

THE YELLOW RIBBON PLAYBOOK

for Canada

Unlocking the Second Prison

A Whole-Community Response to the Families Not Counted

Administered by the Seventh Step Society of Canada (7th Step Canada)
a Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) registered national charity



A note before we begin

This document is administered by the Seventh Step Society of Canada (7th Step Canada), a Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) registered national charity. It is the Yellow Ribbon Playbook for Canada, and it is the movement's founding text. Every other Yellow Ribbon document produced in this country, the one-pagers, the run materials, the letters to partners and volunteers, is cut from this cloth.

It is not a funding proposal. It does not ask you for money. It sets down some things that are true about Canada and points at a few doors that are already open. The asking, when it comes, comes elsewhere. What you decide to do after reading this is the entire point.

Read it front to back. It was built to be read that way.

Part 1. The Story Behind the Symbol

He's on the bus and he won't look out the window.

He's done his time. The sentence is served, the gate is behind him, and the only thing left to settle is the one question no cell block ever answers. It's whether there is still a place for him at the far end of the ride. He worked out the terms in advance with the woman waiting there. If she wants him back, she'll tie a yellow ribbon around the old oak tree in the yard. One ribbon. He will see it from the road and know. If the tree is bare, he'll keep his seat, ride on past the town, and not trouble her again.

Simple terms. A man can live by simple terms. The trouble is that last mile, the stretch where the tree swims into view and the answer becomes a thing you can't un-know. It's why he can't make himself look. So he does the only thing left to a man who's that afraid. He asks the whole bus to look for him.

You know how it ends, because the song made certain you would. The bus doesn't report one ribbon. It erupts. "A hundred yellow ribbons" on that old oak tree, and a coachload of strangers cheering a man they only met an hour ago, because every one of them understood exactly what was riding on the answer. Tony Orlando and Dawn took those three minutes to number one in the spring of 1973 and parked it there for a month. It is one of the 50 biggest songs in the history of the Billboard Hot 100. People who can't name another song from that year can still hum that one.

But here's what's easy to lose under the sing-along. The man in the song is a released prisoner. The whole ache of it, the reason a pop record about a shrub sold three million copies, is that a man who has paid down every cent the court demanded still does not know whether he gets to come home. The debt to the state was finite. It had a number and an end date. The other debt, the one that runs back and forth between a person and the people who were supposed to be his, has no legal end date. The song is a man finding out, in real time, whether that second sentence is over.

That's the whole idea. Everything Yellow Ribbon does, in Singapore and now here, grows out of **that** bus.

Singapore reached the same place by a colder and more institutional road, and then, to its credit, did something about it. In 2004 the agencies that run that country's prisons and help people return to the community after release ran the numbers on their own system and hit the familiar wall. Not the wall around the prison. The wall after it. A person could complete a sentence, could be, by every measure the state bothered to track, finished, and still find every door in the community quietly shut. Employers would not hire. Landlords would not rent. Neighbours would not meet the eye. The released person had served the sentence a judge imposed, then started serving a second one that no judge imposed and no calendar would ever end.

They gave that second sentence a name. They called it **the second prison**.

The insight that built the Yellow Ribbon Project out of that phrase is the one worth stealing whole. The first prison is the state's job. Concrete, steel, budgets, guards, the machinery of custody. The public did not build that prison and cannot tear it down. The second prison is a different structure entirely. It is made of doubt, distance, and the closed door, and it is built brick by brick by the community, which means the community holds the only key that fits it. No minister can legislate a neighbour into shaking a hand. Singapore's move was to stop asking the justice system to do a job only the public could do, and to ask the public directly. Tie the ribbon. Unlock the second prison. The campaign lifted the oak tree out of a love song and replanted it in the middle of a country.

Say it plainly, because the rest of this document leans its whole weight on it. Every person who leaves custody walks out of one prison and into another. The first has a release date. The second does not, because it is made of other people, and other people do not run on a sentence calculation. The man in the song knows this in his body. He is more afraid of the bare tree than he ever was of the cell, because the cell was a known quantity and the tree is a verdict.

And here is the part the song only half tells, the part this Playbook exists to finish. The family is already in the second prison. They have been in it the entire time. While the sentence ran, a child rode a different kind of bus, past a different kind of tree, carrying a secret to school that she is not old enough to carry. A partner learned which coworkers could be told and which could not. A mother rehearsed what to say at church. They committed no offence. They received no sentence. They serve one anyway. The second prison is not a place the released person walks into alone on release morning. It is the house his family has been living in since the arrest.

The movement arrived in Canada the way most durable things do, which is through two people in a room who could not put an idea down. In 2024, at the International Corrections and Prisons Association (ICPA) annual conference in Singapore, Iridian Grenada and Dr. Mar'Yana Fisher found themselves standing at the source of it. They ran the Yellow Ribbon Run there, in the heat, in a crowd for whom the second prison is not a metaphor but a policy the whole country has agreed to help dismantle. Somewhere in that they decided this belonged in Canada. They came home and built it. In March 2025 the first Canadian Yellow Ribbon Run went off in Abbotsford, British Columbia, administered by 7th Step Canada. Dr. Fisher serves as National Ambassador and is the movement's public face. In 2026 the run goes to three cities on the same day.

What the ribbon means here is exactly what it meant on the bus, and it is worth being precise about, because the wrong reading is sitting right there waiting to be picked up. The yellow ribbon is not a

charity pin. It is not a small flag of pity you wear to prove you feel badly about people in prison. Pity keeps its distance. Pity is the coworker who lowers her voice. The ribbon does the opposite thing. It closes distance. It is a signal sent from a community to a person and a family, and the signal reads the same as it read on the oak tree. You are still wanted here. There is a place for you at this end of the ride. Come home.

That is the entire idea. Everything that follows in this document, the training that puts people to work, the wellness that keeps them there, the runs in three cities, is machinery built to send that one signal at scale. And to send it, for the first time, to families this country has never once thought to send it to.

The song has a tidy ending. A hundred ribbons, a cheering bus, the girl in the doorway. Real life is stingier with those. But the song was never a promise that the tree would be covered. It was a picture of what it costs a person to ride that last mile not knowing. This is a document about the people still on the bus, and about the ones who never got a ribbon at all, and about what it would take for Canada to become the kind of place that ties one.

Part 2. The People We Are Talking About

Start with a number that sounds like a lot until you find out what it leaves out.

At the close of the 2023 to 2024 fiscal year, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), which runs the federal system for sentences of two years or more, was managing 22,375 people. Of those, 13,855 were inside and 8,520 were living in the community under supervision, such as parole. That is a year end count, not a daily average, and CSC runs only one of the two systems.¹ The other is provincial and territorial custody, which holds people serving shorter sentences and people awaiting trial, and it holds more of them. In January 2026, Statistics Canada published the first count that puts both systems together. Across six provinces, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia, an average of 26,297 adults sat in custody on any given day, federal and provincial facilities combined.² Those six provinces hold roughly two thirds of everyone in custody in Canada. Do the division and the national picture arrives. On an average day, close to 39,000 adults in this country are behind a locked door.³

Now here is why that is the wrong headline. Each of those adults is a knot in a web, and the web is where the damage actually lands. Count the person in the cell and you have counted the smallest part of it.

There is a boy in a grade three classroom somewhere in this country doing long division while a specific weight sits in his chest that none of the other children are carrying. He has an answer ready for where his dad is. The answer is a lie, and he has practised it. Now multiply that boy.

