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BUILDING A **SAFE AND RESILIENT CANADA**

Public Safety Canada - National Victims Roundtable on the Right to Information in Federal Corrections and Conditional Release

Summary Report

September 2020



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Executive Summary

On March 4th and 5th, 2020, Public Safety Canada's (PS) National Office for Victims (NOV) met with victim stakeholders and non-governmental organizations to discuss the role of victims in the federal corrections and conditional release system, and their *Right to information* under the *Canadian Victims Bill of Rights* (CVBR). The roundtable event was divided into two sessions.

The first session focused on a victim's *Right to Information* and how the federal government can improve information dissemination throughout each stage of the federal corrections and conditional release process. The engagement sessions provided an opportunity to hear from the roundtable participants on information dissemination issues, including:

- a) how to strengthen victim's awareness of their need to register to receive information;
- b) how information dissemination can become more victim-centered, trauma informed, culturally sensitive, and inclusive;
- c) how language and formatting of information products can be improved to share information with victims clearly and concisely; and
- d) how information and participation opportunities can be made more accessible to victims with disabilities?

The second session centered on restorative justice, specifically focusing on how information sharing about restorative justice processes made available by the Correctional Service of Canada's (CSC) Restorative Opportunities program, can be improved.

The discussions that took place over the course of a day and a half demonstrated that the way information is delivered to victim stakeholders is an important aspect in ensuring that victims are educated on their rights under the CVBR and that the process of finding and retrieving information needs to be simpler and easy to access to ease the process for victims to the extent possible. PS officials are examining suggestions received at this and previous roundtables for ways in which information can be better communicated as well improvements related to policies and procedures to ensure that victims of crime are aware of their CVBR rights.

Please note that this report summarizes group presentations as well as multiple breakout sessions which took place over the course of the engagement session. The issues and participant recommendations outlined in this report fall within the responsibility of PS's Portfolio and any suggestions/recommendations pertaining to activities of provincial/territorial jurisdiction or matters for which other federal departments are responsible will not be included in this report but instead be shared with appropriate partners.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Introduction	3
Overview of PS Portfolio Victim Services.....	4
National Office for Victims (NOV)	4
Correctional Service of Canada’s (CSC) National Victim Services Program	4
Parole Board of Canada’s (PBC) Services for Victims.....	4
Purpose of the Roundtable	5
Day One: Victim’s Right to Information and the Role of the Public Safety Portfolio	6
PS Portfolio Program Outreach and Engagement	6
Accessible Services for Victims with Disabilities	7
I) Employment and Social Development Canada.....	7
II) Service Canada	7
What We Heard	7
Session 1: Regional/National Outreach and Engagement	8
Session 2: Information Dissemination	10
Session 3: Information Products & Toolkit	11
Session 4: Information Sharing to Persons with Disabilities.....	13
Day Two: Restorative Justice and the Right to Information	14
CSC’s Restorative Opportunities Program	14
What We Heard	15
Clarifying Perceptions	15
Sustained Funding.....	16
Facilitator Training	16
Giving Victims a choice/voice	16
Moving Forward on Understanding Victim Needs in Corrections and Conditional Release	16

Introduction

On March 4th and 5th, 2020, Public Safety Canada's (PS) National Office for Victims (NOV) hosted a National Victim Roundtable on the Right to Information in federal corrections and conditional release. Representatives from the NOV, Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), Parole Board of Canada (PBC), Policy Centre for Victim Issues (PCVI), non-governmental organizations, and victim stakeholders met to discuss the following questions within the context of federal corrections and conditional release:

- a) how the PS Portfolio can strengthen victims awareness of the CVBR at both the regional and national level, with particular attention to the need for victims to register to receive information about the federal offender who harmed them;
- b) how information dissemination can become more victim-centered, trauma informed, culturally competent, and inclusive;
- c) what can be done to improve information sharing on corrections and conditional release;
- d) what an integrated toolkit would look like and how it would be disseminated;
- e) what barriers are encountered by victims with disabilities when attempting to access information about corrections and conditional release and how to make information and participation more accessible;
- f) what special considerations should be included in restorative justice processes for serious crime victims; and
- g) how can information sharing about the Restorative Opportunities program be improved?

