



February 4, 2017

Senator Kim Pate  
The Senate of Canada

Re: Human Rights for Prisoners in Canadian Prisons

Dear Senator Pate;

Please accept this submission on behalf of the 7<sup>th</sup> Step Society of Canada in support of upgraded recognition of Human Rights for prisoners in Canadian federal and provincial correctional institutions.

The whole premise of this starts with the fact that these are human beings who are imprisoned and although they may have given up certain civil rights by virtue of the offenses for which they are convicted, they certainly are entitled to basic human rights and protection from cruel and inhumane treatment. Extensive periods of segregation/isolation from other inmates and staff, poor nutrition, lack of appropriate housing, withholding of medical and mental health treatment, physical abuse, lack of reintegration programming and isolation from family are all examples of conditions which exist in Canadian correctional institutions and which must be rectified without delay. Punishment and inhumane treatment has never proven to be successful in rehabilitating criminals and in fact, has likely contributed to the high rate of recidivism which we see in this country. We have essentially been "beating the same dead horse" for over 100 years, with regards to the correctional institutions in this country and somehow expecting a different result. Until, and unless we take a different approach to the treatment of offenders while incarcerated, we are unlikely to see any appreciable difference in outcomes. More so, we pride ourselves on being a compassionate and caring nation, yet we continue to treat offenders with less care than animals in humane shelters.

A high percentage of offenders suffer from a variety of mental illnesses which in turn, leads to addictions, self harm and anti-social behavior. These offenders need to be treated with compassion, in a health care centered environment as opposed to a punishment oriented one.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Step Society of Canada is an offender based self help organization that has been active in this country since the late 1960's, having migrated here from the United States where it started in 1963. Our primary target group is recidivists who have run afoul of the system many times during their lives. Our approach is a firm but respectful call to accountability from the offender members by ex-offenders and non-offenders who participate in our encounter groups. Given time and an opportunity to examine their past behavior, many of our members have gained their release from prison and moved on to become productive members of society. Often, they have entered our groups embittered by their encounters with the criminal justice system and in particular, the prisons they have been housed in. Right or wrong, they have built up many resentments to what they perceive to be an uncaring, punitive environment that has stripped them of their rights and dignity from the minute they entered it. These resentments and anger cloud their thinking and limit their ability to respond to positive stimuli, thereby diminishing their chances for success. Our goal, as an organization is to help them overcome these resentments and move on to dealing with the root causes of what caused their criminal behavior in the first place. This is often a long process just to get to a positive mental outlook for a prisoner.

A prison environment that is fully respectful of human rights and the basic needs of offenders would in many cases, potentially shorten the cycle of recidivism and speed up the process of change by removing the stigma and anger that is instilled in offenders during their incarceration. Prisons in Canada have changed for the better over the last 50 years but there are still many gaps and deficiencies due to our retribution based model of incarceration. Security and efficiency have trumped treatment and many of the progressive efforts of the 1970's and 80's have been eliminated in favor of cost savings. Unfortunately, this is a short sighted strategy and the long term consequences outweigh the short term gains.

Restoring human dignity and self worth along with teaching new coping skills is a far more effective rehabilitative strategy than punishment and it is imperative that the prison system in Canada recognizes this if we are hoping to reduce recidivism in this country.

Sincerely,  
George Myette  
National Executive Director