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REDUCTION OF RECIDIVISM FRAMEWORK BILL

THIRD READING

Speech by:
The Honourable Patricia Bovey

Monday, June 21, 2021

THE SENATE

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[Translation]

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Hon. Patricia Bovey: Honourable senators, I am speaking to you from Winnipeg, Treaty 1 territory, the traditional territory of the Anishinabe, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dene and Dakota, the birthplace of the Métis Nation and the heart of the Métis Nation homeland.

I support Bill C-228, An Act to establish a federal framework to reduce recidivism.

[English]

I draw your attention to clause 2(2)(a) of Bill C-228, which says the framework must “. . . initiate pilot projects and develop standardized and evidence-based programs aimed at reducing recidivism”

And I would also like to point out clause 2(2)(e), which says the framework must include measures to:

. . . evaluate and improve risk assessment instruments and procedures to address racial and cultural biases and ensure that all people who are incarcerated have access to appropriate programs that will help reduce recidivism.

All faith-based and Indigenous organizations should receive support to undertake programs of particular spiritual and cultural meaning for those involved.

You’ve heard my late husband’s mantra, “we are all better off when we are all better off.” That mantra and my work in the arts impels me to speak to Bill C-228. I do so honouring National Indigenous Peoples Day and the tremendous work and cultures of all artists. Senator McCallum, your carrying the eagle feather is important. I thank you. Your cultural leadership and honesty is applauded and truly meaningful to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

[Translation]

Why am I talking about C-228? Because I believe we have a duty to look beyond the reasons for these incarcerations, to help people discover their creative heritage and to develop tools that encourage positive community interaction and healthy, meaningful living.

Prison art programs and those where professional artists provide training create positive outcomes and reduce recidivism and crime rates.

[English]

Education programs in prisons prepare inmates for life outside and equip them with skills to prevent recidivism. We know those which existed in the past had good outcomes nationally and internationally. I believe revitalizing earlier programs of artists-in-residence in our prisons — federal, provincial, women’s, men’s and youth detention centres — would make a positive contribution to society.

For years I have followed arts programs with goals of crime prevention and recidivism reduction. Some are developed for adults; others for youth-at-risk.

My multi-year research on youth-at-risk after school community programs revealed truly encouraging results. A pioneering program was in Fort Myers, Florida. After just several years in existence, the 1996 publication *Coming Up Taller* reported its stunning early impacts:

The City of Fort Myers police claim a 28 percent drop in juvenile arrests since the inception of the award-winning STARS Program . . .

— a program that provided recreational and artistic outlets.

J. Weitz, of the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, noted in the same report:

One of the most natural and effective vehicles for gang members is the road of the arts, especially theater. New values only emerge through new experiences, and the arts provide a unique laboratory where truth and possibility can be explored safely. Validating emotional safety is everything.

Further, the report comments that art programs that allow:

. . . youth to accept responsibility is part of what makes these programs work. “It’s not learning to please some external thing. The kids are in charge of the project.”

These projects are brought out into the community for viewing and sharing . . . the kids are responsible for the success.

Other publications draw similar conclusions. *Youth on Youth*, concluded that art:

. . . allows youth to express themselves, to create their own identity instead of having it shaped by the mainstream institutions . . . There is no expected outcome or no right or wrong.

This is particularly important for at-risk kids who are marginalized to begin with.

I should say now I prefer not to use the negative at-risk-youth nomenclature but rather youth with untapped potential.

The overriding result in Dr. Gina Browne's 2003 extensive study, "Making the Case for Recreation" was that cultural and recreation programs can reduce the cost of social services and policing, indicating that accessible services appear to pay for themselves, the reduced use of health and social services, child psychology, social work, policing and probation. "A \$500 savings was attributed to family not including the doubling of exits from social assistance!"

A proposal for arts programming in Winnipeg's youth detention centre was unfortunately turned down a few years ago. I was told kids creating art together might "incite negative behaviours." However, the then First Nations spiritual leader at the centre underlined that art creation was essential for these young people. He showed me drawers filled with art the kids had created, work never exhibited. I hope the significant impact of such programs will be understood. In that case, I had private funders ready in the wings.

Winnipeg's Graffiti Gallery is an inspiration, founded in 1998 by Steve Wilson, not an artist but a former Stony Mountain Institution prison guard with a social work degree. He knew there was a better way to deal with youth in trouble, so he founded, with the power of positive creativity, this unique place in Winnipeg, a not-for-profit youth community arts centre dedicated to enhancing the cultural well-being of the community, focused on arts programming and legal mural painting.

Young artists meet, work, research, exchange ideas, learn skills and show their work in an encouraging environment, which sees value in their work. It is a powerful tool for community development, social change and individual growth. The Murals of Winnipeg website comments of this former prison guard's work:

Many of the young people he encounters have serious trust issues, especially with people who are adults or in some kind of authority position. Some of them, perhaps, have been in trouble with the law or have been portrayed by others as attacking their community.

