

The Development of Restorative Justice Practices in Vancouver- VISION STRATEGY/DEVELOPMENT IMPLEMENTATION

In 2005, the Vancouver Family Court Youth Justice subcommittee, (FCYJC), saw a need for extrajudicial measures for youth that could be an alternative to the criminal justice system. The Youth Criminal Justice Act had been introduced in 2003, as a response to the inordinately high number of youth serving time in Canadian institutions. It mandated that courts dealing with young offenders, consider alternate measures such as restorative justice, in sentencing.

Restorative justice practices have proven to be one of the most important alternate measures for addressing many of the offences committed by youth. In a restorative action process, the youth, by being accountable and showing willingness to make appropriate amends and repair the harm done to family, themselves and the community, can have the matter addressed directly between all the affected parties without going to court. This restorative approach can change the youth's behaviour rather than build his court record, and promote genuine healing for the youth, the victim, and the community. In Vancouver, the need for permanent restorative justice programmes exists both inside and outside the formal legal/court system. It is a service needed by the legal system, the school system and the community. Vancouver, unlike other major urban jurisdictions in Canada, currently has a limited offering of restorative justice initiatives in a community in need of this option. The Federal Youth Criminal Act cannot work as intended in Vancouver without having in place, a system of restorative practices.

Knowing that restorative justice intervention actions affect community, the FCYJ subcommittee held an introductory workshop at the Vancouver School Board to educate the public on restorative practices. One hundred and seventy-five people attended and heard about restorative justice practices, and the many forms it can take. They observed and took part in a restorative justice conference role play, and dialogued with the panel speakers and fellow participants. The audience enthusiasm was overwhelming! The main question evolving out of the workshop was, 'When will restorative measures be readily available for the youth in our community?'

In order to address this question, the FCYJ subcommittee applied for, and received a small grant from the Solicitor General's office and used it to fund three Forums that 'targeted' Vancouver youth service providers, eg. PLEA, the John Howard Society, Neighborhood Houses, VSB, VPD etc.

The first Forum generated a collective VISION of restorative justice for Vancouver, a large urban jurisdiction made up of many distinct communities, each with its own socio-economic, ethnic and cultural characteristics. This diversity presents unique challenges with regard to developing restorative justice practices and programs in schools, neighbourhood houses, community centres, and youth court. However, a senior member of the Vancouver Police

Department, with strong leadership skills and expertise in restorative practices, encouraged the participants to dialogue, collaborate and list the current restorative justice needs in Vancouver. They listed the following:

- minimal restorative justice services
- limited restorative justice capacity
- minimal communications and networking
- gaps in services
- funding challenges,
- few training & procedural standards
- little public awareness
- lack of a common voice
- no central data collection
- absence of evaluation

The participants felt that the above current needs are apparent in:

- lack of youth responsibility
- lack of victim and community engagement
- lack community social/civil development
- lack of a means for community dispute resolution
- a lack of information regarding school-suspensions/expulsions
- the lack of examination/information of the use of extrajudicial measures as mandated by the Youth Criminal Justice Act.

Reflecting on the collective concerns from the first VISIONING Forum, and again facilitated by the VPD and other members of the youth service providers of the community, the second Forum focused on the STRATEGY for the restorative justice needs of youth and what the DELIVERY of these restorative practices might look like. The consensus was to form a new non-profit restorative justice society, which could act as a governing body for the development and implementation of a framework or 'Hub' for restorative practices and programs in Vancouver. The RJ Hub would provide resources, networking, education, training, keep statistics, monitor referrals and facilitate communication between collaborative stake holders.

Forum 3, again facilitated by the VPD and attended by community stakeholders, focused on the IMPLEMENTATION of a RJ Hub and looked at three options of delivery: a collaborative table, as a part of an existing non-profit society, or as a stand alone non-profit society. The decision, by consensus, was to use a stand alone non-profit society. It was suggested that an existing, inactive 'shell' of a former non-profit transformative justice society, was available for re-activation. Subsequently, a committee reviewed and amended the constitution and by-laws of the former society and called a meeting for April, 2007. At that meeting, committees were struck to work on membership, board nominations, and a Statement of Work. As a result, the

membership continues to expand, and now includes both individual and corporate members from; VSB, VPD, Probation, Community Court, John Howard Society, Kinex, Neighborhood Houses, Social Workers etc. A Board of Directors, (ten), was elected at the first Annual General Meeting which was held in May, 2007, and the name of the society was formally changed to the Vancouver Association for Restorative Justice, (VARJ). <varj@telus.net> With further funding from the office of the Crime Prevention Division and Victim Services, Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, the IMPLEMENTATION stage of the RJ Hub, has commenced. The first task the VARJ Board of Directors undertook, was prioritizing the issues in the collective VISION created at the Forums. Next, a "Statement of Work" was posted for a Business Plan which was seen as necessary to give VARJ direction as well as credibility in the business community for funding purposes. After considering all the submitted proposals, The YES Resolution Group Inc. was chosen to develop a business plan for a values based, sustainable RJ Hub. The plan takes into consideration the challenges that face restorative justice practices in a large urban centre like Vancouver, and gives 'a road map' with guidelines and criteria for addressing and delivering restorative justice services in the community.

The YES Resolution Group Inc.'Strategic Planning Model', which VARJ is following, reflects a realistic use of resources, awareness of the environment, identifies productive relationships, and includes recognition of current and ongoing programs and workloads. It includes a comprehensive plan for the VARJ journey: the VISION to be realized, STRATEGIC/DEVELOPMENTAL priorities, with desired tangible outcomes, IMPLEMENTATION time frames, and the VARJ Mission Statement:

'To advance the knowledge and application of restorative practices in Vancouver.'

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November, 2007