

PeerLife

annual report 2016



Hope • Reintegration • Success

PeerLife
Transition
Services

PeerLife

Annual Report 2016

Introduction

It gives me great pleasure to contribute to the annual report of PeerLife Transition Services. PeerLife was created in 2012 and is maintained through the collaborative efforts of the four St. Leonard's Societies, Hamilton, Ottawa, Peterborough and Windsor.

St. Leonard's has been a leader in designing and developing innovative programs for long-term offenders. We believe that correctional agencies should be, at the very least, lawful, safe, industrious and hopeful. Hope is a very functional force in mentoring, motivating and managing long-term offenders. The foundation of PeerLife is the power of the individual peer support worker to give hope, purpose and direction to the individual life sentenced offender.

There are over a thousand lifers in the Ontario Region. Given our limited resources, PeerLife reaches out to only 25% of the lifer population. We are currently developing small focused activities such as Break Away program and Information Sessions to address the needs of lifers in medium and maximum institutions.

As you read the Report, you will appreciate the skills and commitment that our two Peer Support Workers, John Rives and Rick Sauve, bring to their work. During the course of the year they logged over 1400 individual interviews and appeared at 40 Parole Board panel hearings(see Activity Chart). These two men are not only a source of inspiration to their fellow lifers inside our prisons but to all professionals who believe in humane and effective corrections.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the support and cooperation of the Correctional Service Canada and Parole Board Canada

Skip Graham

Yearly Report From John Rives

My work with PeerLife has been concentrated at Kingston area Minimum Security Institutions. Maintaining a regular presence at Collins Bay and Joyceville throughout the week remains the keynote of the service.

Most of the Lifers accessing PeerLife (and I believe this holds true for Rick's work at Fenbrook) have well established relationships with this Peer Leader in many cases going back as far as two or even three decades. It is no surprise that for our clients, keeping the old "LifeLine Concept" alive is as much a priority as individual service. Given the increasing challenges to earning a conditional release, particularly in the form of legislative changes, it is very much to the credit of Lifers that they have sustained sufficient collegial will to support and promote an idea that serves the larger group not just themselves. Nevertheless, it has always been true that in our work our successes tend to come one Lifer at a time.

During the course of this past year Rick and I have logged over 1400 individual interviews and appeared at 40 Parole Board panel hearings (see Activity Chart). In addition, I remain active on the Executive Committee of the John Howard Society of Toronto and their Prison Conditions Committee as well as with other community agencies involved in criminal justice. As you can read in Rick's report, he continues to have a real impact on Lifer related issues through the media and directly at committee hearings at the House of Commons in Ottawa. His initiatives addressing Gangs and the needs of the aging prison population are keeping our work relevant not only to our select group of clients but also the wider field of corrections as a whole.

Earlier in this report I alluded to the challenges of earning a conditional release. Ever since Lifers have had the opportunity serve out a portion of their sentence in the community, grants of parole have not been easy to come by. They are not automatic as some in the media will aver and they are highly conditional in practice. Living a life on parole takes commitment and not without its own set of challenges, most notably the need to self-monitor a host of restrictions and learning to go about one's daily business with the knowledge that freedom itself is conditional.

Recent legislative changes have meant that a breach of conditions, not the committal of any new criminal offense, can and does often result in years of incarceration. Far from being a positive motivator for acceptable behaviour, the spectre of even the most remote possibility of a suspension and/or revocation of parole puts incredible stress on the paroled Lifer. The use of successful role-models and peer groups in the community can assist in coping with these realities and much has been in the community such as with the monthly meetings hosted by St. Leonard's House Windsor PeerLife Residential Program. One of our key roles at PeerLife is to share our experiences of Life After Life with those behind the walls. Sometimes, I have to make a conscious effort not to discourage clients in their progress towards release by focusing too much on the, for lack of a better term, frightful aspects of Life on Parole.

Behind the tangible and metaphorical walls of the institutions one of the developments which had a very clear negative impact on Lifers stands out. Changes in Inmate Pay policy (such as room & board, the abolition of incentive employment, mandatory contributions to the telephone fund and the use of the rather nebulous and subjective notion of "accountability" in the

evaluation of pay levels) make it extremely challenging for offenders to effectively plan for and finance travel and related expenses during the transitional period of Unescorted Temporary Absences. And for Lifers, there is no alternative to planning for and working through an extensive period of conditional release prior to a return under parole into the community. I am not suggesting any offender group should not do their part by saving a portion of their meagre wages for this purpose, but it is simply not possible for the great majority of Lifers to save enough to fund an extensive period of travel and expense while on a UTA program. Further, for those who have family support, I do not believe it proper to presume these people will foot the bill or any shortfalls.

