

December 22, 2021

Dear MP,

I am writing to you on behalf of Circles of Support & Accountability (CoSA) Canada to ask for your public support for a small expenditure that is likely to prevent a significant number of sexual assaults and victimizations in Canada. CoSA Canada needs your support for \$2.5 million 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.

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 and needs 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 study¹ 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 current operations can be maintained for a very small investment of **\$1.5 million** annually. But other Canadian communities can benefit from CoSA's programs to reduce recidivism. With **\$2.5 million**, CoSA could expand its existing programs and launch new sites to meet increasing demand and prevent even more 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 annually to the criminal justice system. The benefits that CoSA offers, operates on 10% of the cost to keep 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/year per victim. This means the impact of CoSA's prevention program represents approximately \$30 million annually in cost savings to Canadian victims.

¹ Duwe, G. (2018). Can Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) significantly reduce sexual recidivism? Results from a randomized controlled trial in Minnesota. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 14(4), 463-484.

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 35 Canadian cities and establish itself as a key criminal justice partner both nationally and internationally. We are working hard at all levels, including federal, provincial, municipal, and the private sector, to diversify our funding sources. 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 current core members and countless new applicants would no longer be able to receive our services**. CoSA's impact and sustainability are on the line.

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

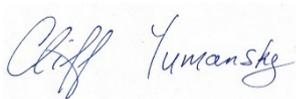
CoSA is a unique example of a community-based, non-profit organization that succeeds in meeting the measures contained in Bill C228 by having a proven approach and standardized, evidence-based programs that reduce recidivism, prevent further victimization and promote safe and healthy community reintegration of those who have committed sexual offences. Much of the hard work is done by volunteers, but funding is needed to maintain safe and effective operations by skilled staff.

Finally, CoSA was very pleased to note that the Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau, in his Mandate Letter to the Minister of Public Safety, the Hon. Marco Mendicino, tasked the Minister 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 this 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 and ‘yes’ vote 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 to the Minister of Public Safety. Most importantly, it will contribute to the **prevention** of further sexual assaults and victimizations in Canada.

Yours Sincerely,



Cliff Yumansky
Acting 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), the 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 volunteers 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.

CoSA Canada is a registered charity. CoSA's national network includes 15 sites serving 30 Canadian cities. CoSA forms circles around approximately 200 core members annually. The CoSA network shares commitment to its Good Practice framework, 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