I spoke with Steve last week. He said:

. . . the reason that these young people are attacking their community is because that's all they know. It's because at a very early age they were being attacked by their community. . . . When they get a little older, it's little wonder that they start getting into trouble. Number one they're trying to get away from their community that is abusing them, and number two they're looking for some sort of connection that they can hang onto.

Graffiti Gallery has diligently worked to:

. . . reverse that cycle and get a young person who has a little bit of skill, teach them a thing or two about painting Murals . . . Murals are one of the best ways to bring at risk youth and young adults back into the community. . . . They come away from that experience with feelings of accomplishment and confidence. Plus in order to complete

the work, they've had to drop the negative influences on their life and get it together to accomplish this work which leaves a lasting legacy in the neighbourhood.

They come to the point where they:

. . . are offering to contribute to give something back to help their community heal through some form of public art. The end result is a young person who was attacking their community is now back in the community painting a beautiful Mural that is adding to the community and gives the artist a sense of renewed pride in that community. . . . It's a really positive experience for both the artist and the community, and can act as a catalyst for further change.

Exhibitions of their artwork at Graffiti Gallery expand their self-esteem and their community connections, and the young artists realized as they said to me:

Well I can do other things besides breaking the law; I can get attention in a positive way with my artwork.

A number of other programs have developed since, and many led by recent graduates of the University of Manitoba. They are instilling cultural understanding through beading, murals, drumming and painting in these young people, and it's proving to reduce incarceration and recidivism.

I have recently been involved in a number of discussions about potential exhibitions of art created by prisoners, and I hope these opportunities will be supported. They validate the artist's ideas, increase self-confidence and afford audiences the opportunity to understand the issues and perspectives of prisoners from the inside, from the outside, and prisoners' personal circumstances. We need these voices of change. We need to understand that place making can make play and individual and community level change. It's especially timely now.

When formulating Winnipeg's public art policy, a Winnipeg police officer called me. He wanted to join the public art committee, not because he knew anything about art — he said he didn't — but because he knew public art reduced crime since it contributed to civic pride and because most people honour the creative work of others. He contributed significantly to the development of the policy and thereafter as part of the public art committee.

An American study for a rehabilitation program reducing recidivism in prison had interesting conclusions:

When an arts-based, non-profit organization claims to have developed a prisoner rehabilitation program that reduces recidivism to less than five percent, criminal justice experts may shake their heads in disbelief. Yet that is what Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA) a non-profit organization based in New York State has done. Their program has improved prison morale and safety, caused

the incarcerated population to act more respectfully and work more cooperatively, and helping people in prison build the life skills necessary to make it on the outside.

New York State's Department of Corrections and Community Supervision independently published research that demonstrated, ". . . fewer infractions; and a greater pursuit of higher education among the program participants."

Brampton's Bridge Prison Ministry, in 2017, exhibited art by former and current convicts. The work I have seen reproduced is impressive, truly moving, and the revelations are of deep suffering yet of hope and humanity. Colleagues, when I was director of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Albert Head prisoners helped us build stages and some installations. Some prisoners attended the opening of an exhibition in which they were the subjects for a featured portrait artist. That same night we opened an exhibition of Jack Bush, a major Canadian artist. The sponsoring bank's board chair and CEO were in attendance. A harmony drum was set up, and through the evening corporate executives drummed unknowingly alongside the prisoners. Some had been incarcerated for bank robbery.

In closing, I want to quote an article from *The Tyee*, about a University of British Columbia program where Indigenous academics were researching art and culture for those in prison. They distributed art and journaling kits to Indigenous men in prison and halfway houses to ". . . alleviate dual mental health

tolls of incarceration and the pandemic." Revealing:

. . . the importance of relationships between First Nations communities and Indigenous incarcerated people against the backdrop of over-incarceration of Indigenous people in British Columbia. . . .

Last December, Emily van der Meulen and Jackie Omstead published a report about rethinking evaluation arts programming in prison. They say:

Canadian prison-based arts and other programming are limited at best. Even the country's Correctional Investigator, or prison-ombudsperson, has critiqued the lack of meaningful options in which prisoners can engage. Those programs that do exist tend to be focused on the logic of penal rehabilitation, with the end goal of reducing recidivism.

Their work showcased the evaluation of a nine-week arts program in a women's prison, which was tremendous.

Colleagues, we have a long way to go. I support prison and community programs aimed at reducing recidivism and building self-esteem, self-confidence and skills. Excellent art has been created on the inside over the years, and art has prevented others from going inside. Let's turn that creative talent into constructive ends. These programs are essential, successful and far-reaching. I therefore support this bill. Thank you.
