

Office of the Provincial Advocate
for Children and Youth for Ontario

THE ROY MCMURTRY YOUTH CENTRE

A SUMMARY OF ADVOCACY ACTIVITIES AND ISSUES
AUGUST 2009 – FEBRUARY 2010

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March 2010

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Introduction:

The Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth is an independent Office of the Legislature established under the *Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth Act, 2007*. The mandate of the Office is clearly outlined in the opening paragraphs of the legislation:

- Provide an independent voice for children and youth, including First Nations children and youth and children with special needs
- Encourage communication and understanding between children and families and those who provide them with services
- Educate children, youth and their caregivers regarding the rights of children and youth

The Provincial Advocate is mandated to serve the more than 26,000 children and youth who are often in peril and known to child protection services, youth justice and children's mental health facilities in Ontario. The Office identifies systemic issues involving children, conducts reviews and provides education and advice on the issue of advocacy and the rights of children.

The Office is guided by the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and has a strong commitment to youth involvement.

The Roy McMurtry Youth Centre (RMYC) is a 192 bed secure facility that was scheduled to open in early 2009. Construction began in 2007 and RMYC began posting job ads for the hiring of front line staff in October 2008. Management and staff began training and planning for youth at the RMYC in January 2009. The RMYC formally opened on Thursday May 28, 2009.

Youth started to arrive in small groups by mid July and a few weeks later the Advocate's Office received the first calls from youth. Over the next month the calls increased and youth identified a number of substantial concerns which were communicated to the senior management team and the Administrator at RMYC. Continued complaints

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Children's Rights in Juvenile Justice Article 40

Committee on the Rights of the Child,
General Comments, 2007

"Children [young persons] who commit offences are often subject to negative publicity in the media, which contributes to a discriminatory and negative stereotyping of these children [young persons] and often of children [young persons] in general. This negative presentation or criminalization of child [young] offenders is often based on misrepresentation and/or misunderstanding of the causes of juvenile delinquency and results regularly in a call for a tougher approach (i.e. zero tolerance, three strikes and you are out, mandatory sentences, trial in adult court and other primary punitive responses). "The Committee recommends the implementation of "all appropriate measures to improve the situation of children [young persons] in juvenile detention facilities, including their access to adequate food, clothing, heating, educational opportunities and leisure activities."

Note: The UNCRC defines "child" for the purposes of the Convention as every human being below the age of 18. The Ontario Child and Family Services Act (CFSA) employs an analogous age definition. Both the CFSA and the federal Youth Criminal Justice Act make special reference to the term "young person" (adolescent) and define a young person as "a person who is or, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, appears to be twelve years old or older, but less than eighteen years old and, if the context requires, includes any person who is charged under this Act with having committed an offence while he or she was a young person or who is found guilty of an offence under this Act."

about basic care and access to the Advocate's Office combined with complaints about safety and peer violence prompted the Provincial Advocate to notify the Assistant Deputy Minister, Youth Justice Services Division and the Minister of Children and Youth Services about the reports from youth.

In early October the Ministry implemented a number of changes at RMYC which appeared to result in some positive improvements in basic care, access to the Advocate's Office and access to family. However, between October 9th and November 30th the complaints about safety and security at RMYC increased by fifteen per cent. By mid January, young people were still calling the Advocate's Office about many of the same things they had called about in July 2009: quality of food; lack of programming; phone access to the Advocate's Office; staff youth relations and violence. Today there is little change in the types of concerns that youth are bringing to the attention of the Advocate's Office. The Ministry and RMYC Administration have indicated that although the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre has been operational for over eight months they are still experiencing "growing pains." The Advocate's Office believes these growing pains could have been minimized had the relationship custody service model been fully planned and implemented prior to youth arriving at the Centre. Positive relationships between staff and youth are powerful tools that can increase safety and create a respectful environment.

According to the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, Youth Justice Services Division, "the single most potent factor in the detention environment is the attitude of staff persons who interact with the residents. Relationship custody is a philosophy that encourages and empowers staff at all levels of the organization to foster a positive and professional relationship with the youth in their care. In order for relationship custody to be effective staff need to be seen as positive role models."

There is a struggle taking place within the facility for the metaphorical soul of RMYC. This struggle is characterized at all levels by those comfortable with a traditional "corrections" approach and those searching for a "relationship custody" approach. It is exacerbated by:

- a lack of clarity about the philosophy, goals and expected outcomes of what a relationship custody approach would require;
- the destabilization amongst staff that is created by competing philosophies and approaches; and
- the perception of youth that the organization is in chaos and has little or no structure due to staff inconsistencies and the struggle for the approach.

The Advocate's Office believes that the two approaches to youth custody are not mutually exclusive. Stronger leadership is necessary at all levels to support the 'relationship custody' approach planned with the establishment of the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre.

The Advocate's Office has been working with the RMYC to support changes to improve the standard of care for youth. Although there have been some improvements the pace of change is too slow, particularly in the areas of safety, staffing levels, staff-youth relations and programming.

The Public Face of RMYC:

The Brampton Guardian published a newspaper article about the event on Thursday May 28, 2009:

Fully operational, the jail will accommodate up to 192 youth aged 12 to 17 and employ 311 full time staff and part time staff. The local jail will have an annual budget of approximately \$28.1 million, according to ministry officials. The complex is 220,000 square feet on 77 acres. A 192 “campus-style” detention centre has been created for youth serving jail terms or in custody. A high school, workshops, sports fields, running tracks, and a multi-faith spiritual and religious centre are also on site.