Until very recently, Canada could not tell you how many of him there are, which is its own kind of answer. In April 2026, researchers led by McMaster University published in the journal PLOS One the

¹Correctional Service of Canada, 2023 to 2024 Departmental Results Report. At the close of the fiscal year CSC managed 22,375 offenders, of whom 13,855 were incarcerated and 8,520 were supervised in the community. This is a year end count, not an average daily count. <https://www.canada.ca/en/correctional-service/corporate/transparency/reporting/departamental-results-reports/2023-2024.html> For the following year, see the 2024 to 2025 Departmental Results Report, which gives approximately 23,000 offenders, over 14,000 incarcerated and nearly 9,000 supervised in the community: <https://www.canada.ca/en/correctional-service/corporate/transparency/reporting/departamental-results-reports/2024-2025.html>

²Statistics Canada, The Daily: Overrepresentation of Indigenous and Black Adults in Provincial and Federal Custody, January 14, 2026. The 26,297 figure is the average daily custodial count in federal and provincial facilities combined across the six reporting provinces, which are Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/260114/dq260114b-eng.htm>

³Statistics Canada, The Daily, January 14, 2026 (see note 2). Statistics Canada states that the custodial population of the six reporting provinces accounts for approximately two thirds of the total Canadian custodial population across the provincial, territorial, and federal systems. Applied to the reported count of 26,297, this places the national average daily custodial total near 39,000. Note that the six-province count already includes federal custody and therefore cannot be added to the Correctional Service of Canada total at note 1.

first credible national estimate of its kind. Looking at five provinces, Alberta, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Saskatchewan, across the years 2015 to 2021, they identified 169,740 children under the age of eighteen who experienced a parent going to prison. That is the seven year total. In a single year it runs at about 1.2 percent of the children in those provinces. The study counted provincial custody only, which means every child with a parent doing federal time is missing from it. The authors were blunt that this is a floor and not a ceiling, an underestimate forced by the limits of the available data.⁴ Their phrase for these children is the one to sit with. Statistically invisible.⁵

The organizations that have worked this ground for years put the count higher. The Canadian Friends Service Committee (CFSC) estimated 405,373 children with a parent in custody.⁶ The Canadian Families and Corrections Network (CFCN) and its partners put it at least 450,000.⁷ Take the full spread honestly and here is what you are left holding. The peer-reviewed floor counts 169,740 children over seven years, in five provinces, in provincial custody alone. The advocacy estimates reach across the whole country and both systems. These are not rival answers to one question. They are what a country produces when nobody is ever required to ask it, and until 2026 no peer-reviewed study had troubled itself to ask at all.

The McMaster team also found the ratio that turns the abstraction into arithmetic. For every ten adults sent to prison, about seven children experience a parent's incarceration.⁸ These are not rounding errors in someone else's spreadsheet. Parental incarceration is a recognized adverse childhood experience (ACE), the same class of early harm as abuse or neglect, and it casts the same long shadows: poorer physical health, higher mortality, trouble in school, mental illness. The boy doing long division is not a sad anecdote. He is a public health statistic with a citation.

Behind most of those children is a parent who is also something the statistics rarely say out loud, which is a mother or a father who is missing bedtime.

⁴McMaster University News, Thousands of Canadian Children Growing Up with Incarcerated Parents, Study Finds, April 9, 2026. <https://news.mcmaster.ca/thousands-of-canadian-children-growing-up-with-incarcerated-parents-study-finds/> Peer-reviewed study: PLOS One, April 8, 2026. <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0344941> The study identified 169,740 children under 18 who experienced parental incarceration in Alberta, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Saskatchewan across the full 2015 to 2021 period, drawing on provincial correctional facility data only. The annual rate was 1.2 percent of children in those provinces in 2016 and 1.3 percent in 2017. The authors describe these as minimum estimates.

⁵McMaster University News and PLOS One, April 2026 (see note 4).

⁶Canadian Friends Service Committee, New Report Estimates 405,373 Children Have a Parent in Custody, December 7, 2022. <https://quakerservice.ca/news/new-report-estimates-405373-children-have-a-parent-in-custody-new-documentary-shows-the-harms-this-causes/>

⁷Canadian Families and Corrections Network, cited in CBC Radio, Fatherhood Interrupted, 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/interactives/docproject/fatherhood-interrupted>

⁸McMaster University News and PLOS One, April 2026 (see note 4). Across time periods, for every 10 adults incarcerated, about seven children experienced parental incarceration.

More than half of the men in Canadian prisons and jails are fathers.⁹ On the women's side, CSC's own survey of federally sentenced women found 77 percent had children in 2010, up from 64 percent in 1991.¹⁰ Set those two facts beside the custody totals and the scale reassembles itself. The people inside are not a sealed-off population. They are, disproportionately, parents. Which means the sentence is never served by one person. It is served by a household.

And now the honest gap, because this document does not paper over what Canada has failed to measure. For children we finally have a number, thanks to McMaster. For everyone else in the family we do not. There is no national count of the partners, the parents, the siblings, the grandparents raising kids while a son is inside. No study has put a figure on them, because no system was ever built to. The wider family remains uncounted, and that absence is not a small footnote. The empty cell in the spreadsheet is itself the argument. A country counts what it has decided matters. Canada has not decided these families matter, and you can read that decision most clearly in the space where their number should be.

One more cluster, the sharpest in this section, and the one that has to be handled with the most care.

Indigenous people are vastly over-represented at every level of Canadian custody, and their families carry the second prison in the same proportion. The Office of the Correctional Investigator (OCI), the federal prison watchdog, reports that Indigenous people account for roughly one third of everyone in federal custody while making up less than five percent of the Canadian adult population.¹¹ Statistics Canada's January 2026 release found Indigenous adults were 33.2 percent of the average daily custodial count across the six reporting provinces, against 4.3 percent of the adult population there.¹² In 2022 to 2023, Indigenous adults were 30 percent of admissions to provincial and territorial custody.¹³ Among federally sentenced women the picture is starker still. The Parole Board of Canada (PBC) reports Indigenous women as 41 percent of the federal women offender population. And in April 2022, for the

⁹CBC Radio, Fatherhood Interrupted. CBC reports the estimate that more than half of the men in Canadian prisons and jails are fathers. CBC does not attribute this specific estimate to the Canadian Families and Corrections Network. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/interactives/docproject/fatherhood-interrupted>

¹⁰Correctional Service of Canada, A Profile Comparison of Federally Sentenced Women 1991 to 2010, Research Snippet RS-10-03, October 2010. The proportion of federally sentenced women with children rose from 64 percent in 1991 to 77 percent in 2010. <https://www.canada.ca/en/correctional-service/corporate/library/research/snippet/10-03.html>¹⁰

¹¹Office of the Correctional Investigator, Annual Report 2023-24, Government of Canada. <https://oci-bec.gc.ca/en/content/office-correctional-investigator-annual-report-2023-24>

¹²Statistics Canada, The Daily, January 14, 2026 (see note 2). Indigenous adults were 33.2 percent of the average daily custodial count across the six reporting provinces, 8,734 of 26,297, against 4.3 percent of the adult population there.

¹³Justice Canada, JustFacts: The Overrepresentation of Indigenous People in the Criminal Justice System, November 2024. In 2022 to 2023, Indigenous adults made up 30 percent of admissions to provincial and territorial correctional services, against 4 percent of the Canadian adult population in 2021. <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/jf-pf/2024/nov.html>

first time, exactly half of the 596 women in federal custody were Indigenous. Two hundred and ninety-eight of them.¹⁴

Follow that line into the McMaster data and it lands where you would fear. Of the children counted in that study, 30.5 percent had at least one Indigenous parent.¹⁵ Nearly a third of Canada's statistically invisible children are Indigenous children.

