

**WELCOME to our seventh issue of the  
"NGO JUSTICE SUMMIT  
NEWSLETTER"**

Our goal is to promote awareness among NGOs about the opportunities arising from the Alberta Summit on Justice. This newsletter is intended to inform NGOs about what is happening with the implementation of Summit recommendations and how to get involved.

**What is an NGO?**

Non-government organizations, also known as community agencies or non-profits, provide a variety of services and activities in the community and at various stages of the justice system. They are governed by volunteer boards of directors and make extensive use of volunteers in providing programs.

Many of these organizations work on the front lines, witnessing daily the impact of poverty, unemployment, substance abuse and violence. They have come to understand how these factors relate to involvement in crime. This is one of the many reasons why NGOs have an interest in the Justice Summit.

## Celebrating Successes!

The time has come for us to sign off on the NGO Justice Summit Project. Four years have passed since the planning for the Justice Summit started and, during that time, much has changed in the area of legal services in Alberta. During the last four years, we have been working with the provincial government and other stakeholders in a process of democratisation and involvement. That is not to say that prior to the Justice Summit there was a lack of democracy and involvement; rather, the Justice Summit has helped to strengthen the voices of our community in the decision making process.

A vital component of a just society is the principle of a fair and equitable legal system that is accessible to all. The Justice Summit has been an exciting experience of

how, when the will is there, a vision can slowly but surely change the basis upon which we fulfill our obligations to build and strengthen society.

The John Howard Society of Alberta's role in the Justice Summit was to promote awareness among NGOs about the opportunities arising from the Alberta Summit on Justice. The newsletters we produced were intended to inform NGOs about what was happening with the implementation of Summit recommendations and how NGOs could get involved.

We hope that during the last 25 months we have achieved this goal of spreading information and highlighting opportunities for NGO involvement. Difficult as it is for a project to end, there comes a day when we must recognise

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that it is time to move on to other opportunities.

We hope that the 450 plus organizations that we have attempted to keep in the loop have found our services interesting and useful. We hope that you will continue to flourish and grow in your fields of expertise. We know that there are going to be many more opportunities for you to voice your views on aspects of the justice process and we hope that you will continue to take advantage of these opportunities.

While this Justice Summit Project is winding down, the Policy Advisory Committee of the Minister of Justice and the Solicitor General will continue to meet, and Christine Leonard remains a representative on this committee. Therefore, if there are issues that you wish to be considered, please do not hesitate to contact her.

There have been many achievements in the justice field over the past four years. We would like to take this opportunity to highlight a few of them once again.

### **Listening to the voices of Albertans through community consultation, including:**

- ? The Community Justice Policy consultation, which supports the implementation of restorative justice processes. The draft was sent to over 400 government and non-government organizations throughout the province for feedback and involvement.
- ? The Graham Report, which investigated and brought forward recommendations on improving the family court system in Alberta.
- ? Family Law Reform Project, reviewing provincial legislation that deals with family law,

“... community partnership, and, where possible, community ownership and delivery of justice services [are] seen as important avenues toward creating a system that is an integrated part of community life.”

— Final Report  
Summit on Justice

mainly to see how these laws can be updated and consolidated to make them more understandable and accessible to Albertans.

- ? Policing Alberta MLA Review Committee consulted with police, police commissions, First Nations, municipalities and the public on policing issues in Alberta and, in particular, on the need for changes to Alberta's Police Act.

### **Developing strategies between government departments and stakeholders, including:**

- ? The first and second annual Children's Forums.
- ? Partnering Deputies Committee on Mental Health and Justice.

### **Developing innovative projects to meet local need, including:**

- ? Booklets produced by the Family Law Information Centres provide general instructions on making applications in the Court of Queen's Bench in family law matters.
- ? Legal Aid funding increases, making it possible for more low income Albertans to have access to Legal Aid than ever before.
- ? Family Law Offices that provide multi-disciplinary family law services to low income Albertans.
- ? Community grant programs for NGOs and communities to access funds for restorative justice and crime prevention programming.

The Justice Summit was a strong catalyst in the province for stakeholders to combine their knowledge and resources to put forward a vision of an accessible and caring legal system. The vision has

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# Youth Criminal Justice Act

On March 11, 1999, then Justice Minister Anne McLellan introduced the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA). The aim of the proposed legislation was both to “build on the strengths of the YOA (Young Offenders Act) and introduce significant reforms that address its weaknesses. The YCJA would provide the legislative framework for a fairer and more effective youth justice system.”

