

# Canada's Female Offenders

## New options in the Federal system

*Jane Miller-Ashton*

In March 1989, the Commissioner of the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), Ole Ingstrup, established a Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, in collaboration with the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (a nonprofit, private-sector organization which works with, and on behalf of, women in conflict with the law). The Task Force included women inmates, as well as members from a broad range of relevant community agencies, women's groups, Aboriginal [native] organizations, and Government departments. A large number of women participated in the Task Force and decisionmaking was conducted by consensus.

*Prison for Women, Kingston,  
Ontario: main cell block  
viewed facing  
east.*

The Task Force was one of five set up by the CSC to review such fundamental correctional issues as substance abuse, mental health, and community and institutional programs. The results of these task forces are being used by CSC to more effectively address the needs of offenders in their efforts to become law-abiding citizens.

In April 1990, the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women submitted its final report, which called for a new approach to meeting the unique needs of Federally sentenced women.

At the time of the completion of the report, about 260 Federally sentenced women were incarcerated in Canada, about 50 percent of whom were accommodated at the only Federal prison for women, a maximum-security institution built in 1934 in Kingston,

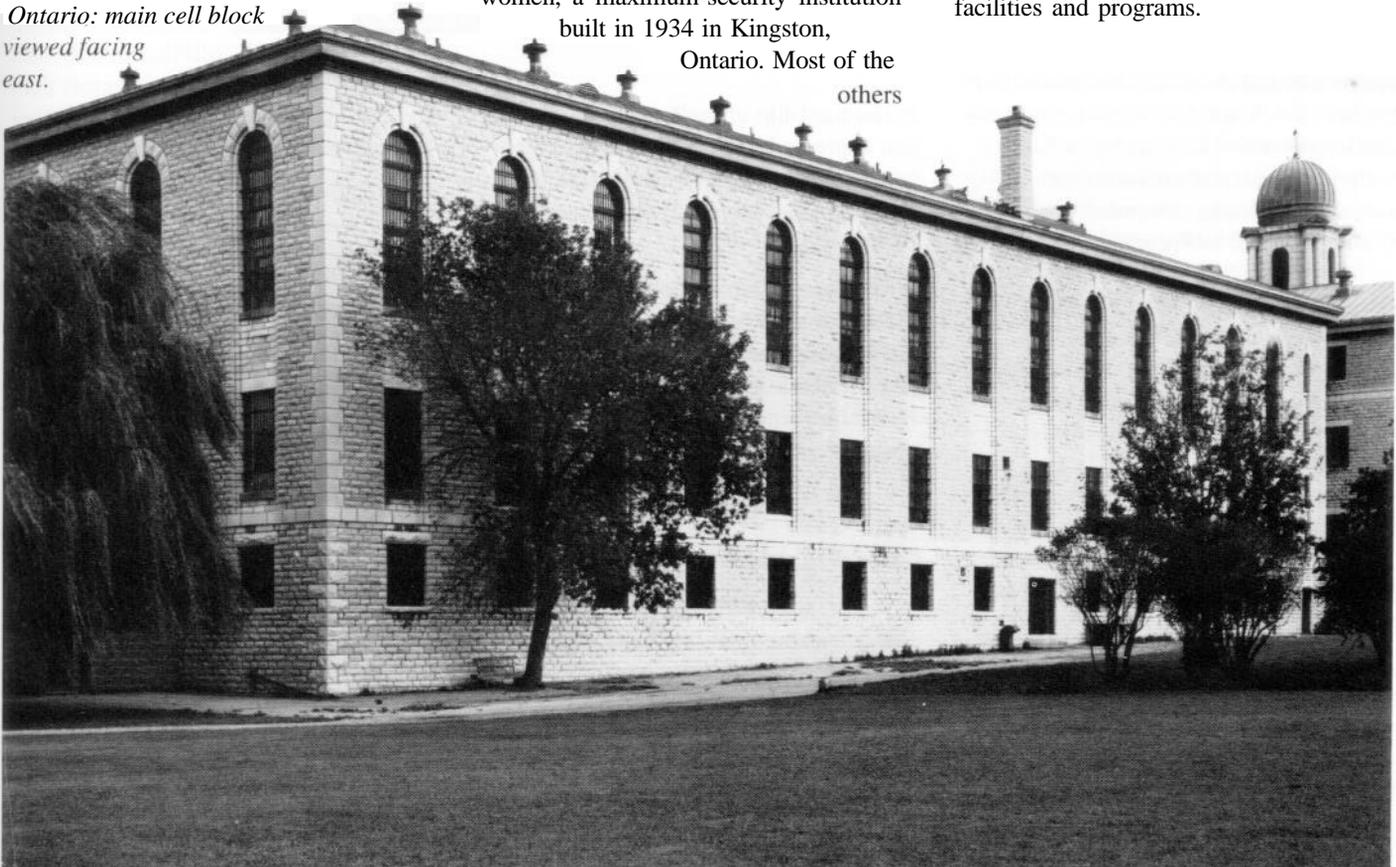
Ontario. Most of the  
others

were serving their sentences in provincial institutions. There were, as well, about 200 women under community release supervision. The number of women offenders is generally stable, and represents 2 percent of the total Federal offender population in Canada.

### Issues and concerns

Several long-standing and unresolved issues have placed women, due in part to their small numbers, at a disadvantage in the correctional system:

- n The geographic dislocation of many women from their families, cultures, and communities.
- n The "overclassification" of many women, and the lack of significant opportunity for movement within a range of both institutional and community facilities and programs.



- n The lack of sufficient programs and services that respond to the unique needs of women.

- n Program inequities that result from placement of women in provincial institutions, which are often not geared to the needs of longer-term offenders.

- n The difficulty of effective prerelease planning.

- n The uniquely disadvantageous situation experienced by Aboriginal women who, at about 16 percent, are overrepresented in the Federal prison population, and are particularly isolated from their cultures and communities.

