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Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies

A BRIEFING FOR THE
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CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF ELIZABETH FRY SOCIETIES

Pathways Home

The status of family contact for federally sentenced women and gender-diverse people, in custody and after release

November 2026
Gatineau, Quebec

caefs.ca

Summary

Supporting family contact is essential not just to reintegration, but to the wellness and foundational dignity of federally sentenced people, and of course, is a critical component that must be met to ensure that the operations of the Canadian prison system respect the legislative framework it operates within. CSC's own research found that people who received visits in custody were less likely to be readmitted, that private family visits had the strongest association, and that family support "was critical for a successful transition into the community" [1,2]. International research reaches the same conclusion [3]. Current practices in federal penitentiaries and community supervision units designated for women, for many reasons and most unfortunately, are work against this evidence at every stage. People are held far from home and transferred between regions involuntarily, calls are costly and restricted, visits are cancelled, and video visits are replacing support for in-person visits. After release, territorial boundaries, travel permits and the treatment of families as "collateral contacts" keep people from their families. Together, these practices make reintegration nearly impossible for many federally sentenced women and gender-diverse people.

Federally sentenced women and gender-diverse people are held in five regional penitentiaries designated for women, the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge, and two psychiatric centres with beds designated for women [4]. Many are held hundreds or thousands of kilometres from their children and families. Three in four federally sentenced women have children under the age of 18 [5], and about half of women in federal custody are Indigenous [6]. Federally sentenced women are the fastest-growing population in federal corrections. Every penitentiary designated for women now exceeds its original rated capacity, and the Office of the Correctional Investigator (OCI) found in its 2025–26 annual report that CSC's use of involuntary interregional transfers to manage this growth disrupts "family connections, cultural ties, and access to support networks" [7].

Family contact in custody depends on visits and telephones, and both are difficult to reach. Families receive no dedicated support to travel to penitentiaries. Calls are paid for by the person in custody or by the family, living units share a small number of phones, and some units restrict phone use after a set hour. CAEFS Regional Advocates have long documented people waiting weeks to make a first call to family after an involuntary transfer, and visits cancelled because visiting areas and private family visit units were used for other purposes [8,9,10].

Separation from family continues and often worsens after release. People are increasingly released far from the communities they come from, and a standard condition of release confines every person on parole or statutory release within territorial boundaries fixed by a parole supervisor [11]. Travel to see family outside those boundaries requires a travel permit, and CSC policy places family members among the collateral contacts whom parole officers use to verify information about the person under supervision [12].

75%

As of 2014, approximately two thirds of federally sentenced women have children under the age of 18 [5]

About half

of women in federal custody are Indigenous; Indigenous women are 52% of women in maximum security [6,7]

About 60%

of people at Edmonton Institution for Women are from outside Alberta, according to institutional management [13]

21.7%

lower odds of readmission to custody for a person who received two private family visits, compared with a person who received none [1]

1 Family contact in custody

CSC's own research associates family visits with lower rates of readmission to custody [1]. Yet, for federally sentenced women and gender-diverse people, distance, cost, crowding and operational decisions limit that contact. This trend directly contravenes the purpose of Canada's regionalization of penitentiaries designated for women.

Families have no support to reach their relatives

Families of federally sentenced women and gender-diverse people pay the full cost of travel to visit. No national program pays for travel for families, including children, Elders and family members with low incomes. In CSC's 2010 survey of federally sentenced women, women raised concerns about the costs of telephone calls and travel [14]. Indigenous people from remote communities and reserves face particular barriers to returning home to visit family, which CAEFS documented at Fraser Valley Institution in 2026 [15]. At the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge, CAEFS found that the lodge's location "poses challenges for travel, whether due to weather conditions and / or distance" [16].

Geographic dislocation

Five regional penitentiaries designated for women and the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge hold federally sentenced women and gender-diverse people for all of Canada. Two psychiatric centres also have beds designated for women: the Regional Psychiatric Centre in Saskatoon, which has a unit for federally sentenced women at all three security levels, and the Institut national de psychiatrie légale Philippe-Pinel in Montreal, a provincial forensic psychiatric hospital with which CSC has an agreement [4].