7th Step Canada states these numbers plainly and claims nothing from them. We do not speak for Indigenous communities, and this Playbook does not pretend to. We name the data because leaving it out would be its own dishonesty, and we say the plain thing that follows from it, which is that any movement serious about the families behind the wall has to make room for Indigenous-led organizations to lead, on their own terms and in their own communities. The invitation is real, and it is theirs to accept or decline. The counting is the start of a conversation, not a claim to speak in anyone's place.

The same January 2026 data records a parallel over-representation. In the four provinces that break the figures down by race, Black adults are incarcerated at three times the rate of white adults.¹⁶ In the McMaster study, 5.9 percent of the affected children had at least one Black parent.¹⁷ The same caution applies, and for the same reason. The number belongs in the open. The advocacy belongs to the communities living it.

Every figure in this section is a family with the lights on. The point of the counting was never the count. It was to make it harder, from here forward, to say we did not know. Now you know. That is the only thing a number can do. What happens next was never a matter of data.

¹⁴On the 41 percent: Parole Board of Canada, 2024-2025 Performance Monitoring Report, Summary. Indigenous women accounted for 41 percent of the federal women offender population, Caucasian women 47 percent, and Black women 5 percent. <https://www.canada.ca/en/parole-board/corporate/transparency/reporting-to-canadians/performance-monitoring-report/2024-2025.html> On the April 2022 threshold: Justice Canada, JustFacts, November 2024 (see note 13) reports that for the first time, in April 2022, exactly half of the 596 federally incarcerated women were Indigenous, 298 of them, and traces the figure to the Office of the Correctional Investigator, Annual Report 2021-2022: <https://oci-bec.gc.ca/en/content/office-correctional-investigator-annual-report-2021-2022>

¹⁵McMaster University News and PLOS One, April 2026 (see note 4). Of the 169,740 children counted, 30.5 percent, or 62,120, had at least one Indigenous parent.

¹⁶Statistics Canada, The Daily, January 14, 2026 (see note 2). In the four provinces that disaggregate the data, the Black population was incarcerated at three times the rate of the white population. Black persons accounted for 12.8 percent of the custodial population on an average day, against 3.3 percent of the general adult population.

¹⁷McMaster University News and PLOS One, April 2026 (see note 4). Of the children counted, 5.9 percent, or 10,030, had at least one Black parent.

Part 3. The Second Prison in Canada

The knock comes at 6:40 in the morning, which is a time chosen by people who know that a household is at its softest just before it wakes. Cereal is out on the counter. A backpack is half-zipped by the door. Somewhere a kettle is thinking about it. Then the door is not the door anymore, it is a set of shoulders and a piece of paper, and the paper wins.

What happens in the next ninety seconds is the part no arrest report records, because no arrest report has a column for it. A seven-year-old comes to the top of the stairs in dinosaur pyjamas to see why the dog is losing its mind. He watches his father put his hands behind his back in the front hall, under the coat hooks, beside the little bench where everybody sits to pull on their boots. He will be at school in two hours. He will be asked, as children are asked every single morning of their lives, what is new. And he will have to decide, at seven, what a truth is for.

That is the border crossing into the second prison, and the family goes through it first. The person in handcuffs is headed somewhere with a name and a mailing address and a set of visiting hours. The family is headed into a country with none of those things, a country with no flag and no consulate and no release date, and they are issued their papers at the top of the stairs in their pyjamas.

Consider a composite, one invented woman built from patterns that repeat in this work until they stop looking like coincidence and start looking like design. Call her Dana, because she could be a hundred Danas. She is a licensed practical nurse. She keeps a spreadsheet of the collect-call charges taped inside a kitchen cupboard so the number never ambushes her again. When the intake officer asked her relationship to the accused, she said, quote, I am the one who still shows up, unquote, and the officer wrote spouse.

Dana's arithmetic is the arithmetic of the second prison, and it is worth doing out loud, because the sentence is served in dollars as much as in years. One income leaves the house on arrest day and does not come back. Legal fees arrive like weather. The phone becomes a toll road, because a call from an institution is not priced like a call from anywhere else on earth, and a child who wants to say goodnight is a recurring line item. Then there is the geography of Canadian custody, which was laid out by people who apparently believed the country was smaller than it is. The institution is three hours away by a bus that runs when it feels like it. A visit is a full day, a tank of gas, a packed lunch eaten in a parking lot, and a strip search of a woman's dignity performed in front of her kids so that she can sit across a bolted table from the man they call Dad for fifty minutes. She does it anyway. She does it because the alternative is teaching her children that people are disposable, and she has decided she would rather go broke than teach them that.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada, in its national action plan for criminal justice and mental health, does not treat any of this as sentiment. It treats it as infrastructure. It calls, in plain policy language, for access to free telephones so that people inside can speak with their families, for tablets and video for those in remote places, for visiting spaces built for children rather than against them.¹⁸ Read that as the state quietly conceding the thing this document is built on. The phone call is not a nicety. It is the thread by which a father stays a father. Cut the thread to save a few cents a minute and you do not save money. You manufacture the next generation's clientele, and you bill the child for the privilege.

The child is the second composite, and he is the one who keeps me up. Call him Marcus. He is small for grade three and has learned to make that an advantage in a doorway. When a classmate asked where his dad was he said, quote, working up north, unquote, which is the cover story that half of these kids arrive at independently, as if it were issued with the backpack. His teacher has him marked as a boy who has recently gone quiet, and has no framework in her training that would tell her why.

Marcus is not a metaphor, although he is carrying one. Parental incarceration is a recognized adverse childhood experience (ACE), which Part 2 established, in the same hard category as abuse and neglect, and it moves through a body on the same long fuse. Worse sleep. Worse marks. Higher odds of anxiety and depression that arrive early and overstay. Over a life, measurably higher mortality risk (see note 5). None of which Marcus can articulate, because he is eight, and because the one adult in the building who could name it has never been handed the vocabulary. Seven children experience this for every ten adults who go inside (see note 8). Marcus is sitting in a classroom right now. There is a decent chance he is sitting in yours.

The thing that makes the child's secret so heavy is a piece of folk wisdom so old it has worn smooth in the mouth, the one about the apple and the tree, the one that says a father's fall is a forecast for the son. It is offered as observation and lands as sentence. Marcus has never heard the phrase and has already absorbed its verdict, the way children absorb everything meant to be over their heads, which is completely. He has decided that the safest move is to be a boy about whom no one wonders anything at all, and so he goes quiet, and the quiet reads as fine, and fine is the most dangerous word in that classroom. A country that believed the apple line would build exactly the system we have built, one that treats the child of an incarcerated parent as a risk to be managed rather than a kid to be reached. The

¹⁸Mental Health Commission of Canada, *Finding New Pathways: An Action Plan for Criminal Justice and Mental Health in Canada*, Recommended Actions 14, 40, and 41. Recommended Action 40 lists access to free telephones, access to tablets or other digital devices for video calls especially in remote or underserved areas, and family visiting houses with child-friendly spaces. Project knowledge document.

whole premise of this movement is that the line is a lie, and that the proof of it is a community deciding to reach the boy before the forecast has a chance to come true.

And the phone becomes the whole world, which is the part that sounds sentimental until you have watched it. A call from an institution is not a conversation. It is a countdown with a voice attached, a recorded warning about the recording, a per-minute meter running under a father asking his kid how the math test went. Dana schedules her life around it. The children learn the ritual, the silence before the connect tone, the way you say the important thing first because the line might drop and often does. It is a terrible way to keep a family whole and it is, for a stretch of years, the only way there is.

