

February 24, 2022

Dear Minister Mendicino,

I am writing to you today to bring your attention to an important initiative that Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) assists in facilitating across Canada. As a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist Christian churches, MCC works to share God's love and compassion in the name of Christ by responding to basic needs and working for peace and justice, in Canada and around the world. Our faith calls us to imagine and work for a world where all can live at peace with God, with one another and with creation. As part of this commitment, MCC has operated Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) for over 25 years in Canada.

We partner with CoSA Canada, funded by Public Safety Canada, to operate this successful initiative together as a network of 15 CoSA sites across the country. We ask for your public support for a small expenditure that is likely to prevent a significant number of sexual assaults and victimizations in Canada. We stand with CoSA Canada in asking for your support for \$2.5 million dollars per annum in the upcoming Federal Budget.

CoSA Canada addresses a critical issue affecting all our communities – the traumatic impact of sexual assault and other sex offences on vulnerable people and the crucial need for effective prevention strategies. By offering community-based, volunteer led circles to people convicted of sex offences who are designated high risk when released from prison, CoSA represents a vital link in reintegration programming for this population. CoSA may be the only option for those who have committed sexual offences released at warrant expiry to access support while being held accountable for their actions as they adjust to returning to the community (See Appendix for more background and research).

We have CoSA program staff and provide support for CoSA sites in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec. We work effectively with trained volunteers to support offenders to: remain safe in community, adhere to their release conditions, connect to community resources, and to rebuild their lives in a healthy manner. The primary aim of CoSA is “no more victims.”

This government has demonstrated its commitment to reducing recidivism with all party support by passing Bill C228, *The Reduction of Recidivism Framework Act*. C228 received Royal Assent last June 2021 and contains specific measures to reduce recidivism through a comprehensive strategy.

CoSA is a unique example of a community-based, non-profit organization that succeeds in meeting the measures contained in Bill C228 by having a proven approach and standardized, evidence-

based programs that reduce recidivism, prevent further victimization and promote safe and healthy community reintegration of those who have committed sexual offences. Funding is needed to continue this work.

Finally, we are very pleased to note that the Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau, in his Mandate Letter tasked you to *“Develop a Federal Framework to Reduce Recidivism in consultation with provinces, territories, Indigenous communities, Black communities and other stakeholders. As part of this work, consider how to ensure that federal correctional institutions are safe and humane environments, free from violence and sexual harassment, and promote rehabilitation and public safety.”* Again, funding CoSA Canada represents a significant milestone in achieving that specific mandate.

Funding CoSA Canada at \$2.5 million annually represents 0.15% of the current budget of Correctional Service of Canada, providing Canadians with an excellent return on investment.

Your public support in supporting CoSA Canada in the forthcoming Federal Budget will achieve all measures in Bill C228 as well as some results contained in the Mandate Letter. Most importantly, it will contribute to the prevention of further sexual assaults and victimizations in Canada.

We ask you to do what you can to ensure that CoSA sites across Canada secure ongoing sustainable funding of \$2.5 million and support the safety and wellbeing of all Canadians, victims and offenders.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rick Bauman', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rick Cober Bauman
MCC Canada Executive Director

Appendix: What is CoSA?

In the early '90s, leaders in the justice sector recognized that persons leaving prison after serving sentences for sexual offences were reviled and ostracized by their communities and families. The extreme isolation often contributed to re-offending. Professionals, such as police officers, prison chaplains and parole officers believed that if these individuals were given the correct type of support, the prevalence of re-offending could be curbed. **Circles of Support and Accountability** was formed in Hamilton, Ontario in 1994, as an innovative community-based response for individuals who had committed sexual offenses and were being released into the community after incarceration. As a restorative practice, CoSA offers support and accountability to those who have caused harm while calling attention to the important perspectives of victims and impacts of harm.

