



## **National Aboriginal Women's Summit – *Strong Women, Strong Communities***

**June 20 – 22, 2007 Corner Brook, NL**

**Issue Paper Theme: Health Safety and Wellness**

**Topic: Corrections**

### **ISSUE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INUIT**

#### **RISKS**

*“Inuit offenders are in a unique and very difficult situation. There are no Inuit specific programs available for them within the institutions and their limited knowledge and understanding of either official language of Canada prevents them from participating in other programs that are available. Incarceration requires the Inuit to adapt to a situation that is difficult for any offender, and is completely foreign to their life experience. They must learn to live in a closed environment, in a different climate, hearing a strange language and eating unfamiliar foods. Contact with their families is very difficult to maintain, and is thus usually non-existent”. (Solicitor General of Canada, 1988).*

Although this statement was made by Solicitor General of Canada almost twenty years ago, it still rings true today. Even though there is now one Inuit-specific program - the Tupiq program, Inuit are still being lumped in as Aboriginal which implies that aboriginal programming is for all aboriginals. This is not the case. Inuit are fundamentally different from First Nations, have different belief systems, eat different foods and have very different social and cultural systems.

According to Statistics Canada, 70% of Inuit speak their own language and most still practice cultural traditions such as harvesting country foods, camping, fishing and naming practices, just to name a few. Inuit are still incarcerated in a strange land from their own, housed with people that are foreign to them, and have problems because of language.

Inuit still rely heavily on country foods as their main staple of food, this also allows them to pass on traditional hunting practices. Inuit men are generally the hunters in our communities and all aspects of gathering, hunting, preparing and sharing country food are essential to the harmony and wellbeing of healthy Inuit communities. Because country food carries such importance for Inuit, lack of access to country food poses the threat of deprivation, scarcity and a loss of one's own cultural and social identity and may impact health and affect mood swings and homesickness.

Elders continue to play an integral role in Inuit culture. They are the vessels of our culture and they pass on teachings such as compassion, importance of the community and sharing. These are essential to the harmonious relationship Inuit have with the land and to each other. Access to elders in the institutions is an important step that CSC needs recognize as a programming option. Cultural sensitivity training for officers and Inuit resources at headquarters and within the institutions would go a long way in addressing the needs of the Inuit offender.

*“Upon entry into federal institutions, Inuit are identified as ‘Aboriginal. Unfortunately, the use of this generic term tends to refer to the First Nations population. Consequently, there are minimal programs and services geared towards the specific and unique needs of Inuit inmates. Because of the lack of knowledge and/or understanding of these distinct needs, Inuit inmates are provided with programs and services that include practices and beliefs that are not part of Inuit culture or way of life.*

*For example, although there are sweat lodges, sweet grass ceremonies, Elders, and healing programs, these programs and services are based upon, or only include, First Nations culture, and do not take into consideration the unique cultural differences between Canada's Aboriginal populations. Without some understanding of cultural differences between First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures, the appropriate services and supports for Inuit during their incarceration will continue to be unmet. Programs and services that address Aboriginal offenders as a whole, rather than focusing on the diverse needs within each Aboriginal culture can hamper successful reintegration of Inuit offenders back into the community”.* (From the Needs of Inuit Offenders in Federal Institutions, CSC research report 2004).

Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada began developing a relationship with Correctional Service Canada (CSC) Aboriginal Initiative Branch in 2001. CSC funded Pauktuutit to assist in the development of the research report *The Needs of Inuit Offenders in Federal Correctional Facilities* (June 2004). The report provides insight into the unique culture and needs of Inuit in federal institutions. It was found that:

*“Similar to the situation for First Nations and Métis people, Inuit are over-represented within the federal correctional system. Although Inuit represent about 0.1% of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2001), they represent about 1% of offenders incarcerated in federal correctional facilities (approximately 99 offenders) (Correctional Service Canada, 2003a).”*

The report notes that when an Inuk enters the federal system he or she is usually identified as Aboriginal - unfortunately the use of this generic term often tends to refer to First Nations. Consequently, there are few programs and services that meet the specific needs of Inuit inmates. Due to the lack of understanding or knowledge of these distinct needs, Inuit have on occasion been provided programs that are based upon or include practices and beliefs that are not part of Inuit culture or way of life.