During the day and a half event, presentations from government representatives focused on information services for victims of federal offenders, outreach and engagement plans, sentence calculation, the *Accessible Canada Act* and delivering accessible services, and lastly, restorative justice in the context of the CVBR.

This summary report provides a brief description of the government presentations that were provided which outline the PS Portfolio services available to victims, and the themes of the breakout session discussions. The roundtable also served as a forum for victim stakeholders to ask questions and network with fellow victim advocates from across Canada.

Overview of PS Portfolio Victim Services

The roundtable began with PS Portfolio partners, namely Public Safety Canada's National Office for Victims (NOV), Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), and the Parole Board of Canada (PBC) providing a brief overview of current victim programming and services.

National Office for Victims (NOV)

The NOV was established in 2005 to ensure that victims' perspectives would be considered in the development of federal correctional policy; to act as a central resource that offers information to victims about federal corrections and conditional release; and to promote services offered by CSC and PBC. The NOV plays an important coordination function in the PS Portfolio with a focus on working with victims of offenders who have been sentenced to two years or more in federal custody, service providers and the general public. The NOV produces information products for victims of federal offenders, hosts annual roundtables to engage with stakeholders, and conducts outreach activities (e.g., targeted mailing of information materials and social media outreach).

Correctional Service of Canada's (CSC) National Victim Services Program

Correctional Service of Canada's Victim Services provides victims with case-specific, protected information in accordance with section 26 of the Corrections and Conditional Release Act (CCRA), general information about CSC operations and invites victims to provide statements for consideration in offender case management decisions. In addition, the CSC's Victim Services liaises with provincial and territorial jurisdictions to improve information exchange and conducts outreach to inform victims and victim-serving organizations about their rights and the services provided by CSC.

Parole Board of Canada's (PBC) Services for Victims

The Parole Board of Canada is an independent administrative tribunal that makes conditional release decisions for offenders in federal custody and provincial offenders (i.e., less than 2 years in custody) in all provinces except Ontario and Quebec. Similar to CSC, victims who register with the PBC are entitled to obtain information about the offender who harmed them (see section 142 of the CCRA). The information provided by PBC is primarily related to scheduling upcoming parole reviews and providing victims with the outcome and conditions of parole decisions and is received by mail, fax, phone, or through the secure Victims Portal. Victims may provide a written statement at any time for consideration in the case management and risk assessment of the offender. Members of the public, including victims and their supports, can apply to observe the hearing and may choose to present their statement at the hearing. The victim may also designate a support person who will attend the hearing with them to read the statement on their behalf. Whether or not they attend the hearing, victims may also request a copy of the written PBC decision and/or request to listen to an audio recording of the

offender's hearing. This contributes to public understanding of conditional release decision making and promotes openness and accountability.

Purpose of the Roundtable

The purpose of the roundtable was twofold: first, to obtain participants' suggestions and recommendations on how to improve information dissemination about the corrections and conditional release system to better assist victims in exercising their CVBR rights; second, to consult participants on ways to improve information dissemination about restorative justice.

Day One: Victim's Right to Information and the Role of the Public Safety Portfolio

The NOV consulted victim stakeholders on practical considerations to improve information dissemination to victims of crime throughout the federal corrections and conditional release process, with an emphasis on the need to register with either CSC or PBC to receive information, utilizing trauma informed and culturally sensitive delivery methods, and providing accessible information products and services for victims with disabilities.

