

## HepCBC Reaches Inmates through Info-Fairs at 8 Federal Prisons in BC:

November 5 - 9, 2018. Abbotsford, Harrison Mills, Agassiz/Harrison Hot Springs, Mission, and Metchosin, BC

One of the most likely places to acquire and/or to be living with hepatitis C is prison, with 20-40X the national prevalence of HCV (<https://ctac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Access-to-Treatment-in-Federal-Institutions-Web-1.pdf>). Conversely, with its concentrated and highly-regulated population, a prison can be one of the easiest places to treat, cure, and even eliminate, the disease. With this in mind, between November 5 and 9, 2018, two HepCBC Volunteers, Leon Anderson and Cheryl Reitz, drove between Vancouver and several Fraser Valley communities every day for a week (Monday through Friday morning) to participate in federal prison “Community Resource Expos” (also known as info-fairs) sponsored by the John Howard Society. Another HepCBC Volunteer, Douglas Laird, organized and manned HepCBC’s resource table at the Vancouver Island info-fair in a prison outside the community of Metchosin on Friday afternoon. These federal prison info-fairs are held every June and November. This was our second round of fairs, though our first round in June included a couple “lockdowns” which prevented us from visiting the affected prisons. This time we were fortunate that there were no lockdowns. **Our main “outreach” goals** were to encourage/educate inmates (and any staff we could) about:

- Accessing HepCBC’s peer-driven viral hepatitis education, navigation, and advocacy services (including toll-free help line)
- Prevention of viral hepatitis, including use of harm reduction methods (condoms, lubrication, and dental dams available now, with needle exchange programs being added in all Canadian federal prisons by August, 2020)
- Regular testing, especially if still engaged in high risk activities
- Vaccination and treatment for hepatitis B, and treatment/cure for hepatitis C
- Follow-up monitoring
- Confronting stigma and self-stigma, and
- Discovering any possible barriers to the above which stand in the way of linkage to care and eventual elimination of hepatitis C (and B) in BC’s federal prisons

**How we worked at the info-fairs:** We brought a life-size model of the liver, a dozen different kinds of pamphlets and other educational resources (HepCBC’s own, HepEduCan’s, and CATIE’s), and many copies of HepCBC’s Viral Hepatitis Colouring book/art contest (see [http://hepcbc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/20180919\\_ColouringBook\\_edition1b.pdf](http://hepcbc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/20180919_ColouringBook_edition1b.pdf)).

How did we get inmates’ attention as they were quickly walking by our table? We forgot to bring a fishbowl of candy so stood up with big smiles showing them the colouring book, asking them if they were an artist (or know an artist), if they’ve been tested, if they know what their liver looks like, etc. About half the time one of these “hooks” worked and inmates came over, often in a group, to find out what we’re all about. Once we got them over, they usually stayed to talk for several minutes and took educational resources, both for themselves and for others who were not there. Most were happy to meet two seniors who both had lived experience of hepatitis C, and who could personally vouch for the efficacy and ease of the new treatments.

These fairs are aimed at helping inmates with a release date coming up soon to find a halfway house that will accept them, so health issues are usually not what inmates are expecting to discuss. Generally the only other health-related table at these events is Positive Living BC’s (PLBC’s) HIV/AIDS booth, which also handles HIV/HCV co-infection issues. We have been working closely with PLBC on these visits, and want to give a shout-out particularly to Wayne Campbell for sharing his experience and spot-on advice with us.

Below is **basic information about the 8 prisons, and at least one interesting thing we learned or experienced at each.**

Monday morning we were at **MATSQUI Institution in the Matsqui Complex (alongside PACIFIC and FRASER VALLEY [Women’s] institutions outside Abbotsford)**, a medium-security prison with rated capacity of 446 male inmates. We primarily discussed the state of hepatitis C surveillance and care at their institution, and what the inmates told us was very close to what we found throughout the other 7 prisons we visited later in the week as well. First, there was nothing

but praise for the tireless efforts on their behalf over many years by Dr. John Farley! We met many prisoners who had been treated and cured through him, either with the older interferon/ribavirin treatments or the newer Direct-Acting Antivirals (DAAs). We also were pretty amazed at the large percentage of inmates who told us they had self-cleared HCV. We told them it might be a good time to verify that this is still the case, since, if HCV has returned or they got re-infected, it might be easier for them to get cured while they're in prison than outside it. We only met one inmate in the entire week who may possibly be getting denied life-saving treatment (being told his "numbers" are too low to treat him). As he has possible liver and other problems, we are going to keep in contact with him until we are sure he is getting the best treatment he can. It is quite possible he misunderstood the doctor, and that he self-cleared the disease.



