

To be very clear, my story is not about me decrying the fact I am in prison. I am very guilty and justifiably sentenced as a ‘dangerous offender’. In my own opinion, I should be incarcerated for a very long time. My complaint is the state of incarceration with Correctional Service Canada (CSC) penitentiaries today.

I have been in for eleven years on this sentence and eight years on a previous one starting in the 1990s. The decline of the system could be seen in the late-1990s, even before the Conservatives took federal office in 2006. Yes, prison ‘clientele’ has changed over the years. There is way more of a gang mentality, coupled with way less respect and personal integrity. However, the system has not changed its policies and procedures accordingly or appropriately to address this ‘new generation’. They have fought fire with fire only creating a much larger fire. There is also a change for the worse in attitudes of new and younger employees. New prisoners and new staff both seem to have an unhealthy sense of entitlement, disregarding the bigger common good, which necessarily takes some sacrificing of personal comfort. As for staff, in my opinion, the worst culprit in the 1990s was the guard’s union playing games – directly and indirectly creating a more volatile environment – for bargaining chips at the contract negotiating table, which continues to this day. However, since the Harper administration things have gone drastically downhill with the management of cases and a continuing loss of privileges. It feels like the only freedom of choice is in how we choose to react to adversity, which is very disempowering.

Maybe I am getting old, but I see in the employees here a reflection of our socio-cultural decline in society – poor work ethic and everyone looking out for number one – which manifests itself in doing whatever is necessary to keep job security. Relations between prisoner and staff are worsening with things becoming more and more confrontational and adversarial. Even relations amongst staff are often tense, cold and uncooperative. Politics and media only fuel the drive for self-survival (CSC’s that is) at the expense of humane, realistic, cost-effective and beneficial-to-public-safety practices in the system.

I think just about anyone with some insight into human nature and basic psychology would agree that what is behind nearly every criminal’s anti-social behaviour is low or no self-worth. The current penitentiary environment only deepens and reinforces these negative deepest beliefs

about ourselves. There is very little reward for sincere hard work and efforts towards change, and too much punishment for airing grievances, as well as issuing requests and making comments. Case Management Teams outright lie, exaggerate, and tailor documents to reflect the narrowest scope and most damning impression of the prisoner. They have become very skilled in creative writing and delaying tactics – “sluffing us off”.

There have been outright threats, but much more implied threats to any prisoner who pursues their rightful parole eligibility to the Warden and at parole hearings if it interferes with the Institutional Parole Officer’s (IPO) own plans/ulterior motives. The pen is truly mightier than the sword. There is no room for human expression of natural modest emotion. My IPO once wrote in an Assessment for Decision (A4D) that they felt I was engaging in my ‘crime cycle’ because I expressed my frustration with their delaying and avoiding my requests to meet and get working on applications. Trust me, it was a very mild expression – a staff member standing right next to us at the console did not notice anything other than regular conversation. You can imagine how that looked to the Warden at my hearing. And get this – I only received a copy of that A4D a minute before going into the hearing with no time to read over it to see what he had read already. It was not until after the hearing, in my cell, that I read it and almost choked at how overblown some comments were. My IPO rarely met with me, and only briefly, so how could they have any read on who I am? This is only one example of many and of what many others have experienced.

Today I am gun-shy. I am scared, at times filled with anxiety when I have to deal with them. It reminds me of being a kid when my dad would blow up on me and I had no idea what for. I cannot just be myself in any interaction with them. Therefore, they may be getting an inaccurate impression of me and our encounter. The most accurate of my many assessments over the years was by a psychologist here who spent a whole five hours in total interviewing me. It was not glowing or supportive, but it was accurate – my warts and all. This I respect and can work with. Sadly, this more detailed and rigorous report was not referred to by any other writers (i.e. my IPOs). How convenient.

I am sorry I cannot articulate better a more specific list of ten things I see requiring systemic change, but I am sure you can extrapolate a few from what I have written. All I can state is the Case Management Team hierarchy, the ‘intervention’ line of people, are all scared to risk their job security, do

not want their wrists slapped or hurt their chances promotion by supporting someone. We had one program facilitator who eventually quit their job because they had integrity and because their superiors kept returning his final reports after being quality controlled saying they were too supportive (i.e. not critical enough). At each level, under the previous administration the writer's afraid of their superior's reprimand all the way up to the Prime Minister. Most importantly, I strongly believe the training is all misdirected, inadequate and unrealistic.

