

Mission Institution

Simon Chow / Inmate Welfare Committee Chairman

My name is Simon Chow, and presently, I am the Inmate Wellness Committee Chairman of Mission Minimum Institution. I am a Lifer who has spent over 17 years in many federal penitentiaries, which include Kent Institution, Edmonton Institution, Grande Cache Institution, Matsqui Institution, Mission Medium Institution and Mission Minimum Institution. I have the first-hand experience with respect to the effects of the Harper government's punishment agenda.

I started serving my federal time in 2000 under the Liberal government's policies and mandates, which at the time focussed on rehabilitation and harm reduction. Then in 2006, we were under the Conservative government's 'tough on crime' policies and mandates, which focus on punishing and keeping prisoners behind bars longer. I do not think I need to tell you the distinctions between the two sets of policies and mandates. However, I would like to mention one thing that is quite distinctive. We all know that tattooing in prison is forbidden, but is unstoppable. Prisoners infected with Sexual Transmitted Diseases (STDs) is quite common within the penitentiary population. Under a Liberal government harm reduction policy, institutions could create a tattoo artist job position and provide a safe environment for tattooing. When Conservative government took power in 2006, they cancelled the tattooing program and the consequence was that the health care costs increased significantly. This example clearly differentiates the policies between the two past governments. The old program needs to return to save lives and taxpayer dollars spent on health care.

After receiving the invitation to participate in this *Dialogue*, I sent out a communiqué and asked the prison population for their comments. In addition, at the Restorative Justice weekly meeting, penitentiary reform was the topic for group discussion. The discussion for the evening was quite productive. We shared our experiences with the volunteers and came-up with some suggestions in improving the correctional system. In conclusion, we all agreed with the recommendations found in the *Out of Bounds* article and its demands for penal reform.¹

After many discussions amongst the population here, not surprisingly, we all agreed that food is the highest priority on the top ten list. Previously, under the Liberal government, every medium- and maximum-security institution prepared prisoners' meals in their own kitchens. Presently, all regions are serviced by central feeding, in which every region designates one or more institutions to prepare all prisoners' meals in its region.

Meals, prepared days ahead and frozen, are put inside hot meal carts and delivered to the institutions. Both the quality and quantity of the food are insufficient. Moreover, prisoners housed at all different security levels used to be confined in penitentiaries that allowed food drives, with the funds raised for local initiatives, as well as opportunities for prisoners to order food from local restaurants. In maximum-security institutions, the food drives were not only used to support local businesses, but also served as a tool to encourage prisoners to maintain good behaviour. For example, in 2005 at Kent Institution, when the living unit maintained charge free and incident free for two months, prisoners were allowed to have a food drive. Prisoners who want to have access to good food outside would try their best to keep their living units in good order. At Mission medium, where food drives were permitted, prisoners could order outside food for special social family events. At Mission minimum, prisoners could order food delivery from local restaurants and consumed it with their family during the visiting hours. Unfortunately, under the Harper government's punishment agenda all the food drives and food orders were suspended.

In addition to the food issue, I would like to point out another issue that should be looked at, which is better access to education on technology. We used to have access to computers for personal use. In 2000, because of security concerns with respect to an Internet access breach, CSC ceased to allow personal computer for prisoner use. The rationale was that a prisoner could have access to Internet with a cell phone, which was frequently found in prisoners' possession against institutional rules. Computers and computer-related gadgets have become one of the most essential tools in daily life outside. It would be greatly beneficial for prisoners to be able to learn or improve their computer skills. Moreover, all night schools were suspended due to the budget cut from the Conservative government. Everyone agrees that education is one of the most important programs for prisoners' rehabilitation.

Most, if not all, issues need time to amend and reinstate except for those noted above, which would only require amendments to Commissioner Directives. Therefore, I believe these issues should take priority to get them fixed first.

ENDNOTES

¹ Demand Prisons Change (2015) *Dear Liberal Government*. Retrieved from <https://demandprisonschange.wordpress.com>