The regional penitentiaries designated for women were designed to keep people close to home. CAEFS has reminded CSC that penitentiaries designated for women "were created to support close community and family connections," and that "separation from family and community has harmful short, medium, and long-term impacts" [17]. The Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights named "the geographic dislocation of federally-sentenced women, particularly federally-sentenced Indigenous women, from their families and communities" as a persisting failing of Canada's prison system [18], and yet even since this recognition, the pattern has only worsened.

Federally sentenced women and gender diverse people are currently routinely being transferred between regions involuntarily as a population management strategy as result of the rising rates of federally sentenced women. The OCI finds that this practice "disproportionately impacts women – particularly Indigenous women – by disrupting family connections, cultural ties, and access to support networks," and that the situation has worsened, with every penitentiary designated for women exceeding its original rated capacity [7].

CAEFS Regional Advocates have documented these transfers and issues which result from them, across the country. This includes people taken directly away from their home region at the onset of their federal sentences, as well as people being moved during their sentence.

At any given time, CAEFS speaks to people who have been involuntarily moved from their home region who have not been supported to maintain meaningful access to their families [20] It seems that this is the result of, in the operationalization of penitentiaries, family contact falling low on the institutional priority list. The penitentiaries are reactive, rather than proactive environments, leading to their institutional management teams having little capacity as result of managing a steady influx of crises. The immediate order of an institution shadows the constant social, economic, psychological, emotional, and familial losses that federally sentenced people experience while in prison, creating both lasting harm for women and gender diverse people, and disjuncture between institutional and individual experiences of incarceration. In other words, the tremendous importance of the loss of family contact, and choice and empowerment generally that people in prison and on parole are facing is not understood as a significant problem by those administering the system.

Troublingly, in 2026, many people were transferred without knowing where they were going. In one instance, a group of individuals, at the onset of their sentences, believed they were being transferred to Grand Valley Institution, located just a few hour drive from the provincial prison where they were held in remand waiting. They were, without their knowledge and while restrained, then transported to the Atlantic region, spending days in prisoner transport conditions and having to sleep on floors in a men's prison in Kingston, Ontario on the way. The impacted individuals expressed significant trauma resultant, including a "deep concern regarding the sudden and unanticipated geographic separation from their children, families, and community supports" [9]. CAEFS has recommended that involuntary interregional transfers be used only as a measure of last resort [9,13], and that instead, the very low risk rating of most federally sentenced women be recognized to build strong release planning and to enhance community based alternatives, as Creating Choices intended. While promising practices are emerging from the Women's Sector at CSC who are most clearly working hard to build responses in support of these goals, in some instances leading to select women being able to return to their home regions pre-release, this result is not being achieved consistently.

Visits and private family visits

Crowding and security culture in the penitentiary has taken away the spaces where families meet. At Edmonton Institution for Women, the use of the private family visit unit as living space "has prevented private family visits from taking place for years" [10]. In many of the penitentiaries the private family visit unit has been used as an isolation unit and as additional living space, and when the PFV units are open, with visits being liable to be "cancelled at any time due to limited capacity" [21,20,22]. At one penitentiary,

families took time off work only to have visits cancelled and not rescheduled, and in 2026 all visits were cancelled while the visiting area was used as a cooling unit [23,8].

Visiting hours and approval processes add unique and overly restrictive barriers generally. Maximum-security visits are the most limited in availability and quality of access, which creates "significant challenges for families with work, childcare, or cultural obligations such as hunting" [24]. It is not uncommon for visitor applications to take months to approve, and when families have histories of criminalization, they are often outright barred, if not significantly restricted from maintaining contact, despite abundant evidence of the prevalence of community criminalization for Indigenous and Black communities [25,26].

