



Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies™

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 31st, 2020

Hon. Bill Blair, Minister of Public Safety  
Hon. David Lametti, Minister of Justice  
Hon. Catherine McKenna, Minister of Infrastructure and Communities  
Hon. Ahmed Hussen, Minister of Families, Children, and Social Service

House of Commons  
Ottawa, ON  
K1A 0A6

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### **Open Letter: Depopulation of Federal Prisons**

Dear Ministers,

As we write this, we have been made aware of more than one federally incarcerated woman with a confirmed case of COVID-19, and several others with presumptive cases. We fear that these cases mark the beginning of a potential public health emergency. As an organization dedicated to advocating for federally incarcerated women, Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS) is concerned about the Correctional Service of Canada's (CSC) preparedness to manage this outbreak and reduce the harm to people inside prisons.

We write to you to insist on immediate action and offer our collaboration, along with our network of over 20 local Elizabeth Fry Societies, in devising a plan to ensure that we are able to safely depopulate federal women's prisons in Canada.

The time for bold, decisive, and life-saving action is now.

**CSC health care is not equipped to treat prisoners who become ill with COVID-19:** Long before this public health crisis, our Regional Advocates have reported on the substandard healthcare provided to women in federal prison. Moreover, the Office of the Correctional Investigator has consistently reported on a lack of adequate health care in federal prisons. A system that was already failing to meet the needs of the people in their care cannot reasonably claim that they can manage a public health crisis. Given the substandard access to healthcare and the potential for rapid spread within prisons, as prisoners become ill

they will need to be transferred to hospitals, putting even greater pressure on an already strained health care system. This puts everyone at greater risk.

**Women are not safer in prison:** It is impossible to practice physical distancing in prison. This is particularly concerning as incarcerated people fall within the groups that Public Health have deemed to be at an increased risk of more severe outcomes; including: those who are aged 65 and over, those who have compromised immune systems; and those who have underlying medical conditions. We have already seen devastating examples in our long term care facilities about the impacts that an outbreak can have on a population that is older and / or has underlying health conditions when living in close quarters. Medical experts across Canada have continuously expressed concerns for the safety of prisoners and staff once COVID-19 enters the prisons, and now it has.

**There are community release options for Federally incarcerated women:** There are over 20 local Elizabeth Fry Societies across Canada who provide programming and support for criminalized women. Many of these locals already have housing options for women leaving prison and are working tirelessly to provide safe and supportive housing - but we can do more.

Our local Elizabeth Fry Societies are willing and ready to be part of the solution to depopulate prisons in partnership with the Canadian Government. With adequate support, we are confident that we can work with you to facilitate the release of many federally incarcerated women in Canada.

There are options already available to help facilitate these releases; including: the extension of unaccompanied temporary absences, the use of Section 81 and 84 of the Corrections and Conditional Release Act (CCRA), expedited hearings for suspension and revocation cases, and section 121(1.b) of the CCRA states that “parole may be granted **at any time** to an offender [...] whose physical or mental health is likely to suffer serious damage if the offender continues to be held in confinement”. We urge you to use the tools that are at your disposal to depopulate now.

As an organization dedicated to prison abolition, we understand that prisons have never served to keep our communities safe or address harm. Especially now, we echo the calls from prisoners, families, legal professionals, health care workers, senators, advocates, organizers, unions, and other service providers to release as many people from prison as possible. We do not have the death penalty in Canada, but inaction on the part of the government during this critical time will effectively sentence some of our country’s most marginalized people to death.

### **Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies**

Cc. Anne Kelly - Commissioner of the Correctional Service of Canada  
Cc. Angela Connidis - Deputy Commissioner for Women, Correctional Service of Canada  
Cc. Marie Claude Landry - Chief Commissioner - Canadian Human Rights Commission  
Cc. Senator Kim Pate - Standing Committee on Human Rights (in prison)  
Cc. Ivan Zinger - Correctional Investigator of Canada  
Cc. Jennifer Oades - Chairperson of the Parole Board of Canada