

STATEMENT: A NEW GOVERNMENT AND A NEW OPPORTUNITY TO PURSUE COMMUNITY SAFETY WITH PROVEN SOLUTIONS

OTTAWA (April 29, 2025): On behalf of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS), we wish extend our congratulations to Mark Carney on his appointment as Prime Minister of Canada and to all newly elected Members of Parliament. We are eager to work collaboratively with you and the new cabinet once appointed.

At this pivotal time in our global and national history, we are reminded of the core Canadian values that unite us: a steadfast commitment to equality and equity and safeguarding the well-being of every person in our communities. As an organization who lives those values in our work to advance the rights of criminalized women, trans, non-binary, and Two Spirit people, we know that Canada's strength lies in our collective resolve to ensure that no one is left behind.

Throughout the pre-election campaign, we witnessed much public anxiety about crime rates rising, and we have heard calls for a harsher prison system, for more use of incarceration to address these fears. As a new government forms, it is more important than ever to ensure that these fears are met with credible solutions which include raising awareness about the significant issues Canada's prison system faces.

“When talking about public safety, our penitentiaries, jails and prisons deserve more attention, as they face many serious problems” – **says Emilie Coyle, co-Executive Director of CAEFS.**

“Prison conditions are worsening people's pre-existing and creating new mental health and addictions issues. People are released with complex post-traumatic stress disorder, fractured from their families, with little money, a huge gap in their resume, and with a criminal record that makes finding safe housing very challenging. Countless individuals in our network who have been released from prison share that they have survived in spite of the system”.

This is happening, in part, because we are incarcerating so many people- people who do not need to be in prison. Our prison system is exhausted and overwhelmed, and the pandemic had a devastating impact that is still unresolved, visible today in increased use of lockdowns and sustained lack of services.

“We must remember in all of this, *who* it is that we are incarcerating. Nationally, over 50% of people federally incarcerated in prisons designated for women are Indigenous, and in many provincial prisons and penitentiaries in the Prairies, British Columbia and in the North,

Indigenous people comprise much higher percentages of prison populations- in some cases hovering around 85%” **says Nyki Kish, co-Executive Director of CAEFS.**

After years of misleading calls for tough on crime policies, our overwhelmed system is sweeping up critically disadvantaged people—people being incarcerated as a first resort for issues of addiction and poverty, warehousing them in harsh conditions, and releasing them in worse shape than when they were first incarcerated. This is challenging to witness because we know what actually works to enhance public safety. We know that giving people opportunity and hope works. Keeping people in their communities works. Creating strong, well-resourced communities works. Mass incarceration does not.

True public safety and security come from investing in accessible, trauma-informed healthcare, affordable and stable housing, community-based programs that address the underlying causes of incarceration - policies that uphold human rights and dignity. Scapegoating and criminalizing marginalized people only perpetuates exclusion and harm, further entrenching cycles of poverty. Our sector has contributed to Canadian communities deeply and integrally through dedicated financial investment provided in recent years by the Department of Women and Gender Equity. Ensuring a cabinet position for Women and Gender Equality will support this critical life-saving work.

We urge our new government to listen to the voices of those who have been the most excluded so that we can build a future where everyone belongs and thrives.

We look forward to working together-with our new Prime Minister, the new cabinet, when appointed, and all newly elected MPs-to realize the vision of a more just, inclusive, and compassionate Canada that Canadians have so clearly demanded.