*Explore **an exciting opportunity** to be part of a multi-disciplinary team with the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre. Within a secure custody environment you will perform a full range of duties related to the supervision of youth on an assigned shift **utilizing a relationship custody approach**; identify and participate in the provision of case management and **appropriate structured rehabilitative programs** and services for youth; **ensure the safety and security of youth, staff, youth centre and community.***

Excerpt from a Ministry of Children and Youth Services job ad posted on October 3, 2008.

Voices of Youth at RMYC:

The Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth began receiving phone calls from youth at RMYC at the end of July. The initial calls originated from girls housed in one of the two female designated units at the centre. The calls increased in frequency by mid- August. Concerns reported by youth at that time included:

- Foreign substances found in the food
- Small portions of food, “hungry all the time”
- Not enough food provided for youth observing Ramadan
- Poor quality of food
- Prescription medication not received regularly
- Cold temperatures especially at night, not enough blankets provided
- Lack of access to showers
- Lack of privacy in washrooms
- Overhead lights on all night, can’t sleep
- Staff inconsistencies regarding the behaviour management system
- Lack of programming, “nothing to do here”
- Delay and denial of phone access to Advocate’s Office
- Delay and denial of phone access to lawyers
- Lack of privacy during phone calls to Advocate’s Office and to lawyers
- Only allowed to call parents via collect calls/parents with cell phones cannot accept collect calls/parents with financial constraints cannot accept collect calls
- Numerous cancelled family visits.

From December 1, 2009 to January 22, 2010 concerns reported by youth during site visits and phone calls included the following:

- Uncooked and small food portions, less food on weekends because two meals (brunch, dinner) rather than three meals are served per day on weekends
- Lack of access to medical care
- Not allowed to call the Advocate
- Lack of programming
- Shortage of staff prevents movement and therefore lack of access to school, spiritual centre, use of washroom and recreation
- Locked in room for long periods of time
- Use of physical interventions by staff to manage behaviour
- Excessive force by staff
- Excessive searches
- Peer to peer violence

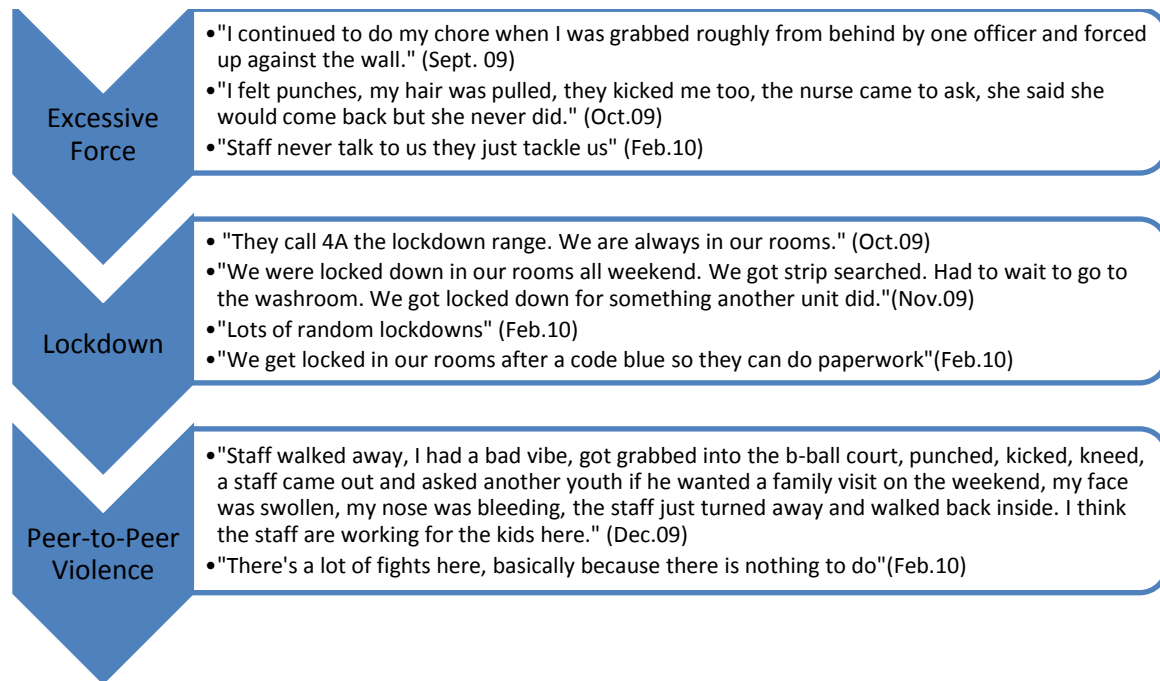
The youth spoke of the excessive number of searches that regularly take place. Youth are required to be locked in their rooms during searches while staff ‘strip search’ each youth for contraband. Complaints regarding the use of long periods of room confinement (48, 72, 96 hours and in some instances 10 days in a row) as a regular consequence were frequently voiced by youth. During confinement youth are

locked in their rooms and only permitted out one at a time to use the washroom when staff are available to escort them.