Presentation Synopsis:

PS Portfolio Program Outreach and Engagement

I) National Office for Victims

The NOV outlined short, medium and long term goals in its Outreach Action Plan. In the short term, the NOV planned to organize training with CSC Victim Service Officers, PBC Regional Communications Officers and Crowns to raise awareness of NOV's clarified mandate, available information products and its PS Portfolio coordination role within the first year. In addition, NOV engaged in targeted mail outs to disseminate its information products to social service agencies, provincial/territorial victim service offices, and schools/hospitals. In the medium term, the NOV will provide annual updates on its achievements, including its outreach activities posted online and shared via email and social media; establish an intra-departmental Victim Policy Working Group to examine existing policies in light of suggestions from previously held roundtables and recommendations from the Office of the Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime with a view to improving policy and legislation; continue to sponsor or endorse events related to victim issues; and to host an event on emerging issues, in year two. Finally, in the longer term, NOV will develop a social media strategy, increase its ability to raise awareness through presentations and kiosks at key events; work collaboratively with CSC and PBC to develop webinar trainings and public education videos, and streamline web content within a three year timespan.

II) Correctional Service of Canada

The goal of CSC's outreach activities is to inform victims and victim service providers about CSC's victim services programs, and to better inform victims of their rights. CSC does this by conducting local public awareness activities through targeted community interaction and by forming partnerships with various stakeholders, including victim volunteers. CSC engages with victims, victim-serving organizations and advocates at events such as the Victim Symposium during the Victims and Survivors of Crime Week, as well as through the use of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. In addition, CSC works closely with Provincial-Territorial victim services agencies, other federal government departments, as well as the Office of the Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime, and other criminal justice system partners to strengthen their information dissemination efforts.

III) Parole Board of Canada

The Parole Board of Canada's (PBC) outreach initiatives enhance Canadians' confidence in the Board as a credible and integral component of the criminal justice system, by informing them about how the conditional release, record suspension, expungement and clemency systems work, and how these contribute to reintegration and public safety. PBC Outreach activities focus on: outreach sessions to specific external target audiences (victims, Indigenous, general public, community groups, educational institutions, government institutions, stakeholders, partners, etc.); in-reach sessions to CSC staff and offenders; meetings with criminal justice partners, organizations, stakeholders, and various levels of government.

During 2019-2020, a social media presence was established through the launch of a twitter account, quarterly reporting was introduced, internal resources for regional staff delivering outreach were updated, and feedback and evaluation tools were created. Looking ahead, PBC will continue to deliver outreach activities to new and existing stakeholders, and is dedicated to increasing its in-reach with Indigenous and women offenders. PBC is striving to apply innovative means of engaging criminal justice partners, stakeholders and organizations in information exchange and partnerships, while seeking continuous improvement.

Accessible Services for Victims with Disabilities

To open the discussion on accessible services for victims with disabilities, participants were informed of recent legislation and the work of the Public Service Accessibility Strategy.

I) Employment and Social Development Canada

The first presentation outlined the recently passed Accessible Canada Act, which came into force on July 11, 2019. The purpose of the Act is to realize a barrier-free Canada on or before January 1, 2040 by identifying and preventing barriers to accessibility in seven priority areas, two of which are communication and the design and delivery of programs and services. This will be accomplished by developing standards, reporting on and enforcing accessibility requirements, and monitoring their implementation.

II) Service Canada

The second presentation, delivered by the Centre of Expertise for Accessible Client Service (ACS) of Service Canada, focused on the Public Service Accessibility Strategy. The Strategy includes a goal of equipping public servants to design and deliver programs and services that are easily accessible to persons with disabilities. ACS identifies eight types of client service barriers that include: location, awareness, complexity, policy, cultural, language, accessibility, and literacy/numeracy. It was emphasized that clients who face barriers often face more than one. In order to provide accessible services, improvements need to be made for all clients, not just the majority.

What We Heard

During the breakout sessions, participants identified a variety of barriers to information dissemination and discussed various ways to improve the way in which the federal government can better inform

victims of crime of their right to information and how to exercise this right. The following themes capture the overall discussion that took place on Day One.

