

MLUWC General Meeting - March 9, 2015

Julie Cobb, Warden Archambault Institution

A Prison Warden Tells her Story

Julie Cobb, a graduate of McGill University, began her career at the Correctional Service Canada (CSC) in 1988 as a Correctional Officer. Since then she has worked as a Living Unit Officer, a Parole Officer and went on to become a Unit Coordinator, Team Leader and Deputy Warden all at different institutions where she gained expertise in a range of areas including case operations and mental health management. She also served as Executive Director of the Regional Mental Health Centre. Interestingly, she initially joined CSC because they needed to increase English speaking officers in the institutions.

Since September 2012, Julie Cobb has officially held the position of Warden at Archambault Institution.

We learnt an interesting definition: Penitentiaries are federal and prisons are provincial! Also, their legal mandate is to reintegrate the offenders and to work toward this end. All offenders start by spending 70 days being evaluated prior to the preparation of a placement report and a security classification which determines where they will go. They look at education, mental health issues, risk to the institution, risk of escape, and risk to public security. All this determines at which institution an offender will be placed. In Quebec there are two maximum security, five medium security and two minimum security institutions.

Archambault Institution is a medium and minimum security facility which houses 700 inmates: there is a treatment centre for inmates with mental health issues and ones that are suicidal; there is a temporary detention centre for some 120 inmates who have returned after some sort of parole violation; and the rest are medium to high risk cases. The institution has 425 staff and provide staffing on a 24/7 basis.

The prisons are largely boring places and the inmates are disorganised, lack stability, may have abusive upbringings, and they are mostly very disadvantaged. There is a small minority that are hardened and have gone into crime as a business. Interestingly, there are 20% aboriginals in prison compared to 3% in the Canadian population! However, most of the inmates are "just like us". So it is important not to forget why they are incarcerated and maintain objectivity when working with them.

Julie Cobb said that this is not a good time to be in public service for somebody who believes in rehabilitation. Approximately 40% of the inmates are "lifers" that is to say they have killed somebody. The majority of these are serving their time in minimum security since they are doing well enough. These inmates are very concerned by the new security measures that will limit parole or make it impossible for 35 years. This new law would create challenges and it would not improve outcome.