Video visits in place of in-person visits

Video visits are increasingly used where support for in-person visits is missing: when families cannot afford to travel, when people are transferred far from home, and when visiting areas and private family visit units are closed. Video visits are a useful addition to family contact, and research from Minnesota found that people who received video visits had lower rates of reconviction [28]. However, this type of contact cannot and should not replace in-person contact. A parent cannot hold a child through a video terminal, and a video visit offers none of the time together or meaningful human contact that being in the same physical space provides. The Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights recommended that CSC accelerate video visits while ensuring that video conferences "are not a substitute for in-person family visits" [18]. Still, video visits are also difficult to obtain.

The Mother-Child Program, which allows young children to live with a parent in a penitentiary designated for women, reaches very few families. Paynter and colleagues counted 133 participants over 19 years and found that Indigenous women are under-represented in the program [31]. In 2025, two women approved for the residential program at Edmonton Institution for Women remained separated from their children because of a lack of space [10]. The OCI reported in 2026 that participation in the residential component has decreased, with population pressures a significant constraint [7].

> *"Too many federally sentenced women are fractured from their families by the conditions of incarceration."*
>
> CAEFS, advocacy letter to Nova Institution for Women, July 2026 [8]

2 Telephones

CSC policy describes telephone access as a way "to help maintain family and community ties" [32]. Yet cost, the small number of phones, restricted hours and slow approvals limit calls in practice. In 2025–26, the OCI received 328 complaints about communication with the outside, including 183 about visits and 68 about telephones [7].

The cost of calls

People in custody and their families pay for every call. CSC policy makes the person in custody or the person receiving the call responsible for its cost [32]. CSC's 2023 review of inmate pay eliminated its charges for food, accommodation and telephone services, but it "did not address base pay rates," and each call is still billed at the rates CSC publishes [7,33]. People routinely report to CAEFS that their financial burden limits their ability to put money on their PINS. [35].

Few phones, long waits and phone curfews

Living units share a small number of telephones, and in many units one single phone serves everyone who lives there. At the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge, phone access is extremely limited. [29]. Phones in high-traffic areas offer little privacy for conversations with children and family.

Some penitentiaries also impose phone curfews, stopping permitting phone calls between 10:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m. [37]. People tell CAEFS that phone exclusion hours, on top of work and program schedules "leave little or no time to call family before the 10:00 p.m. cutoff." One person had not spoken to their mother since the phone hours changed, and another had been teaching their children traditional songs over the phone, however could no longer due to the imposition of a phone curfew. CAEFS recommended that the restriction be rescinded immediately [38].

Every number must also be approved and added to a person's PIN list. CSC's published process allows up to 15 working days to add a number but delays further to this are routinely reported [33].

3 Case study: Nova Institution for Women

Nova Institution for Women in Truro, Nova Scotia, shows how geographic dislocation, crowding and limited phone access combine to create almost total familial isolation.

Nova has a rated capacity of 102. Its population was 113 in October 2025 and 127 in September 2026, and in 2026 some people slept on mattresses on the floor in houses holding 10 people [40,41,42]. Management attributed the growth to "increased number of transfers from other institutions" [40]. Indigenous people

now make up about one third of Nova's population, and people told CAEFS that they are transferred to Nova "from very far distances" [41]. People transferred to Nova arrive far from family and often wait to make a first call. One person who arrived by involuntary transfer from Ontario waited three weeks to speak with family by phone [8]. Another reported being able to make only a single phone call to family, through the chaplain [9]. In 2025, phone access through the visiting and correspondence area was available only for legal calls, and people without money in their phone accounts were told to ask their parole officer to arrange family calls [40].

Nova Institution for Women operates on Atlantic time. During the day, people at Nova work and attend programs, and children in western provinces are at school. In the early morning at Nova, families in the west are asleep. The evening at Nova is often the only time a person can reach children after school and family members after work.

Restrictions on evening phone use remove most of that time. CSC states that in most institutions the telephone system is available from 8:00 a.m. to 10:45 p.m. [33]. A person who must wait for a single shared phone may lose what remains of an evening. People whose families live in western provinces therefore have far fewer chances to call their children than people whose families live in Atlantic Canada. The same problem applies in reverse to people transferred from Ontario to Fraser Valley Institution, where 9:00 p.m. is midnight in Ontario.

