

Saskatoon Roundtable

November 19, 2003

Summary:

These discussions focused on the need for more resources to help keep youth out of criminal activity, and the need for more funding and support to organizations to enable them to work with the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA). The YCJA came into effect on April 1st 2003, with the stated intent to address the underlying causes of youth criminality.

Although there were frustrations expressed concerning repeated meetings on these same topics – without noticeable effect – there was also a strong need expressed for inter-agency collaboration and determined will to do so.

Participants identified a number of resources which they felt could make an important contribution to reducing criminal behaviour in Saskatoon, including the following:

- a detox centre in the province of Saskatchewan;
- addictions treatment services for serious addicts;
- “somewhere to go” for those who are recovering from addictions;
- support for youth who have little or no adult family support, or very difficult family situations. Some existing models include supportive housing and small class situations in alternative schools.
- parenting support for young parents and youth who are parenting younger siblings;
- community services which go beyond recreation, to provide help with education, the acquisition of skills, and employment;
- addressing the underlying issues of poverty and its immediate effects, such as needs for food, clothing, and shelter;
- connections with the business community, to provide employment opportunities for youth, even if they have had some brushes with the law.

Concerning the Youth Criminal Justice Act, several participants agreed that passage of the Act should have been accompanied by the development of mechanisms to implement it. This should have included a process for police to assess and refer youth, as well as funding for existing – and currently lacking, but needed – community services to address the underlying causes of criminality.

Participants commented that in the absence of these mechanisms and services, police are being asked to do referral work, for which they have neither the time nor training. Some community groups have increased caseloads which they do not have the capacity to handle, while others have lower caseloads because the youth are no longer being referred to them by the police. Several participants commented that some youth who should be in jail are now simply left to go free.

To address some of the problems with the YCJA, there was discussion of:

- developing a screening and referral mechanism for youth apprehended by the police, based on existing processes for Aboriginal youth under age 12;
- ensuring that this screening and referral mechanism could serve both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth, and be developed and conducted by community groups which serve both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth, in collaboration with the police.

To obtain greater funding of needed resources, there was discussion about:

- using the intent of the YCJA, and its savings in the areas of corrections, to push for more funding for the necessary resources.

To ensure better coordination of resources and better identification of needs, there was discussion of:

- Karen Cheechoo's plan to hold a city-wide youth conference on gangs, violence, and street drugs.

There was general agreement that coordination among the different groups working to address the underlying factors of youth criminality was important, and if possible, it should be continued.

Participants

- Sandra Lane, Saskatchewan Department of Health Youth Addictions
- Karen Pine Cheechoo, White Buffalo Youth Lodge
- Tim Vellacott, Egadz Back-to-school program
- Lisa Lafrenière, Saskatoon Police Service, Serious Habitual Offender Comprehensive Action Program (SHOCAP)
- Cheryl Vermette, Youth Justice Social Services
- Joceline Schriemer, Saskatoon Police Service Constable and CCSD Board Member
- Ron Wilson, Justice Coordinator Saskatoon Tribal Council
- Joan Feather, Board Member, CCSD
- Janet Creery, Communications Officer, CCSD and Coordinator of this roundtable

Notes from the Roundtable discussion:

(Note: This is **not** a complete transcript.)

Sandra opened the discussion

There are programs that kids can attend instead of being charged. But kids bounce around from one service to another. We need a place for young people to stabilize, we need a detox centre in our province. We've been asking for it for years, and writing letters, and getting nothing.

Tim

We have been frustrated since April 1st (when YCJA came into effect) – so little money came to the communities across the province. Lots of people have been inundated with higher caseloads, with nothing there to help them. Others have had a decrease in their caseload because youth are no longer required to follow their programs.

Cheryl

There isn't a program in Saskatoon that my kids will fit into, although there are lots of services for the lower-end kids. The way the Act is being administered is frustrating.

Lisa

We started training to deal with the YCJA in February, and there was a promise of government funding – but nothing came of it, and no one knew how anyone else was reacting.