Session 1: Regional/National Outreach and Engagement

During the first session, PS consulted on how to strengthen victims' awareness of the CVBR both at the regional and national level, with particular attention to the need for victims of federal offenders to register to receive information.

Victims' Rights under the CVBR

Knowledge & Awareness

Participants noted a general lack of knowledge and awareness amongst victims with respect to their rights and entitlements under the CVBR, remarking that victims are often unaware of the CVBR and the rights guaranteed under the Act. Stakeholders agreed that there is a need for clarity with respect to informing victims of their rights throughout the corrections and conditional release process, in particular at the beginning of an offender's federal sentence. Overall, participants would like to see victims given equal access to information about their rights. Thus, with the appropriate knowledge victims will be better equipped to exercise those rights.

Language

Participants reinforced the idea that victims should be provided with simple, accessible and easy to understand explanations of their rights and how to exercise them. Some participants noted the difficulty of reviewing and interpreting legislation for the average citizen and suggested more plain language materials be available that demystify the legislation for victims by outlining, in detail, their rights and the practical application of the CVBR.

Training

Participants also noted the importance of appropriate and continuous training for information service providers on victim's rights under the CVBR as a means to increase awareness. One way to achieve this would be to include participation in and delivery of CVBR rights training into performance management processes.

Victim Registration

Registration Process

Stakeholders expressed concern that information on registration is not widely known and that most victims of federal offenders are not aware of the need to register with CSC and/or the PBC in order to receive information about the offender who harmed them. Some participants suggested that the current registration practice is too overwhelming and/or intimidating for victims. Participants recommended streamlining the registration process and Victim Portal (i.e., fewer demands for information when registering). For example, in relation to the Victim Portal and registration, agencies should have consideration for victims who may not have consistent access to fixed broadband services (e.g., homeless, living abroad, living in rural or remote communities). If a victim does not have fixed internet services, receiving information and notifications via mail or through the web may be

challenging. Finally, participants identified the necessity for clarification of exactly what information victims would receive after registration.

Proactive Registration¹

The idea of proactive registration arose frequently throughout this session, along with acknowledgement from participants that it also poses challenges to privacy rights. Consideration of proactive registration would have to balance the information needs of some victims with the privacy rights of others. For example, some victims choose not to register or seek out information on the individual who harmed them. Proactive registration of all victims of federal offenders when some want no further contact with the criminal justice system would potentially violate their right to privacy and lead to feelings of re-victimization. On the other hand, proactive registration is purported as a trauma informed practice for victims who may be too overwhelmed to seek information themselves, and therefore may not receive any information unless victim service agencies contact them. One suggestion was for an opt out approach versus the current opt in approach to registration. This would allow victims to accept or decline whether they would like to be contacted to receive information. It was noted that not all victims are ready to register to receive information immediately following the sentencing of an offender— sometimes years pass before victims want to register. In respect of this, stakeholders proposed ‘check-ins’, where victims may be contacted at different periods of time depending on the sentence length (e.g., immediately after sentencing, 3 months later, 6 months later, etc.).

Facilitating Collaboration

In the absence of proactive registration, participants suggested connecting other professionals (Crown prosecutors, court support personnel, social workers, nurses, etc.) with information on victim registration. One suggestion was to provide information about victim registration at professional forums/conferences/knowledge exchanges, examples include the Canadian Domestic Homicide Prevention Initiative Conference and the Ontario Annual Crowns Conference, to equip criminal justice professionals, court workers, and service providers with knowledge about registration and materials to distribute to victims. Stakeholders suggested that Crowns should share information with victims on how to register for federal victim notification. Some participants also suggested providing victim registration information at community events and through community partners who may not be directly linked to the CJS (e.g., institutional waiting areas, health and social services, counselling offices, schools, and public libraries) which would reach a wider audience.