> **6:45 p.m.**
> in British Columbia when it is 10:45 p.m. at Nova Institution for Women, the hour at which CSC says the telephone system closes in most institutions [33]

4 Health and the separation of families

Separation from family directly and significantly harms the physical health of women and gender diverse people in custody and affects their children. Canadian research documents the scale of this separation and its consequences for reintegration.

Health effects of separation

Social support is the most consistent predictor of a good outcome after trauma [43], and most federally sentenced women have survived violence before they reach prison: 86% reported physical abuse in their lifetime [14]. Research on women's responses to stress describes a pattern in which women under stress seek out, protect and rely on relationships [44]. Separation from family removes this support when it is most needed. A study of 121 incarcerated mothers in the United States found that close and involved

relationships with their children "were associated with less loneliness," and that "less loneliness was associated with better overall health and physical functioning" [45].

Children are affected as well. Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to show trauma symptoms than other children, and frequent letters and telephone contact with an incarcerated parent have been associated with fewer behaviour problems [46]. CAEFS letters record these effects directly. At Nova Institution, one young parent transferred from Ontario described the anxiety of being unable to communicate with children who did not yet know about the transfer to the Atlantic region [20].

Canadian research on incarceration and families

Most federally sentenced women are parents. In 2014, the OCI reported that 75% of federally sentenced women had children under the age of 18, that 64% were single mothers at the time of arrest, that 51% had experience with Children's Aid, and that almost one third of mothers (29%) had no contact with their children [5]. CSC's profiles show the proportion of federally sentenced women with children rising from 64% in 1991 to 77% in 2010 [47].Family contact is also essential reintegration. More foundationally, being convicted of a crime should not result in the permanent loss of one's family.

CSC's study of 6,537 people released in 2005–06 found that visits were associated with lower readmission to custody: a person who received 6.7 visits had 13.7% lower odds of readmission than a person who received none, and a person who received two private family visits had 21.7% lower odds [1]. The study found no difference in this effect by gender [1]. CSC's research on women's reintegration found that "social support, particularly family support, was critical for a successful transition into the community," and that the risk of revocation was highest for women with substance use problems who lacked social support [2]. CSC's research on the conditions for women's successful reintegration includes "strengthening family connections" among them [48]. An international meta-analysis of 16 studies found that visitation was associated with a 26% decrease in recidivism [3].

The only Canadian population estimate of children who experience parental incarceration comes from provincial custody data. Kouyoumdjian, Paynter and colleagues found that at least 169,740 children under 18 experienced parental incarceration in five provinces between 2015 and 2021, and that 30.5% had at least one Indigenous parent [49]. No comparable estimate exists for the children of parents in federal custody.

5 Release and reintegration

Separation continues and worsens after release for many families. The conditions of release and the rules that govern travel and supervision are, generally quite needlessly, keeping people from meaningful contact

with family. This is the result of cumulative systemic practices that devalue the importance of a person's connection to their family.

Release away from home

Many people are not released to the communities they come from. Release plans depend on available community residential facility beds, parole office approval and community assessments, and people held far from home often build their release plans in the region where they are incarcerated. At Fraser Valley Institution, people transferred from Ontario told CAEFS that remaining in the Pacific region "may negatively impact future reintegration opportunities closer to home" [19]. The OCI found in 2026 that community-based options for women, including Section 81 healing lodges, "remain scarce, under-resourced, and unevenly accessible" [7].

Territorial boundaries and travel permits

CAEFS identifies that one of the most impactful barriers to family results from a standard parole condition that has not been evaluated for its appropriateness since it came into force. The condition reads that every person on parole or statutory release is subject to a standard condition to "remain at all times in Canada within the territorial boundaries fixed by the parole supervisor" [11]. The same condition applies during unescorted temporary absences [11]. CSC policy defines territorial boundaries by "a radius in kilometres or by city limits" [12]. The condition applies to every person, whatever their assessed risk, for as long as the person is under supervision. For people with life sentences, that is the rest of their lives. Most strikingly, despite that the law requires the CSC to use the least restrictive practices, to be responsive to women, and to promote successful reintegration, the radiuses that people receive correlate not to their needs, but to the jurisdiction of the supervising parole office, which usually is expressed as the city limits that the parole office is located within.