Three years later, the Act has been passed and is scheduled for implementation in April, 2003. The impact of this legislation will not be fully understood until we know how the provincial and territorial governments are going to administer youth justice under the new Act. However, what we do know is that statistics such as the following indicate the need for new legislation that will address some of the challenges in the system:

- ? Canada has one of the highest rates of incarceration for young offenders in the western world.
- ? We incarcerate youth at twice the rate of most American states.
- ? We jail about 25000 youth per year.
- ? The rate of custody in Canada doubled since the introduction of the YOA in 1984.

One of the key features of the YCJA is to reduce the use of custody as a means of dealing with youth in conflict with the law. Other key components are an acknowledgement of the need to prevent crime in the first place, and an emphasis on keeping more youth from ever entering the system through diversion opportunities.

It is important to devise alternative strategies to the status quo if we wish to see the quality of our lives and the safety of our communities improve. The YCJA is the federal government’s answer to addressing the challenges and shortcomings of the current youth justice system.

While debate continues about what impact the Act will have, what is clear is that the Alberta Solicitor General is already implementing a fair number of the principles of the legislation in it’s youth justice policy and practice. Alberta has led the country in diverting youth from the system through Alternative Measures programs, in encouraging community involvement through Youth Justice Committees, and in lowering custody rates. Alberta began setting these trends before the Youth Criminal Justice Act was even close to being a reality.

Several of the new sentences in the Act are already being piloted in partnership with NGOs, and Young Offender Branch has been preparing for implementation of the Act for some time now. Because the provincial government, NGOs and other community stakeholders have already been offering programs that incorporate the key principles of the Act, it is likely that the enactment of the YCJA will not have the same impact in Alberta as it may have elsewhere.

There are opportunities for NGO leadership and involvement in providing both support and education services for young people. NGOs are most often the mechanism for community volunteers to work with youth in prevention, education and support. Youth Justice Committees are an excellent example of this. We encourage you to learn more about the YCJA in order to assess the opportunities for your agency’s involvement, keeping in mind Act’s key principle of community involvement with youth.



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At the same time, a lot of work needs to be done to help youth, communities and schools understand this new Act. The Act itself recognizes the importance of knowledge about the law. We believe in educating our children in school about their rights and responsibilities, both to themselves and their community, so that they can make wise choices.

Examples of education programs include:

- 2 Criminal Justice Education Programs provided by the John Howard Societies in Alberta. These programs are offered in schools to help to increase student's knowledge about law and the criminal justice system, and provide students with information on the consequences of crime and the impact of crime on the community, victims and offenders.
- 2 The Heritage Community Foundation's Law and Justice Youth Heritage Project involves youth learning about the legal and justice traditions of their community. "By enabling youth and their teachers to actively discover and present stories related to law and justice in their community, they develop knowledge and understanding of the active practice of law and justice, as a daily reality."

For further details on the Criminal Justice Education programs provided by the John Howard Societies, please see: [www.johnhoward.ab.ca](http://www.johnhoward.ab.ca)

For further details on Law and Justice Youth Heritage Project, please see: <http://www.heritagecommunityfdn.org/programs/index.html>

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been translated into concrete goals and objectives through the strong leadership of the Minister of Justice and Attorney General, Dave Hancock, now working closely with the Solicitor General, Heather Forsyth.

And yet, even while we celebrate these achievements, our excitement is tempered somewhat by the reality of how provincial finances impact on this vision. Recent budget restraints have meant that two key community program funds have been cut, having a real impact on the ability of NGOs to work in the areas of crime prevention and restorative justice. With all of the excellent initiatives underway, it is disheartening that the two programs that were designed to help NGOs promote community involvement were among the first to be cut. Perhaps this final newsletter will inspire NGOs to respond to these program cuts so that the impact on the community is fully understood by the government.

For now as we sign off, it gives us great pleasure to say that it has been satisfying to be involved in the Justice Summit and to work with organizations such as yours. Until we meet again, keep on pushing the parameters of justice...

WE WOULD LIKE TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE ONGOING FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF THE ALBERTA LAW FOUNDATION FOR THIS PROJECT. WE ARE GRATEFUL FOR THEIR LEADERSHIP IN THE FIELD OF PUBLIC LEGAL EDUCATION AND FOR THEIR SUPPORT OF EDUCATION PROGRAMS SUCH AS THOSE DESCRIBED ON THIS PAGE.