*(Volunteer Leon Anderson)*

Monday afternoon we were at **PACIFIC Institution and Regional Treatment Centre in the Matsqui Complex (alongside MATSQUI and FRASER VALLEY [Women's] institutions outside Abbotsford)**, rated capacity 509 male inmates.

This facility includes a Regional Health Centre, and a Regional Treatment Centre for addictions; we did not visit either of these centres, of course. One of the inmates told us there was a special treatment unit there for people with HCV, but we were unable to verify this. We did find out a couple interesting facts: It costs approximately \$0.11 per minute for federal inmates to call anywhere in Canada on the prison-operated phone system. Also, federal inmates make up to \$6.90 (top wage) per day at their job; the actual rate depends on whether they work full-time, if there are no unauthorized absences, and if they are free of 'mishap charges.' The prison may deduct some other charges from the wages as well.

We also found out that roughly half of the inmates knew about the new Needle Exchange Programs (NEPs) coming to their prison sometime between January, 2019 and August, 2020. The two pilot projects in eastern Canada (one at a men's, the other at a women's, prison) are coming to an end next month, and it will be very interesting to see the research report(s) from these pilots. We also would love to see the timetable of the NEP phase-ins to the rest of the prisons. Inmates were generally pleased with the prospect of the NEPs, though some harboured some misgivings along with hope that the NEPs will succeed: "The devil is in the details" and "Be careful what you wish for" were expressed by more than one inmate during the rest of the week. In general, inmates, as major "stakeholders," here, hope they will be given some input into how the program is run.

We exchanged information with folks at the fair from the West Coast Prison Justice Society (WPCJS) and Prisoners' Legal Services. They were happy to see we had referred to their services and hotline on the first page of our Viral Hepatitis Colouring Book. They were distributing a short but excellent handout about hepatitis C treatment in prison. We hope WPCJS will be able to update it soon as the pamphlet was using pre-DAA statistics (not their fault – it's hard to get current numbers).



(Volunteer Cheryl Reitz)

Tuesday morning we spent at **KWIKWÈXWELHP Healing Village, a facility outside Harrison Mills**. The fair was inside the healing village's longhouse, heated with wood and with a soft though well-flattened dirt floor, referred to as the 5<sup>th</sup> longhouse of the nearby Sts'ailes Nation. The adjoining facility, with rated a capacity of 50 male inmates, is specially set up for minimum-security prisoners who wish to follow aboriginal traditions. An outsider's impression? It seemed as if inmates and staff alike felt comfortable in this homelike village. We left with a positive feeling; if not of complete wellness, at least an undeniable sense of its potential, and of the power of spirituality, nature, culture, community, and tradition in bringing about true healing. Only a few of BC's disproportional number of aboriginal prisoners live at Kwikwèxwelhp. However, we found out that most federal institutions have an "Aboriginal Offender Wellness Committee" which organizes events and liaises among inmates, Elders and staff (Commissioner's Directive 702, para. 53, Annex D). For statistics regarding aboriginal inmates, see <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54972-eng.htm>

We also got to know some of the wonderful people at these info-fairs from the M2/W2 organization. This is a Christian social-justice ministry outside Abbotsford which focuses on transforming lives and restoring relationships both inside and outside penal institutions, featuring a man-to-man and woman-to-woman visitation program (<http://m2w2.com/>). A very special moment at Kwikwèxwelhp occurred when a man who has a female friend outside found out from us that as of March, 2018, BC Pharmacare has been treating anyone with hepatitis C, no longer requiring proof of significant liver damage to qualify for coverage. His face broke into a huge smile and he said he was really looking forward to telling this to her since she's anxiously awaiting treatment but was deemed ineligible due to insufficient damage.





Tuesday afternoon we went to **MOUNTAIN Institution outside Agassiz/Harrison Hot Springs** (about 23 km SE of Kwikwèxwelhp). This was a medium-security prison with rated capacity of 440 male inmates.