Research

As there were a number of suggestions related to effective means of registering victims, participants recommended that research be conducted that explores both qualitative and quantitative methods to determine who registers (specific demographics), and why some victims choose not to register. Participants noted the importance of research for the develop of strategies to increase uptake with victim registration.

¹ A term used to refer to proactively contacting victims to provide information about their rights within the federal corrections and conditional release system and the services available to them. If introduced, it would allow agencies to automatically register victims and require sharing information between agencies.

Session 2: Information Dissemination

During the second session, PS asked participants for recommendations on how our collective information dissemination could become more victim-centred, trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, inclusive and respectful of minority communities. This session required stakeholders to address the notion that victims are not a homogenous group. During this session, participants provided a number of suggestions and recommendations.

Victim-Centred²

Again, language was acknowledged by participants as exceedingly important when communicating with victims. The term “victim” was noted as being potentially exclusionary even pejorative in some contexts. Many choose not to identify as victims but instead as “survivors” as a positive alternative, or choose to use the phrase “those impacted by crime or violence”. Agencies and service providers need to be conscious and attentive to what language is being used in discussions and information products. The importance in acknowledging that victims’ needs remain fluid overtime was also raised, including a need to enact processes and practices that are capable of accommodating victims’ changing needs. Participants expressed that ‘top-down’ approaches to information sharing is not working. All resources and services should start with the victim to determine what they need. One participant suggested that agencies and service providers should be conducting assessments to identify the needs of victims so that they can be referred to the appropriate services and supports based on their circumstances.

Trauma Informed³

Trauma, healing, and recovery are not a linear path. Stakeholders noted that the passage of time between the occurrence of the crime and when information is delivered needs to be adapted. Service providers should acknowledge that the circumstances of a crime may determine when and how a victim would like to receive information. For example, one victim may be prepared to receive information shortly after victimization, while another may not be prepared to receive information directly following the event but may want it in the future. Service providers should consider that circumstances of the event and trauma may impact when and how a victim is able to digest information. Thus, information needs to be shared in a trauma informed manner. One participant emphasized the importance of being mindful of significant dates. Victims should never be contacted by agencies or service providers on or around a significant date (e.g., death of a loved one) as this can be a trigger for a victim at an already emotional time. One agency representative noted the importance of building appropriate rapport with victims. Most participants recommended training for agency representatives and service providers that address issues such as timing of service delivery, telephone etiquette and sensitive communication, especially when initiating difficult or potentially triggering conversations with victims.

Cultural Competence, Sensitivity, and Humility

Participants provided a number of suggestions with respect to how culturally-sensitive information dissemination could be undertaken, expressing that a ‘one size fits all’ approach to information sharing

² A systematic focus on the needs and concerns of a victim to ensure the compassionate and sensitive delivery of information and resources. This requires putting the victims’ needs, concerns, and rights at the heart of planning.

³ The recognition that trauma is pervasive. Approaches should promote environments of healing and recovery rather than providing information and services that may inadvertently re-traumatize.

is not effective. Stakeholders suggested targeted information dissemination efforts to ensure that vulnerable groups (e.g., Indigenous victims or persons with disabilities who have been the victim of a federal offender) receive appropriate information. Appropriate considerations should be made when providing information to specific groups of victims, for example, culture and language when communicating with Indigenous communities and victims.

Information and materials provided to specific communities need to be more inclusive of different voices and diverse perspectives. Information products should be developed in collaboration and consultation with multi-cultural groups. Products should be translated with a cultural competency lens so that members of varied cultures can understand and identify with the information being communicated. Participants expressed that the adoption of different voices and perspectives involves relationship building within communities. Developing trust and relationships within communities, especially those where there is a reluctance to participate in the CJS due to past injustices pose additional challenges. Participants suggested that multi-cultural organizations, community based cultural centres, non-profit organizations, and trusted community leaders may be best suited to serve as access points for the provision of information in a manner that is both respectful and meaningful to participants.