And the house itself starts to come apart, quietly, the way a marriage of long standing goes bankrupt, slowly and then all at once. Landlords have a sense for a household that has lost an earner. The lease is not renewed, and no reason that would ever hold up anywhere is given, because none is needed. The family that was fraying moves to a smaller place in a worse spot with a longer bus to that grade three classroom, and the one stable thing in Marcus's week, the desk that is reliably his, gets harder to reach. Housing is not a side effect of the second prison. Housing is often the wall that goes up next.

Here is the cruelty with the sharpest edge, and this document will not soften it, because softening it is a kind of lie. The second prison does not open its gate on release day. The person comes home to a family that has spent two years learning to run without him, to a partner who has become the sole load-bearing wall and is not sure she remembers how to lean, to a child who rehearsed this reunion so many times that the real one cannot possibly match the tape. Release is not the end of the sentence for the family. It is the start of a new and unlisted one, the negotiation over whether the returning person gets to be a member of the household again or merely a guest in it, and that negotiation is the exact thing the man in the song is riding the bus toward. The first prison had a door. The second one has a doorway, and everybody has to decide, over and over, who is allowed to stand in it.

None of this is an argument about crime. It is a description of a country that built a sophisticated machine for punishing individuals and never once checked who else was standing close enough to catch the ricochet. The answer, it turns out, is a nurse with a spreadsheet in a cupboard and a boy who thinks his father works up north. They committed nothing. They are serving anyway. The least we can do, before we ask anyone to fix it, is have the decency to look at it with the lights on.

I have sat in the parking lots. I have watched the packed lunch eaten off a dashboard and the small dignified reassembly a woman performs in a rear-view mirror before she drives her kids home from a place that took something from all of them and gave nothing back. You do not forget the reassembly. It is the most human thing I know of, and we have arranged the whole apparatus so that almost no one

ever has to see it. This section was the seeing. The rest of the document is what you do once you cannot un-see it.

Part 4. What 7th Step Canada Believes

A charity is a legal fiction with a filing cabinet, and anyone who tells you otherwise is selling a gala ticket. So let us be exact about the fiction, because precision here is a form of respect. The Seventh Step Society of Canada (7th Step Canada) is a Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) registered national charity, and every charitable, grant, and legal document that carries the Yellow Ribbon name in this country is signed by one person. Pete Brown, Executive Director, sole national signing authority. Not a committee, not a rotating chair, not a handshake. One name on the line, which is how accountability is supposed to work and so rarely does.

That is the machinery. Here is the belief that the machinery exists to protect, and it fits on a single line. 7th Step Canada is the caretaker of this movement, not its owner. The distinction is not modesty. It is doctrine. A movement about belonging that behaved like a landlord would be a joke with itself as the punchline. The ribbon does not belong to a charity in Ottawa or a founder in British Columbia. It belongs to the tree, and the tree belongs to whoever ties something to it. 7th Step Canada holds the paperwork, the standard, and the discipline. It does not hold the meaning. The meaning is loaned out, community by community, and the whole point is to give it away well.

Under that belief sits an architecture, and it has three layers, which are worth naming plainly because they are often mistaken for a menu when they are in fact a building. The first layer is employment and trades, the work of getting people trained, ticketed, and standing on a job site earning a real wage. The second layer is workplace wellness, the work of keeping them there once they arrive, because a foothold that cannot bear weight is not a foothold. The third layer, the one this document lives in, is the movement itself, the run, the ribbon, and above all the family. Three layers, one structure. The employment program speaks the language of industry, because industry is who it is talking to and industry is not moved by poetry. The movement speaks the language of community, because community is who holds the key. Both statements are true at once and neither dilutes the other, in the same way that a house has a foundation and a roof and does not have to apologize to either.

The founding principles are four, and a board member should be able to say them from memory in an elevator.

First, second chances are about belonging, not charity. Charity is a coin dropped from a height. Belonging is a chair pulled out at a table. This movement is in the furniture business, not the coin business. When we use the phrase second chances, and we use it openly and proudly, we mean a standing invitation home, not a discount on someone's guilt.

Second, the community holds the key. This is the Singapore insight, borrowed without embarrassment, because good ideas do not need a passport. The first prison is the state's to build and the state's to run. The second prison is built by ordinary people out of doubt and distance and the closed door, which means no minister can unlock it and no budget can be voted to demolish it. Only the neighbour can. The entire strategy is to hand the neighbour the key and trust that most people, asked directly, would rather open a door than keep it shut.

Third, the family is at the centre. Not adjacent to the work. The centre of it. Everything else in this organization, the tickets, the wellness, the runs in three cities, radiates out from the household that has been serving a sentence it was never given. Put the family anywhere but the middle and the whole thing tilts. This is the belief that keeps the movement honest when the money starts talking, and the money always starts talking. A program can drift toward whatever its funders find easiest to measure, and the easiest thing to measure is never a family. So the family goes in the centre and stays there on purpose, as ballast, so that when the pull comes to make this about something more fundable and less human, there is a fixed point to steer back to.

Fourth, we count who we invite. This is the caretaker's hardest promise. 7th Step Canada names the data honestly and claims nothing from it. Indigenous and Black families carry the second prison in numbers that Part 2 laid out without flinching, and the correct response to those numbers is not to appoint ourselves anyone's spokesman. It is to build the room, hold the door, and make space for Indigenous-led and Black-led organizations to walk in and lead on their own terms, in their own communities, with their own hands on the key. We do not speak for. We make room. The difference between those two verbs is the difference between an ally and a nuisance.

So what does 7th Step Canada actually believe. It believes the sentence is served by a household and should be answered by a community. It believes a charity's job is to be a reliable set of hands and an unglamorous set of standards, and then to get out of the light. It believes that the language of industry and the language of community can share a building without either one lying. And it believes, with the specific stubbornness of people who have watched the alternative up close, that the families behind the wall are worth counting and worth inviting.

None of that is negotiable. Most of the rest is.

A caretaker is a humble word for a serious job. It is the person who keeps the lights on and the roof sound in a house that belongs to other people, so that when those people come home there is a home to come to. 7th Step Canada is content to be that, and slightly suspicious of any version of this work that

would rather be the owner. The tree was never ours. We are just the ones who promised to keep the yard.

Part 5. The Run as Symbol

On the morning of September 26, 2026, in three Canadian cities at once, a number of people are going to put on yellow and move through their own downtown at a pace that would embarrass an actual athlete, and it is going to be one of the more radical things this country does that year, although almost no one watching from a coffee-shop window will clock it as radical. It will look like a fun run. Bibs, a start banner, a kid on a father's shoulders, somebody's aunt walking the whole thing in sensible shoes and finishing anyway. Abbotsford, Halifax, and Montreal, the same sun, the same colour, the same idea crossing four time zones of it.

Here is what makes it more than a fun run, and it is worth saying slowly, because the entire strategy hides in this one distinction. A charity walk asks you to feel something about a group you will never meet. The Yellow Ribbon Run does the opposite. It puts the group next to you and asks you to move with them. On that start line, a child runs beside a father who came home eight months ago. A partner walks beside a mother out on parole. Somebody rolls the route in a chair beside a grandparent who has been raising two kids on a pension since the arrest. They are not a cause you are supporting from a safe distance. They are the person whose elbow is next to yours, and by the second kilometre you have stopped being able to tell who in the yellow is the returned citizen and who is the neighbour, which is precisely the point.

