



The Reporter

Achieving Safer Communities In Alberta

In the Spring of 2007, the Honourable Ron Stevens, Q.C., minister of Justice and Attorney General of Alberta, announced the creation of a Crime Reduction Task Force, chaired by Ms. Heather Forsyth, Calgary M.L.A. Over the course of the next several months, the Task Force travelled across Alberta seeking information and ideas from citizens about their perceptions of crime in their communities and the responses to such that they felt ought to be adopted. The process culminated in a 2 day Symposium in Calgary in June, and out of that came, *Keeping Communities Safe: Final Report & Recommendations*, which was tabled in the Alberta Legislature in November 2007¹.

It must be stated at the outset that the Report is very well-written and that on the whole, presents a very balanced and accurate picture of crime in our communities. In many ways, it also presents an informed and thoughtful set of recommended responses, and the members of the Task Force, and their advisors, are to be commended for producing a document which could change the criminal justice landscape in Alberta.

There are in total some 31 Recommendations contained in the Report – far too many for this essay to consider in the detail they deserve. Instead, we will focus our analysis on Recommendation 31, which is the Recommendation that the Alberta Minister of Justice, The Honourable Ron Stevens, Q.C., has indicated is taking priority over all others in terms of immediate implementation.

31 . Establish a comprehensive, longer-term Alberta crime reduction and prevention strategy coordinated and supported by a dedicated responsibility centre within the provincial government.

The Honourable Minister, the Government, and members of the Alberta Legislature are all to be commended for recognizing the importance of this Recommendation, and for moving forward to implement the establishment of “a dedicated responsibility centre” to recommend the legislation needed, and develop the policies, procedures, and practices required to give effect to the other recommendations contained in the Report.

¹ A copy of the Report can be obtained at
<http://www.justice.gov.ab.ca/downloads/documentloader.aspx?id=48149>

Achieving Safer Communities... con't.

Implicit in the establishment of this “centre” is that it will be charged with the responsibility of coordinating the efforts of a number of Ministries within the Alberta government as such efforts relate to making our communities safer.

This responsibility will necessarily entail a significant change in the way that government does business – it will mean a shift from designating legislative responsibility to individual Ministries, and the necessary funding requirements associated with this legislative responsibility, to designating “outcome responsibility” to the “centre”, the achievement of which outcomes will be dependent upon the ability of the “centre” to influence the activities (and allocation of financial resources) of a number of Ministries.

This truly does represent a paradigm shift in the way the government does business.

An analysis of the Recommendations contained in the Report indicates that implementation of many will require new legislation, or amendment of existing legislation, as well as policy development and implementation that presently falls within the realm of the following Ministries:

- Justice and Attorney General;
- Solicitor General and Public Safety;
- Children’s Services;
- Education;
- Employment, Immigration and Industry;
- Finance;
- Health and Wellness;
- International, Intergovernmental and Aboriginal Relations;
- Municipal Affairs and Housing;
- Seniors and Community Supports;
- Service Alberta;
- Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture; and
- Treasury Board

As well, the outcomes the “centre” is mandated to address cannot be effectively tackled without the cooperation of other provincially legislated bodies that operate with varying degrees of independence from the government, among others such as:

- AADAC;
- The Alberta Mental Health Board;
- The Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission;
- The Provincial Court of Alberta;
- Municipal governments;
- The Driver Control Board;
- The Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission; and
- The Health Regions

There are also Federal Ministries, Boards, Commissions, and so on, including the RCMP.

And finally, in addition to the very important work the “centre” will have to do within and across government, it will also be charged with coordinating service delivery efforts with community agencies (NGO), and research efforts with the academic community.

Clearly, with such a mandate, and such “outcome responsibilities”, the “centre” will have to be set up and structured in such a way that it will actually be able to function in a governmental environment that is presently structured far differently.

Given the breadth of mandate and responsibilities, and the milieu within which this will all have to occur, the preferred course would be to establish an independent Safe Communities Commission that reports to the Legislative Assembly – either directly, or through the Premier or Minister of Justice.

But in addition to the obvious logistical issues that a Commission would be best suited to address, there is also a more fundamental issue that the Report references – that of the need for initiatives to extend beyond “the election cycle”, and be removed from the realm of partisan politics.

Albertans clearly recognized that addressing the plethora of issues in our communities cannot be done in any kind of meaningful way in the short term – there are no quick or easy “fixes”, and programs and initiatives that arise as a result of media sensationalism or current (perceived) public sentiment are most likely, in the long term, to prove counterproductive to achieving the desired outcomes.

