



St. Leonard's
Society of
Canada



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: November 5, 2024

Statement on the 51st Annual Report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator (2023-24)

Ottawa, ON/Algonquin Anishinaabe Territory: on October 29, 2024, the 51st *Annual Report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator (OCI)* was tabled before Parliament. St. Leonard's Society of Canada (SLSC) applauds the national systemic investigation featured within this report, *Hope Behind Bars: Managing Life Sentences in Federal Custody*. People with a life sentence comprise more than one-quarter of Canada's prison population, yet there is no meaningful strategy in place to meet their unique needs.

For more than 55 years, SLSC and its members have played an essential role in supporting people in conflict with the law – particularly through the provision of community-based and peer-based supports for those who are incarcerated or paroled. Since the creation of the life sentence in 1976, our network has studied its implementation and impact, and was involved in establishing the LifeLine[®] service in the 1980-90s as a targeted response to the needs of people with a life sentence. Despite international recognition and more than 20 years of successful operations, funding for LifeLine[®] was cancelled in 2012. Since then, the PeerLife Collaborative (PLC) has been responding to the needs of this population, and has been available to support a limited number of lifers in the Ontario region. In 2017, SLSC developed resources and actively called on CSC to develop a national strategy for life-sentenced people. SLSC and PLC's work and advocacy continue to be informed by the knowledge and experience of community-based agencies who understand that preparing for release is critical for safe and successful reintegration.

In light of our collective expertise, SLSC and the PLC welcome OCI recommendations 23 – 26 and 28, among the many other thoughtfully crafted recommendations from this latest annual report. As ever, we are prepared to specifically meet and exceed recommendation 26 by providing CSC with our experience and expertise to “provide support to federal Lifers from intake to community release”. We are encouraged by CSC's response that our organizations will be consulted and that allocating more funds to support people with life sentences will be considered. Indeed, any meaningful response will require from the outset the engagement of the community and people with lived experience. Doing so ensures that any strategies pertaining to life sentenced people take into account the full spectrum of needs and concerns – from intake to community release.

Supported by Public Safety Canada, SLSC recently developed evidence-informed, up-to-date Lifer Resource Strategy (LRS) materials to increase capacity to support this underserved population. Using these materials, the PLC is now entering its fourth but *final* year of funding from CSC's Ontario Region to deliver services by two exemplary peer in-reach workers: Rick Sauvé and Liana MacDonald. Last year alone, Mr. Sauvé and Ms. MacDonald tirelessly supported 138 men and women (out of the more than 1000 in Ontario), in many ways both inside (e.g. individual/group sessions) and outside institutional settings (e.g. phone calls, parole hearings).

As such, the OCI's recommendations are especially timely and present an opportunity for CSC to scale up the provision of in-reach services as part of its national lifer strategy, rather than risk losing existing capacity from community partners. Significantly increasing funding and access for voluntary organizations can mobilize support for the 5000+ people who have a life sentence in Canada. We urge CSC to rise to the occasion to create 'hope behind bars' and work with us to respond meaningfully to these recommendations.

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