Over the years, these problems have been examined by a variety of task forces and commissions, and considerable effort has been made to improve the situation for Federally sentenced women. Nonetheless, major problems have persisted. Numerous and recent recommendations to close the Prison for Women emerged, challenges under the Charter of Rights were launched, and pressures for substantive change continued to mount from concerned lobby groups.

Given this background, the mandate of the Task Force was to examine the correctional management of Federally sentenced women from the commencement of sentence to warrant expiration, and to develop a plan to guide this process in a manner responsive to the unique needs of this group.

## Findings

The Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women was based on insights gained from extensive consultations and from several research projects. Pertinent findings included:



*Above and left: Inmates can earn permission to spend up to 72 hours once every 2 months at a private family visiting house on the grounds of their institution.*

- n The hardship of mother-child separation expressed by incarcerated women, two-thirds of whom are mothers, and many of whom are single parents of children under 5 years of age.

- n The extensive histories of physical or sexual abuse experienced by 80 percent of Federally sentenced women, and 90 percent of Aboriginal women under Federal sentence.

- n The high incidence of self-injurious behavior among women at the Prison for Women, and its relationship to past histories of abuse.

- n The relatively high incidence of substance abuse as part of the offense or offense history of the women and their expressed need for more comprehensive substance abuse programs.

- n The high need for educational and vocational training geared to the development of marketable skills.

- n The paucity of community-based services for Federally sentenced women.

- n The high need for culturally sensitive programs and services.

- n The high priority placed by Federally sentenced women on their desire to be closer to home.

- n The evidence that successful program directions for women offenders include those that focus on self-awareness and self-esteem, promote community involvement and adherence to community norms, use tools validated for women and Aboriginal peoples, and provide in supportive environments programs responsive to the needs of women, with less emphasis on static security measures.

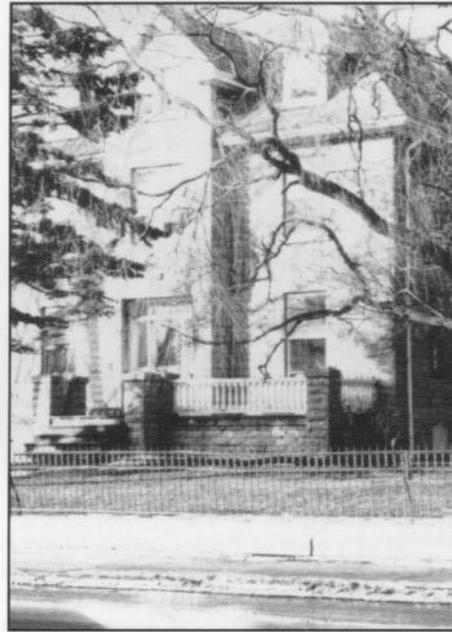
## Recommendations

The Task Force made eight short-term recommendations geared to improving the immediate situation at the Prison for Women. In large measure these recommendations have been fully implemented. In addition, an 11-bed minimum-security institution for Federally sentenced women was opened during the course of deliberations.

