

President's Report
CAEFS' Annual General Meeting
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The history of Elizabeth Fry is a long and distinguished one in Canada. Indeed, although Elizabeth Fry was born and worked in England in the early 1800s she is perhaps better known in Canada since her work was transported here and is carried on by all of us.

The first Elizabeth Fry society was formally established in Vancouver in the late 1930's. Like so many of the other Elizabeth Fry societies, it started with a small group of women whose wealth and stations in life (something Elizabeth Fry also possessed) provided the perfect opportunities for them to undertake charitable work that permitted these women to contribute to those less fortunate than themselves. Many other Elizabeth Fry Societies were first started by similar groups of women endowed with the notion of *noblesse oblige*, while others started as offshoots of women's church groups.

Later, other Elizabeth Fry Societies started as adjuncts to the burgeoning women's movement in Canada during the 1960s and 70s. When the Elizabeth Fry Society was formed in Halifax for example, the feminists who were key in its formation initially determined that it should never have staff or receive any government resources. The women opposed any efforts to curtail the advocacy that they saw as vital and necessary to their role in working with and on behalf of criminalized women.

Today, there are 24 Elizabeth Fry Societies across the country. Their history, like the societies themselves, spans the gambit from many who are primarily interested in providing social services at the community level, to those who have a long interest in anti-oppressive work to address systemic inequalities. It should be no surprise, therefore, that the manner in which our membership works also ranges from service delivery on the basis of contracts with government - to advocacy aimed at alleviating the systemic challenges faced by women. The result is a mixture of charitable models and social development approaches, fed by a strong vein of advocacy.

Within CAEFS, as is the case in many national and international women's groups, we are faced with the false dichotomy between the roles of service providers and advocates. It is clear that neither can exist without the other. An excellent service provider is made so as the result of the very fact that she is an effective and experienced advocate and ally to those she works with and for. Similarly, an excellent advocate can only arrive at such

excellence through her ability to empathize. Empathy, as described by Henderson involves three basic phenomena:

Feeling the emotion of another; **understanding** the experiences and situation of another, both affectively and cognitively, often achieved by imagining ones self to be in the position of another and **action** brought about by experiencing the stress of another. This is usually done via the experience of working in, developing, and/or living the experiences about which she presumes to advocate.¹

Action is advocacy – advocacy is action. Neither service delivery nor advocacy exists in isolation. In situations where those providing services are discouraged from advocacy it is almost inevitable that the services they provide will not fully meet the needs of their “target” group. Moreover, if an advocate has no appreciation of the services that are needed, advocacy may in fact be an empty process. Accordingly, the strength and value of much of what CAEFS exemplifies is evident by even a cursory examination of the role, responsibilities and array of services provided by CAEFS’ membership.

CAEFS emerged from a membership which advocated a national office as a means of ensuring that the advocacy function could exist at the most senior levels in Canada. The provision of grants designed to increase the perspectives and democratic involvement of non-governmental/community-based organizations provided the resources to establish the office in the early 1980’s. In 1984, the federal government of the day implemented sustaining funding in the recognition that their own policies would be stronger and more effective if they were informed by the voices of those who would experience and therefore critique them.

The department of the Solicitor General, as it was then known, also wanted to end an earlier practice of contracting directly with community groups such as individual Elizabeth Fry and John Howard societies, recognizing that such a scheme of providing individual federal funding for service delivery did not ensure greater access of the public to services nor enhance input in matters of policy and/or law reform. They recognized that by placing resources in the hands of national organizations, whose mandate would be both the development of community based service delivery agencies in conjunction with law and policy reform, it could more readily enhance the government’s own abilities to improve the democratic production of sound law and policy.

CAEFS, as an organization, is structured to ensure that the membership defines and directs the work of the association. Every year, CAEFS utilizes its resources to bring together two representatives from every member Elizabeth Fry Society in order to ensure that the policies, priorities, and directions determined by the national body are reflective of the will of the membership. Decisions are achieved by consensus, so that the general

¹ Lynn Henderson, “Legality and Empathy” (1987) 85 Michigan Law Review 1574 at 1592/

will is adhered to and individuals holding differing opinions agree to remain silent as the rest of the membership ventures forth on an agreed upon plan of action.

This history of developing policy is rooted in community initiatives and membership direction and is therefore a vital and important aspect of the CAEFS' network. The result is that every member has a voice, but no one member has veto. The manner in which these sorts of procedures build support, analysis, advocacy, and overall excellence in the pursuit of individual and systemic support and advocacy for criminalized women, is evident in some of the results of the many collective and collaborative initiatives that CAEFS has undertaken.

These include, participation in government initiatives such as the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women (1989-1990), as well as those initiated in collaboration with other governmental and non-governmental groups, such as the Self Defence Review (1995-1997) and the Arbour Inquiry (1995-1996). Most recently, we have independently identified, defined, and shaped a national and increasingly international coalition, facilitated by our 2001 conference, and most recently in the systemic review and special report of the Canadian Human Rights Commission (2001-2004).

In response to the federal government's decision to regionalize the prisons for women, CAEFS developed our own regional structure in 1995-1996. Our current organizational model emerged from the labour of a regionalization committee formed by the membership. The members consisted of a representative Executive Director and a member of a Board of Directors of a local society identified to represent each region in the development of the new regionalized structure at the national level. Prior to regionalization, every local society was represented at the Board table.

The Committee recommended a move to a regional structure in order to limit the size of the Board and in order to ensure a more equitable distribution of resources and decision-making authority to the entire membership. The Committee also suggested that CAEFS ensure equal access of all local societies to the annual general meetings of CAEFS by ensuring that funding was provided to each local society, so that they could send a Board and staff representative to the meeting. Prior to regionalization, each local society was funded to send their CAEFS' board representative, and every society was entitled to three votes, but many of the smaller societies and less well-off regions could not afford to send additional delegates to the CAEFS' AGM. The Committee recognized that the result was that discussion and decisions tended to be dominated by those with the greatest numbers and resources at the table.

The current organizational model was developed by the Committee, recommended to the membership, and adopted unanimously by CAEFS in 1995. The funding component was adopted for a trial period at the same time and confirmed a year later in 1996. The most significant changes occasioned by this structure are the more equal distribution of

resources and authority amongst the regions. This has resulted in the need for some of the larger individual societies to adjust to fewer resources, but has also ensured that smaller societies and regions are funded to come together regionally and develop collective and collaborative working relationships. The extra responsibilities placed on regional representatives to ensure that they have effective means of communicating information to and from local members and the national body have proven to be a challenge for some. It is for this reason that we are now reviewing our current regionalization framework.

In her day, Elizabeth Fry was regarded as rebellious and radical, and many completely misunderstood her rationale for devoting much of her life to working to alleviate the poverty and oppression of the women and children whom she first encountered in British prisons and poor houses. It is this legacy that CAEFS continues to breathe life into in Canada. If we replicated the services that Elizabeth Fry provided two hundred years ago, we would certainly be criticized for being stuck in the past. However, the fact that we have continued on, in the spirit and intent of her work to advocate as clearly, cogently and consistency as possible, in many areas that directly impact upon the women who are criminalized, echoes her spirit in our organization.

The past two decades, since CAEFS received funding which allowed us to meet nationally and open a national office, reveals just a glimpse of what is possible as we continue our work. We have no end of passion in this network and we owe it to the women we work with and for to do everything in our power to stay focused and clear in our ethical approaches to advocating and providing community-based services with and for them and with a view to achieving respect, equality and true human dignity. We all look forward to continuing to contribute to this important and vital legacy.