



Angela Beecher, Warden
Grand Valley Institution for Women
1575 Homer Watson Blvd Kitchener, ON N2P 2C5
Sent via email.

March 24th, 2025

CAEFS' February 2025 Advocacy Letter

Dear Angela,

We want to thank the institutional management team ("IMT") at GVI for taking the time to meet with our advocacy team on February 28th via Teams.

This letter summarizes reports we received and conditions we observed during our visit to the Grand Valley Institution from February 25th to 27th as well as summaries of the discussion between the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS) and members of the institutional management team following the visit, the relevant laws and policies, and CAEFS' recommendations.

We look forward to your response.

Respectfully,

Jacqueline Omstead
Senior Advocate

Access to Food and Nutrition

Description: CAEFS received a number of reports that they are experiencing food insecurity. People expressed concerns over the cost and quality of food, sharing that they cannot afford to make healthy choices and / or choices that align with their specific dietary needs with the per diem that they are allowed to spend on food. People also expressed feeling that the decision to increase the budget for food in prisons designated for men while decreasing the budget for women was discriminatory. Specific reports detailed below:

Credits: House representatives reported an increase in “credits” being issued, meaning that items ordered are unavailable. While they are able to pick up replacements the next day using the credits, they report that there is sometimes no adequate replacement or that what is available is more expensive. People shared that this makes it challenging for people to effectively budget and meal plan. House representatives also report that the quality of produce has decreased, specifically that produce is often rotting when it is issued.

Access to Healthy Choices & Budget / Portion Size: People expressed ongoing concern about the budget for groceries being reduced based on the number of recommended calories that women should consume in a day. People shared that calories are not equal to dollars (for example a box of mac and cheese is high calories and inexpensive, but that a cucumber is expensive and low in calories). People also shared their understanding that the number of calories that a person needs is dependent on age, activity level, and other factors – not just sex. People shared that they believe that the price of groceries will increase the new fiscal year, but that their budget will remain the same – meaning they will be able to afford even less food. People noted that they feel that the portion sizes are already decreasing while the prices remain the same. People in the maximum-security unit report that they are now only getting half a bagel or an English muffin, and that there is insufficient protein and vegetables.

Discussion: The Assistant Warden of Management Services (AWMS) was unable to attend the meeting, and so limited discussion was possible on this topic. The IMT shared that it was their understanding that GVI was looking into a new contract for groceries.

Law & Policy:

CCRA, s.70: The Service shall take all reasonable steps to ensure that penitentiaries, the penitentiary environment, the living and working conditions of [incarcerated people] and the working conditions of staff members are safe, healthful and free of practices that undermine a person’s sense of personal dignity.

CCRR, s.83(2): The Service shall take all reasonable steps to ensure the safety of every [incarcerated person] and that every [incarcerated person] is (a) adequately clothed and fed.

CHRA, s. 5 It is a discriminatory practice in the provision of goods, services, facilities or accommodation customarily available to the general public (b) to differentiate adversely in relation to any individual, on a prohibited ground of discrimination.

CAEFS Recommendation: Access to healthy and fresh food is essential in ensuring the overall health, wellbeing, and dignity of incarcerated people. CAEFS strongly recommends reversing the decision to decrease the grocery budget for people in prisons designated for women. Canada’s Dietary Guidelines¹ clearly state that “energy needs are individual and depend on a number of factors, including levels of physical activity” and prioritizes the regular consumption of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and proteins; the positive impacts of eating with others; and other the value of access to traditional cultural foods.

¹ *Canada’s Dietary Guidelines: For Health Professionals and Policy Makers*, Government of Canada (2019)



Committees: Fundraisers and Events

Description: Committee executives shared that they have been experiencing barriers in planning and hosting fundraisers and events for the GVI population. This has included events and fundraisers not being approved. For example, the Inmate Committee reported that any requests to access their funds to purchase gifts for the population have not been approved, including Christmas gifts, and the Black Women of Diversity Committee (BWOD) shared that their proposal for a Black History Month event was also not approved. The Inmate Committee also expressed concern that platters of food purchased for a family day event was removed by staff.

Committees expressed that it has been challenging to communicate with staff about these barriers, citing that requests for confirmation or further discussion have been returned to them saying “already discussed”. They also reported that there has been a reduction in the frequency at which fundraisers can be held, but that this change has only been communicated to them verbally.