The Task Force's longer-term plan incorporated a societal understanding of women's and Aboriginal people's experience of disadvantage. It was based on the belief that a holistic women-centered approach to the treatment of Federally sentenced women is required to address the historical problems, and is predicated on principles of empowerment, meaningful choices, respect and dignity, supportive environments, and shared responsibility. The plan placed high emphasis on the need for Federally sentenced women to recover from past trauma, and to develop self-esteem and self-sufficiency through programs and services designed to respond to their needs. It stressed the need for physical environments that are conducive to reintegration, are highly interactive with the community, and reflect the generally low security risk of these women.

The plan included the following recommendations:

1. Close the Prison For Women.
2. Establish four Federally operated regional facilities for Federally incarcerated women.
3. Establish a Healing Lodge, which would serve as an incarceration option for Federally sentenced Aboriginal women.



*The Elizabeth McNeil House, an 11-bed minimum-security facility for women in Kingston, Ontario, opened in March 1990.*

4. Develop a community release strategy that would expand and strengthen residential and nonresidential programs and services for women on release.
5. Respond to the needs of the few women from remote or northern parts of Canada by negotiating agreements for them to remain in their home areas under Territorial/Provincial jurisdiction.

The Task Force plan was situated within the Canadian Federal Government's ongoing efforts to achieve equality for women and Aboriginal people, and was fundamentally rooted in the mission of CSC, which respects the dignity of individuals, the rights of all members of society, and the potential for human growth and development. It was consistent with CSC's strategic objectives to provide a safe, humane environment that promotes health and well-being and encourages positive interaction between staff and offender. Further, it honored

CSC policy respecting the social, cultural, and religious differences of individual offenders and addressed the special needs of female and native offenders. Finally, the plan brought a disadvantaged group within a long-standing CSC policy of regionalization, enhancing program opportunities for women and bringing them closer to their families, communities, and cultures.

The locations recommended by the Task Force report for the regional facilities were based on proximity to the home communities of the majority of women from a given region, and on the availability of community resources generally found in larger urban centers.

## Facility description

The Task Force recommended that regional facilities be developed and operated premised on a program philosophy that approximates community norms, focuses on extensive use of community expertise, and is geared to the safe release of Federally sentenced women at the earliest possible point in their sentences. Program delivery would be based on gender-sensitive assessments and individualized plans developed by each woman in conjunction with a staff person (primary support worker) and a community worker assigned from a private-sector agency.

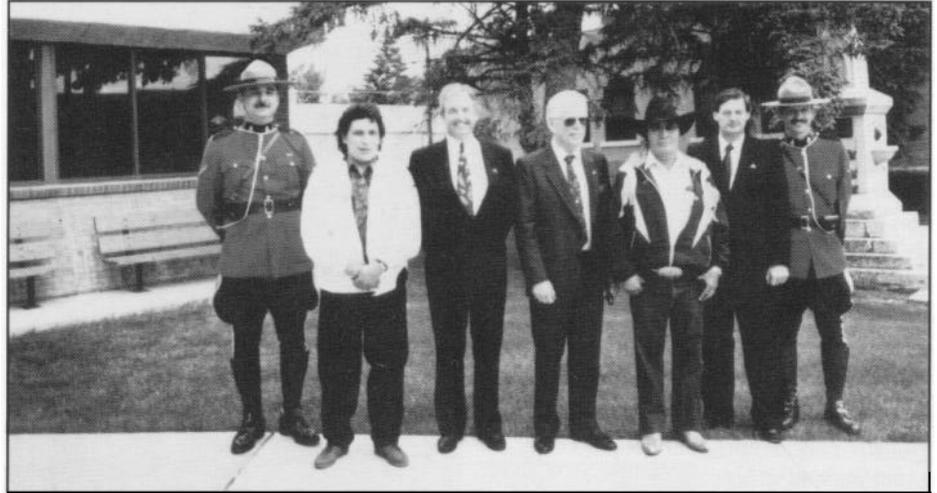
Programs should be holistic, culturally sensitive, and responsive to the needs of women. Primary programming would focus on counseling and treatment—including sexual, physical, and substance abuse recovery; educational, vocational, and skills development; leisure activities; family visitation; onsite residence of children; and spiritual services. Self-sufficiency and community responsibility

would be fostered through daily opportunities for living skills acquisition, and through the positive support of staff who are skilled in counseling, communications, and negotiations, and are sensitive to women's and cross-cultural issues.