Session 3: Information Products & Toolkit

In the third session, PS asked participants to provide suggestions for improving the sharing of information on corrections and conditional release through the use of information products. In addition, PS asked that participants and stakeholders provide input on the creation of an integrated toolkit (i.e., what one could look like and how it could be effectively disseminated).

Communication and Delivery of Information Products

Multi-media

Responses widely varied with regard to how best to communicate with victims of crime through information products. Traditional methods of delivery included printed and hardcopy materials (translated into a variety of languages), digital documents such as PDFs, and online resources (webpages and links). Stakeholders suggested that agencies and partners embrace other creative formats of media for the communication and dissemination of information products. For example, using various forms of multi-media including: social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), portals for live chats, podcasts, radio, audio books, graphic novels, interactive features, mobile phone applications and webinars featuring dynamic speakers. Overall, participants felt that victims should be provided with a choice of formats through which they can seek and receive information.

Although electronic multi-media sources have become a significant method of communication, it was noted that print resources should continue to be available. Hardcopies of information resources continue to be used in communities that do not have access to reliable internet, specifically remote and northern communities. In addition, one participant noted that while having a diversity of resources is

beneficial, there needs to be consideration for the volume and/or quantity of information being presented to victims as to not create confusion and information overload.⁴

Language and Presentation

Again we heard that a focus on plain language is integral to communicating clear and concise information to victims. Participants noted that information presented with overly complex and technical language may lose its meaning for many victims. Participants were supportive of agencies and service providers offering their information and resources in languages other than English and French. One participant emphasized the need to present documents that are easy to understand and informative for those with lower literacy levels. Overall, the presentation of information should be simple, clean, and concise and not visually overwhelming⁵.

Toolkit

PS proposed the creation of a toolkit that could serve as a single, comprehensive orientation kit. Victims could be directed to this toolkit at their first contact with the corrections and conditional release process, which could offer information on how to navigate the process. In response to PS's proposed toolkit, this is what we heard:

- Prior to developing a toolkit, all publications and information resources should be reviewed to target information that would be most useful to victims and survivors, identify information that could be synthesized, and identify information gaps that could be filled by the toolkit.
- The toolkit should be formatted as a 'one stop shop' for victims and survivors. Victims and survivors should be able to receive all the appropriate information through this resource, clearly and concisely.
- Where information in the toolkit is not considered to be exhaustive, victims should be provided with external links to alternate resources, where necessary.
- The toolkit should be available in hard copies and electronically. It should also be developed in various formats, such as graphic novels, audio books, short videos, online tutorials, web links, interactive process maps and applications.
- The printed version of the toolkit should be a colour coded booklet containing tabs that covered separate topics such as 'stages of the criminal justice process', 'victims' rights', and 'registering as a victim'. Each information section could provide a list of resources and referrals specific to that particular point in the process, or a general contact to respond to inquiries.
- Information should be clear and easy for a lay person to understand. One participant proposed that agencies should consider taking complex information resources and converting them into digestible mediums (e.g., Sentence Calculation Handbook into fact sheets or infographics).

Victims and survivors should be able to provide feedback and input on the construction of the toolkit. One participant proposed having a focus group to receive input.

⁴ Information overload refers to victims feeling inundated with too much information which may cause them to feel overwhelmed, causing additional confusion and stress to their recovery process.

⁵ Visually overwhelming documents were described by one participant as information products that contain a large amount of text, graphics, charts, tables, pictures, symbols, colours, etc.

- Partner agencies should consider where this information toolkit would be best disseminated. There was suggestion for having the toolkit available at the courthouse. Toolkits could be provided to Crown Attorneys and court support workers for distribution and/or at stationed displays.

Session 4: Information Sharing to Persons with Disabilities

Federal and regional victim services have a responsibility to ensure that our services are accessible and can accommodate persons with disabilities. In the fourth and last session of Day One, PS asked participants to help identify barriers that are encountered by victims with disabilities when attempting to access information about corrections and conditional release. In addition, PS also asked participants for their input on how information and participation can be more accessible to overcome these barriers.

