person whom claimed that I assaulted him admitted that the accusations were false and that he was the one whom had assaulted me. I had requested that my revocation hearing be postponed until after my court date because I knew that I was innocent. However, I was not granted this request. I was told that the federal government had put in place rules that if a prisoner is charged with a new offence that their parole is automatically suspended and revoked.

After returning to prison, I grappled with memories of childhood abuse I experienced. As I tried to access counselling, I was informed that because of CSC cutbacks mandated by the Harper government as part of their austerity