

Probation Officers Association of Ontario
PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE
March 2003

The winter season was extremely cold and long, but very productive! Meetings and activity on many issues continued at a rapid pace, which is consistent with the on-going rate of change in our profession.

Following a motion passed by the membership at our Annual General Meeting in London, I raised the issue of Ministry identification with ADM Michael Simpson. He was provided with a prototype of a more 'official' identification system than the current one. We are hopeful that this will be pursued and appropriate identification issued to PPOs and POs in recognition of our duties in protecting the public.

Several meetings with MPSS officials occurred regarding the Electronic Surveillance Program (ESP) during the winter months. The most remarkable concern, workload implications, has been stated repeatedly and cannot remain unaddressed if this program is to be effective. Concerns related to policy development, training, and other issues, have all been raised and recognized by the Ministry. As we suggested to the Ministry in December, January and February, implementation clearly needed to be delayed or it would not occur appropriately. Fortunately, the Ministry did postpone ESP implementation so that several issues could be resolved.

On a positive note, the basic principles for ESP that we have stated since 1998 (in our own Model) have been embraced by the Ministry. Those are: that ESP is only a tool, which cannot substitute for supervision, treatment/rehabilitation, and other methods of intervention, and, that any private partner cannot interfere with the duties and professional discretion of the PPO. There has been considerable concern expressed by POs about the fact that an offender advocate organization is involved in ESP. This was raised with the Ministry immediately and they have emphasized that this partner has no discretion whatsoever regarding decision-making, and all decisions will remain with Ministry staff. We are continuing to consult on this program, and will monitor its implementation closely.

In January, I had the pleasure of participating in the Latvian justice delegation's visit to Ottawa. You will see a report further in this publication from Gail Steeds, who has worked diligently to assist with the development of the Latvian youth justice system. I met with some of the officials to provide information on Ontario's system, as well as our Association and current areas of concentration. At the reception hosted by the Latvian Embassy, I presented the delegation with the (well-received!) POAO commemorative portfolios, purchased by Eastern Branch.

We look forward to hearing of the success of our colleagues' efforts in Latvia. My thanks to Gail for her on-going efforts with this exciting project.

Also in January, we had our second meeting with the Task Force on Corrections. This was a follow-up to our October presentation, and we utilized this opportunity to continue exploring workload issues, as well as accountability and transparency within the Ministry. We emphasized the importance of following through on recommendations that are made repeatedly by front-line staff and others (eg. the requirement for appropriate resourcing). In addition, we discussed the need for the Ministry to respond to identified problems in an accountable manner, rather than ignoring them, so that a more effective organization with improved morale could exist.

As you are all aware, since the implementation of OTIS, we continued to raise significant concerns regarding its negative impact on our profession, specifically related to time loss and difficulty inputting and retrieving information. Our persistent efforts regarding OTIS have been met with some success. In February, enhancements to OTIS Community Case Management were released, with a positive reaction by POs. While the fragmented nature of the system remains, these improvements in functionality are helpful. Also, recognition of the fact that assessments could not be done on OTIS was provided in a concrete manner with the release of the e-LSI-OR assessment program. POs seem to be pleased with this program and the resultant reduction in entering the same information in multiple places. In a meeting with Michael Simpson at the time of these enhancements, I again stressed the need for a single, chronological view of casenotes in OTIS, as we had with the Word-based system. This will be requested for the next round of improvements. It is fortunate that our MCFCS colleagues did not begin to use OTIS until the enhancements were in place (hence they missed the tiny font!) and hopefully they will adapt to the current system with somewhat less stress than the PPOs experienced.

The PPSDM Steering Committee held its final meeting in January, and the committee is now being revamped with a new mission. Discussions occurred around how PPSDM implementation has been inconsistent as a result of workload, high turnover, variances in leadership, and communication issues. Ways to prevent program drift, and ensure consistency, were explored and suggestions made. You will likely observe a renewed focus on the Model in the near future, which is consistent with results of the Collaborative Evaluation Process (CEP) and the Provincial Auditor's Report. We have also noted that training in specialized areas, which many PPOs are interested in, has been lacking and this needs to be addressed as well.

The Corrections Advisory Council continues to meet on a quarterly basis, with an expanded membership as it now addresses both community and institutional matters. At the last meeting, we discussed ESP, YCJA, Single Jurisdiction, and other relevant issues.

I met with the new Director of Bell Cairn, Kathryn Biondi, in February. We discussed issues related to basic training, the Association's role in presenting to new PPOs, and providing overall feedback on training issues. We are currently reviewing the basic training curriculum, and developing a POAO session that we hope will be included in that curriculum. This will be provided to Ms. Biondi in the near future for consideration.

On the research front, we submitted an application for a grant through the Victims' Justice Fund to conduct research into the effectiveness of community-based sanctions. Our proposal was to identify and examine issues related to Probation and Conditional Sentence Orders, the ability to protect victims and recognize their legitimate interests related to such orders. The proposed outcome included developing methods to increase the effectiveness of community-based sanctions. Professor Julian Roberts worked with me on the development of this proposal, and would provide technical expertise should we proceed with this study. At this time, I have not heard as to whether this grant will be approved.

The Provincial Election is approaching. While we have repeatedly encouraged the current provincial government to address critical workload issues by hiring more POs, we noted that the Official Opposition released a platform including the hiring of 100. We immediately encouraged the current government to minimally match this commitment in their platform, and this remains to be seen. Of course, we are cognizant that these are election 'promises'; however, it is always good opportunity to emphasize our integral role in the justice system and the need for appropriate resourcing.

Symposium 2003 is developing at a great pace and we are promised another stellar event by Peninsula Branch under the Chairmanship of Don Larman. Book your (Fallsview!) rooms now in Niagara Falls for this impressive event.

Spring is here – finally! Enjoy the weather and as always, I invite your feedback on any issues relevant to our profession.

Cathy Hutchison
President