Communication Disabilities and the Need for Interpreters

Participants quickly identified that one of the most prominent barriers that victims with disabilities face when attempting to access information is the difficulty communicating with victim service providers. Whether a victim has a hearing impairment or a communication disability that prevents them from communicating in traditional ways, their right to access information still exists. Participants noted that the availability and accessibility of accredited interpreters is a key component in ensuring that victims with disabilities can communicate effectively with victim service providers to receive the information they are seeking. It was expressed from some participants that many victims with disabilities are left to rely on their family members to communicate for them and to help them access information. Interpreters should be readily available to assist victims with communication disabilities to receive information, as well as provide information such as victim statements. The question of who would be responsible to fund interpreters was also discussed. Participants clearly expressed that victims should not bear the costs for these services.

Partnerships

Developing national and regional level partnerships was another idea put forward by participants. Participants raised the possibility of developing partnerships with various agencies that offer accessible services and/or provide training resources on communication disabilities as a strong tool to help overcome barriers that victims with disabilities face when seeking and receiving information about federal corrections and conditional release. These partnerships would create the potential to provide training to victim service providers on how to communicate with victims with disabilities, raise awareness amongst victim service providers of referral services for persons with disabilities, expand the victim service resource list with practical support options, and continuously evolve to ensure the implementation of best practices.

Accessible Information Products

Not only did participants emphasize the need for information products that use plain language, they also suggested that various forms of information products be developed that are accessible to persons with disabilities. This means developing information products in braille or as audio recordings, as well as adapting information products into pictograms or graphic novels. This would be another opportunity to

utilize partnerships with agencies that have expertise in communication disabilities that could assist with the development of accessible products.

It is important to note that each person and their needs are unique, and that it is the responsibility of victim serving organizations to ensure that their processes are adaptable and accommodating.

Advertising Accessible Services

Participants suggested that advertising that accessible services are provided is just as important as providing them. Victims with disabilities may not be aware that there are services or supports in place to assist them in accessing needed information. Improving information sharing about available accessible services, would in turn, increase awareness of victim services, as well as policy and legislation meant to uphold all victims' right to information and participation.

Additionally, it was acknowledged that not all disabilities are visible. Whether or not a victim presents a visible disability, accessible services and accommodations need to be promoted and offered to all victims to ensure that their availability is well known and that individuals who require them feel comfortable in accessing them.

Day Two: Restorative Justice and the Right to Information

On Day Two of the roundtable, PS consulted stakeholders on ways to improve information dissemination about restorative justice, with an emphasis on CSC's Restorative Opportunities program.

The purpose of this portion of the roundtable was to:

- identify why some victims choose not to participate in restorative processes and
- to explore if there are special considerations for serious crime victims who participate in RJ processes.

Presentation Synopsis:

CSC's Restorative Opportunities Program

Restorative justice (RJ) is an approach to justice that focuses on addressing the harms caused by crime that aims to meet the needs of those involved. Restorative Opportunities (RO) is a program based on RJ principles, which operates at the post-sentence stage in the criminal justice system, and offers victim-offender mediation services facilitated by experienced mediators across Canada. Through the RO program, victims of serious crime are provided a chance to discuss the impacts of the offence with the offender who caused the harm. Victims can ask the offender questions, describe the impact the crime had on their lives, and identify what can be done to help address the harm. Offenders are given the opportunity to take responsibility for their actions, hear firsthand how their behavior affected others,

and if possible, participate in determining how they can help to repair the harm they have caused. This voluntary program allows a victim or survivor to communicate with the federal offender who harmed them in their preferred format, whether it be face to face, in writing, via video message, or shuttle communication, where the mediator relays messages between the participants.