CSC policy states that "a travel permit is required for all travel outside the established territorial boundaries" [12]. Before approving travel, the parole officer considers factors that include the "purpose and length of travel," and may consult the parole office and the police at the destination. Community assessments by default impose surveillance and regulation of familial and community relationships, even where no special parole condition exists.

A community assessment must be completed before travel to "a community contact unknown to the Parole Officer." Permits must be entered at least five days in advance, except for listed urgent reasons. The person "must carry the travel permit at all times," so that police can see that travel was authorized, and may be required to report to police at the destination [12].

For a person released far from family, each visit to children, parents or a partner outside the boundaries requires an advance application, a parole officer's approval and, where the officer does not know the

family member, an assessment of the family member's home. Permits can be refused, delayed or cancelled. This process makes family contact a privilege that can be withdrawn at any time. For Indigenous people, the practice is eerily reminiscent of Canada's former "Indian pass system" which required a nearly identical structure for Indigenous people to leave reserve.

Family contact regulated by parole officers

Under these rules, a parole officer decides how, when and where a person can see family. A person's closest relationships come under the control of the supervisor whose approval the person needs to remain in the community. People on parole carry the stress of asking permission to see their children, of travel plans that depend on a supervisor's schedule, and of the possibility that a request will be read as a sign of instability. Recent research with people with life sentences on parole found that parole conditions operate "without procedural safeguards," "fracturing families" and "creating invisible isolation in the community" [50].

The stress increases when parole officers are poorly trained in women centered and trauma informed practice, where we see instances from some offices of dismissive and sometimes abusive practices toward family members. CAEFS is aware of parole officers who do not allow family members to speak when they attend meetings as supports for a person on parole. In one case, for clarification, a mother attended her child's meetings with a parole officer as a support and was not permitted to speak at all during the meeting. The mother and the person on parole both described the experience as deeply traumatic. The mother could see no way to complain that would not upset the parole officer and put the person's release at risk. Families who are silenced or treated with suspicion may withdraw from contact with the parole office, and the person under supervision then loses support that the release plan relied on.

> *"It's unbearable to watch my daughter being treated, well, abusively with no option for recourse that won't upset the parole officer and put my daughter's freedom in jeopardy. I thought her working so hard as she did to get out of prison meant we would get her home."*
>
> Mother of a person on parole, speaking to CAEFS

Families as “collateral contacts”

COLLATERAL CONTACT

“Any person with whom the offender interacts occasionally or on a regular basis and who is required to have contact with the offender as part of their supervision. They can be individuals in the offender’s immediate environment or other individuals who take part in their reintegration, including CSC’s employees, CSC external partners as well as organizations.”

Definition of “collateral contact,” Commissioner’s Directive 715-1, Annex A [12]. CSC policy uses the term “offender,” which CAEFS does not use.

One cause of strain on families post release, even when they live in close proximity, is the framework which places expectations on community parole officers to treat the loved ones of people on parole as sources of information, unfairly asking untrained families to become agents of surveillance, and increasing the likelihood of future victimization of women in intimate relationships. As written in policy, the parole officer “will establish a network of collateral contacts to verify and validate offender reported information as well as to gather information on the offender’s behaviour and circumstances, throughout the supervision period” [12]. Contacts are to be varied, for example “conducted at different times and days,” and are not to rely always on the same individual [12].

This framework imposes on family members a role in supervision, and is experienced as a great source of trauma and stress for family members. A parent, partner or adult child becomes a source of information for the parole officer about a person they love and are told they are expected to report to a parole officer any behavioral issues, even though they know this will send their family member back into prison. These experiences discourage families from staying close, and worse, places women and gender diverse people in ongoing risk of coercive control and intimate partner violence, and the person on parole becomes resultantly isolated or victimized or both.

