



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **CAEFS and Elizabeth Fry Northern Alberta Call for a Systemic Response to Sexual Violence or Coercion Perpetrated by the Staff of Correctional Services of Canada**

Edmonton, Alberta (March 6, 2023): On March 3, 2023, the media reported that a staff member at the Edmonton Institution for Women (EIFW), a federal prison designated for women in Edmonton, Alberta, was charged in connection with an historical sexual assault on one of the women incarcerated there. The Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS) and the Elizabeth Fry Society of Northern Alberta are calling for action from the federal government to address the persistent – and well known – systemic issue of sexual violence and coercion in federal prisons.

The Office of the Correctional Investigator's (OCI) 2020 investigation into sexual violence and coercion in federal prisons exposed an 'organizational indifference' to the problem, evidenced by the fact that the Correctional Service of Canada does not collect, record, track statistics, or conduct research around sexual violence in the prisons. In April 2022, following news reports that a Nova Institution for Women Correctional Officer has pleaded guilty to six charges of sexual assault perpetrated against three incarcerated people, the Canadian Human Rights Commission joined CAEFS' call for an independent public inquiry into the issue of sexual coercion and violence against prisoners in facilities designated for women. In response, Public Safety is currently conducting research on this issue, but now – almost a year later – urgent and wholistic action is needed to address this ongoing issue impacting the lives and wellbeing of people inside.

Incarcerated people are isolated from external systems of support and must contend with the power imbalances between CSC staff and prisoners. Incarcerated peoples' accounts of their experiences are often disbelieved by CSC administration, who instead trust the accounting of their colleagues. This silencing of prisoners is facilitated by an absence of witnesses, and CSC's lack of documentation and tracking of reports over time.

"Inherent to the persistence of the problem is that CSC is not bound to act upon the recommendations of any external bodies – and there have been extensive recommendations to end this violence, including from CAEFS and OCI" noted Emilie Coyle, Executive Director of CAEFS. "It is morally and legally incumbent on the Correctional Service of Canada and on the Federal Government to act to finally address this persistent systemic issue - an issue that impacts incarcerated people and CSC staff alike".

The impact of sexual violence, abhorrent on its own, is amplified in a prison context, in part because many prisoners have already experienced sexual violence prior to their incarceration. "In Edmonton and on the prairies, the over-representation of Indigenous women in our prisons is astonishingly higher than the national average. What is worse is that upwards of 90% have survived extensive histories of trauma and sexual violence prior to their imprisonment," shared Toni Sinclair, Executive Director of Elizabeth Fry Northern Alberta. "For that trauma to continue once inside is yet another system that has failed them and harmed them."

CAEFS has previously highlighted the incredible power that Correctional Officers and other Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) staff wield when it comes to the liberty of incarcerated people. Coming forward with a claim against a CSC staff could result in retaliation that could jeopardize one's chance of being granted parole when eligible. Despite this, incarcerated people continue to share their stories.

"I suspect that the news of this assault and subsequent charges might hit home for some people, particularly incarcerated people who may – through this news - be becoming aware of their rights around consent and the inappropriateness of behaviours that have been normalized in a prison context" commented Sinclair. "We are here to help, and we believe survivors."

If you are in Northern Alberta and have experienced sexual violence, please contact Elizabeth Fry Northern Alberta's Independent Legal Advice Project for Survivors of Sexual Violence for information and support at 780-421-1175.

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For Comment

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About CAEFS: Since its inception in 1978, the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS) has worked to address the persistent ways in which women and gender-diverse people impacted by criminalization have been denied humanity and excluded from community. CAEFS advocacy utilizes a feminist rights-based approach and recognizes that, to create substantive equality, unique attention and approaches are needed to respond to incarcerated equity-deserving groups.

About The Elizabeth Fry Society of Northern Alberta: The Elizabeth Fry Society of Northern Alberta advances the dignity and worth of women, girls and gender diverse people who are criminalized and those who are considered at risk. EFryNA offers supports in prisons, courts and community that help create pathways away from and out of prisons and to help the people we serve live as valued members of our community.