Discussion: The IMT shared that there is a currently shortage in the number of Social Programming Officers (SPO) at GVI and that new staff are in the process of being trained, which is impacting the department’s capacity to support fundraisers and events, including associated “outside shopping”. The IMT shared that the main duties of the SPO is to facilitate the Social Integration Program. The IMT shared that committees are still in “COVID recovery” and that there is a focus on trying to finalize constitutions and holding elections. CAEFS and the IMT discussed ways of utilizing request forms to ensure effective communication between staff and committees.

Law & Policy:

CD 860, s. 32: Disbursements from the Inmate Welfare Fund will be authorized only to:

- a) provide for education, social, cultural and recreational activities for [incarcerated people]
- b) provide amenities for [incarcerated people] [...]

CD 860, s. 33: Once a collective need has been identified and the use of the Inmate Welfare Fund approved, the Institutional Head will ensure the funds are committed for use. Any amount in excess of the commitment must be paid from the Inmate Welfare Fund. Should sufficient funds not be available, reimbursement of this amount will be a priority from future deposits.

CD 760, s.7: The Social Program Officer will: (1) deliver social programs to [incarcerated people]; (2) supervise/coordinate [...] leisure activities [for incarcerated people]; (3) organize special events for [incarcerated people] pursuant to local procedures and/or national policy; (4) act as a liaison between [population] [groups and/or committees and institutional management, pursuant to CD 083 - Inmate Committees [...]

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, s. 2: Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms (c) freedom of peaceful assembly.

CAEFS’ Recommendations: Peer led committees are an essential element of the Creating Choices model of incarceration. Functional committees provide individuals with the opportunity to build community, positively contribute to the penitentiary environment, and to develop transferable vocational skills that will aid in community re-entry. Committees promote a culture of democracy and shared responsibility as well as empowerment and should be widely promoted and supported in penitentiary settings.

Access to Employment

Description: People incarcerated at the MSU continue to express that there are not enough employment positions, particularly positions other than cleaning. CAEFS also received reports that advertising available employment positions on the “teledon” is not sufficient as it is hard to read all of the relevant information. It was suggested to CAEFS while the “teledon” can



be useful, it should be a supplement to a physical job board and having positions posted to the common drive. It was suggested that ensuring the “teledon”, job boards, and common drive were always updated with the available employment positions could be a position in and of itself. People reported to CAEFS that they are waiting a long time between applying for a position and receiving a response, and that there are now clear timeframes available for when they should expect a response.

Discussion: The IMT agreed that there were not enough employment positions available to people at the MSU, and shared that it was their understanding that the Correctional Manager of the MSU was looking to increase employment opportunities. The IMT shared that they would pass the suggestions regarding job postings on to the appropriate staff person. The IMT shared that they were unsure of the specific timeframes for responding to employment applications, but noted that many different people provide feedback on the applications, which can take time.

Law & Policy:

CCRA s. 4 (c.2) the Service ensures the effective delivery of programs to [incarcerated people], including correctional, educational, vocational training and volunteer programs, with a view to improving access to alternatives to custody in a penitentiary and to promoting rehabilitation.

CCRA s.3: The purpose of the correctional system is to contribute to a just, peaceful, and safe society by carrying out sentences imposed by courts through the safe and human custody and supervision of incarcerated people and by assisting the rehabilitation of incarcerated people and their reintegration into community as law-abiding citizens.

CAEFS’ Recommendations: CAEFS recommends that CSC increase opportunities for meaningful employment both within the penitentiary and through conditional release processes such as work-releases. CAEFS supports the recommendation made by people incarcerated at GVI to post positions in multiple locations to ensure equitable access and accommodations needs are met. The amount that incarcerated people are compensated for their labour within penitentiaries has not been updated since the 1980s. CAEFS continues to recommend that CSC adjust compensation to the rate of inflation in order to support in reintegrating people back into community as law-abiding citizens.

Involuntary Transfers & SIU Placements

Description: CAEFS received reports that multiple people were set to be involuntarily transferred to Joliette from the maximum-security unit at GVI due to population management and the high number of people who have identified / been identified as incompatible.

It was also reported that there are two people in the SIU because of issues related to population management.

Discussion: The IMT confirmed that what was reported to CAEFS was accurate. They shared that GVI is facing serious challenges with population management as a result of the number of people who are incompatible, the number of beds / pods available, and the need to prepare for the arrival of someone who has been classified as a “complex case”. The IMT also shared that the number of recommendations for lower bunks on the unit exceeds the number of bunks available.