For the families whose person is still inside, the run does a stranger and more beautiful thing. It sends a message back through the wall. Every ribbon on that route is the oak tree again, tied by a whole city this time instead of one girl in a doorway, and the message it carries down the phone line and into the visiting room the following weekend is the same three-word sentence the whole movement is built to deliver. You are wanted. There is a ribbon on the tree for your family, tied by people who never met you, and it is still there, and it is still yellow, and you are still expected at this end of the ride.

This is what the campaign people in Singapore understood and named with a phrase I have never improved on. It is an attitude intervention. You do not change a country's mind about ex-offenders and their families by handing out a pamphlet. Nobody has ever read a pamphlet and felt their heart move. You change it by getting ten thousand ordinary people to spend a Saturday morning physically standing with the very families they have spent years quietly stepping around, and letting the standing do the work the pamphlet never could. Proximity is the argument. The run is just the excuse to get everyone close enough for the argument to land.

The lineage matters, so credit where it is owed. The oak tree came out of a 1973 number one that Part 1 already sat with, a pop song about a released prisoner that outsold its own silliness because everyone

who heard it understood exactly what was riding on a bare branch. Singapore lifted the tree out of the song in 2004 and planted it in the middle of a national reintegration campaign, and its signature act, year after year, became a run. Ten thousand people in walking shoes on a Sunday, offenders and ex-offenders and cabinet ministers and schoolteachers on the same road to the same idea. Canada is not copying that. Canada is joining it, late, in its own accent, with its own families on the start line.

There is a hockey image the movement uses in its own materials, and it earns its place here in one sentence rather than ten. The run is a stretch pass. It is the long, committed feed up the ice to a teammate who has slipped into open space, the pass you make on faith because you can see the opening before the play develops. That is what a city does when it lines a route with yellow for a family it has not met. It commits the pass. It trusts that the person is going to be there to receive it. Most of the time, if you make the pass with enough conviction, they are.

None of this requires anyone to feel sorry for anyone. That is the quiet genius of moving your feet instead of wringing your hands. Pity keeps its distance and calls the distance compassion. A run closes the distance and calls it a Saturday. By the finish line nobody is being pitied. Everybody is just tired, and slightly sunburned, and standing in the same field, which is the only place from which the door of the second prison can actually be opened, because that door only ever opens from the outside, and only by a hand that is close enough to reach it.

I have run this route in another country, in heat that felt personal, in a crowd for whom the second prison was policy rather than metaphor, and I remember thinking that we were not really running anywhere. We were rehearsing a welcome. That is all a Yellow Ribbon Run has ever been. A whole city practising, out loud and in daylight, the thing it will need to be good at when the bus finally pulls in and someone is too frightened to look out the window.

Part 6. The Field We Are Playing In

Nobody arriving at this work is arriving at an empty field, and any organization that pretends otherwise deserves the skepticism it is about to earn. There are people who have been tending this ground for decades, mostly on shoestrings, mostly without a run or a brand or a single national headline, and the honest first move is to name them and mean it. 7th Step Canada is not here to compete with them. It is here to build the thing none of them was ever resourced to build, which is a national movement with a public face, and to do it in a way that makes their work more visible rather than less.

Start with the elders of the field. The Canadian Families and Corrections Network (CFCN), a Canada Revenue Agency registered charity incorporated in 1992, has spent the better part of three decades on the plain, unfashionable proposition that a family kept connected is a family and a community made safer.¹⁹ They run the toll-free line, the letter-writing kits, the fathering programs inside federal institutions. They are the national body for families and corrections, and they are complementary to this movement, not competitive with it, in the specific sense that a road and a car are complementary. One of them is not much use without the other.

Alongside them, doing the advocacy that CFCN's service work leaves less room for, is the Canadian Coalition for Children with Incarcerated Parents (CCCIP), a network of organizations and individuals that emerged from a national dialogue and now presses a single relentless point.²⁰ The best interests of the child should be a primary consideration at every stage of the justice system, not an afterthought discovered somewhere around sentencing. The Coalition is the reason the phrase best interests of the child is starting to appear in Canadian policy conversations where it used to be absent. That is slow, unglamorous, essential work, and this movement's job is to give it a bigger room to shout in.

Then the specialists, each holding a corner of the tarp. The Elizabeth Fry Societies, the long-established national network working with criminalized women and gender-diverse people, who understood the family dimension of incarceration long before it was a talking point. Kids with Incarcerated Parents (KIP) Canada, founded in Toronto in 2011 as FEAT for Children and renamed since, which does the gloriously concrete work of putting children in vehicles and driving them to see a parent, because a visit that a family cannot physically reach is a right that exists only on paper, and which runs the after-school and mentorship programming aimed at the self-esteem and security of kids who are carrying a secret to

¹⁹Canadian Families and Corrections Network, incorporated as a national charitable organization in 1992. Canada Revenue Agency charitable registration number 875428062RR0001. <https://www.cfcn-rcafd.org/our-story>

²⁰Canadian Coalition for Children with Incarcerated Parents. <https://wearecccip.ca/>

school.²¹ And on the west coast, the JustKids Initiative in British Columbia, whose summer camps and Saturday Club give these children the one thing the second prison is most efficient at stealing, which is an ordinary childhood afternoon with other kids who get it (see note 18).

One program deserves singling out, because the country's own prison watchdog has singled it out. The Dad HERO program, a partnership between the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) and CFCN, helps incarcerated fathers stay fathers, and it has been recognized as a best practice by the Office of the Correctional Investigator (see note 18). It works. It is exactly the kind of thing that should be everywhere and is instead in a handful of institutions, funded hand to mouth, waiting for a movement large enough to carry it the rest of the way.

So the field is not empty. It is, if anything, quietly heroic. But walk the whole length of it and a gap opens up that no single organization in it was ever built to fill, and naming that gap is not a criticism of any of them. It is simply the honest survey.

There is no national structure holding this work together. There is no shared brand that a family in Halifax and a family in Abbotsford would both recognize and both feel invited by. There is no public event at scale, nothing that puts these families on a start line in daylight and asks a whole city to stand with them. Each of the organizations above is doing indispensable work inside its own patch, with its own funding cycle and its own logo, and the sum of all that excellent patchwork is still a patchwork. What is missing is the thing that ties the patches into a flag. A common colour. A common day. A common front door wide enough that a church, a hockey club, and a school counsellor could all walk through it and find themselves, to their surprise, on the same team.

That is the empty lane, and it is the only lane 7th Step Canada intends to run in. Not the service lane, which is full of people better at it than we are. Not the advocacy lane, which has skilled hands already on the wheel. The convening lane, the work of bringing everyone to the same table. The movement lane. The job of being the yellow that everyone else's excellent, underfunded, uncoordinated work can finally be seen against. A convener does not win by being the biggest organization on the field. It wins by making the whole field visible at once, and then handing it a colour to wear.

There is a temptation, when you arrive somewhere late, to announce that you have come to fix it. Resist it. The people in this field did not need rescuing. They needed reinforcements, and a flag high enough

²¹Kids with Incarcerated Parents (KIP) Canada, formerly Fostering, Empowering, and Advocating Together (FEAT) for Children, founded 2011, Greater Toronto Area. The featforchildren.org domain no longer resolves. <https://www.kipcanada.org/our-story>

that the country could finally find them under it. That is a humbler job than saviour and a more useful one. It is also, as it happens, the only job actually open.