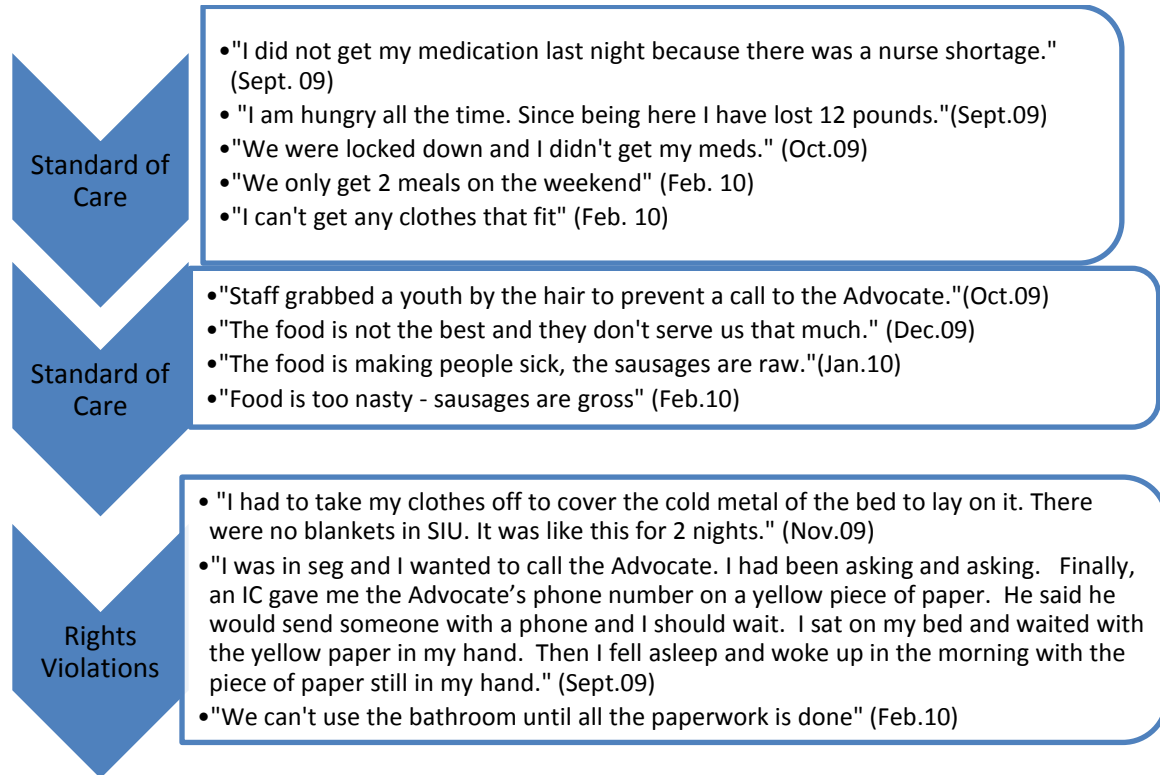
It was also observed by Advocates visiting the RMYC that the level of cleanliness on the units had declined since the end of November. In some of the units there were black scuff marks on the walls, piles of dirt had accumulated in the corners, food droppings were on the floor in the program room, the common area seating was quite soiled and the resident washrooms did not look as though they had been cleaned thoroughly for some time.

The comments listed below are taken directly from interviews and telephone calls from youth at Roy McMurtry Youth Centre:

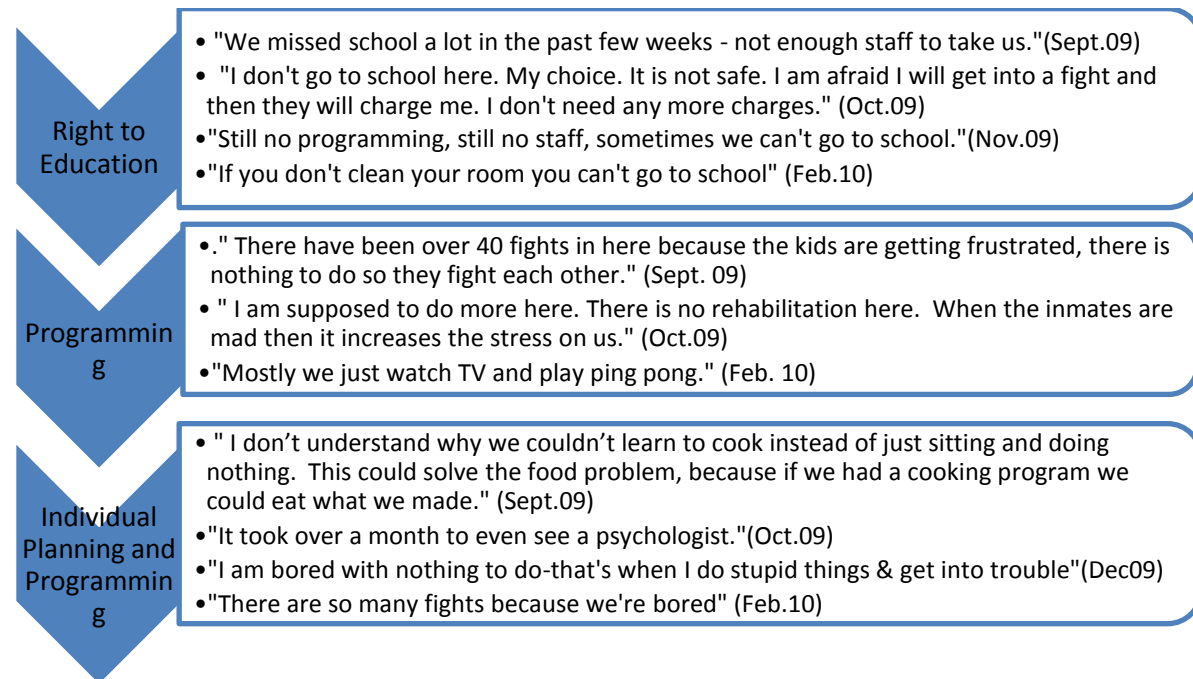
Safety and Security:



Standard of Care and Rights Violations:

