

Out of Sight and Out of Mind: The Incarcerated

Mothers Offering Mutual Support / MOMS

Who are the people most likely to end up incarcerated? Most often, it is people who are experiencing addiction, poverty, alienation, and mental health problems. Should we cut them off from society, segregate them, and deprive them of social connections as a result? Mothers Offering Mutual Support (MOMS) say *no*. To us, “those” who are incarcerated are our loved ones – they are not nameless and faceless to us.

MOMS is a volunteer support group in Ottawa for women with loved ones involved with the criminal justice system. We aim to:

- Support and educate each other;
- Support our loved ones; and
- Advocate for change based on our lived experiences.

Founded in 2010 by three moms and an engaged community worker wanting to help families like ours, MOMS has grown to 50 members on our mailing list, a website, and monthly meetings of approximately 15 active members. The John Howard Society of Ottawa provided us with a meeting space that we use monthly for confidential and first name only face-to-face meetings. The meetings consist of:

- Introductions;
- Check-ins;
- Information sharing;
- Lending library; and
- Guest speakers when available.

As our membership and knowledge grew, we learned of the acute deficiencies of an adversarial justice system and the damaging impact of prison conditions on our loved ones.¹ This led to more advocacy and lobbying as we sought improvements. Women find us through:

- Our website at www.momsottawa.com;
- Information posted at Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre;
- Public speaking events; and
- Word of mouth through lawyers and community workers.

ADVOCACY

In 2015, MOMS formed an advocacy subgroup to:

- Raise public awareness;
- Participate in issue-based coalitions (e.g. Correctional Reform Coalition);²
- Lobby government (e.g. Public Safety Minister, opposition critics, etc.);
- Participate in consultations and task forces aimed at change;
- Carry-out research; and
- Engage in media relations³ and documentaries.⁴

With a constructive and collaborative approach, we bring our shared and lived experiences to the forefront of decision making to make suggestions and recommendations for practical solutions and improvements. Hearing from other women in similar situations, we know we are not alone in experiencing shame, guilt, and bewilderment with the criminal justice system. Our MOMS connection is integral to our survival as advocates for human rights for the incarcerated, people with many loved ones.

Common themes emerge at our monthly meetings, where our loved ones frequently have:

- Lifetimes of mental health issues;
- Addictions;
- An inability to find effective treatment; and
- Long wait times for treatment and support.

Many of these factors lead to criminal actions resulting in incarceration and the cycle repeats. Evidence-based policy affirms the critical importance of family connections during incarceration. However, there is a wide schism between policy and practice. Criminal justice policy that prioritizes family has not materialized on the ground and recommendations take decades to implement, if at all, especially when governments change.

Ivan Zinger, Correctional Investigator of Canada (2018, p. 3 emphasis added), notes the reluctance and aversion to recommendations that are put before the federal Minister of Public Safety:

It is especially concerning when the Service fails to respond to recommendations issued by my Office (Missed Opportunities) or dismisses the Office's initial findings (Saskatchewan Penitentiary riot). It is even more perplexing when CSC initiates its own consultation and review after the (OCI) Office has already investigated and reported on the matter (Secure Units for women offenders). Not surprisingly, progress appears stalled, stuck or even regressive in some highly visible areas of correctional practice.

This is our reality. Given that family contact (i.e. phone calls, correspondence, visits) are critical for physical and mental well-being for loved ones on both the inside and outside, it is notable that these contacts are fraught with hurdles and daunting processes for all involved. For example, while phone calls are usually quite simple to make by the vast majority of Canadians, for those who are incarcerated and their families, it is chillingly Kafkaesque including:

- Broken phones that are not fixed for weeks and even months at a time;
- Not enough phones for the number of people incarcerated in one area;
- The phones that are available are often dominated by select group of incarcerated people;
- All calls are monitored and every word must be carefully chosen by both parties so that conversations are not misconstrued;
- Frequently the system erroneously detects a 3-way call so the phone shuts down (often several times during a call) and each new call costs additional money;
- Calls are outbound only and, until recently, could only be made to land lines; and
- Exorbitant phone costs. This may be the most egregious aspect of all the noted problems, particularly for those who are in provincial remand centres awaiting trial and presumed innocent.

In light of the above, MOMS received intervenor status with counsel having access to question witnesses in a coroner's inquest into a death in custody of Cleve "Cas" Geddes, a 30-year-old man with schizophrenic

disorder in November 2018. The man was picked-up by police and the judge ruled that he be sent to the Royal Ottawa Hospital. However, there was no bed available at the hospital, so police took him to Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre. Distressed by the situation, he repeatedly asked to call family but was not allowed phone access and subsequently died by suicide. At the inquest, his sister testified that, if she had been able to connect with him, she might have been able to prevent his death. The sadness, frustration and heartbreak of the family were heart wrenching. The Ontario provincial correctional system failed to recognize the critical need of a distressed young man with considerable mental health concerns to connect with family, thereby failing to prevent a tragic death with a simple phone call. MOMS presence at this and another similar inquest last year, provided authenticity to the lived experience of the families dealing with the stigma and the egregious deficits in our criminal justice system.

When Mary's son was remanded in custody, she was devastated. She knew if she did not pick up the phone, his anxiety would be unbearable. Her son called collect every day and she always answered, despite the forbidding cost of \$800-\$1000 a month, because she was his lifeline. It is quite ironic that Bell Canada's advertising slogan in their annual campaign "Bell Let's talk" is marketed as "Mental Health for All"!

Written correspondence? A cheery card, a birthday greeting. Who does not like to get letters when there is no access to e-mails, text messages or phone calls? When writing to a loved one in jail, families know mail is checked for contraband or illegal activity. Stringent and inconsistent rules inhibit and hinder this form of communication. Calendars, hand painted cards or colourful stickers on envelopes intended to bring cheer have been returned by correctional institutions.

Visits are a lifeline for those in prison as well as their family, but the overwhelming hurdles make the prospect of visiting dreadful. We hear from many MOMS concerning the extent of their preparations to ensure they are not turned away, sometimes after driving for hours and sometimes days. "We feel sentenced along with our loved ones in jail, as their suffering is ours. How can we get the system to not judge us by what our loved ones have done?", one of our members recently remarked.

Guilt or innocence aside, the majority of our loved ones will one day return to our communities – to your community. They may be our loved ones, but they are also your fellow citizens. If they have been treated as

sub-human, how angry will they be? How well equipped will they be to return? If they are shoved out the prison door after the isolation and are still ill-equipped to find a place to sleep, let alone start a new life, who does that benefit? How does that increase public safety? Can we hope that, as we approach mid-twenty-first century, Canada's political leaders will heed calls to reform the criminal justice system?

We hope for all the families of individuals that are incarcerated and struggling with addictions, poverty, and poor mental health that governments will acknowledge the importance of progressive policies impacting these most vulnerable citizens, to enable them to stay connected to family and community, and to become law-abiding.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See <https://www.mcscs.jus.gov.on.ca/sites/default/files/content/mcscs/docs/Corrections%20in%20Ontario%2C%20Directions%20for%20Reform.pdf>.
- ² See <https://doris-blog.rnao.ca/post/letter-correctional-reform-coalition-crc>.
- ³ See <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/their-moms-do-the-time-too-a-support-group-for-mothers-of-prisoners-1.3581561>.
- ⁴ See <http://unconditionalpodcast.com/>.

REFERENCES

Office of the Correctional Investigator (2018) *Annual Report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator 2017-2018*, Ottawa: Office of the Correctional Investigator of Canada.

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