

Action Plan

Helping Youth Realize Their Potential
at the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre

March 2010

Background

Youth in conflict with the law have very different needs from adults. That is why Ontario created a new youth-centred correctional system devoted exclusively to the needs of youth in conflict with the law that is separate and apart from the adult system. As of April 1, 2009, all youth being held in custody in units located in adult facilities were moved to dedicated youth justice facilities that meet their unique needs.

Ontario's goal is to reduce the chances that a youth in conflict with the law will re-offend. The province's youth justice system is designed to rehabilitate youth while holding them accountable for their actions. It offers secure and open custody, as well as a broad range of community-based alternatives to custody, including diversion from court, rehabilitation, probation and supports for mental health and behavioural issues. Studies show that providing youth in conflict with the law with meaningful supports and services, while holding them accountable for their actions, helps to steer them away from crime, make better choices and lessens the likelihood they will re-offend. Today less than seven per cent of youth in conflict with the law are placed in secure custody and detention facilities.

The Roy McMurtry Youth Centre in Brampton, like others across the province, was designed and built specifically to meet the needs of youth who must be held in custody. These young people need high-quality services and supportive environments to achieve success and make better choices when they leave. Youth placed in these secure custody and detention centres have the opportunity to form positive relationships and benefit from specialized programs that will help them leave their criminal past behind and return to their communities better prepared to make the right choices. Staff are involved in a form of supervision known as "relationship custody" where they enforce rules and procedures as well as coach, mentor and engage youth in decision-making. Positive staff and youth relations help increase safety and reduce negative behaviour by youth both while in custody and after they leave.

Opened in May 2009, the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre can accommodate 192 young people, 160 males and 32 females, who are in conflict with the law and who were between the ages of 12 to 17 at the time of their offence. Youth started to arrive in July 2009. The unique campus-style layout allows youth to experience as normal a daily routine as possible in a secure facility. The centre also provides opportunities for youth to participate in specialized programs and activities delivered in classrooms, a trades building, a non-denominational multi-faith centre and recreation areas, including a sports field.

Context for Action

On average, about 100 youth are admitted to the centre each month. Of these, about 40 percent are in the facility for less than a week.

Meeting the complex needs of many of the youth, including mental health, substance abuse, gang involvement and other issues presents many challenges. Staff face particular challenges meeting the needs of youth placed in custody for short stays because there is little time to form meaningful relationships or to provide effective rehabilitation.

This Action Plan brings together the resources, training and programming needed to ensure that the goals and objectives of the relationship custody approach are achieved, while protecting youth and staff safety, and preparing youth to make better choices when they return to their communities.

Helping Youth Realize Their Potential

When it comes to youth in conflict with the law, Ontario's primary goal is to provide these young people with the supports and opportunities they need to succeed and realize their full potential. Youth in custody often have complex needs such as mental health and substance abuse issues, and problems managing anger and conflict. Many have never developed positive relationships with family or peers and have been drawn into criminal and gang activity.

Developing positive interactions between staff and youth and providing effective supervision and good living conditions supports youth and staff safety, and helps steer youth away from crime when they leave.

Education, rehabilitation and recreation

The centre has a range of education, rehabilitative and recreation programs in place to help youth become engaged, develop positive relationships, complete high school credits, learn new skills and get involved in activities that will help them lead more productive lives when they leave. Measures in place include:

- Social workers meet with youth within 24 to 48 hours to identify any immediate risks or needs. Individual plans are developed for youth that address their educational, emotional and recreational needs so they are well-prepared to return to their community when they leave. Plans for youth who are at the facility for short stays are designed to meet their immediate needs.
- An on-site high school operated by the Peel District School Board, which includes 30 teachers, including a transition teacher, providing high school credits, pre-apprenticeship, trades and skills building programs in such areas as horticulture, small engines, construction/woodworking and communications technology. In February 2010, 95 out of 109 youth at the centre were enrolled in educational programs that contribute to their high school credits.
- High school self-learning courses, developed by the Peel District School Board, for youth who are at the centre for a short stay and not able to attend the on-site school.
- Rehabilitative programs, led by psychologists and social workers, to help youth deal with behavioural and emotional issues such as substance abuse, self-harm, learning difficulties, trauma and anger management.
- Social Workers are assigned to each living unit to provide individual counselling.
- The YMCA Life Skills program, delivered by social workers at the centre on four living units, supports youth returning to the community by helping them manage their health, learning, employment and social needs.
- Violence awareness programs delivered by the Elizabeth Fry Society for female youth who often suffer from low self-esteem; female youth are counselled on partner abuse, family violence, sexual assault, self-protection, healing and their rights.
- Opportunities throughout the week, on evenings and weekends, where youth can participate in sports like basketball, soccer, weightlifting, volleyball and yoga, volunteer work and other activities.
- Access to the library and reading materials.

New Measures

To provide more opportunities for youth to learn, resolve conflict, turn their back on criminal activity and stay active and engaged, over the next six months the centre will introduce:

- A new evidence-based program, Reasoning and Rehabilitation, for male youth that promotes social skills development, problem-solving, relationship-building and positive decision-making.
- Enhanced training for staff on “relationship custody” – a form of supervision where staff engage and involve youth in decision-making and serve as role models on a daily basis.
- A new program, On Track (Aggression Replacement Training), designed to help youth prone to violence to better control anger and aggressive behaviour so they can make more appropriate choices when they leave the centre. The program will be led by psychologists and social workers.
- Improved youth assessment and assignment to individual units to minimize incidents of youth-on-youth violence.

Ensuring Positive Staff and Youth Interactions

In addition to providing secure supervision and a safe environment, staff at youth justice facilities are there to support and encourage youth to participate in programs and activities that will help them make better choices when they leave. Staff also serve as coaches and role models, must be good listeners, committed to working with youth with complex needs and to building positive relationships.

The centre has 266 permanent staff. Staff who are trained to deal with the needs of youth in conflict with the law include youth services officers and managers, social workers, psychologists, nurses and recreation officers. Supporting staff in developing and enhancing their skills contributes to safety and youth success. Measures in place include:

- Newly-hired youth services officers must complete four weeks of formal training and three weeks of on-site orientation with experienced staff.
- 47 new staff have been hired since September 2009, who are available when required. Staff are available to reinforce rules and procedures in the individual youth units.
- Every effort is made to consistently assign staff to the same living units. This helps both staff and youth establish better, trusting relationships and improves safety and supervision.
- Youth services officers are required to take refresher courses yearly to maintain and enhance their skills in verbal and, where necessary, physical intervention to control aggressive youth behaviour.
- Youth Liaison Officer helps resolve concerns raised by youth in a timely and constructive manner, and provides regular contact with the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth.
- Youth can register complaints anonymously under a new system and complaints are reviewed by a manager daily.

New Measures

To support a safe environment and the consistent enforcement of rules and procedures by staff who are dedicated to helping young people, over the next six months the centre will:

- Hire and train 48 additional staff, including a dedicated recreation officer for female youth and a Community Liaison Coordinator. This will help increase overall supervision and supports to youth. More staff will be available to oversee family visits, accompany youth to activities and to supervise their participation in programs that will help them continue their education and develop new skills.
- Provide enhanced training for staff to support a consistent understanding of the philosophy, goals and expected outcomes of the relationship custody approach.
- Ensure staff understand their responsibilities with respect to the use of secure isolation.
- On the advice of community experts, over the next four months, staff will be provided with additional tools to better identify and manage youth involved in gangs.
- Provide specialized training starting to help staff better manage aggressive behaviour
- To meet the specific needs of female youth, over the next four months, the centre will provide specialized training to staff on the Girls Circle model found to be effective in working with young women to promote their healthy growth and emotional development, so they can build confidence and develop caring relationships. Female youth in custody have different needs than male youth.
- Additional security cameras will be installed to improve supervision, as needed, by fall 2010. This supports safety and security for youth and staff.

