

For Immediate Release

Minister McLellan Must Remedy Human Rights Violations **Changes Could Mean Fewer Women in Canadian Prisons**

January 28, 2004 – Ottawa - Equality rights groups are urging Public Safety Minister Anne McLellan to immediately implement the recommendations released today by the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC). The special report on systemic human rights violations experienced by women serving sentences of two years or more in Canada is a response to a complaint filed by the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS) and the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) in 2001.

“The number of times that the Commission calls for reviews, audits and external accountability shows they understand the urgent need to address the human rights violations experienced by women prisoners,” stated Dr. Ailsa M. Watkinson, President of CAEFS, which called for the review. “We commend the Commission and we are especially pleased that they recognize the fundamental flaws in the classification system. It results in the unnecessary labeling of so many women as maximum security with ‘the harsh treatment this entails’. We welcome the Commission’s call for CSC to design a classification system and corresponding programs that accommodate women’s needs, rather than continuing to treat women like men ‘based on stereotypes and perceptions’,” continued Dr. Watkinson.

As part of the process of developing submissions to the Canadian Human Rights Commission, CAEFS consulted with approximately 30 national and international women’s, Aboriginal, disability and social justice groups.

Throughout the report, the Commission points to the tragic consequences that result from the defective manner in which women are initially assessed. Aboriginal women and women with mental disabilities are especially over-classified, often kept in segregated, isolated living conditions. “Fewer women classified as maximum security prisoners will mean more women can be reintegrated into the community in a much shorter time,” says Kim Pate, Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Societies. “We hope that Minister McLellan will act immediately to introduce a new classification system and the decarceration strategies that this will necessitate.”

CAEFS strongly supports the Commission’s proposal for independent monitoring and accountability mechanisms. The call for judicial oversight reiterates the recommendations of Madam Justice Louise Arbour. In 1996, Arbour reported on the failure of the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) to follow the law and its own policies in dealing with women prisoners. “We are hopeful that Minister McLellan will recognize the vital need for such a body to monitor CSC’s adherence to principles of justice, fairness and the rule of law.”

“The Commission’s report clearly identifies the discrimination experienced by women prisoners. CAEFS welcomes the opportunity to work with CSC, as well as the Ministers of Public Safety and Justice, to help implement recommendations that are vital to improving the lives of some of Canada’s most vulnerable women,” concluded Pate.