It was recommended that the regional facilities be situated on several acres of land and be built to modern environmental standards that foster wellness, including considerations of natural light, fresh air, color, space, and privacy. Living areas would be cottage-style, with 6 to 10 women per cottage. A central core area for administration would contain flexible program space for recreational, social, spiritual, and counseling activities. The facilities would be designed to maximize mother-child interaction and family visits.

The Task Force report suggested using dynamic rather than static security measures wherever possible, to reflect the supportive orientation of the facilities. An unobtrusive perimeter security measure, for detection purposes only, may be added to what would otherwise be a boundary fence surrounding each facility, built to community standards. One cottage (or part of a cottage) in each facility would require enhanced static security features, but staff support to higher risk women would be the preferred approach.

The Task Force recommended that the Healing Lodge be developed and operated according to native traditions and staffed by Aboriginal men and women. The Lodge would be designed in consultation with Aboriginal people, and would require, in addition to standard CSC administrative requirements, a connection to a nearby native community and the support of an elders' council.



*May 1992: Official announcement of the location of the new Healing Lodge facility for Aboriginal women at Maple Creek/Nekaneet, Saskatchewan. Left to right: Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer; John Oakes, Nekaneet Band Councillor; the Honourable Doug Lewis, Solicitor General of Canada; Doug McAlister, Mayor of Maple Creek; Chief Gordon Oakes, Nekaneet Band; Geoff Wilson, Member of Parliament; RCMP officer.*

The physical space and programs for the Healing Lodge would reflect Aboriginal culture. The needs of Aboriginal women under Federal sentence would be addressed through native teachings, ceremonies, contact with elders and children, and interaction with nature. Program delivery, as in the other facilities, would be premised on individualized plans, a holistic approach, an interactive relationship with the community, and a focus on release preparation. The Healing Lodge, however, would at all times operate from a unique cultural perspective, placing a high value on spiritual leadership, as well as on role modeling and the life experiences of staff, with more traditional professional expertise providing an important but largely supportive role.

### Regional Advisory Councils

The Task Force report recommended that Regional Advisory Councils be established in association with each regional facility to advise the CSC on the devel-

opment and operation of programs and services in both the facility and the community.

Membership for the Regional Advisory Councils would be drawn from local private-sector groups and individuals who have expertise and interest in women's issues and criminal justice. With respect to the Healing Lodge, the Regional Advisory Council would take the form of both an elders' council and a connection to a local native community.

Councils would evaluate existing programs, identify gaps in services, and recommend additional programs and services. They would also monitor the continuity of programs between the facility and community and make recommendations on how continuity could be improved. Finally, councils would play an educational role in their local communities so that the facility and

the women released from it are seen as an integral part, and a responsibility, of the community.

### Community release strategy

As envisioned by the Task Force report, the community orientation of the regional facilities would facilitate the development of individualized release plans, assisted by a community support team. The team, composed of CSC staff and community workers, would work closely with each woman to ensure that needed services would be available on release.

This effort would be supported by new, enhanced residential and nonresidential opportunities for women. There would be an increased need for specialized services, including Aboriginal halfway houses and community-based treatment residences, as well as alternate accommodations such as satellite apartment beds and private home placements. Services purchased from community residential facilities would include employment counseling, substance abuse treatment, and living skills programs.

### Implementation

In September 1990 the Government announced its acceptance of the major recommendations of the Task Force. Included in the announcement were plans to close the Prison for Women by fall 1994, to establish the five new facilities, and to expand and enhance community services and programs for Federally sentenced women. The cost is estimated to be about CAN\$50 million.

In October 1990, the Commissioner of Corrections announced the creation of a National Implementation Committee to oversee the initiative—including all



*The Healing Lodge Planning Committee, a unique partnership composed of Aboriginal women, native elders, and Correctional Service of Canada staff.*

operational input to the planning and development of the regional facilities, the Healing Lodge, and the community strategy.