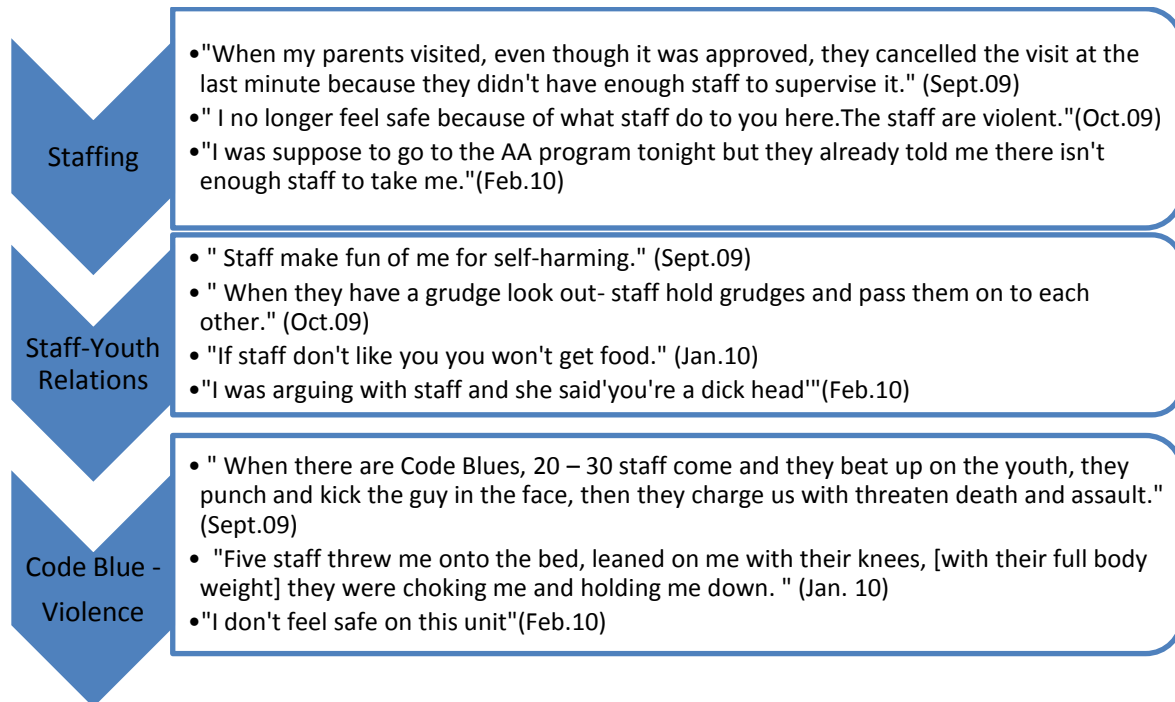


Programming:



Throughout the interviews there were an overwhelming number of comments made by youth regarding staffing issues and staff-youth relations as reflected below.

Staffing and Staff-Youth Relations:



Statistics:

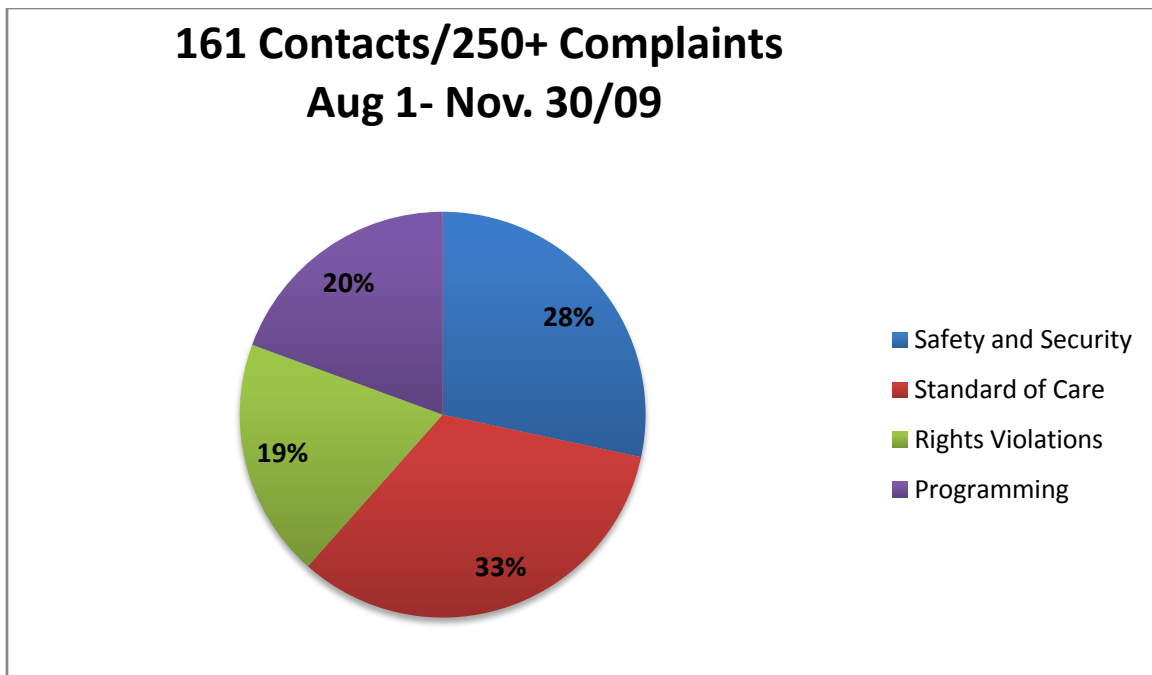
The statistics in this section of the report cover two time periods from August 1st to November 30, 2009 and December 1, 2009 to January 22, 2010. These statistics are based on phone calls to the Advocate's Office and site visits to RMYC. The weekly site visits (ten in total) began on September 10, 2009 and ended on November 12, 2009. Four additional site visits took place in mid February 2010 to talk to young people about programs at Roy McMurtry Youth Centre. Calls from youth since January 22, 2010 and conversations with youth during site visits reflect similar concerns to those stated above.

