

**WELCOME to our third 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.

The Best Laid Plans...

In the February newsletter, we talked about meeting with you in the spring. After mailing the newsletter we started planning the meetings and gathering materials such as videos and public actions that might be of interest to you. We were excited at the thought of connecting in person with the staff and volunteers from all the NGOs.

Then, guess what? The election came and the government decided to split the Justice department into Attorney General and Solicitor General. Dave Hancock remains as Justice Minister and Attorney General. We are pleased he will remain in his leadership role in Justice. Heather Forsyth is the new Solicitor General and we welcome working with her.

With the changes in the department, however, a few things became unclear. The future of the Minister of Justice's Policy Advisory Committee was unclear and some time was needed for the departments to refocus their direction and get settled into their separate roles. Thus, we have put our plans for a meeting with you on the back burner for now.

In the meantime, we have been busy working on the Public Legal Education project that we wrote about in our February newsletter. The Alberta Law Foundation asked us to gather information, through a questionnaire, on the provision of Public Legal Education by NGOs in Alberta. We want to thank the 150 plus organizations that contributed their valuable time to answer the questionnaire and we hope to bring you a report of the findings in our next newsletter.

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Moving from Knowledge to Innovation

Poverty is not simply an issue of lack of access to money; it is also an issue of power. In order to eliminate poverty, we have to be involved in the process of empowerment. This process contains many steps, one of which is access to justice. Access to justice involves providing access to information and knowledge, particularly about protecting clients rights within the various “systems” they encounter – education, health, justice, welfare. We know that NGOs excel at spreading information and knowledge in the community.

NGOs recognize the importance of information in people’s lives. Information and awareness can help make a difference between a troubled youth being sent through the court system or being dealt with through a Youth Justice Committee.

This is the strength that we as NGOs seek to spread amongst our communities on a daily basis. We use information to help individuals and communities become included in power sharing, with the ultimate result of supporting and expanding justice to all.

During the year 1999, there were two exceptional events that helped the goal of power sharing and expanded the goal of providing justice to all:

- ? Alberta Summit on Justice
- ? The Children’s Forum

As you are likely aware, the Alberta Summit on Justice was called in 1998 by the then Minister of Justice and Attorney General Jon Havelock Q.C. to “build consensus on actions for improving public confidence and community participation in the justice system.” This Summit took place in 1999 and since then, we have witnessed many changes, some of which we reported to you in our newsletter in February.

In May 1999, Premier Ralph Klein established a Task Force on Children at Risk, after the tragic shooting at a Taber high school. Parallel to this initiative was a conference, “First Circle- Uniting For Children” which was held in October 1999. Over a thousand people attended this two-day conference. The conference brought together a range of people who deal with child-related issues to look at the way forward for children in Alberta. The record of proceedings of the conference was published as the Children’s Forum Report.

The conference covered a variety of topics that affect children from pre-birth to adulthood. In our view, the most intriguing concept presented at the conference came from Dr. Lionel Dibden, an Alberta pediatrician. He proposed that Alberta should use a “children’s filter” in policy development and the planning of services. He suggested two concepts in implementing the children’s filter:

How does this decision affect children?

Is this decision in the best interest of children?

It is interesting, but not surprising, that a pediatrician put forward one of the fundamental family law principles as a key to unlocking effective service planning and service delivery goals for children in Alberta. The “best interest of the child” principle has, over the past twenty years, become a clarion call for child advocates the world over. It is a test that is legislated in the federal Divorce Act and most provincial statutes. It is also an international standard, included in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Canada is a signatory. This test can, when used properly, become a very important tool in helping children access their rights. Therefore, it is truly exciting to see this test leaping into the social services field in Alberta in the form of a vision statement for children’s service planning and service provision. The potential for this test is endless and these early discussions of it are quite exciting.



Moving from Knowledge to Innovation continued

The links between the Justice Summit and the Children's Forum are fairly obvious. Most of us in the NGO sector deal with clients and families who may be either the victims of crime or related to someone in legal trouble. Crime inevitably impacts wives, husbands, mothers, fathers and, most of all, children. Both sides of the crime cycle come to NGOs for assistance and we, in turn, provide them with the most suitable information about justice or social services resources available for them.

One example of how justice and social services link is in the area of youth. During both the Children's Forum and the Justice Summit, participants were eager to see the development of alternatives for young people in the criminal justice system. Youth Justice Committees (YJCs) are one of the best examples of how Albertans have developed and promoted "the best interest of the child" concept. YJCs are a form of a people's court; they are made up of local volunteers who, in partnership with youth justice personnel:

- ? Help the young offender lead a constructive and responsible life within the community.
- ? Seek restitution for community members who have been victimized by the young offender.