Under existing legislation CSC is required to provide transportation for those on Administrative forms of release, provided the offender contributes an appropriate amount (no percentage specified). If policy were amended so that CSC simply pays the complete transportation portion (at the lowest available rate, no more) this would effectively solve the issue for Lifers. After all, a \$180 round trip bus ticket is a small sum for Corrections but the equivalent of six weeks net salary for most of our clients - leaving nothing at all for necessary expenses such as toiletries on canteen or any of the many unavoidable expenses accrued during a conditional release in the community. Just a suggestion.

In summary, over the past three-and-a-half years, PeerLife has provided vital service to Lifers particularly during the demanding stage of the sentence when, after often decades of imprisonment, they are preparing for release and stepping out into the community on parole. But more, our regular interaction has allowed the Peer Leaders to keep in tune with the issues facing corrections and life in prison from the prisoners' perspective. Our ongoing purpose is to share this knowledge with decision makers in the Correctional Service of Canada, the Parole Board of Canada and all the supportive agencies with whom we work. In this way the "LifeLine Concept" continues to have real meaning both inside and outside our correctional institutions in Ontario and even into the rest of Canada.

Yearly Report From Rick Sauve'

The past year has been an interesting for Peer Life as we have continued to provide services for our clients in what can be challenging times for them. There have been some highlights and some concerns we have experienced. Some of the high lights. In Feb 2015 I appeared on a panel representing ST. Leonard's Peer Life with Mary Campbell and Stephen Finestead at the Senate Hearings to discuss changes to parole eligibility timeframes. The changes that were introduced by the conservative government was to increase eligibility times for those that receive a negative decision from PBC. It was argued that these changes would not meet a constitutional challenge. Afterwards I did an interview with Global about the Bill.

In April I was asked to appear at a high profile trial as an expert testimony in Toronto. The context of my testimony was about life sentences. This was during the sentencing phase of the trial which the crown was seeking consecutive life sentences for the client. Although he did receive consecutive life sentences the case was being presented as a test case and will be challenged to the supreme court of Canada. the lawyers for the client said that my testimony could be essential in the argument against this draconian legislation. Once again I did interviews with both TV and print media. St. Leonard's Peer Life was discussed not only in the trial but was reported in the the interviews.

Prior to the federal election I did a number of interviews with media including having Global National come to my home to do interviews regarding prisoners voting. Again St. Leonard's peer Life was discussed in the interviews.

A project that Peer Life has introduced is the Break Away program for those prisoners who have self identified as having some gang affiliation, and want to get away from that lifestyle. One group was run as a pilot and all participants were not only willing and enthusiastic but some sent letters to express how great the program was. Resulting from this Skip sent a proposal to Trillium Foundation for a grant to do and educational film to be used for youth at risk. The proposal was accepted and funding has been provided to do three additional groups at three different institutions over the year. The first group is set to begin at BCI minimum in April. Approval has been provided to run the group at BCI medium and Warkworth institutions. After the groups have been assessed a follow up proposal will be forwarded to do the film. Of interest at a recent St. Leonard's conference representatives from Public Safety said that funding would be made available for groups that deal with Gangs and youth at risk. The focus of the Break Away program deals with both of these issues, so heres hoping.

One issue that has raised concerns is the growing number of elderly inmates within the institutions. The challenges that corrections must face is of growing concern. This also presents problems for the CRF's that must have to adapt to this growing population. Recently a proposal presented by the Lifers Group about this group highlighted the many concerns, ranging from not being able to care for themselves but as well how they can become victimized in the system. St. Lenonards Peer Life will actively engage in any initiative to deal with this matter.

In closing despite the challenges that peer Life faces we are still enthusiastic about the work. We know that not only do we continue to provide a valuable service but we bring hope and innovation to our clients.

Activity Report
SLS PeerLife Transition Services

Apr2015-Mar2016

	Case Confs.	NPB Panels	Judicial Reviews	Inst. Groups	PubEduc & Media	Comm. Relations	Family Assist	Meetings	Client Contacts	Misc. including travel*
Rick Sauve (BCI/FM)groups)	17	20	0	72	12	1	3	48	775	7
John Rives (FI/PI)	3	20	0	5	1	19	0	76	673	8
Total	20	40	0	77	13	20	3	124	1448	15

NB: brackets indicate the three primary minimum institutions served * 11 client transports

Individual Clients (not including group contacts):

Bath	27
BeaverCreekMin	114
CollinsBayMin(FI)	74
JoycevilleMin(PI)	79
Inst. Total	<u>294</u>
Community	17
Grand Total	<u>276</u>