Ron

From early April to early May, we met with Deputy Chief Wicks, who wanted the Tribal Council to take referrals under the Act. But the funders said they were not in the business of funding direct police referrals. Deputy Chief Wicks was confronting a problem with assessment – an expectation that the police could do that without training.

Because we have a program for youth under 12 who have come into contact with police (I sit on the screening committee for it), we wanted to work on an alternative measures program for all the youth. In that previous program, Aboriginal youth under the age of 12 were entitled to 24 hours of counselling and a reintegration worker. Because we have that experience, we would like to be the clearinghouse for people being referred into the community.

Joceline

I agree with this idea – for the YCJA to work, we need to develop an assessment process and identify all resources and tools. I think there is a need for this assessment and referral for non-Aboriginal as well as Aboriginal youth.

Services for youth have been a problem – there is a lack of continuity of care. The inter-agency aspect is important, but there are roadblocks, and the YCJA has magnified the problem.

The lack of funding for such a process no doubt results from the federal government's reduction of transfer payments to the provinces.

Ron

We had envisaged the process as including non-Aboriginal youth. We were hoping we could sit as a group at a screening committee, with the John Howard Society and others.

Karen was asked to comment on the resources available at her Centre:

The White Buffalo Centre provides services to everyone – we get lots of non-First Nations children. We no longer do counselling, but we do intervention.

Poverty is the #1 problem, then kids not in school, employment, skills. We can only do so much. On a typical night, there are 150 kids there.

Tim

Since April 1st, we've missed a huge opportunity – to deal with poverty, to deal with education.

Sandy

Our clients need somewhere to go. Our staff have been writing recommendations for 6-7 years.

Cheryl

We have to meet the needs of these kids.

Karen:

Our kids are very street smart. They go for breakfast and lunch at the Friendship Inn, go to school during the day, and come for dinner to the White Buffalo. There is a lack of parenting, of responsible adults. Kids 11 years old are living by themselves. We are seeing a lot of survivors with a lot of unique skills.

Cheryl

I have kids who are 10 who need to be stopped. They need to go to jail. The bigger problem is unmet needs – gangs replace the families they don't have. And they are being run from the pens.

Karen

We need to recognize these kids early. We're going to have an influx of criminals, because we are not doing it on the front end. We are frustrated because we are a recreation centre and despite running all day, we know we're not meeting needs.

I have met with schools – I was very troubled to hear how serious the issue was in schools – seeing kids in the schools being recruited into gangs.

If we can just break down the barriers of talking to one another, then we are going to be able to move ahead. There are good contacts among agencies, but a breakdown at the management levels in trying to work with social services and education. We need integrated services.

We came up with a plan to allow youth to say what they need. We are thinking of a city-wide youth conference on gangs, violence, and street drugs.

This is not just a First Nations problem – gangs are now mixed. And they are recruiting heavily. The gangs promote themselves as glamorous. It's easy to glorify gangs, compared to welfare.

We want to find a way to be protective. People who move to the city are often very naïve, so schools are good places to educate newcomers.

Tim

We need to provide some sort of parenting support for the older teenagers – those who are parenting their younger siblings.

We are spending less money on courts, on corrections – say, \$300 a day, since there are facilities that have been closed down. Let's use that money in the community.

Cheryl

We can't offer just recreation. One kid has been looking for work since June. We have to have connections which can provide real work – in order to open new doors and close old ones. They all ask for education and addiction services; they all want to do work and feel proud of it.

Tim

It's all a huge joke to some of them. I know one kid who has been out of trouble for three years. He has been on a waiting list for adult school for a year and a half.

Kids are making choices to move forward in a positive way, and we slam doors in their faces.

I think we have a bit of a wedge we can use with the YCJA – we may be able to use it to push for change.

Joan

Maybe an initiative coming from the grassroots could make a difference.

Karen

There is a lot of potential, a lot of creativity here. Saskatoon still has a lot of "small town" values. People are still willing to work together.

Janet

Mentioned that she had seen two very impressive programs: the Opening Doors school program for teens who have had previous problems with school and have been out of school for some time, and Quint Co-op House for young men which opened at the beginning of this year.

There was general agreement in the room that both programs are great – but they have very limited capacity, and they are always full.