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**Sub-Standard Treatment of
Mentally Ill Inmates is Criminal: Experts**
*Federal prisons ill-equipped to manage growing incarceration of
mentally ill Canadians*

OTTAWA – The treatment and support of inmates who are mentally ill in Canadian prisons is sub-standard, and sometimes almost non-existent, experts say. Compounding this, according to the Annual Report from the Office of the Correctional Investigator of Canada released today, the number of mentally ill offenders in the federal prison system has more than doubled in the last 10 years, an even more critical problem, say leading mental health organizations

“The Correctional Investigator’s report highlights the seriousness of the conclusion by the Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology that our prisons have become warehouses for the mentally ill due to funding cuts and closures in community psychiatric facilities,” said Penny Marrett, national CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA). “This is an inhumane and unsafe way to address offenders with mental illnesses, especially when they are often serving time for low-level, non-violent crimes that are the result of little to no availability of treatment or support in the community.”

Many people with mental illness – often who are low-income, homeless or struggling with substance abuse – cannot access mental health treatment. If they commit a crime, even low-level non-violent offences, punitive sentencing laws in some provinces can result in imprisonment, which will further restrict their access to treatment and support.

“Prisons can be dangerous and destructive places for people who are mentally ill,” said Len Wall of the Schizophrenia Society of Canada. “They are victimized and exploited. Prison rules punish mentally ill offenders for symptoms of their illness – such as being noisy or refusing orders, or even self-injury and attempted suicide. Prisoners who are mentally ill are more likely than others to end up housed in especially harsh conditions, such as isolation which, in turn, can place them at risk for acute psychosis or suicide.”

It is estimated that up to 20 per cent of inmates have a mental illness that requires treatment. Of these, seven to nine per cent have a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depression. “If these inmates do not receive hospital-standard psychiatric care, their chances of rehabilitation are extremely low and their risk of re-offending remains high,” said Dr. Pierre Tessier of the Royal Ottawa Hospital. “The mental health system needs to step forward and provide federal correctional facilities with the support they need. Allowing inmates to go untreated for their mental illness is a failure of the mental health system on many levels, from community to hospital-based care.”

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CANADIAN MENTAL
HEALTH ASSOCIATION
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POUR LA SANTÉ MENTALE



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A REASON TO HOPE. THE MEANS TO COPE.
SCHIZOPHRENIA SOCIETY OF CANADA
SOCIÉTÉ CANADIENNE DE LA SCHIZOPHRÉNIE
UNE SOURCE D'ESPOIR, DE SOUTIEN ET D'ENTRAÏDE.

According to the Annual Report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator of Canada, mental health services in federal penitentiaries are woefully deficient. Across the country, prisoners are denied treatment because of a shortage of clinical staff and inadequate mental health facilities for the prison population.

The groups attribute the growing rate of incarceration of the mentally ill to the lack of a national strategy for mental illness and mental health. "This dire situation is a consequence of under-funded, disorganized and fragmented community mental health services," said Marrett. "Correctional systems are being forced to assume the burden of the country's failure to properly diagnose and care for those with mental illnesses and other mental health problems."

"Prison officials are too often asked to do something they aren't trained to do," said Wall. "Prisons are not designed as places to provide comprehensive mental health treatment and services. If people with mental illness must be incarcerated, they should be in facilities designed and funded to meet their mental health needs."

The groups urged governments to establish more mental health courts, such as those in New Brunswick, Ontario and other programs, like those in Alberta, which divert mentally ill offenders to treatment programs rather than prison, and to improve the quality of mental health services provided to inmates.

They also urged elected officials and the heads of correctional agencies to ensure that mentally ill prisoners receive mental health services consistent with community standards of care, and called for rules to prevent housing prisoners with mental illness in isolated confinement.

In most parts of the world, mental health and mental illness are not given anywhere near the same degree of importance as physical health. In Canada, mental health has been described as the "orphan child" of medicare (Romanow, 2002). Mental illness indirectly affects all Canadians through a family member, friend or colleague. Twenty per cent of Canadians will directly experience a mental illness in their lifetime, with approximately eight per cent experiencing major depression, and approximately one per cent of Canadians experiencing bipolar disorder ('manic depression') and another one per cent schizophrenia.

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