The offender, the victim (wherever possible) and the YJC work together to develop a co-operative action plan intended to provide a just consequence for the youth and reparation for the victim and the community. Youth Justice Committees also divert the young person from the criminal justice system by providing alternatives that are based on the offender's willingness to accept responsibility. Bringing together all the people who have been harmed by an offence provides the opportunity to develop a dynamic solution. It can empower the offender, the victim and the community through their combined control of the process of rehabilitation.

While YJCs may not specifically be using the "best interest of the child" principle, nevertheless they can and, in many instances, do implement this principle very effectively. YJCs are simply one example of how a vision can benefit the daily lives of people.

In February 2001, Alberta Children's Services produced its "Commitment To Action" report which informs Albertans that:

At the Children's Forum, Albertans said children must remain our top priority.

In the last year, the government has:

Committed to using a "children's filter" as a framework for reviewing all policies, legislation, business plans and decisions of government.

We hope that, like us, you feel that the commitment Alberta Children's Services has made is very enlightened and courageous. We applaud their vision of meeting the needs of children through the children's filter, which includes the best interest of the child principle. This vision can truly bring about empowerment for the most vulnerable children in our communities and, at the same time, benefit all our children.

In order to take this vision and turn it into a living, breathing practice, we all have a responsibility as Albertans to contribute towards its development. The Alberta Children's Services report informs us that a second Children's Forum is being planned for the fall of 2001, "where government will sit down at the table with those concerned about children to listen to their ideas and concerns."

We are asking you, the NGOs, to spread the word to your clients and communities about the upcoming second Children's Forum. The information you share will help to generate greater interest and involvement in the Forum, which will not only add to the success of the Forum but will also provide an avenue for your clients, your communities and you to participate in the development of a children's agenda in Alberta. Together we can work to build a stronger child protection coalition in Alberta.

The Second Children's Forum is to be held on October 2nd and 3rd this year.

For further information please contact:

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NGO Voices Making a Difference

A key theme during the Justice Summit was the importance of crime prevention through social development. Communities and agencies recognized that poor living conditions, lack of opportunity and family crisis are linked to involvement with the law. In fact, the meetings held with the NGO sector in 1998 were themed around this topic. We talked about what can be done to make a difference in people's lives so they don't become involved with crime.

Your NGO voices were the strongest among the sectors on this topic and echoed the views of the community members at the hearings. During the focus groups many of you pointed out issues of poverty, lack of financial support and the need for the basics of life. You felt that tackling poverty and supporting people in need would help crime prevention objectives.

You also contributed to the recommendations in the Justice Summit, including:

Measures to prevent crime through early intervention and social development be strengthened.

Communities, families and young people be supported in their efforts to deal with youth crime.

Now is our chance to have our voices heard again on this topic. The Alberta government is "Extending the Alberta Advantage" by carrying out a review of some of its low-

income programs. A five member MLA committee has been established and is asking for public input into their report, which is to be presented this fall to the Minister of Alberta Human Resources and Employment, Clint Dunford. This consultation could be vital to your clients because the programs under review include financial support, medical benefits and training and employment programs. Programs such as AISH, Extended Health Benefits, Alberta Child Health Benefit and Family Maintenance are being reviewed.

Please take the time to look at the document on the web site:

<http://www.gov.ab.ca/hre/lir/index.html>

You can download or print out the discussion document and the questionnaire, or telephone 310-4455 for copies of the guide. The deadline for submissions is **August 3, 2001**.

Please tell your clients, friends and colleagues about this review. We think the review is likely to be critical in deciding the approach taken by the government on low-income policy in the province. If we want to influence how poverty is addressed in Alberta, then we have to take pen to paper and provide innovative answers to the questions posed by the government. Don't miss this opportunity of extending the Alberta advantage to those in greatest need.

Some useful web addresses:

Commitment to Action Booklet:

<http://www.acs.gov.ab.ca/>

Youth Justice:

<http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/yj>

Youth Justice Committees:

www.gov.ab.ca/just/yjc/about.htm

Youth Justice Committees in Alberta:

<http://www.johnhoward.ab.ca/PUB/C17.htm>

Extending the Alberta Advantage:

<http://www.gov.ab.ca/hre/lir/index.html>

One of our goals is to ensure that information about the Justice Summit is shared with Alberta NGOs.

We encourage you to pass the word. Please circulate this newsletter, promote these Summit related opportunities in your own publication, and/or let us know what other organizations might like to receive our newsletter.

**WE APPRECIATE YOUR ASSISTANCE
IN SPREADING THE WORD**

If you would like us to remove your organization from our mailing list, please let us know.