In a discussion there of the upcoming federal prison Needle Exchange Program (NEP), we also asked inmates about tattooing practices, as we knew safe body-art equipment/supplies (needle, syringe, ink especially) were hard to come by and also a major pathway for transmitting viral hepatitis. We were surprised when several inmates told us prisoners in Canada can sometimes collect safe tattoo needles from sewing kits available through the canteen. Inmates also told us about a “pilot” safe tattooing program which ran in six of Canada’s federal prisons (including one in BC) between 2005 and 2006. Inmates loved this program but it was shut down as a cost-saving measure when a new government took over. A new study, which includes a detailed description and analysis of this program, was published in August, 2018: <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-018-5867-x> . Inmates we talked to on this visit encouraged HepCBC to join with other groups to advocate for the return of a similar safe tattooing program in federal prisons as a way to help prevent people from getting infected with HIV, HCV, or HBV for the first time, or getting re-infected with HCV once they are cured (with expensive drugs!). It made sense to us. In fact, the federal Corrections ombudsman Ivan Zinger, and an internal Correctional Service memo made this case in February this year: (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/prison-tattoo-goodale-1.4542191> ).

Positive Living BC has a great safer-tattooing resource: [https://positivelivingbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/POP\\_SafeTattoo.pdf](https://positivelivingbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/POP_SafeTattoo.pdf)

At several institutions we were able to connect with various staff members – guards, social services, and medical staff, who were all encouraging of our work. Two took copies of our colouring book. We told anyone to go ahead and copy any pages they wanted to use, such as for a group activity. One worked with a small group of inmates with mental disabilities who would enjoy an “adult” colouring book, and it would be a good way to introduce them to the ways to prevent hepatitis C and other sexually-transmitted and blood-borne infections (STBBIs).

We also connected with representatives of several halfway houses who were interviewing and assessing inmates who were interested in transferring out to them once they were released. During our visits to the June info-fairs, we had obtained contact information from houses that were interested in our colouring books, and a few weeks later, we sent their bulk order requests to them to use with their residents.



Nearby Mount Cheam is visible to inmates residing at either Mountain or adjoining Kent institutions. While driving home Tuesday evening, we took time to photograph a small bit of the awe-inspiring beauty of the area which is in such stark contrast to the conditions which, (as we imagine anyway) drove inmates to commit the crimes which brought them here. While most inmates in these institutions are able to see this beauty during their incarceration, they cannot touch or experience it fully until their release. One hopes that this would more often inspire than sadden them while they await their freedom.



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Wednesday all day was spent at **KENT Institution, also outside the Agassiz/Harrison Hot Springs area, next to Mountain Institution.** The maximum-security prison had a rated capacity of 378 male inmates. We were subject to vastly greater security precautions here, including sniffing by rather aggressive dogs both when approaching and leaving the fair venues. The guards were not overtly intimidating at any of the institutions, in fact they generally seemed relaxed and friendly to the inmates as well as to the info-fair visitors. But they definitely appeared well-armed and capable of calling in immediate reinforcements if needed. We felt safe at all times, though it was odd to be in a situation where you knew your every movement and the behavior of those around you was being diligently monitored by armed guards.

A middle-aged inmate told us he knew at least some of the “lifers” had purposely infected themselves with HCV in the hope/belief they might gain access to better food and care in this way. We have no verification of this, but will ask other inmates about this alleged practice if we get a chance. Inmates we talked to in maximum security seemed to have similar access to HCV testing and treatment as those in the less secure facilities.





Thursday all day was spent at **MISSION Institution, overlooking the town of Mission**. The morning was at the minimum-security section (also known as “Ferndale”), with rated capacity of 324 male inmates. The afternoon was at the medium-security section, with rated capacity of 216 male inmates.

We were delighted to spend 15 minutes or so talking to the editor of the MISSION Institution’s monthly inmate newsletter, *The Mallard*. November’s newsletter (26 pages @ 5.5” X 8.5’) included a broad spectrum of topics: an editorial about Remembrance Day; announcements from various inmate groups and events; health news about the flu and how to prevent it; a Faith section with news of inmate religious groups; an interview with a “re-integration worker” from the John Howard Society; inmate news including an announcement of the end of solitary confinement for federal prisoners; an article about the needs of aging and dying prisoners and those who care for them; and finally a large “Creative” section with poetry, a short story, and several black and white drawings – the one that most tore my heartstrings was of a prisoner on the phone, with this text bubble above: “Daddy’s gotta say nite-nite now, sweetheart. You give Mommy and Teddy a hug for me, ‘kay? Love you...” The editor would like HepCBC to contribute a couple short articles about the new hepatitis C treatment, and about the upcoming Needle Exchange Program (NEP). He said he hopes inmates will have a voice in the operation of the NEP.

There is a Canada-wide quarterly bulletin for prisoners (aimed primarily at men) as well: “Cell Count,” accessible through the PASAN site: <http://www.pasan.org/cell-count.html> .

