

ANXIOUS WOMEN AWAIT PRISON CLOSING

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Anything less than being fully informed about all of the options available to us, is not acceptable to the prisoners at Prison for Women (P4W). The scheduled closing of the prison in September, 1994 makes us very apprehensive about our futures. There are too many unanswered questions.

Some women think, if we are not from Ontario, we cannot go to the new Kitchener facility. The Native women want to know more about the "healing lodge" which is to be built for them. The Black women feel slighted because they have not been asked for their opinions on any of the proposed facilities.

Some women do not want to leave Kingston at all because they have family close by. Some have husbands and sons in men's prisons in the Kingston area and feel that if they are moved to a new facility they will have more difficulty seeing their loved ones. They have enough problems just trying to see them now, even though they are only a short distance away. Their visits now are always late with reasons given that there are not enough escorts available. What will happen when they are even further away?

Some women's needs center around day care facilities. The priorities of mothers imprisoned are often different from those of men incarcerated. Maternal instincts become more personified in many cases with the separation of mothers from their children, usually a deeply wounding experience for both mother and child. Addressing this important issue will be a major challenge for CSC staff. "Children are our most important resource", say these incarcerated mothers.

For a fraction of the costs of imprisoning mothers, we could provide a child from an underprivileged background with all of the personal and educational opportunities they now lack. This could assist in eliminating illiteracy among these children. The temptation to experiment with drugs, delinquency and other paths to conflicts with the law could be greatly diminished if resources were re-allocated. There should be no amount of money, time or energy too great to spend on our children. They are our future. In failing them, we are failing ourselves.

The system of incarceration also fails the women they lock up. One woman said, "We are wrestling not against flesh and blood, but against policy, against power, against rulers of oppression. There is no compromise between staff and prisoners. It's like a war zone." Another said, "We need to dig in. We need to take a position to support ourselves against CSC policies which threaten us. We need to stand our ground."

But all of this is difficult since there is little common ground among us. We are all unique individuals and have unique priorities.

Exercise and recreation are very important activities and the women interviewed felt that they did not have enough time outdoors, especially in the summer months. They also felt that there were not enough activities in the gym, that it is not fully utilized as it should be.

Some women complained about the guards. "The guards do not do their jobs properly. Some like to play 'heavy' and some are uncooperative and on 'power trips'." Additionally, just the problem of living with so many women in closed quarters is a hard ordeal. Many women, guards included, are afflicted with PMS at the same time. We gain information when we enter the prison system for the first time from other prisoners who tell us about the rules and programs, etc. If we did not help each other with information, we would have an even more difficult time for staff rarely tell us anything. They rarely give us a straight answer.

Listening to the experiences of different women in the population, I have learned that many have been victims from an early age. Many are survivors of abuse and many still are compelled to self-injure. They need to feel the pain to know that they are alive. One woman said, "We shouldn't be locked away in a concrete fortress" and then one day handed a piece of paper and told to "go out into the community and behave like responsible, trustworthy people".

After I began this article, on June 21, 1993 the Warden held an information sharing session to inform us about the new facilities. It seems that we might have to be moved to Provincial jails while awaiting the opening of the new Federal prisons. So far, though, no plans are firmly in place.

Another woman had these comments, "I feel that this excuse of being near families just doesn't cut it." Many women believe that the CSC is simply worried about the reputation of P4W, that the media and others' negative reflections on the administration puts their careers at risk. Instead of trying to make this a better place, they will just split us up and send us away. It doesn't make sense for me, either. Since my family resides in Ottawa, sending me to Kitchener which is twice as far away to visit as Kingston is for them, contradicts the reason given for moving me.

Many women have been here for a long time, and though it may sound funny to an outsider, this is their home. Its like saying, "well we know you have lived here ten years, but now you are moving and you have no say in it whatsoever".

The CSC has recently spent thousands of dollars on renovations and also on a new visiting unit here at P4W. Why were all of these changes not done a long time ago when they were needed? We wonder if P4W is being improved for the benefit of the men moving over from Kingston Penitentiary?

Why couldn't some of the thousands spent on new uniforms for the guards, have been spent on making changes here? Think about it - a guard could be in any type of clothing for all I care - it does not mean that they will not charge us, irritate us, like us any more, because of what they are wearing. Why not put some of that money to a good cause instead of using it for "outer garb"? If you were to do a survey of how these new uniforms for the guards are going to affect our view of them now that they are dressed differently.....

There are many women in here with substance abuse problems and no programs to help them. Why are there no programs? Cutbacks in the budget!!! Does this make sense to you? It sure does not make sense to me. We are returned to the street with the same problems we had when we entered the building in the first place.

Recently we had a visitor from Elizabeth Fry, Halifax. She told us the sod had actually been turned for the new Truro facility. As far as we know, both Kitchener and Truro are to go ahead. The warden for Truro has already moved there. She is said to be now liaising with various groups to enable the facility to function well with community based programs. She is also meeting with the townspeople. The size of the facility has already been downgraded so that less women will be incarcerated there than were previously planned for. When Therese LeBlanc visited us last spring, we were also told that the Halifax County Correctional Centre, Women's Section, is closing down completely. Does this mean we will be housed in Truro with women serving Provincial time? That's what it sounds like at the present time.

As we get more information, we will keep you informed and if you hear anything, please let us know!

Update 1994: Edmonton is now going ahead, and we are consistently losing more services here at P4W.

Report from Prison for Women (P4W)
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