Working with Community Partners

Bringing partners from the community into the centre to participate in programs and activities increases youth awareness of the community around them and provides opportunities for skills development that benefit youth when they leave. Measures in place include:

- Opportunities for youth to make spiritual and cultural connections through activities offered by multi-faith community groups: Muslim prayer, Buddhist meditation, Catholic connection, Anglican Eucharist, Aboriginal teaching, Salvation Army and Bible correspondence courses.
- A partnership with the Elizabeth Fry Society provides special supports to female youth, including links to housing, school and employment, to help them get established in the community when they leave.
- The African Canadian Legal Clinic, on referral by a probation officer, provides culturally sensitive supports to youth in custody who have been convicted of an offence as they transition from the facility back to their communities.

New Measures

To expand and develop linkages with experts and community organizations for both programs delivered at the centre or available to youth when they return to their communities, over the next four months the centre will:

- Establish a Partnership Action Committee, made up of education, mental health and other experts as well as youth, community service agency and private sector partners to identify community programs that could be delivered at the centre to help youth, including those youth placed at the facility for short stays.

- Create a new position of Community Liaison Coordinator to support the work of the Partnership Action Committee. This individual will help identify gaps in programming and involve youth in decisions on programs and activities offered. Once program gaps have been identified, a request for proposals for on-site community programming will be issued. The Committee will also help to strengthen the centre's relationship with the community and provide advice on effectively transitioning youth back into their home communities.
- Work with community partners to offer programs and activities that are culturally reflective of the youth in custody.

Some programs that have already been identified include:

- The Steel Pan program, in partnership with Second Chance Foundation, will be introduced to help youth gain new skills in areas of leadership, cooperation, tolerance and respect.
- Sheridan College will provide student placements at the centre starting in September 2010.
- Operation Springboard will provide training to staff on the use of innovative, multi-media, digital programming that engages youth in learning skills.

Tracking Progress

In order to be effective, the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre must track and monitor its outcomes. The new measures outlined in the Action Plan will be regularly monitored to ensure they have been fully implemented and that they are achieving the intended outcomes.

Tracking progress at the centre helps to identify areas that need further work. It also ensures that any concerns raised by youth, staff or through the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth are addressed in a timely manner.

The centre continues to meet regularly with the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth to address concerns about living conditions and safety. A new Youth Liaison Officer ensures regular contact with the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth. Youth can now register complaints verbally and in writing. Written complaints are reviewed by managers daily. As well, Local Employee Relations and Health and Safety Committees have been established for staff to raise concerns and offer potential solutions to issues.

Actions taken as a result of assessments of each individual unit have helped to improve living conditions and increased consistency in the way rules and procedures are enforced. A comprehensive staffing review assessed scheduling practices and the resources required to get youth to programs, family visits and activities. As a result, 48 new staff will be hired, including managers who will increase supervision of staff and reinforce consistency.

Indicators are now in place to regularly track:

- Youth complaints.
- Staff receiving various types of training.
- The number and types of community partnerships.
- The number of rehabilitation and education programs offered as well as youth participation.

As new programs are implemented at RMYC, participation by youth will be measured and programs will be evaluated for effectiveness. Youth will be given the opportunity to anonymously assess their experience of programs.

With these new accountability and monitoring measures in place, the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre will continue to make the necessary changes to ensure youth and staff safety, while working to achieve better outcomes for youth.

Conclusion

Youth in custody have diverse needs, but they should all expect to be safe, to be offered the opportunity to be engaged and to learn. All youth at the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre will eventually leave custody, returning to their communities and often their friends and families. It is in the interest of youth, and the interest of society, to do our best to help youth make better decisions when they leave RMYC, so that they don't return. Achieving this end requires effective supports when youth are at RMYC, as well as assistance in their transition back into the community.

Ontario has made significant progress in developing its youth justice system over the past few years, but there is more to do. This Action Plan seeks to take the next important steps forward by working with youth, staff, and community partners to fully implement the vision and goals of relationship custody at the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre and help youth realize their potential. It also recognizes that in order to be successful, the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre must monitor and track its progress, so that program gaps can be identified and addressed on an ongoing basis. By working together to rehabilitate youth in conflict with the law, while holding them accountable for their actions, they will be less likely to re-offend and society as a whole will benefit.