One older aboriginal inmate had been cured with Harvoni recently. He is feeling much better and will be released soon. However he told us he was really worried about some of the HCV+ “lifers” who do not have the information we were handing out, since the info-fairs are aimed at people who are close to their release date (to assist them with re-entry matters). He took big handfuls of our pamphlets and colouring books he hoped would convince them to (finally) say YES to getting treated, and starting a healthy, new direction in their lives such as he was experiencing.

An inmate really wanted us to have a copy of a study that was made in a BC prison investigating the feasibility of a Community-Based “participatory HIV-prevention intervention.” He ran to his room and gave us his one extra copy (a complete 9 page hard copy) of the article, which he carefully annotated. This study, though it is about HIV rather than HCV, is excellent and we can hope at some point we can adapt at least some of it to viral hepatitis. Abstract available here: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1757975916659045> .

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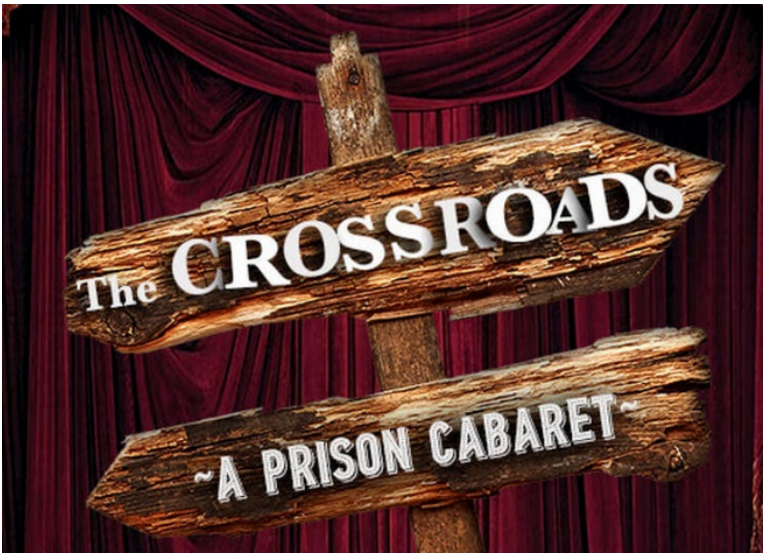


Friday morning Cheryl spent at **FRASER VALLEY Institution for Women, situated in the Matsqui Complex (alongside MATSQUI and PACIFIC institutions outside Abbotsford)**. This has separate minimum, medium, and maximum-security areas, plus a mental health unit, and is rated for 112 female inmates. We were unable to take any photos; instead below is an online photo of the women's housing from <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/institutions/001002-5000-eng.shtml> . Two interesting facts we learned at this prison: First is that female inmates are generally allowed to have their infants and children incarcerated with them up until they are school age. We also learned kale is grown by inmates in the prison's garden almost year round, and at least one of them loves it and eats it almost every day! Here is a link to the Women's Prison Network newsletters for women, trans, and youth prisoners in Canada: <http://www.womensprisonnetwork.org/>.



Friday afternoon Douglas Laird, from Victoria, went to **WILLIAM HEAD Institution, situated outside Metchosin on Vancouver Island, adjoining the Pacific Ocean**, to visit the minimum-security prison rated for 200 inmates. This institution is unique in Canada not only for its location on a lovely Pacific Coast beach, but also because it has a long-standing inmate theatre program based in the "CROSSROADS THEATRE". Douglas actually has been involved as an ally and supporter of this program, so already had some friends among the inmates. In talking to others at the fair, Douglas

came to the conclusion that most William Head inmates are fairly informed about hepatitis C, its risk factors, how to prevent it, and how it can be cured. In general, they get tested regularly – and if needed, they ask for (and receive) Direct-Acting Antiviral (DAA) treatment. This is excellent news, and generally matches up with what Leon and Cheryl observed in the Mainland institutions as well.



For further interesting details about the history, purpose, and design of the 8 federal prisons in BC, see <http://www.csc-ccc.gc.ca/institutions/001002-5000-eng.shtml>. (Examples: Matsqui Institution was originally a drug-dependency treatment facility. On the other hand, Mountain Institution was originally a prison for male and female Sons of Freedom Doukhobors; metal huts were used to discourage potential arson protests). HepCBC will continue our visits into the federal prisons in June, and we hope to set up regular visits in the provincial prisons as well.

If you are interested in volunteering either through prison visits, or as a support person from the outside, please let HepCBC know (see <http://hepcbc.ca/about-hepcbc/volunteer/hepcbc-volunteer-application-form/> ). Thanks!