Isolation

Indeed, isolation is felt by women on parole profoundly and in overlapping ways. Distance that began custody, pressure to be released far away from home, territorial boundaries, travel permits and the treatment of families as collateral contacts together isolate federally sentenced women and gender-diverse people. This isolation works against the purpose of release conditions, which the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act* ties to the person’s “successful reintegration into society” [51].

7 Recommendations in custody

CAEFS recommends that the Correctional Service of Canada, working with Indigenous communities, Elizabeth Fry Societies, and other agencies supporting women and gender-diverse people, take the following steps to protect family contact in custody.

1

Hold people in their home region, plan for dedicated family contact, and decarcerate

Place every person in the penitentiary closest to their family and community, and use involuntary interregional transfers only as a measure of last resort [9,7]. Where a transfer occurs, provide consistent and free calls to family on arrival, develop a dedicated plan with the person for family contact, and return the person to their home region as soon as space allows. Reduce population pressure through community release, including Section 81 and Section 84 placements, as the OCI recommends [7].

2

Fund family travel

Establish a national family travel fund, administered by Elizabeth Fry Societies, that pays travel and accommodation for families visiting relatives in penitentiaries designated for women. Give priority to children, to the families of people transferred out of their region, and to Indigenous families from remote communities.

3

Make calls to family free

Remove all charges for calls to family, both for the person in custody and for the family receiving a collect call, consistent with the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights' recommendation to reduce the cost of telephone access [18]. Until then, refund every call dropped for technical reasons.

4

Install more phones

Install telephones in every living unit in numbers that allow each person to call family every day without long waits, and provide private spaces for calls with children.

5

End phone curfews

Rescind restrictions on evening phone use in living units. Set phone hours that account for the time zones where families live, so that people whose families live in other regions can call children after school and family members after work. People at Edmonton Institution for Women proposed extending phone hours to at least midnight [38].

6 Remove barriers to phone contacts and visitors

Set and publish less restrictive processes for adding numbers to PIN lists and approving visitor and video visitor applications. Give newly admitted and newly transferred people immediate access to family numbers.

7 Protect family visits

Return private family visit units to their purpose, end the cancellation of visits for operational reasons, offer evening and weekday visiting hours, and remove account-balance requirements for private family visits. Offer video visits in addition to in-person visits and never as a substitute for them, as the Senate committee recommended [18]. Fill Family Liaison Officer positions at every penitentiary designated for women, and expand the Mother-Child Program [7].

8 Recommendations in community

CAEFS recommends that the Government of Canada, the Parole Board of Canada and the Correctional Service of Canada take the following steps to support family contact after release.

1 Release people to their home communities

Plan release from the start of the sentence toward the community where the person's family lives. Increase funding for community residential facility beds and Section 81 and Section 84 placements in every region so that people can be released close to family [7].

2 Rescind the standard condition on territorial boundaries

Amend paragraphs 161(1)(b) and 161(2)(b) of the *Corrections and Conditional Release Regulations* to remove the standard condition that confines every person on conditional release within territorial boundaries fixed by the parole supervisor [11]. Where a geographic restriction is necessary to manage an identified risk, the Parole Board of Canada can impose it as a special condition under subsection 133(3) of the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act*, which allows conditions the Board considers "reasonable and necessary" [51]. A special condition is individualized, legally compliant, explained in the Board's reasons, and can be removed or varied by the Board [51].

3 Support family contact broadly

Where family contact is not a risk factor, approve contact and travel to see family broadly and reliably. Grant standing approval for regular travel to see immediate family, decide other family travel requests within days, and do not require an assessment of an immediate family member's home as a condition of a visit.

4

Recognize families as supports

Remove family members from the definition of collateral contacts in Commissioner's Directives 715 and 715-1, and recognize families in policy as supports for reintegration. Contact family members about a person's supervision only with the consent of the person and the family member and in trauma informed and women centered manners [12].

5

Set standards for how parole officers treat families

Establish standards for respectful, trauma-informed contact between parole officers and families, train parole officers on them, and give families a clear way to raise concerns about their treatment.

6

Fund family reunification

Fund Elizabeth Fry Societies to support family reunification after release, including travel, family mediation and support for children reconnecting with a parent.

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