Part 7. What Good Looks Like Elsewhere

Canadians have a national reflex about criminal justice, and it points at Norway. We look north to Scandinavia the way a certain kind of dinner guest name-drops a country he visited once, and we come home with photographs of humane cells and low rates of reoffending and a comfortable sense that the good ideas live somewhere colder and more virtuous than here. It is a fine reflex. It is also, for the particular problem this document is about, pointed at the wrong hemisphere. For the second prison, and specifically for the families in it, the country that did something worth stealing is warm, crowded, and famously unsentimental. It is Singapore.

In 2004, Singapore looked at its own numbers on how released prisoners were faring and named the wall that everyone in this field eventually hits, the wall after the wall, the community's quiet refusal to let a person who has served a sentence actually come home. They gave it the name this document has borrowed, the second prison, and then they did the thing that separates a slogan from a strategy. They built a fund. The Yellow Ribbon Fund (YRF), established in 2004, was the first national charitable fund in that country devoted entirely to ex-offenders and their families, and it did not stay small. By 2018 it paid out over a million dollars in a single year, S\$1,161,910 to be exact, reaching 3,816 ex-offenders, families, and children, with a standing focus on the very things the second prison attacks first, which is housing, family reconnection, and the ability to keep the lights on during the hardest stretch.²²

Do not over-read that. A Canadian playbook that promised to reproduce Singapore's results would be lying, and this one will not. Singapore is a city-state with a particular relationship between government and community that Canada does not have and could not build if it wanted to. The point of looking at Singapore is not the program. It is the principle. A country decided, at the level of policy and then at the level of the street, that the community was responsible for the second prison and that the family was inside it, and it organized itself around that decision in public, every year, in yellow. That is the portable part. That is the part that fits in a suitcase.

And it does fit, which is the encouraging bit. The idea travelled. Fiji brought a version of the Yellow Ribbon into its own corrections service in 2008, built on the Singapore model, complete with a public walk and the same insistence that stigma is the real sentence and the community holds the key.²³ The idea has taken root in other places as well, from Hong Kong to the Philippines to the Czech Republic (see

²²Tan Kwang Cheak (Keong), The Yellow Ribbon Project Story, public lecture paper, 2020, on the Yellow Ribbon Fund established in 2004 as the first national charitable fund devoted entirely to ex-offenders and their families. In 2018 the fund disbursed S\$1,161,910, benefitting 3,816 ex-offenders, families, and children, per the Yellow Ribbon Fund Annual Report 2018. Project knowledge document.

²³Fiji Corrections Service, Yellow Ribbon Project, launched 12 October 2008 by Mr Desmond Chin of the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises, on the Singapore model. <https://www.corrections.gov.fj/yellow-ribbon-project/>

note 22). None of them copied Singapore's homework line for line, because you cannot, and all of them kept the one transferable insight, which is that reintegration is something a community does, not something a corrections department can do to a community on its behalf. Canada, arriving now, is not the pioneer. It is the notably late adopter of an idea that has already been proven portable on three continents.

The evidence base here at home has caught up enough to make lateness embarrassing rather than merely unfortunate. The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC), in its national action plan *Finding New Pathways*, did the work of turning the family question into adopted federal policy, and it did so in the form of specific, numbered Recommended Actions (RAs). Recommended Action 14 calls for children's best interests to be considered in sentencing decisions involving parents, with expanded support for the children and families that incarceration touches. Recommended Action 40 calls for family visits and connection to be actively encouraged, down to the concrete detail of free telephones and video access. Recommended Action 41 calls for peer support across every juncture of the system (see note 18). These are not aspirations someone filed and forgot. They are policy. What has been missing is not the mandate. It is the implementation, the actual hands doing the actual work in the actual communities, and that gap is precisely the shape of this movement.

The MHCC report also does Canadians the favour of reminding us that the family principle is not a Singaporean import at all but an international human rights baseline we have already signed. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and specifically Article 9, holds that a child's best interests should be a primary consideration when the law acts on a parent, and that children should not be needlessly separated from parents (see note 18). Canada ratified that. We agreed to it in principle decades ago. We have simply never built the community machinery that would make it true in practice on a wet Tuesday in a visiting room.

There is even a domestic template for how a community-scale response organizes itself, and it comes from an adjacent field. The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA), in its 2026 *Playbook for Action*, worked with local government and community leaders from across the country to assemble a menu of practical, community-level interventions that towns and small cities can actually adopt.²⁴ The subject matter is different. The mechanism is the lesson. It shows that Canadian municipalities will convene around a shared community response grounded in evidence when someone bothers to build the table and set the places. The second prison has never had that table. Building it is

²⁴Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, *Playbook for Action: Practical Interventions Small Cities Can Use to Tackle Canada's Substance Use Crisis*, 2026. <https://www.ccsa.ca/en/playbook-action-practical-interventions-small-cities-can-use-tackle-canadas-substance-use-crisis>

not a leap into the unknown. It is a walk down a path other people have already cleared, in a colour we have chosen, toward a door we already agreed, on paper, ought to be open.

The uncomfortable truth of this section is that there is nothing to invent. The idea works, the idea travels, the policy is already written, the treaty is already signed. All that is missing is the doing, which is the only thing that was ever missing, and the only thing a country cannot import. Norway is not walking through it for us. Singapore already showed its work. The homework left on the table is ours, and it has our name on it.

Part 8. The Families That Have Not Been Asked

There is a scene near the end of a certain baseball movie where a man builds something absurd in a cornfield on the strength of a whispered promise that if he does, the people who need it will come. It is a sentimental film and I am a hard audience, and it has nonetheless got hold of the truest thing about this particular moment, which is that the families of the second prison are already here, already in every institution this document could name, and the only reason they have not come is that nobody ever built the thing, and nobody ever asked. This section is about the asking. It is a list of front doors that have never once been knocked on, and the size of what is standing behind each of them.

Start with the faith communities, because they are already doing the work and do not have a name for it. Every congregation of any size in this country is quietly carrying a few households through a crisis it has learned not to discuss out loud, and a fair number of those crises have a person in custody at the centre of them. The pastor knows. The pastor has always known. What the pastor has never had is a movement to plug that private, awkward, faithful work into, a public act through which a congregation could say from the front steps what it already whispers in the back pews, which is that these families belong to us and we are not ashamed of them. Hand a faith community a ribbon and a run and you have not given it a new burden. You have given a name and a colour to a thing it was already doing in the dark.

Then the schools, which is the door that ought to keep a whole country up at night. About one percent of Canadian children experience a parent going to prison every single year, and for every ten adults sent inside, seven children are left carrying it (see notes 5 and 8). Do the arithmetic on a class of thirty and the chances that not one child in the room is quietly serving this sentence are slim. That child is in the building right now. And the counsellor, the teacher, the principal, every trained adult in the place, has been handed a framework for grief, for divorce, for a dozen other adverse childhood experiences, and never once, in any faculty of education in this country, a framework for this one. The largest institution we have for reaching these children is the one institution that has never been told they are in the room. That is not a failure of schools. It is a failure to ask them, and it is fixable in an afternoon of will.

Then the employers, and here the pitch practically writes itself for anyone who runs a payroll. Men make up roughly 92 percent of the federal custody population and 85 percent of the provincial (see note 9), which means the second prison is overwhelmingly a story about somebody's father, and somebody's father is very likely on your crew, or married to someone on your crew, or the reason a good worker has started missing Mondays. Human resources has a binder for bereavement and a binder for parental leave and no binder at all for the employee whose partner is inside and whose life has quietly become a

logistics problem with no slack in it. An employer who joined this movement would not be doing charity. It would be doing retention. The families are already in the workforce. Nobody has ever handed the workforce a way to hold them.