Our Mission: *The CoSA Mission is to substantially reduce the risk of future sexual victimization by assisting and supporting released individuals in their task of integrating into the community and leading a responsible, meaningful, and accountable life.*

How do the circles work? A circle is made up of staff, 3–6 trained and screened volunteer community members, and the core member (CM) or person seeking assistance. The circle is established for the benefit of both the CM, who voluntarily participates, and the community at large. All participants in the circle form a **Circle Agreement** which is regularly revisited to affirm the commitments made to each other. **Constructive exchange** and **connection** between the CM and the circle are facilitated through regular meetings. Circle members offer the CM assistance in finding housing and employment and provide practical and social supports that help prevent the isolation and other risk factors that might lead to re-offending. The circle assists the core member to recognize the **impacts of past harmful choices**, to cultivate empathy, and to take steps towards a fulfilling, pro-social, and safe life.

The circle models positive, **healthy relating** and **constructive decision making**, and challenges behaviours and/or attitudes that may prevent the core member from moving forward. Circle members assist the core member to understand and manage their **personal risk factors**, recognize their strengths, and develop new skills and self-understanding in a safe and inclusive environment – ensuring an integration of both support and accountability.

Circles model supportive, accountable relationships through establishing **clear boundaries**, ensuring a safe space for transparent and open communications, and revisiting circle goals, responsibilities and expectations on a regular basis. Honouring the circle's aims and commitments promotes an environment of **trust and respect** over time between the core member and volunteers, ultimately helping to **reduce the risk** of breach or reoffence.

The circle aims to reconnect the core member with the **wider community**; it empowers and supports the core member to develop connections and over time, to establish and nurture lasting relationships outside the circle. A safe, successful, and engaged life builds skills, confidence, and a strong motivation to core members to remain crime-free.

The CoSA model, built on **restorative justice principles**, has been proven effective with diverse populations, including **Indigenous, Black, and other people of colour**. The CoSA model is attentive to the harm of **systemic racism** by focusing on the experience of each unique individual. It is a model that works equally well in urban, rural, and suburban contexts in both official languages.

The research is overwhelmingly clear: A 2018 study demonstrated that participating in the CoSA program significantly reduced sexual recidivism, **lowering the risk for new sex offences by 88%**. Twenty-eight studies in several countries show that CoSA dramatically reduces reoffending. Supporting and expanding CoSA prevents further sexual victimization.

CoSA's community-based program is **cost-effective**, leveraging thousands of volunteer hours. CoSA trained volunteers represent a savings of up to \$3 million dollars annually to the criminal justice system. The benefits that CoSA offers cost 10% of keeping someone in federal prison, 18% of the cost of provincial incarceration, and are much less expensive than probation and parole.

CoSA has the potential to **prevent the victimization** of 200 or more Canadians annually. The physical, mental, and emotional trauma of sexual victimization is difficult to measure. However, Public Safety Canada estimated the legal, employment, and mental health service costs of sexual assault at about \$150,000 per victim. This means the impact of CoSA's prevention program represents approximately \$30 million dollars in cost savings to Canadian victims.

CoSA achieves these great results because trained volunteers and staff dedicate their time and meet regularly to support and hold accountable individuals that have sexually offended as they return to our communities. This practical support creates an important connection. The Circle members can address concerning attitudes or behaviours while guiding individuals effectively on the path towards safe re-entry.

CoSA Canada will complete a five-year Public Safety Demonstration project in March 2022. This funding has enabled CoSA to develop a national office, strengthen its network of 15 local sites serving 18 Canadian cities and establish itself as a key criminal justice partner both nationally and internationally. But unless funding beyond March 2022 is secured, **25%** of the 15 sites risk closure and the remaining sites face a **reduction in programming**. Approximately **100 individuals would no longer be able to receive our services**. CoSA's impact and sustainability are on the line.

CoSA Canada is a registered charity. CoSA's national network includes 15 sites serving 18 Canadian cities. CoSA forms circles around approximately 200 core members annually. The CoSA network shares commitment to its Good Practices work, ongoing learning, and excellence in delivering CoSA's piece in Canada's reintegration programming and the reduction of recidivism.

For more information: www.cosacanada.com