



A REASON TO HOPE. THE MEANS TO COPE.
THE SCHIZOPHRENIA SOCIETY OF ONTARIO
SOCIÉTÉ ONTARIENNE DE LA SCHIZOPHRÉNIE
UNE SOURCE D'ESPOIR, DE SOUTIEN ET D'ENTRAIDE.

Schizophrenia Society of Ontario **Submission on the Federal Community Corrections Strategy**

The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario (SSO) appreciates this opportunity to provide input into the development of the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) Federal Community Corrections Strategy.

The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario is a non-profit charitable organization with a mandate to improve the lives of people affected by schizophrenia and psychosis through education, support programs, public policy and research. Reaching over 30,000 people each year, SSO is the largest organization representing people affected by schizophrenia in Ontario.

SSO has identified issues pertaining to confluence of mental illness and criminal behavior as one of our policy priorities. As part of our Justice and Mental Health Program, we often hear from family members of people with mental illness who are in contact with the law about the numerous challenges that they, and their loved ones, encounter when dealing with corrections. As such, SSO commends the CSC's commitment to ensure that issues specific to offenders with mental illness are adequately addressed within this Strategy, and are pleased to be able to share our expertise in this area to further inform CSC's Community Corrections Strategy.

1. What does community corrections mean to you?

Community integration is an essential part of overall offender rehabilitation. This is the final step in the completion on one's sentence and a highly fragile transition period for someone with mental illness. SSO concurs with CSC's assessment that transition to life after incarceration is safer and more successful for all parties when there is supervision and support in the community.

Yet, as CSC has noted, community reintegration must not only begin at the end of a person's sentence. All efforts must be made to ensure that appropriate community programs and supports are in place well before the inmate is informed of his/her release date. Many federal and provincial reports point to the current gaps and inconsistencies in release planning which often undermine the effective reintegration of offenders in the community and consequently, may perpetuate the revolving door cycle, particularly for the offenders with mental illness. Indeed, as indicated by the CSC, the integration process starts at intake and family members and local communities should be engaged from the start to sustain and promote offender rehabilitation and community reintegration processes.

For offenders with mental illness, community corrections is the opportunity to successfully re-integrate into society. It strengthens an individual's chance of being successful and having a good quality of life post-release, and prevents them from having to return to the same



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circumstances that resulted in their offence. Community corrections is both good for the offender with mental illness, and good for the community.

2. What can we do to promote the successful reintegration of offenders into the community?

For offenders with mental illness, successful community reintegration is not only an intrinsic part of their rehabilitation but is also a crucial part of their recovery.

Release into community presents an opportunity to start over and it is vital for people to be connected with community supports upon their release. Alas, many institutions lack the internal resources to conduct comprehensive release planning. This is further complicated by insufficient capacity of community mental health programs to take on clients with criminal histories. Offenders with mental illness face significant attitudinal barriers when accessing services, and are often labeled “high risk” and screened out of community programs and doctors’ offices. Yet without access to these services, recently released individuals with mental illness are at an increased risk of homelessness and victimization and may experience detrimental effects on their mental health. CSC can therefore take on an important role in working with community-based agencies, providing them with the expertise and the tools to be able to take these clients on.

Rigorous release conditions which do not take into consideration the reality of mental illness are another challenge that offenders with mental illness and their families often experience upon their release. Relapse and treatment non-adherence are the norm for this population, not the exception, yet many of the current release plans stipulate strict medication regimens and require these individuals to quickly acquire employment and stable housing, without necessarily providing them with adequate supports to do so. In their community corrections policy, CSC must take into consideration the fact that mental illness and addiction can pose real barriers to community reintegration, and examine how it can take on a supportive rather than a punitive approach when an individual has trouble abiding by release conditions.

Another important factor to consider in successful release planning and community reintegration is the role of the families. Families play a crucial role in this process and family involvement and support have been shown to decrease the likelihood of future criminal justice involvement. Family support has been proven to have a positive impact on rates of hospitalization and relapse, adherence to treatment, and rates of recovery¹. Yet families face significant barriers with staying connected with their loved ones who are incarcerated and are

¹ McFarlane, W. R., Dixon, I., Lukens E., & Lucksted, A. (2003). Family psychoeducation and schizophrenia: A review of literature. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 29(2), 223-245.



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seldom involved in release planning process. They often experience difficulties with correspondence with their family member and in communication with staff. This undermines their ability to stay apprised of and support their loved one's recovery and compromises the effectiveness of overall offender rehabilitation and release plans.

As such, families should be involved in release planning and provided with additional support to facilitate family integration and connection, from intake to release. Families should be provided with pre-release orientation package which includes information on family reintegration, relationship restructuring, conditions for release and available support services. Additional investments in services targeted at families will provide this crucial support to families, improve outcomes for those living with mental illness, and reduce recidivism.

3. What is your role in relation to community corrections and offender reintegration?

As noted above, SSO is actively involved in supporting families of individuals with mental illness and criminal involvement and in advocating for practical, system level changes which would not only improve the circumstance of those affected by mental illness, but will also ensure effective offender rehabilitation and public safety.

We look forward to continuing to work with CSC as this strategy is developed and implemented.

For more information on SSO's recommendations on CSC's Federal Community Corrections Strategy, please contact:

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