Then healthcare, where the second prison shows up as an untreated public health problem hiding in plain sight. The family members carrying this load have measurably worse health, more depression, more anxiety, more of the physical illness that chronic stress deposits in a body over years (see note 5), and they carry it without a diagnosis code, without a clinic, without anyone in the system ever connecting the chest pain to the son who is three hours up the highway. A movement that made this population visible to the people who treat populations would not be inventing a new disease. It would be naming an old one that has never been allowed on the chart.

And then telecommunications, the least obvious door and in some ways the most ready to open. The infrastructure that carries a father's goodnight to a child already exists inside institutions, laid down by the companies that run prison communication, and Recommended Action 40 of the federal action plan explicitly calls for that connection to be made easier and cheaper rather than harder and more expensive (see note 18). Synergy Technology Solutions operates in that space as a partner in the movement, purely on the family-connection side of the wall, and the point is not the plumbing. The point is that the pipe is already in the ground. What has never been attached to it is meaning. A phone call priced and framed as a grudging privilege keeps a father barely tethered. The same call, understood as the thread the whole community has agreed to protect, keeps him a parent. Same wire. Different country.

Line those doors up and look at them together, because the cumulative picture is the actual argument. Faith, schools, employers, healthcare, and the companies that carry the calls. Five enormous groups, each already in daily contact with these families, each holding a piece of the answer, and not one of them has ever been formally invited to the table, because until now there was no table and no one whose job it was to send the invitations. This is not a problem of scarcity. It is a problem of introduction. The congregation we have never imagined is sitting in a building we drive past every day, and the only thing between us and them is a movement large enough, and public enough, and unashamed enough to walk up and knock.

The cornfield line everyone remembers is a promise about building. The line people forget is what the man is actually promised in return, which is not a crowd but a reckoning, a chance for people to come and remember something they had let themselves forget. That is the offer here too. Not a fun run and a

hashtag. A country given the chance to remember that these families were always its own, and were only ever waiting to be asked.

Part 9. The Provincial Affiliate Structure

Suppose you are reading this in Halifax, or Winnipeg, or some town the national conversation forgets except during an election, and suppose the thing this document keeps circling has started to feel less like someone else's movement and more like a job with your name on it. Good. This section is the one you read twice. It is the plain, unromantic account of what it actually means to plant a Yellow Ribbon affiliate where you live, what the national body hands you, what you are expected to bring, and who owns the colour once you start wearing it.

The ownership question first, because everything else hangs off it. The brand belongs to 7th Step Canada, held in trust for the whole movement, with Pete Brown as Executive Director carrying sole signing authority on national legal and funding documents. That is not head office flexing. It is the thing that protects you. Yellow Ribbon Project Canada is a controlled brand, with a trademark filing in progress for the English names YELLOW RIBBON PROJECT and YELLOW RIBBON RUN, in the trademark classes that cover events and community services, under 7th Step Canada ownership. The reason a national caretaker holds the mark rather than any single chapter is simple and defensive. It means that when a family in your city sees the yellow, they can trust it means the same thing it means everywhere else, and that no one, ever, can hijack the colour for a purpose the movement would be ashamed of. A shared brand is only worth wearing if someone reputable is guarding the seams.

So here is the trade, stated like the deal it is. What the affiliate gets from the national body is substantial and it is real. You get the brand, with its guardrails and its growing recognition. You get the accumulated know-how of how this is done. You get the run framework, a proven annual event you do not have to invent from a blank page. And you get this Playbook, the founding text, so that you are never guessing at what the movement believes or why. You are not being handed a franchise agreement and a coupon. You are being handed a working template and a name worth standing behind.

What you bring is the half no national body can supply from a distance, which is everything local. You bring the relationships, the fact that you know which pastor actually shows up and which one only sends regrets, which employer will say yes and which will say yes and mean no. You bring the event logistics, the permits and the volunteers and the route that looks obvious only to someone who lives there. And you bring the map of your own family services, the knowledge of who is already doing this work in your city so that the movement arrives as reinforcement rather than as a stranger claiming empty ground. The national body knows the movement. You know the neighbourhood. Neither is worth much without the other, which is the entire reason the structure is a partnership and not a head office with outposts.

The run is the spine of it, the annual anchor that everything else hangs from. September 26, 2026 is the inaugural three-city run, Abbotsford and Halifax and Montreal on one day under one colour, and it is deliberately built to be copied. The model is designed so that a fourth city can join in a future year, and a fifth, each new start line an addition to the same movement rather than a competing event, so that the map fills in the way a movement is supposed to fill in, one committed local partner at a time, until a run in yellow on a late-September Saturday is simply a thing this country does.

For a sense of what an affiliate looks like when it is a real organization rather than a diagram, look east. Steven Deveau and 7th Step Nova Scotia are the working Halifax example, an established local presence with roots in this field, exactly the kind of partner the structure is built to empower rather than absorb. An affiliate like that is not a branch plant taking orders from a distant office. It is a local body that has chosen to wear a national colour because the colour makes its own work more visible, and that keeps its own face, its own relationships, and its own judgment about its own city. The national caretaker guards the brand. The local affiliate runs the neighbourhood. That is the whole machine, and its simplicity is the point.

None of this is complicated, and it is not supposed to be. A movement that required a law degree to join would have already lost. What it requires instead is a local partner willing to bring the neighbourhood, a national body willing to guard the colour, and one day a year when both of them stand on the same start line and prove to a city that the thing is real. Everything else is logistics, and logistics have never been the hard part. The hard part was always finding the people willing to build something where nothing stood. If that is you, the template is in your hands.

I have watched people talk themselves out of building things because the diagram looked too big and the ground looked too empty. The diagram is not the movement. The start line is. You do not have to hold up the whole national structure. You have to hold up one route, in one city, for one morning, and tie enough yellow along it that a family can see it from the road. That is a job a person can actually do. Most of the important ones are.

Part 10. Possible Paths Forward

This is the section where a document like this one usually reaches into your jacket and goes for the wallet, and this one is not going to. It made that promise on the first page and it intends to keep it. What follows is not an ask. It is a survey of doors, some of them already standing open, and an honest account of what is behind each. The asking, when it comes, comes elsewhere, in other documents built for that purpose. This one states realities and points. What you do about the doors is, as it has been from the beginning, the entire point.

The widest door is one the country has already unlocked and mostly forgotten to walk through. The Mental Health Commission of Canada's action plan, *Finding New Pathways*, is adopted federal policy, and three of its Recommended Actions are, in effect, a description of this movement's work waiting for someone to do it. Recommended Action 14, children's best interests in sentencing. Recommended Action 40, family connection and communication. Recommended Action 41, peer support across the system (see note 18). Implementation of that plan runs through Health Canada, which means the policy question of whether Canada should invest in the families of the incarcerated has already been answered, in writing, in the affirmative. The only open question is who does the implementing, in which communities, wearing what colour. A movement that showed up as the ready-built community vehicle for adopted federal policy is not asking government to take a risk. It is offering to do a job the government has already said needs doing.

The provincial door is standing ajar and nobody has noticed. Every province and territory runs a child welfare or child services ministry whose mandate, read plainly, already covers these children, because a child whose parent is inside is a child at heightened risk by the state's own definitions. And yet not one of those ministries has a Yellow Ribbon partnership, or anything like one, because the children in question have been statistically invisible for so long that the systems built to protect children never learned to see them. The door is not locked. It has simply never had anyone knock and say, out loud, that these are your kids too.