The Advocate's Office had 161 individual contacts with youth and received more than 250 complaints during the first time period. From December 1, 2009 to January 22, 2010 there were 61 individual contacts and 77 complaints received. Some contacts provided multiple complaints spanning more than one issue/category.

Types of Complaints:

The nature of the complaints received has been categorized into four themes: Safety and Security, Standard of Care, Rights Violations and Programming.

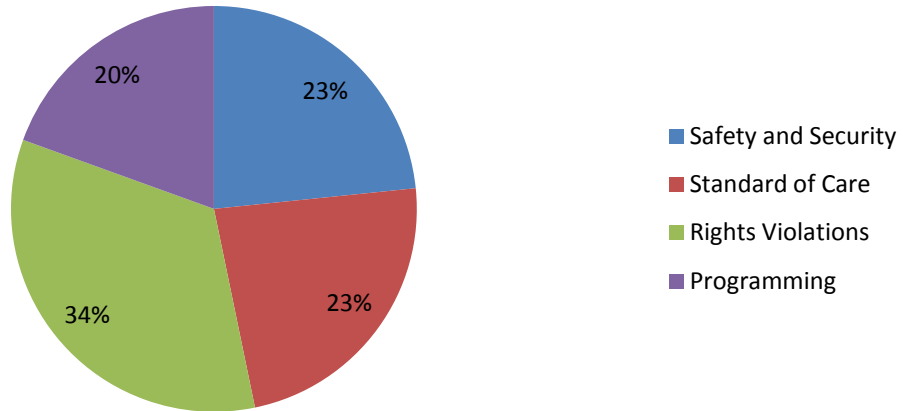
1. **Safety and Security:** Includes physical restraints, excessive force by staff, searches, lockdowns, code blue incidents, and peer-to-peer violence.
2. **Standard of Care:** Includes access to basic quality of care, food, and warmth.
3. **Rights Violations:** Includes access to education, access to family, advocate, and lawyer.
4. **Programming:** Includes school, spiritual, recreation, culturally specific.



Complaints about Safety and Security increased by 15% between Oct 9 and Nov 30, 2009.

There was a short time period between Oct. 6th and Nov. 30th when the complaints received by youth at RMYC decreased in the categories of standard of care, rights violations and programming. However complaints received from youth at RMYC since Oct. 9, 2009 regarding safety and security issues increased and centered on excessive use of force by staff, peer-to-peer violence, transfers to the secure isolation unit and frequent searches.

61 Contacts/77+ Complaints Dec 1, 2009 - Jan 22, 2010

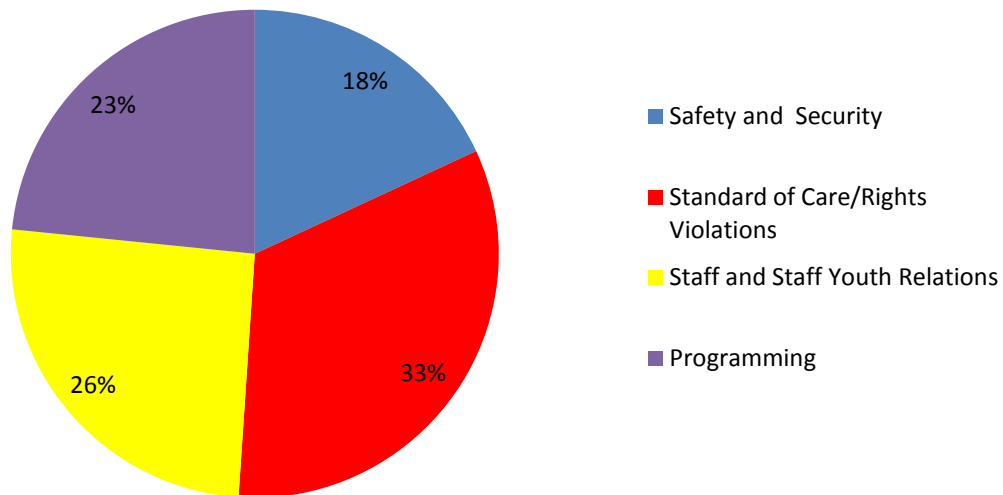


Complaints regarding the small portions of food and poor food quality have also resurfaced since December 1st. Phone calls to the Advocate's Office continue to be received about the lack of programming in general, concerns that staff shortages restricts access to school, family visits, and spiritual and religious programming. Youth at RMYC have indicated the amount of time they are spending in their rooms has been increasing (in several cases – 10 days at a time).

From December 1, 2009 to January 22, 2010 the number of complaints about violations of rights almost doubled. Programming complaints remained the same, standards of care increased by 10% and safety and security decreased slightly.

The violation of rights complaints included no access to education while off program, difficulty accessing washrooms, lack of privacy and no access to family. Programming complaints were lack of programs and no access to programming due to staffing levels. Peer violence, excessive force by staff and excessive code blues and lockdowns were reported in the safety and security category. The standards of care complaints were primarily food and quality of care items.

86 Contacts/94 Complaints Feb 9 Feb 17 Feb 18 /2010



On January 25, 2010 the Advocate's Office requested information about all of the programs offered to youth at RMYC. This information was received by following the "Information Sharing Protocol" with MCYS. Advocates went to RMYC on February 9, 17 and 18th in order to discuss programming with youth at the Centre. Over the three day period 86 youth were surveyed regarding programming and during the course of the interviews youth provided unsolicited additional concerns. In this three day "snapshot" youth described the following:

- Disrespectful communication between staff and youth
- Unfair treatment
- Staffing levels prohibiting movement to school, religious program and recreation
- Excessive lockdowns
- Increased peer violence
- Lack of timely access to washroom
- Complaints about quantity and quality of food
- Irregular programming, not always accessible

Response from the Advocate's Office:

Weekly visits by the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth to RMYC took place in order to meet individually with all of the youth on each unit to advise them of their right to contact the Advocate's Office. Advocates provided general rights advice and offered youth the opportunity to share any concerns they might have during these weekly face-to-face visits.

The Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) Assistant Deputy Minister of Youth Justice, the MCYS Regional Director and the Administrator of the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre were informed of these visits.

The Minister of Children and Youth Services was first advised there were concerns about RMYC by the Provincial Advocate on September 8, 2009.

Information highlighted in this report was submitted to RMYC and to the Ministry of Children and Youth Services in a timely manner. For example, the first email from the Advocate's Office to the Administrator of Roy McMurtry Youth Centre was sent on July 31, 2009 and highlighted the following concerns:

- Decreased access to family due to being placed geographically far from family
- Delayed from calling the Advocate's Office
- Phone's proximity to staff desk prevents private calls
- Lack of internal complaint process
- Not enough food, poor quality of food
- Staff disrespectful to youth, staff mocking and mimicking youth

Information regarding concerns was communicated several times per week (frequently on a daily basis) to the RMYC Administrator and contained detailed and timely information regarding the complaints.

There have been five formal requests for investigations of alleged incidents reported by youth from the Advocate's Office to the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (Sept. 29, Oct. 9, Nov. 16, Oct. 30, and Dec. 7). The requests are regarding incidents of a serious, violent nature and involve allegations of excessive force by staff and/or failing to protect the safety of youth. To date we have received only minimal information in response to our requests. We have been unable to access internal investigation reports regarding "location of staff and supervision during assaults," video footage, and written communication between the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services regarding the alleged incidents. To date we do not have information to validate or dismiss these allegations. This remains a concern.

Regulation 109 of the Child and Family Services Act requires service providers to establish a written procedure for hearing and dealing with complaints regarding alleged violations of a young person's rights. It is unclear if this is the practice at the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre as the RMYC management team often responded to detailed complaints from youth by restating the complaint from the staff or "adult" perspective rather than hearing and dealing with the youth's complaint and seeking to resolve the concern.

The Provincial Advocate has had a number of meetings and teleconferences with the ADM of Youth Justice to further raise the concerns identified by youth residing at RMYC. The Provincial Advocate has also spoken to the Minister of Children and Youth Services and he has personally visited the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre on three occasions to hear directly from the young people.

Response from MCYS

On Oct 9, 2009 The Ministry of Children and Youth Services provided a status update on the changes that had been made at RMYC in response to the concerns raised by the Advocate's Office. These included additional staff hired on the management team, improvements to basic care and the announcement of a unit by unit review of the facility.

Meetings with the Administrator of RMYC were held on November 12th and December 18, 2009. Those changes already implemented and upcoming changes were relayed to the Advocate on December 18th and included:

- Implementation of an internal complaint procedure that includes a locked "black box" on every unit where youth can anonymously deposit written complaints that are reviewed on a daily basis by the unit manager;
- An "Issues Coordinator" has been hired by RMYC to manage complaints from youth that are received by the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth and to act as a liaison between RMYC and the Advocate's Office;
- A Youth Advisory Committee (one for male youth and one for female youth) has been created to begin to solicit feedback from youth within the facility. Currently membership criteria and terms of reference are being developed at RMYC. To date three meetings have been held;
- A process to review and change the current incentive program has also been implemented; and
- New youth officers have been trained and were scheduled to begin work in January 2010.

The RMYC Administrator has been meeting with a representative from the Advocate's Office on a monthly basis to review a summary of complaints received from youth, to inform of changes and/or developments at RMYC and to discuss possible solutions to issues facing youth at the Centre.

The Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM) of Youth Justice Services provided a number of updates regarding actions that had been taken in his letter dated February 19, 2010. The following actions by RMYC and MCYS personnel were provided to address the complaints outlined in this report:

- Assessment of all living units to form an action plan to establish a solid foundation specific to routines, activities, consistency and daily structure on living units;
- Increased staffing has reduced the number of program cancellations and increased types of programs and activities offered;
- Increased supervision of staff and youth on living units;
- Availability of youth service officers has increased by 47 through recruitment and adding additional training classes;

- A more robust internal complaints process was introduced;
- Completed a comprehensive staffing model analysis;
- Interim visiting processes were implemented to improve youth's knowledge of the availability of family visits and to reduce cancellations;
- Complaints from youth related to food, lighting, pillows and room temperatures were addressed; and
- A working group with community experts to undertake work related to youth involved in gangs has been established. These community experts include representatives from the Breaking the Cycle program as well as Michael Chettleburgh, one of Canada's foremost authorities on street gangs.

The Regional Director of the Central Region of Youth Justice Services responsible for the operation of the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre provided the following updates:

- RMYC is reviewing the incentive program;
- They are developing intake and assessment units over the next couple of months;
- Joint management and Youth Service Officer training will take place over the next few months;
- Telephones have been installed in the quiet room on the units; and
- Extra staff on the weekend to try to reduce the cancellations of family visits.

Staff at RMYC:

There were numerous phone conversations, email messages and face to face meetings with both front line staff and various members of the management team at RMYC during the time period encompassed by this report. Several front line staff confided in Advocates and echoed the concerns that were described by the youth living in the facility.

