

Prison Programming Basics

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WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FEDERAL AND PROVINCIAL PRISONS?

Federal penitentiaries house prisoners sentenced to two years or more. They are the responsibility of the federal government through the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), which is accountable to the Solicitor General of Canada. CSC's National Headquarters is in Ottawa, but its administration province to province is coordinated on a regional basis (under various regional headquarters).

Provincial correctional centres house prisoners sentenced to less than two years. They are the responsibility of the provincial government through the Ministry of Correctional Services, which is accountable to the Solicitor General or Attorney General.

Remand centres/detention centres are also the responsibility of the provincial government. These institutions primarily house persons awaiting trial (who are legally *innocent* because they have not yet been convicted of any crimes), or those who have recently been convicted and are awaiting sentencing or transfer to a longer term facility. In some cases, persons who have been convicted and assigned very short sentences will serve their time in the remand centre. People held in remand centres who are convicted may end up in the federal or provincial system, depending upon their sentence.

HOW DO THE PROGRAMMING OPPORTUNITIES DIFFER?

Because the federal system houses people often serving long sentences, the prison population is more structured and consistent overall. Organized prisoner-run groups (i.e. Inmate Committees, Lifers' Groups, Native Brotherhoods/Sisterhoods, Peer Health Groups, etc.) exist in most federal prisons and usually command a great deal of respect both from the prisoner population and the administration. These groups are often the best place to start if your agency is hoping to set up an HIV/AIDS program. Write a letter to the Chairperson of the group, introduce your agency and its services, and ask about setting up a meeting with the group, or groups, to discuss possible programs. Meeting the elected prisoner representatives face to face is crucial not only in properly assessing the needs of a given institution, but in building trust and credibility for yourself and your agency among the prisoner population.

Because provincial correctional centres house people serving less than two years, their population is much more transient than in the federal system. The bulk of prisoners in the provincial system are serving sentences of only a few months. While this is good news (especially for imprisoned people living with HIV/AIDS), it does make outreach programs a bit more difficult - simply because it's more difficult to establish ongoing relationships with individual prisoners. However, correctional centres do have programs which outside agencies can access, and many of them often have organized prisoner groups modeled on the federal system (although the membership is again more transient in nature).

The population of remand centres is the most transient of all the institutions. People can be there for a couple of days, or a number of years, depending upon their individual situations. However, because of this constant exchange between the remand centre and the street, these institutions offer an important opportunity to reach street involved and drug using populations which may be otherwise inaccessible. While jail is obviously not the ideal situation to make such contact, it is an effective way to raise the profile and accessibility of your agency among these populations.

The transient nature of the population in remand centres means that prisoner- run groups such as those in the federal system are usually non-existent. Because remand centres house people charged with any manner of offense (from traffic violations to murder), they are usually run in the manner of maximum security institutions. This means that prisoners are allowed very limited movement within the institution, and are basically locked on their ranges for most of the day. Most movement that does occur within the institution must be escorted by a guard. Any programs which do exist in remand centres are facilitated by outside agencies, or prison staff. If your agency hopes to access your local remand centre, your best bet is to try to "piggy-back" on one of these pre-existing programs. You can usually obtain a list of pre-existing programs from the institution, and then see where HIV/AIDS or harm reduction education might fit in.

HOW DO PRISONERS CONTACT MY ORGANIZATION?

People in prison are only able to make collect calls. This means that in order to talk to prisoners living with HIV/AIDS, **your agency must accept collect calls**. If your agency does not accept collect calls, then imprisoned PHA's will not be able to access your services. Ensuring that your agency can and will accept all collect calls is an important first step in making your services accessible to people in prison.

People incarcerated in federal prisons can only make collect calls to phone numbers which have been pre-screened and approved by institution security. This process creates two major barriers for many federal prisoners wishing to access HIV/AIDS services.

- **Confidentiality**
- **Delay** - It can often take as much as 2 weeks for a new phone number to be vetted by the institution. This can create barriers in accessing crisis counseling (for instance, after testing HIV positive.)

If your agency wants to provide services to federal prisoners in your region, your organization can apply to the institution to have your phone number placed on the general access phone list. This list contains phone numbers which are pre-approved by the prison and are made accessible to all prisoners without prior permission. If your agency accepts collect calls, and/ or is on the general access list for your local federal institution, advertise this fact in your outreach materials, pamphlets, and newsletters.

HOW DO I GET INTO PRISONS TO PROVIDE SERVICES?

Getting access into prisons for yourself or your staff should be a relatively straightforward process. In most prisons, whether provincial or federal, there is a staff person(s) whose job it is to help outside community volunteers access the institution. The titles of these positions vary, but they usually go by either volunteer coordinator, or the social development or social programs department. The Native Liaison Officer can also fulfill this role for Aboriginal workers or organizations. If unsure, just phone the main switchboard at the institution and ask whom you would speak with about becoming a volunteer. If you have contact with the health unit, the nurses will also be able to refer you to the appropriate person.

Once you've identified the right person to ask, just give them a call and introduce yourself, your agency, and what you'd like to do at the prison (whether that's simply getting security clearance for yourself to visit a client, or start a program or support group). This is a pretty common process at most institutions, and is in no way an unusual request, so don't be shy.

The institution may ask you to draft a written proposal to them describing your agency and the services that you wish to provide at the prison. This is particularly likely if you hope to initiate some kind of ongoing program that requires space allocation on a regular basis. However, if your

only wish is to receive individual clearance which will allow you to have "professional visits" with your clients (that is, visits which are private, face to face, and outside of the regular family visiting process), such a letter is less likely. However, in either case the institution may expect that you participate in their "volunteer orientation" program before being given your security ID.

One thing that will be consistent across the board is that you will have to submit to a security check. This is again a simple process - basically completing and signing a one-page form. However, if you have been in any kind of conflict with the law over the past 24 months (arrest, conviction, probation, etc.) it will show up on the security check and may result in your being refused access. Assuming your security clearance is OK, you should basically be able to come and go from the institution at your leisure during established visiting hours. Different institutions will have different processes you will need to follow (i.e. some institutions will require that you call ahead and make arrangements to visit, others may issue you your own volunteer ID card which will allow you to show up and enter the institution at any time.