The school boards are a door and a data collection point at once. The Canadian Coalition for Children with Incarcerated Parents has called for routine, systematic counting of children affected by parental incarceration (see note 20), and the natural place to do that counting is the place the children already are, which is school. A country that finally decided to count these children the way it counts every other at-risk group would not need to build a new instrument to do it. It would need to ask an existing one, the school system, to open its eyes. The Playbook names that possibility without demanding it, in the same way the rest of this document names doors without kicking them.

The connection door involves partners who belong strictly to the movement itself, and the distinction is one this document guards carefully. On the family-connection side of the wall, Synergy Technology Solutions is a movement partner whose infrastructure already carries the calls that keep families tethered, and Recommended Action 40's call for easier, cheaper family contact is the policy wind at that partnership's back (see note 18). Internationally, the Connecting Hearts foundation, established in 2022 to improve the lives of children of prisoners, is a natural point of alignment for a movement built around exactly those children.²⁵ State the connection before anyone else has to. Connecting Hearts was established on the initiative of Oliver Drews, CEO of the Telio Group, and Synergy Technology Solutions is Telio's Canadian arm. Same corporate family, named here on purpose. Both are movement partnerships, neither is a funding relationship, and neither should be confused with any individual advisory arrangement, which is a separate matter governed by its own conflict-of-interest process. They are proof that the connective tissue for this work already exists and is already in motion. It has just never been gathered under one colour.

There is counsel available too, of the kind that opens doors from the inside. Howard Sapers, Executive Director of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA), former federal Correctional Investigator, and a Board Trustee at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), sits at the intersection of the credibility this movement needs and the rooms it needs to be introduced into. Strategic counsel of that calibre is not a funding source and is not described as one. It is a door-opener, and door-openers are worth more than cheques at the stage a movement is in when it is still teaching a country to see the problem.

And there is a policy extension the movement can name without ever taking a position on criminal justice itself. Advocates, including the Canadian Families and Corrections Network, have called for the children of incarcerated people to be recognized within the Canadian Victims Bill of Rights (CVBR), on the straightforward logic that a child who loses a parent to custody has suffered a harm the child did nothing to cause (see note 7). This document takes no side on sentencing, on punishment, on any of the contested questions of criminal justice policy, and it does not need to. It simply notes that the recognition of these children as a class of people harmed by the system is a live conversation in this country, and that a movement built to make them visible is naturally aligned with it. Naming the door is not the same as choosing what is behind it. The movement names it and leaves the choosing to the country.

²⁵Connecting Hearts, Foundation for Children of Prisoners, launched 2022 on the initiative of Oliver Drews, CEO of the Telio Group. <https://www.connectinghearts.eu/en/home/>

Read the doors together and a pattern emerges that should be encouraging rather than daunting. Almost nothing here needs to be created. The federal policy exists. The provincial mandate exists. The data point exists. The phone lines exist, the counsel exists, the policy conversation exists. What has never existed is the thing that gathers all of it under one colour, on one day, in front of a whole community, and turns a scattered set of open doors into a movement that people can actually walk through. That thing does not require an invention. It requires an invitation, and the nerve to send it.

Pointing at a door is a modest act, and this document has done a great deal of it, on purpose. The immodest act is walking through, and that one was never mine to perform on anyone's behalf. All a Playbook can honestly do is stand in the hallway, name what is open, and refuse to pretend the doors are locked when they are not. They are not locked. They never were. That was always the hardest thing to believe, and the only thing worth believing.

Part 11. The Yellow Ribbon Tied Round the Old Oak Tree

Go back to the bus, because the whole thing has been the bus from the start.

A man is coming home and he cannot make himself look out the window, and everything this document has said across ten parts is really just an argument about that one paralyzed moment, the last mile, the stretch where the tree comes into view and the answer becomes a thing you cannot un-know. The 1973 song gave that moment three minutes and a tidy ending, a hundred ribbons and a cheering coach and a girl in a doorway, and sold three million copies because everyone who ever heard it understood, without being told, that the terror in it was not about a prison at all. It was about a homecoming. It was about whether there is still a place set at the far end of the ride.

What this Playbook has tried to do is widen the frame of that song until you can see who else is standing in the picture. Because the man on the bus was never riding alone, even when the lyric let you think he was. There was a family already at the other end, already living inside the second prison, already carrying a sentence no judge pronounced. The girl in the doorway had been serving it the whole time he was away. And somewhere just out of frame there was a child, tying something to a branch, who had rehearsed this moment more times than any child should have to, and who needed the answer to be yes more than the man on the bus did.

Now look at who is holding the ribbon, because that is the part the song never showed and this movement exists to change. In the song, the ribbon is tied by one person, and the whole ache of the thing is that the man does not know whether even one will be there. The movement's revision is quiet and total. It puts the ribbon in more hands than one. It gives it to a child whose parent is still inside, so that the tying becomes a message sent back through the wall, a way for a kid to say you are still wanted here to a father who cannot hear it any other way. And it gives it to a whole community that has decided, deliberately, in daylight, to hold the key differently than it used to. A ribbon tied by a family is a private hope. A ribbon tied by a city is a public verdict. The movement is in the business of turning the first into the second.

That is the entire invitation, and it is worth stating without a single word of charity in it, because charity would cheapen it. 7th Step Canada is not asking a country to pity these families. Pity keeps its distance and calls the distance kindness, and the second prison is built out of exactly that distance. The invitation is to close it. To tie the ribbon not because it is a nice thing to do but because it is a true thing to do, because the families are here whether we trouble ourselves to count them or not, and because a country gets to decide, the way Singapore decided and Fiji decided, whether it is going to be the kind of place that leaves the branch bare or the kind of place that covers the tree.

We are choosing to count. That is the whole of it. Not because counting is comfortable, it is not, and not because the numbers flatter us, they do not. We are choosing to count because the alternative is to keep a nurse's spreadsheet taped inside a cupboard where no one has to look at it, to keep a boy at the top of the stairs in his dinosaur pyjamas explaining to a classroom that his father works up north, to keep an entire population of the innocent serving a sentence in a country with no name and no flag and no release date. We have looked at that arrangement with the lights on, across ten parts, and decided it will not do.

So this is the thing on offer, plainly, at the end. Not a pipeline, though there is one, and it matters. Not a wellness program, though there is one, and it works. Underneath the machinery, the only thing that was ever really on the table is a message, the same three-word message that lifted a shrub into a national symbol and a national symbol into a movement on three continents. It is the message a community sends when it lines a route in yellow for a family it has never met. It is the message a child ties to a branch for a parent who cannot see it yet. It is the message this whole country is capable of sending, has always been capable of sending, and has simply never been asked to send at scale. You are still wanted here. There is a place for you at this end of the ride. Come home.

The song ended with the tree covered. Real life is stingier, and this document has been honest about that from the first page. But the covered tree was never a promise. It was a picture of what a welcome looks like when a whole busload of strangers decides, all at once, that a man they met an hour ago gets to come home. That is not a fantasy about ribbons. It is a fact about people, and it is available to Canada any morning it decides to want it. The branch is bare right now. It does not have to stay that way. The only question the Playbook has ever really been asking is whether we are willing to be the ones who tie something to it.

For the formerly incarcerated Canadians, men and women, who could not look out the window, the 7th Step Society of Canada knows exactly what that last mile costs. We know that no policy, no pipeline, no program ever answered the question riding in the pit of a person's stomach on that ride. Only the tree answers it. Only the ribbon. Only the people at the far end who decided, before your bus even came into view, that the answer was going to be yes. That's what this movement is for. It is not here to run a race or fund a service. It is here to make sure that when the bus finally pulls in, somewhere in Canada, someone thought to tie a ribbon. We encourage all who can to do so. Someone is riding toward it right now.