CAEFS and the IMT discussed less restrictive alternatives to alleviating population pressures, including restorative and transformative justice approaches to conflict resolution. CAEFS shared that we have had conversations with the pod representatives in the maximum-security unit who have suggested more opportunities for mediation for people who are incompatible. The reps also shared having more opportunities to mix pods would encourage people to resolve conflict in order to access more social, recreational, and programming opportunities.



Law & Policy:

CCRA s.4(c): the Service uses the least restrictive measures consistent with the protection of society, staff members and [people in prison].

CCRA s.3: The purpose of the correctional system is to contribute to a just, peaceful, and safe society by carrying out sentences imposed by courts through the safe and human custody and supervision of incarcerated people and by assisting the rehabilitation of incarcerated people and their reintegration into community as law-abiding citizens.

CAEFS' Recommendations: CAEFS encourages CSC to broaden its application of Creating Choices philosophies of empowerment, support, and person-centered care in its administration of the material conditions of incarceration. CAEFS calls for the closure of the Structured Intervention Units and the Maximum-Security Units. CAEFS is concerned with the increasing number of inter-provincial transfers occurring between prisons designated for women, and the impact that this has had on access to family, culture, community, and effective release planning. CAEFS recommends that CSC look to more preventative approaches to managing overcrowding and incompatibility, including ensuring that people are prepared for conditional release at their earliest possible dates, offering alternative dispute resolution opportunities, and utilizing Sections 81 and 84 of the Corrections and Conditional Release Act.

Access to Voting: Provincial Election

Description: CAEFS received reports that people experienced barriers to voting in the provincial election and making informed choices. Reports included that there was limited signage notifying the population of the election and voting instructions, for example nothing related to the election was distributed to the living units and no one received voting cards. People also reported that the process was far more restrictive and cumbersome than in the community because they had to submit a request for a voting package by 5:00pm on the Friday before the election. They also reported that there were delays in the arrival of the voting packages. People also expressed that it was challenging for them to make an informed choice about who to vote for as they had limited access to information, noting that it was especially hard to find information related to their local ridings.

People also shared their desired to be able to vote in the riding where GVI is located, given that the majority of people are at GVI for upwards of 2 years. During this conversation, people referred to how university and college students are permitted to vote in the riding that they go to school in, even if it is temporary and that people who are federally incarcerated still utilize provincial services such as post-secondary schools, hospitals, and employment (work releases).

Discussion: The IMT confirmed that there were some challenges, especially because it was a snap election and noted that there are additional restrictions for people who are in prison. The IMT welcomed feedback on improvement for the federal election but noted that some of the challenges are systemic and not site-level decisions.

Law & Policy:

CCRA, s.4(d): [incarcerated people] retain the rights of all members of society except those that are, as a consequence of the sentence, lawfully and necessarily removed or restricted.

CAEFS' Recommendations: CAEFS recommends that GVI, and CSC more broadly, ensures that people in prison are able to exercise their right to vote. To meaningfully realize this, incarcerated people must be given the tools and resources to make informed choices, including ready access to information about the candidates in the riding in which they vote. The experience of voting while incarcerated should mirror as closely as possible that of voting in community, including the ability to decide to vote on the day of the election.



Physical Conditions of Confinement

Description: CAEFS received reports of a number of leaks in the living units on the main compound that are causing flooding and concern regarding mold. People reported that while they have submitted requests to maintenance, these requests often go unanswered and that they only way to have these issues inspected is to physically find someone who is working in maintenance and ask them to come and look at it.

Discussion: The Assistant Warden of Management Services (AWMS) was unable to attend the meeting and so discussion on this topic was not possible.

Law & Policy:

CCRA, s. 70: the Service shall take all reasonable steps to ensure that penitentiaries, the penitentiary environment, the living and working conditions of [incarcerated people] and the working conditions of staff members are safe, healthful and free of practices that undermine a person's sense of personal dignity.

CCRR, s. 83(1): The Service shall, to ensure a safe and healthful penitentiary environment, ensure that all applicable federal health, safety, sanitation and fire laws are complied with in each penitentiary and that every penitentiary is inspected regularly by the persons responsible for enforcing those laws.

CAEFS' Recommendation: Incarcerated people have the right to live in an environment that is safe, healthful, and free of practices that undermine a person's sense of personal dignity. CAEFS encourages GVI to ensure that living units are inspected regularly and that concerns raised by incarcerated people are responded to within the prescribed timeframes.