To be fair, I have faith in the goodwill and natural wisdom of people when allowed to be expressed freely, without repercussion. Therefore, here are a few recommendations for positive change:

1. I personally believe the IPOs are overworked, leaving them unable to commit much attention to any one case. They need to spend more time with each prisoner, so hire more of them.
2. Free the reins of the IPOs, removing any threat to reporting their own true assessment to their superiors.
3. Provide much more initial training and on-going training to all staff for all positions and at all levels. They constantly need reminding we are human beings and not just a commodity that serves their job security – psychology, social work, sociology, compassionate training and the like, coupled with a hard look at the deeper needs, fears and pain of prisoners. To me, this simply translates into realistic common-sense. I cannot say enough about appropriate training and maybe better screening processes in hiring. Hire those with a bigger, or higher, or more long-term and more inclusive view of justice. Whatever happened to the restorative justice movement that CSC itself claimed to be a part of? Lip service again?
4. Offer much more, and always available, trauma counselling for staff members themselves. They require individual and group therapy for some of the things they encounter at work.
5. I am not really sure how realistic this one is, but what about separating prisoners who clearly prove they want to help themselves from the 'other' ones. Set up tiered programs and environments where the individual is enabled to continue growing and changing, developing self-respect, self-worth and a sense of purpose. Offering practical and effective job skills would go a long way.

6. Here at Mountain our access to the Chapel and social events have been drastically reduced. There is nothing to do. This, in turn, has diminished the 'life' of the joint, reducing outlets for positive interaction and things to look forward to. Of four hundred prisoners, we have a hard time finding enough guys to put a team sports together. The enthusiasm or spirit has been lost. The Security and Programs departments need to loosen the reins to realistic and productive levels on reasons to deny events. The Lifers' Group is barely functioning without a common lounge/office with the ability to only meet every two weeks in Visits & Correspondence. Of approximately one hundred and thirty eligible members, there are maybe twelve or less regulars. Incentives have been removed, such as better fundraising options and connections to community organizations. This brings me to the next suggestion.
7. Again, the Security and Programs departments need to loosen the reins on the ability of visitors and volunteers to enter the prison and interact with us. The ion scanners are unrealistically hypersensitive, hence unreliable. Family and loved ones are turned away after travelling hours and spending so much money. Volunteers have admitted to me personally they feel like they are treated as the criminal when trying to come in. CSC gives lip service of gratitude to volunteers, but in reality over-scrutiny and suspicion is overbearing and discouraging. The risk to benefit ratio is totally unbalanced in favour of oppression and counter-productivity.
8. Perhaps most important of all is, a piercing probing look has to be taken into consultants, policy makers and bureaucrats at the highest levels. All must be held accountable for legislated budget spending and their own personal motives. It only takes a few bad apples, with a lot of authority, to corrupt the whole bushel. We all know 'shit rolls downhill'. Maybe hiring a Correctional Investigator with the ear and sympathy of MPs and Senators would be a good start.

I am a huge advocate of the benefits of good human relations. Anything that cultivates and nurtures good relations can only translate into real rehabilitation and a safer society. Invest the extra funds today for the long-term savings. Who does the risk and cost-benefit analyses anyway? The media who conveniently profit from sensational headlines and extremely

unrealistic catchphrases like ‘one victim is one too many’ and ‘zero tolerance’? Or is it politicians and their big business buddies pursuing their power-lust and greed? It sure is not common-sense folk with society’s best interest in mind.

Change comes slowly – one heavy ball rolling will take time to stop and the next one needs to build momentum. Change, however, is a constant – it will happen. Let us just hope it is for the better. I for one appreciate any and all efforts for progressive penitentiary reform. A Russian author once said, “A society can be judged by the way it treats its prisoners”. Does our great Canadian society, taxpaying voting electorate, have the will to look at itself, as a whole, and ask itself this question: How do we treat our prisoners (and their loved ones and those who would help)? And would they like the answer... if they knew the truth and what that reveals about all of us?