The inability for Inuit to access relevant programs that address their specific needs impedes their rehabilitation process. The report estimates that three quarters of CSC staff interviewed had no knowledge of Inuit culture and/or no knowledge of Inuit offenders even though they had received some form of training about aboriginal issues. In addition to the significant challenges of cultural awareness within federal corrections, the geographic dislocation of Inuit from their region and the scattered institutional population pose other barriers, such as access to Inuit-specific programs and services, access to visitation and support of family members.

## **KAJUSINIQ ACTION PLAN**

The development of the *Kajusiniq Action Plan* stemmed from the Needs of Inuit Offenders in Federal Institutions, CSC research report 2004. A consultation meeting was held at Fenbrooke medium security institution. That three day meeting highlighted three key priorities for Inuit offenders:

1. The need for better coordination of Inuit specific corrections programs and services;
2. The development of successful recruitment, retention and training strategies for Inuit staff within CSC and
3. The development and implementation of Inuit specific parole and release options by using existing programs and strengthening and maintaining community links in order to better serve Inuit offenders.

## **WHAT IS PAUKTUUTIT DOING ABOUT IT?**

- Pauktuutit has partnered with National Headquarters CSC - Aboriginal Initiatives Directorate to develop and fill a CSC position for one Inuk to work within in CSC NHQ AIB, in order to develop Inuit expertise within CSC, to provide Pauktuutit with a broader knowledge and understanding of the policies and priorities of CSC, and to deepen Inuit capacity on the subject of corrections matters.

## **OPPORTUNITIES**

### **Recommendations**

- More needs to be done to address the needs of incarcerated Inuit women, from culturally appropriate programming to access to Inuit resources in the institutions and being housed where you can understand the language;
- *Programs and Services* - Culturally appropriate assessments during intake and the removal of educational barriers so that Inuit may access mainstream programming would increase the chances of successful programming and re-integration;
- Although there are Aboriginal Programs within CSC, most do not apply to Inuit because of the vast differences in customs and cultures between First nations and Inuit. Inuit specific programming for Inuit offenders is paramount to the successful rehabilitation and re-integration of Inuit offenders back into our communities;
- Identify gaps and needs in Inuit communities so that successful re-integration is possible.

In addition, Pauktuutit strongly feels:

- CSC needs to have more Inuit staff resources from program and policy people at headquarters to program delivery and support workers for the institutions;
- Invest in partnerships with northern communities/organizations and Pauktuutit to facilitate the successful re-integration of the offender back into the Inuit communities;
- Increase access to Inuit translators and interpreters for Inuit offenders during the initial assessment, programming evaluation and for parole hearing preparation. Consideration

must be made to employ a full time staff person that takes care of all Inuit translation and interpretation and

- Consolidate Inuit offenders into one institution or into regional institutions - this would help in providing across the broad programming for Inuit and
- Improve capacities to address mental health needs of offenders.

*“Mental wellness is the number one Inuit health priority. ‘Mental Wellness’ is an all inclusive term encompassing mental health, mental illness, suicide prevention, violence reduction, and reduction of substance abuse and addictions”<sup>1</sup>*

Cultural sensitivity training and the hiring of Inuktitut support workers would help to identify Inuit offenders in need of mental health support. An effective intervention for mental wellness must address factors that affect mental wellbeing such as lack of access to coordinated services, loss of language and cultural ways, socio-economic conditions, and impacts of life experiences including trauma among others. Effective reintegration of offenders depends on the ability of CSC to promote an environment conducive to mental health.

- Increase greater connection between the community and the offender. Due to the distance between the institutions and Inuit communities – most Inuit offenders receive little contact with their community or family members. An imbalance is left in the community. A crime has been committed; there are few programs and services within Inuit communities for victims or returning offenders and their families. The majority of Inuit communities are remote, fly in communities;
- Improve access to Inuit Elders;
- Access to country food: caribou, mukuk, fish is not readily available at all institutions where Inuit are housed;

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<sup>1</sup> Inuit Mental Wellness Action Plan, Alianait Working Group, April 2007  
Corrections  
Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada