

# **Community Justice Project**

## **Case Management of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder**

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### **Executive Summary**

The Community Justice Project is a partnership of service providers created to increase awareness and management of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) within the criminal justice system. The purpose of the project is to influence change in the criminal justice system through mentorship, education and training about FASD and related effects.

The main objectives of the project are:

- To influence case management for youth affected by FASD
- To divert youth affected by FASD from the system, where appropriate
- To make recommendations to the court
- To identify high-risk youth and their families and connect them with appropriate services and supports
- To provide community and justice system advocacy for families, schools and service partners

The project has the potential to:

- Increase community awareness of FASD
- Increase the understanding of family members, caregivers, the criminal justice system and other community supports and services regarding FASD
- Help improve the well-being and stability of youth affected by FASD and their families
- Support changes in beliefs about how best to serve youth affected by FASD

- Assist service providers and other professionals in responding appropriately to this disability through education and training
- Assist in the reduction/prevention of related difficulties such as school disruption, placement disruption and drug/alcohol misuse

## Case Examples

*A young man assaulted his teaching assistant during school hours and committed \$5,000 damage to the assistant's vehicle. As a result of the involvement of the FASD Youth Justice Committee, there was no charge laid in this matter and the youth was placed in appropriate home and school placements. Both placements were provided training in FASD and ongoing support to manage the behavioral and learning challenges that were being presented by this young man. Over the next three years, there were no further incidents involving the legal system. The success of this case was all the more gratifying given that this young man was significantly damaged, had low cognitive functioning and was challenging to work with.*

*The FASD Youth Justice Committee was involved with a young female client who was pregnant, skipping school, running away from her foster home and heading into trouble with the legal system. As a result of the committee's involvement, the young girl returned home, instead of continuing in a foster placement, and re-enrolled at the school where she was facing expulsion. (The young girl did lose her baby.) She was placed in a school program that fit her needs and supports were provided to help the family continue to work together. Over the course of the next school year, she received both 'Most Improved Student of the Month' and 'Most Improved Student of the Year'. She has now graduated from high school and is successfully employed in a supported employment situation. .*

These are just two examples of the use of appropriate case management for youth affected by FASD. Approximately **80%** of the youth who have been supported by the FASD Youth Justice Committee have had no further involvement with the Justice System.

Educating and thereby influencing changes in the mind set of community members regarding the challenges and appropriate intervention strategies required to deal with youth affected by this disability is a key factor to the success of this program and the success of the youth who have been involved with the program.

## Background Information

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a permanent and irreversible brain injury. It is common, expensive, preventable and over-represented in the criminal justice system. The learning and behavioral difficulties associated with this disability result in poor judgment, impulsivity and an inability to understand consequences and develop effective living skills. **The societal and judicial belief that people learn from their mistakes by experiencing the consequences of their actions, thereby making better choices in the future, does not necessarily apply to individuals living with this disability.**

The Community Justice Project was initiated to influence change in how the justice system understands and responds to youth affected by FASD through training, consultation, education, case management and advocacy. The Community Justice Project was developed as a partnership under the umbrella of the FASD Coordinating Committee in Lethbridge in response to needs identified in the community.

The FASD Coordinating Committee is a partnership of service providers, community agencies and professionals committed to effecting change for individuals and families affected by FASD by increasing awareness and understanding of FASD, identifying needs in the community and acting as a catalyst for the development of programs and services to meet the needs of those affected by FASD, either directly or indirectly. Beginning in 1990 with the planning of a conference on FASD there has been a commitment by community partners in southern Alberta to manage the complicated issues of FASD.

Lethbridge is a city of 70,000 people located in southern Alberta. However given its location it serves a catchment population of approximately 125,000 people. Two reserves are located within close proximity to Lethbridge - the Blood Reserve and the Peigan (Pikkani) Reserve. Lethbridge has educational and training opportunities for students through the Community College and the University of Lethbridge. Of particular note is the work being done by Dr. Robert Sutherland, one of the researchers who is part of Canada's leading neuroscience research group at the Centre for NeuroScience, University of Lethbridge. Dr. Sutherland's research on the behavioral implications for prenatal alcohol exposure is a well-placed compliment to the community work of this project.