Common complaints from staff were:

- low staffing levels (less than 50% of allocated recreation staff were hired) preventing youth from attending activities;
- significantly less than half of the promised allotment of casual staff necessitated numerous cancellations of family visits, reduction in number and type of visits scheduled, delayed escorts for emergency medical situations;
- an inability to implement earned incentives for youth;
- staff concern for their own safety;
- concerns that youth were not getting enough to eat;
- excessive force by staff;
- peer violence; and
- lack of programming.

Front line staff provided concerns unsolicited. Many staff expressed concern about the direction of the facility and worry that RMYC will not fulfill its true promise. They felt that they were not able to develop relationships with young people in a manner that was described to them in their orientation and training.

Conversely, comments by staff also included statements like, “well, only a certain type of youth complains to the Advocate’s Office, you know the type,” “you do the crime, you pay the time,” “are you going to believe everything these criminals tell you?” and “if you give them more food they will just eat it.” It was clear there are some front line staff and management staff who have not fully accepted the “relationship custody” model.

The Advocate’s Office contacted the Ontario Public Service Employee Union (OPSEU) to identify any common areas of concern at the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre. OPSEU expressed the following concerns:

Successful programs embody these essential ingredients:

- A strength based mindset among staff and youth
- Forming trusting connections with youth in conflict
- Responding to needs rather than reacting to behaviour
- Enlisting youth in solving problems and restoring damaged bonds
- Creating respect among young persons, adults, leaders, and families.

To the maximum extent, attempts to change systems should involve all stakeholders. At the governance level, coercive policies are supplanted by restorative policies. Those at the supervisory level seek to build strengths in direct-care professionals. Persons having most direct contact with youth are the most potent agents for change and need practical methods for building positive relationships and group climates.

Brendtro, Dr. Larry K. (2004) From coercive to strength-based intervention: Responding to the needs of children in pain.

- Insufficient number of staff – low staffing levels don’t allow Youth Services Officers (YSOs) to have breaks and don’t provide enough supervision;
- Not enough staff training;
- High incidence of peer on peer violence and violence against staff;
- Not enough incentives for youth;
- Need for more programming; and
- Recognition of a ‘clash of cultures’ at RMYC.

Programming

The Regional Director indicated the Ministry had recognized the need for increased programming at the facility and advised the Advocate’s Office that staff had worked hard in the month of December to put a number of programs in place. Information obtained by the Advocate’s Office (see below) shows a number of one time programs did take place, especially over the holidays. These can be beneficial to relieve immediate program deficits and boredom but do not effectively address the long term program needs.

The Provincial Advocate believes the type and range of programs offered should be consistent with recommendations from two inquests related to deaths in youth justice facilities (J.L. and D.M).

In the case of J.L recommendation #55 states, “programming must include community resources such as counselling, medical, psychiatric and mentoring programs. Parents and peer groups should be welcomed by youth facilities and incorporated into daily life in a consistent fashion across all systems.”

At the inquest for D.M. recommendations #6 and #12 address programming requirements for youth justice facilities.

- #6 “Dawn to dusk programming with encouragement for participation by a range of incentive based strategies.”

- #12 “Programs for youth should be numerous. Evidence in reports and testimony demonstrates that dawn to dusk programming is effective in reducing peer on peer violence, assists in the rehabilitation process and keeps youth mentally and physically active.”

By following the ‘Information Sharing Protocol’ the Advocate’s Office requested information about all of the programs offered to young people at the RMYC. The information provided by the Ministry indicated there were seven programs in November 2009, fifty-nine in December 2009 and fifty-three in January 2010. Included as Ministry programs were religious diets, individual counselling, assessments, consultation, unit meetings, incentive meals, and individual treatment/behaviour plan.

During the three months 17 programs were cancelled due to lack of staff; 30 were cancelled due to programming conflicts; 22 were cancelled due to lack of interest; and eight were cancelled for various issues.

Over a two week period in February the Advocates visited all of the youth available at RMYC (86). The Advocates asked the youth if they knew about the programs provided to the Advocate’s Office by the Ministry, and if they had been offered the program, and if they attended the program. An overwhelming majority of the young people interviewed had never heard of most of the programs. The mandatory recreation program was the only program all the youth knew about but many indicated they did not go to recreation on a regular basis due to staffing levels and numerous ‘lockdowns’. Many of the youth who were interviewed blamed the lack of programming for the peer on peer violence.

Of the 119 programs it appears youth only attended 79 programs and more than half of the programs were offered only once or twice. The schedule for programs offered does not seem to be provided on a regular basis and often has programs overlapping on the same day.

On a positive note youth acknowledged that “There is religious programming now” when staff is available to escort youth to the cultural centre and one young person said, “A staff gave me presents at Christmas.” In one unit a youth developed a music program (Sigma Beats) with the help of the social worker which is scheduled to start next month.

Since the Fall of 2009 the Advocate’s Office has been contacted by many community agencies working with young people. These front line workers and senior staff were expressing their own concerns about the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre and were seeking a way to assist. On February 20, 2010 the Provincial Advocate brought together over 30 representatives of community agencies and service providers who had previously expressed an interest in program development and reintegration of the youth at RMYC. A Ministry representative attended and offered participants the opportunity to forward to her their ideas and programs and invited everyone to meet in April to discuss forming an advisory committee specific to RMYC. Yet still, there is little evidence of any planning in reintegration work. The RMYC has not built relationships with organizations in communities and priority neighbourhoods where youth will return.

Generally there is no overall approach to programming. Even if accepted, MCYS list of programs provided to the Advocate’s Office does not keep youth busy particularly for those, not in school or after school. The school, cultural centre, recreation, health services, and social work programs do not seem integrated into one cohesive approach.

Ghosts Haunt a New Vision:

For over seven years, the voices of youth have informed us that conditions in detention centres have not improved in Ontario.