Achieving Safer Communities... con't.

Implicit in the establishment of a Safe Communities Commission is the de-politicization, to a greater or lesser extent, of the issues arising in that context.

Again, moving forward in this way would represent a true paradigm shift.

It would entail the government having the courage to acknowledge that there are some issues too important to be left to government alone, with the necessary ideological & political constraints that influence all political parties.

It would entail the government courageously acknowledging that if actions taken are to be derived from evidence and best practices, the determination of those actions has to be beyond the “cut and thrust” of legislative debate (and compromise).

Now, this no doubt seems, at first blush, to be a rather radical idea and not one that readily recommends itself to government approval – after all, it would apparently entail government giving up substantial power and authority over something that is of considerable significance to all citizens.

Where would there be accountability to the citizenry?

The short answer to that is found in asking the question, “Where is the accountability to the citizenry of presently existing Boards and Commissions?”

That is, a carefully selected membership representing key stakeholders from within the community appointed to the Commission and to whom the CEO of the Commission is accountable, and of course the Commission itself accountable to the Legislative Assembly as a whole.

Perhaps of even greater significance, while the Commission would be charged with addressing all the issues with respect to safer communities identified in the Report, and beyond those so identified, it would not itself have legislative authority, nor control the Treasury. It would be responsible for recommending to the appropriate body what actions ought to be taken, and presenting the case for those actions being taken, but at the end of the day, the responsibility for actions actually taken, and the monies actually expended in that

regard, will still rest with government or the other entities mentioned above.

Certainly it would be expected that recommendations from the Commission would be accorded considerable deference, and the decision to not act on any particular recommendation would not be one lightly taken.

Yet clearly there would be accountability (perhaps, in a very real sense, “enhanced” accountability) to the citizens of Alberta, and while the process of recommending policy and legislation would be (to a greater or lesser extent) de-politicized, the final authority and control with respect to implementation would still rest with that body so charged – ultimately, for the most part, the government and Ministers of the day.

What a wonderful opportunity to improve the quality of life of all Albertans!

The Reporter, a publication of the John Howard Society of Alberta, is distributed free of charge to a wide audience of citizens, educators, agencies, and criminal justice staff. Our goal is to provide information and commentary on timely criminal justice issues. We welcome and encourage your feedback on The Reporter.

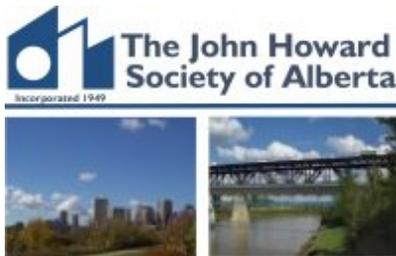
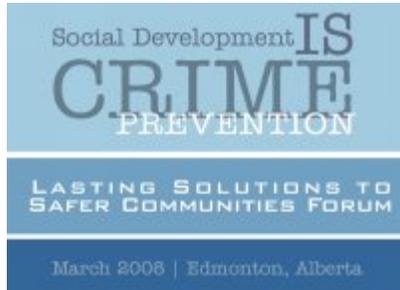
The John Howard Society of Alberta is an agency composed of citizens in Alberta who are interested in criminal justice reform and preventing crime in our communities. We recognize that dealing with crime is the responsibility of the community as well as public agencies.

We gratefully accept donations to help offset the costs of our efforts in criminal justice reform and crime prevention. Donations are income tax deductible. To make a donation or provide feedback please contact us at the address on this page.

ISSN 1192-4381

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We're Hosting a Conference, and We Want You to Join Us



**The Alberta Community Crime
Prevention Association**

**March 12-14, 2008
Coast Terrace Inn - Edmonton South
4440 Gateway Boulevard
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada**

Safercommunities2008.com

About the Forum

This forum brings together practitioners, researchers and community leaders active in social development approaches to crime prevention. Knowledgeable and experienced speakers and workshop presenters will guide forum participants through the realities of crime in our communities, and proven effective responses to crime within the community across the spectrum of prevention, correction, and rehabilitation. Participants will grow their knowledge and awareness, share ideas and best practices, and begin to develop the strategies that can be put in place in their communities to begin to transform them into communities that are more caring and safer. All in an atmosphere designed to encourage open dialogue and sharing of ideas and experiences.

Who Should Attend

Join over 150 delegates from across Alberta and Canada who are involved in social development practices or research in the prevention of crime at the community level. This forum is for community development, youth and social workers, law enforcement and legal professionals, rehabilitation case workers, academics and researchers, mental health practitioners, and students interested in the latest crime prevention strategies.