## **Purpose of the Project**

The purpose of Community Justice Project is to influence change in how the justice system understands and responds to youth affected by FASD through training, education, coordination and advocacy. The project is grounded in the following guiding beliefs:

1. FASD is common. Canadian prevalence research indicates that there is a disproportionate number of alcohol-affected youth in the youth justice system.
2. There are high rates of recidivism with youth affected by FASD.
3. Youth with this disability may be unresponsive to traditional interventions.
4. When intervening with youth affected by FASD, the interventions are generally costly and the process within the court system time consuming.
5. The criminal justice system is based on the premise that youth know the rules, understand that the rules apply to them and can learn from their experiences. This premise does not generally fit for youth with this disability.
6. FASD is a disability with various and varying behavioral and social descriptors.
7. FASD is permanent and irreversible.
8. A multi-disciplinary and systemic approach to managing the behaviors of youth affected by FASD is effective and appropriate.
9. In order to improve outcomes for individuals affected by FASD, a coordinated community approach is required.

## **Objectives and Action Plans**

### **Objectives**

The main objectives of the project are:

- To influence case management for youth affected by FASD
- To divert youth affected by FASD from the system, where appropriate
- To make recommendations to the court
- To identify high-risk youth and their families and connect them with appropriate services and supports
- To provide advocacy for families, schools and the community

## **Action Plans**

- To identify youth with FASD by increasing the ability of police officers, crown prosecutors and other service providers to recognize the disorder.
- To refer youth for assessment when necessary.
- To refer youth to the Justice Committee to ensure that appropriate case plans and supports are put in place, that services are coordinated and that a referral package of recommendations is provided to the Justice System.
- To inform and educate police and other community service providers about the Community Justice Project and FASD to ensure appropriate referrals and links with supportive services for youth and families/caregivers.
- To make decisions about proceeding through the court system which reflect the needs of the youth, the victim and the system.
- To act as an advocate for youth with FASD.

## **Expected Results**

1. Increased effectiveness and appropriateness of the responses to youth affected by FASD
2. Increased support for families and caregivers
3. Improved outcomes for youth in terms of concerns such as school or placement disruptions or substance use.
4. Decreased costs in terms of time and dollars spent by those involved with the criminal justice system.
5. Reduced number of youth entering the criminal justice system.

## **Project Services**

A number of services are provided within the Community Justice Project, the intent being to respond to youth affected by FASD before they require court intervention. Services are based on the premise that when adequate adaptations are available in the home and community and when the services of the professionals involved are coordinated and appropriate, positive outcomes can be achieved for affected individuals. This proactive approach represents a fundamental shift in thinking.

Services are voluntary and provided free of charge. They include:

- The preparation of individualized case plans (that create positive structured environments) in collaboration with community agencies
- The preparation of individualized court plans and the provision of a referral package to the justice system
- Advocacy on behalf of the youth affected by FASD
- Ensuring that families and caregivers are linked to appropriate resources and services
- Acting as a police liaison to schools
- Monitoring home placements and daily programs
- Monitoring families for siblings who may be affected by FASD

## Evaluation

The Community Justice Project has been operating for approximately 18 months. Data has been gathered on the range of services that have been provided; the majority of services being provided directly to youth and adults affected by FASD and indirectly to the families and caregivers of those affected, and through training and education of professionals in the community. The following table provides a summary of the project activities.

	Start up - Aug. 2002	Sept. 2002 - Aug. 2003
Total Clients Served	65	79
Total Hours meeting with Service Providers	555	312
Total Number of Contacts with Service Providers	477	902
Total Hours meeting with Clients	103	43
Total Number of Contacts with Family/Caregivers	113	64
Total Number of Persons Trained	317	
Total Hours of Training	53	30.5

## **Appendix A - Community Justice Project Partners**

Alberta Children's Services

Lethbridge Police Services

Southwest Alberta Child and Family Services Authority

Alberta Justice Authority

Crown Prosecutor's Office

Native Counseling Services

Alberta Mental Health Services

Lethbridge Young Offender's Centre

Lethbridge School District #51

Holy Spirit Roman Catholic Separate Regional Division #4

Lethbridge Family Services

Lethbridge Community College

Office of the Public Guardian

Office of Person's with Developmental Disabilities