In December 1990, an External Advisory Committee was established to provide advice on the overall initiative. The committee includes members from Status of Women Canada, the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, and the Native Women's Association of Canada.

### Location selection

During the months following the Government's announcement, an unprecedented number of communities expressed an interest in having the facilities located in their areas. In July 1991, the Solicitor General, the Honourable Doug Lewis, announced that the new facilities would be located within 100 kilometers of the major centers of Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, and Edmonton or Calgary.

The Government had made significant progress toward achieving the closure of the Prison for Women and establishing the five new facilities. A three-step selection process was implemented, the first of which was the minister's July 1991 announcement.

The Correctional Service of Canada subsequently developed selection criteria; communities were given an opportunity to submit proposals based on those criteria. Forty-four communities were assessed by members of the National Implementation Committee, which also included a staff member from Status of Women Canada. A report was submitted to the Solicitor General in early December 1991; later that month he announced plans to locate the Atlantic facility in Truro, Nova Scotia, and the

Ontario location in Kitchener, Ontario. Announcements for the Quebec and Alberta facilities are expected in the near future.

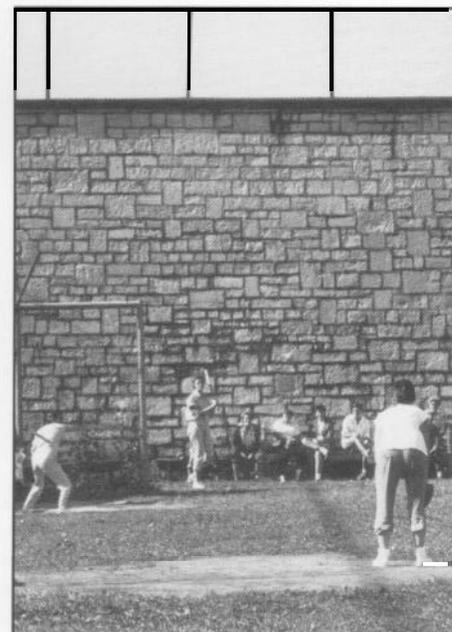
There is no requirement for a regional facility in British Columbia because Federal women are now accommodated in a new Provincial facility for women in that province. This agreement was negotiated prior to the Task Force report.

With respect to the Healing Lodge, the Solicitor General announced that this facility would be established in the Province of Saskatchewan. This centrally located prairie Province is home to many Native women. The Healing Lodge Committee subsequently developed culturally sensitive selection criteria to help determine the location for the Healing Lodge.

In March 1992, 23 Saskatchewan communities (many of them joint partnership proposals from urban centers and nearby Aboriginal communities) were evaluated. The first-place submission from Maple Creek/Nekaneet in Saskatchewan was endorsed by the Solicitor General and made public on May 22, 1992. This community was selected because of its strong Aboriginal qualifications: sacred land, pure spring water, and the support of a traditional Aboriginal community, including elders and medicine people. In addition, this community was favored because of the harmonious relationship that seemed to exist between the native and non-native citizens.



*Left: Vocational trades training. Right: Playing ball at the Prison for Women, Kingston, Ontario.*



## Operational plan

In addition to determining geographic locations, the National Implementation Committee has developed an operational plan for the new facilities. Because the new approach to Federally sentenced women will, in some cases, mark a significant departure from existing policy and practice, it was deemed important to develop a plan that would provide a framework to ensure some commonality and consistency among the new women's facilities. The operational plan was developed in consultation with private-sector partners and other CSC staff, and with input from women offenders themselves. The plan reflects the principles of the Task Force report, as well as the knowledge about women in prison gained through consultation and research. Similarly, the warden's job description for the new facilities has been written to capture the unique aspects of managing in this type of setting. Other aspects of the facility development will receive similar attention to ensure sensitivity to women's issues.

## Conclusion

The undertaking in Canada is in keeping with many parallel initiatives taking place in other jurisdictions and countries to effect change for the generally small numbers of women in prison worldwide. The unique aspects of the Canadian experience, which appear to have worked to positive advantage, relate to the significant involvement and consultation with women offenders, the partnership developed with private-sector groups, including Aboriginal peoples, and the commitment of the Correctional Service of Canada and the Canadian Federal Government to make needed changes for women in prison. **n**

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