



# The Elizabeth Fry Society of Manitoba, Inc.



A United Way Member Agency

June 27, 2007

## **Progress on Women's Human Rights: Info for Our Partners and the Women with and on Behalf of Whom We Work**

Five and a half years ago the Elizabeth Fry Society filed two human rights complaints with the Manitoba Human Rights Commission about the treatment and conditions faced by women incarcerated at the Portage Correctional Centre. The basis of the complaints was that women experience discrimination on the basis of sex, race, and disability, due to the location and facilities at PCC, as well as the lack of attention to their needs and circumstances, including those as Aboriginal women and mothers. In short, due to their small numbers relative to men, and despite the fact that they generally pose a low risk to the community, women have generally been a "correctional afterthought."

After a lengthy investigation, the Human Rights Commission found merit in the complaints and referred the parties to mediation. A series of productive discussions with Manitoba Justice recently resulted in a settlement of the complaints which includes a number of important aspects to improve the situation of criminalized women, such as:

- a commitment by Manitoba Justice to work with the Human Rights Commission to develop and deliver human rights training for all staff and prisoners, to integrate human rights training at all levels of Corrections, and to ensure that accountability for human rights compliance is part of managerial accountability in Corrections;
- establishment of a Women's Program Advisory Committee to be co-chaired by EFS Manitoba and Manitoba Justice, which will bring together community groups to provide input on women-centred and culturally-appropriate programs and services at all existing and proposed correctional facilities for women. This body will provide an important mechanism for accountability and dialogue with the community;
- positive changes made at PCC such as hiring an Aboriginal cultural worker, providing free tampons to women, funding a small-scale literacy program, providing better telephone access, and enhancing computer access and training; and
- a commitment to future initiatives, including addressing the increased demand for Aboriginal spiritual and cultural services, abuse and trauma counseling, library and recreation enhancements, and regular reviews of standing orders.

This complaint and the progress made through mediation is a first for Canada. A number of Elizabeth Fry Societies across the country will likely follow our lead to pursue human rights complaints in their provinces. It is also important to note that this human rights settlement is just one means by which we continue to advocate for the rights of criminalized women and girls. In particular, we are working with local and national partners to oppose the unproductive "law and order agenda" that sees increasing numbers of women incarcerated, at great fiscal and social cost to Canadians, and does not deliver on the promise of community safety.

The settlement agreement has been posted on our website. We urge our partners to work with us to continue this progress and to hold the government accountable for the commitments it has made to Manitoba women, their families, and communities.

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