There is a documented history of the types of issues that have been identified in youth detention centres in Ontario but not resolved over time or change in location. Common recurring themes are evident:

- Obstruction of the right to call the Advocate's Office;
- Lack of programming and rehabilitation opportunities;
- Inadequate provision of basic care; and
- Peer violence.

The comments by youth already cited in this report are confirmation that the experiences and perceptions of youth in detention centers in Ontario have not changed since 2003. Below is a list of quotes from youth in detention centres from 2003 to 2010:

Dec 2003

"It's cold. At night time is when it affects me. "

"The people in the ranges, the guards should keep a better eye out and listen. Lots of shit happens on the range."

June 2008

"Sometimes we don't get enough. Want more so we gamble for food...sometimes staff gamble with us."

"I'd say we are locked in our rooms."

September 2009

"I am always hungry."

"Breakfast. Sleep till lunch. Eat lunch. Sleep in cell. If you just sit here it makes you crazy...we don't do nothing."

"Guy is sent to seg for yelling and banging. Staff went to his room and tripped him and banged his head against the wall and his tooth fell out. I watched from my room." "When staff get wind of calls

[to the Advocate's Office] they start verbally abusing us; call us snitches."

September 2009

"Raw chicken, food is garbage, not enough, even though they increased it. My stomach hurts every day." "I lost my level because someone attacked me, I was in seg for 48 hours and then in my room for 48 hours. It is not safe and it is not fair."

The Roy McMurtry Youth Centre was shortlisted for the Civic and Community Building Award at the 2009 World Architecture Festival in Barcelona.

The Roy McMurtry Youth Centre has been designed from first principles, setting new standards for the comprehensive care of youth offenders and the architecture that supports them.



The Body Politic and Architecture:

The decision made in 2004 by the Provincial Government of Ontario to introduce a new Ministry of Child and Youth Services, as distinct from the adult facilities, has allowed a re-evaluation of the programs and physical expression of them in consideration of youth offenders. Of great interest to the team was the potential that the major innovations distinguishing the new views of this Ministry could be directly expressed in the architecture.

World Buildings Directory Online Database

January 2010

“Fight, watch TV, sleep and eat –all you can do here.” The food here is gross, the meat tastes like crap.” Staff use the complaint box instead of talking to us, they say I don’t want to hear your complaint – put it in the box.” “While we are jail we should leave with something in our brain.”

Conclusions:

The dichotomy between the current voices of youth housed at the Roy McMurry Youth Centre and the vision espoused by of the Ministry of Children Services is hard to reconcile. RMYC has completed a unit by unit assessment, established a youth advisory committee, hired additional staff, and implemented an internal complaint procedure. The Advocate’s Office supports the vision of MYCS but the current pace of change at RMYC is not acceptable.

The worry remains that the negative momentum of the larger problems as outlined by this report has the ability to overtake the vision of the RMYC and impede any progress towards positive initiatives. Time is of the essence. RMYC has been open for over 8 months and is only now looking at more effective ways of working with youth.

MCYS staff identified difficulty working with youth who have a short term stay and youth with serious violent offences. RMYC has the opportunity to look to expertise outside the corrections community for, thinking, problem solving, advice, and help. However this opportunity has not been taken. The Advocate’s Office brought over 30 community experts together who offered to provide the Ministry representative with programs and ideas to support the youth at the RMYC.

Despite the fact that the RMYC has hired and trained new Youth Services Officers and increased staff to reduce program and visit cancellations there are still concerns from staff and youth that staffing levels do not allow youth to attend programs on a regular basis. It also remains a concern that there is insufficient staff to ensure staff and youth safety. Serious safety and security incidents that cause the lockdown of every youth in every unit to their room continue while the problems listed above remain systemic. It is true there are pockets of hope such as:

- the new library that just opened;
- the apprenticeship program getting started;
- a program beginning in one unit to learn music production that was created by a youth;
- changes to the incentive program;
- internal complaint procedure develop;
- increased staffing and enhanced training in February and March; and
- the establishment of a youth advisory committee.

It is obvious there are well intentioned staff at RMYC who are trying to make a positive difference in the lives of the youth at RMYC.

It is the view of the Advocate’s Office that many of the concerns raised could be mitigated by clarifying the philosophy, goals and expected outcome of the relationship custody approach; increasing staffing levels; implementing dawn to dusk programming; and developing strong relationships with organizations in communities and priority neighbourhoods where youth will be returning.

Almost everyone the Advocate’s Office spoke to during the writing of this report recognizes the potential of the youth at RMYC and describes this potential in different ways. The Provincial Advocate

sees the young people as sons and daughters, friends and parents to be, Ontario's next policy makers, plumbers, carpenters, doctors, nurses, entrepreneurs, and everyday workers. Senior ministry officials introduced apprenticeship programs at RMYC and said the potential in supporting youth in becoming responsible community members and "tax payers" was important. OPSEU in its public commitment to social justice describes the potential for youth to be future employees and possibly members. The young people themselves see their own potential and have repeatedly expressed the desire for an opportunity to live a "productive life."

The Minister of Children and Youth Services acknowledged the potential of RMYC and the youth when she said, "Youth in custody and detention have very different needs from adults. We created this centre with the vision of rehabilitating young people so they don't re-offend and are better-prepared to make the right choices and a positive contribution to society. We will continue to assess and make improvements so this state-of-the-art centre is a place we can be proud of." The Minister's Office has advised the Provincial Advocate that an 'action plan' to address the issues at the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre is forthcoming.

In August 2010 the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children will begin a formal review of the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre. At that time RMYC will have been operational with youth for over one year. It is hoped the concerns raised in this report will no longer be evident.