What We Heard

On Day Two PS asked participants if offering RJ processes to serious crime victims involves special considerations in the context of federal corrections and conditional release, and how information dissemination sharing about the Restorative Opportunities program can be improved. The following themes capture the overarching discussions:

Clarifying Perceptions

During the roundtable, it became evident that there are a number of perceptions surrounding RJ that need to be clarified. It was agreed that as a first step efforts should be made to dispel some myths and perceptions, which are present in the media, among victim service providers, and among victims themselves. One roundtable participant discussed their experience with a victim service provider who held negative beliefs about RJ processes and therefore, did not disclose to the victim that RJ was an option available to victims. By properly educating the general public on the goals and processes of RJ while clarifying common perceptions (e.g., RJ is focused on offender needs), service provider bias can be minimized ensuring victims of crime are offered accurate information in order to make an informed decision as to whether or not a RJ process is right for them. Some common perceptions roundtable participants identified are outlined below:

I) Forgiveness

A common perception about RJ is that the end goal is forgiveness. This idea is often portrayed in the media with stories of RJ containing headlines that state “I forgive him”. This immediately creates the fallacy that participating in RJ processes requires forgiveness, something that many victims of crime are not willing to do. It is crucial that victims understand their participation is voluntarily and that they will not be pressured to forgive the offender for the harms they caused.

II) Means of Communication

RJ can take many forms. A common perception is that victims will have to meet the offender face to face. Although face to face meetings are a possibility, it is not a requirement. Face to face meetings only occur if all parties involved agree and the professional moderator facilitating the process is of the opinion that the process will be beneficial for both parties.

III) Alternative to Sentencing

RJ programs can operate at all stages of the CJS. In some cases, RJ programs can operate as a pre-charge diversion program or as an sentencing alternative. This most often occurs for less serious crimes or with young offenders. However, the Restorative Opportunities program operates parallel to the CJS and accepts cases after an offender has been sentenced to a term of federal imprisonment. It is important that is clarified that participation will not impact the offender’s sentence or conditional release decisions.

Sustained Funding

Participants also discussed how sustainable funding for RJ services and their promotion would better inform victims of crime of their existence. Employing public education campaigns could ensure accurate information is delivered to the public, and that victims are aware of their right to information about RJ.

Participants expressed the view that the Restorative Opportunities program should have a designated budget to cover travel costs incurred by victims who must travel to participate in face to face meetings with offenders who are in custody in another jurisdiction.

Facilitator Training

Participants emphasized the importance of RJ facilitators having proper training to effectively support victims through the process, as well as providing follow up support after the process. Furthermore, they emphasized that facilitators need to set realistic expectations with victims throughout the process. Without realistic expectations, victims can experience feelings of disappointment or revictimization if the process does not unfold the way they had imagined or hoped.

Giving Victims a choice/voice

Participants believed that victims lack choices in every aspect of the CJS and that RJ can be an opportunity for victims to exercise choice, and have a more active role in the system. Being offered choices can help victims regain power by having their voices heard. In order to exercise this choice, victim's need to be aware of the program and its potential benefits. Improving information dissemination about RJ services and programs, can help improve victims' sense of agency and choice.

Moving Forward on Understanding Victim Needs in Corrections and Conditional Release

While the focus of this roundtable was the Right to Information, many participants' suggestions and recommendations, similarly to previous roundtables, related to the Right to Participation illustrating that information is the key to exercising victim rights in the corrections and conditional release context. The PS Portfolio endeavors to empower victims by providing information that is easily accessible in a format that reduces victim confusion (i.e., trauma informed), is culturally competent, clear, concise, easy to understand and informative.

The PS Portfolio's concerted efforts to communicate this information to stakeholders and victims - including vulnerable victims - will provide them with the opportunity to become more knowledgeable about their rights under the CVBR and thus, better able to exercise them. This will likely result in an increase in the number of victims who a) register to receive information about the person who harmed them, b) access services and programs, and c) participate in restorative justice programs.