

Background to the Cross Over Youth Project

The Cross Over Youth Committee was formed in October 2013 with members seeking to understand what triggered the trajectory of youth from the child welfare to the youth justice system and how the resultant consequences could be ameliorated. The Committee is co-chaired by Professor Judy Finlay, (Principal Investigator) Ryerson University and Justice Brian Scully, Ontario Court of Justice (Judicial Lead).

The initial discussions included professionals from across all relevant service sectors. All sectors were committed to finding solutions to the issues facing cross over youth. To this end, under phase one of the Project, a series of forums took place across nine service sector groups: Judges, Justices of the Peace, the Legal service sector such as Defense Counsel and the Office of the Children's Lawyer and Crown Attorneys; Child Welfare, Probation Services, Youth, Group Care and Police Services.

The report, Cross Over Youth: Care to Custody summarized the findings of these consultations and made recommendations regarding the ten themes consistently identified by the participants. The predominant theme was the need for more meaningful collaboration across service sectors. Taking this into account and based on all key themes, the Committee recommended a pilot project in 4 geographic sites in Ontario that would aim to stop the trajectory of youth in care to the justice system and identify the points of intersection in which intervention strategies could be developed. The Committee mapped the points of intersection between youth justice and child welfare systems that make up a youth's journey through the youth justice system. However, each geographic community will have their own ideas about which intersection points warrant what type of intervention.

As it moves into service delivery, the components of the Cross Over Youth Project include: (a) Intersectoral Training and Partnership Development; Panel Presentations; Education Modules for Colleges and Universities; (b) Systemic Capacity Building and Case Conference Facilitation; (c) Youth Mentorship; and (d) Evaluation.

This Project is designed to develop local competencies and sustainability of a coordinated approach to serving cross over youth. The Project will rely on a small team of experts in the fields of youth justice and children's services to coordinate the above components across all service sectors, with a focus on improving outcomes for youth involved in the child welfare and justice systems. An integral part of the Pilot Project is resource coordination at the systemic level and case co-ordination at the "macro" level.

The Cross Over Youth Project will work with the local youth justice and children's services community to offer youth mentorship to cross -over youth. This will involve a case management approach including ensuring the youth is represented by a lawyer with experience in both systems where possible, explaining the Youth Court process and advocating on behalf of the youth regarding residential placement and other related issues. A youth advisory group, called "Project C" is already in place and will provide consultation and feedback on the Project. This will give cross-over youth an ongoing voice in the Project, which affects their lives.

The Project will invite youth justice, child welfare and other children's service sectors to participate in training and partnership development, prior to the introduction of Cross Over Youth sites in local Youth Courts and in the participating community. The training will be multi-disciplinary, detailed and interactive. The Project will also develop modules for colleges and universities who are educating future lawyers, police officers, probation officers, youth workers and social workers.

The Project will introduce its first site at 311 Jarvis St. Court House, Toronto, Ontario due to the familiarity with the Pilot Project at that site by the respective service sectors. The Project will then move to the Thunder Bay, Belleville and Chatham sites on a graduated basis. The goal is to develop and implement each Pilot Project according to the unique needs and culture of the individual sites and communities. The Project will coordinate its work with that of the local First Nations' and African Canadian communities.

Most significantly, the Cross Over Youth Project is in itself a unique process of engagement, knowledge exchange and partnership development facilitated by a small team of skilled coordinators. The projected outcome is a more effective and sustainable system of service for cross over youth.

The Project received funding in the initial phase of development, from the Department of Justice Canada's Youth Justice Fund. The Project currently has a four year funding grant from the Department of Justice Canada's Youth Justice Fund, with additional funding from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, Province of Ontario for two years. The Cross Over Youth Project is housed at and supported administratively at Ryerson University.