

Round Table # 4 – Northeast & Cariboo

May 11, 2012

We want to thank all of the participants in the Northeast & Cariboo roundtable for taking the time to share their ideas, identify issues and discuss possible solutions to prevent and respond to criminal activity in their communities.

Roundtable Format

A total of 38 people attended the fourth BC Policing Plan roundtable in Prince George on May 11th, 2012. Participants included local government representatives, aboriginal community representatives, victim services, community support organizations and policing agencies from throughout the Northeast and Cariboo region. Minister of Justice Shirley Bond also attended to provide opening remarks and listen in on some of the discussions. The goal of the roundtable was to capture constructive input from participants towards defining priorities and solutions on policing, crime prevention, and public safety in their community and for the province. To that end, participants were divided into five groups and engaged in five different cafe-style discussions throughout the day, including:

1. Problems and Responses to Criminal Activity
2. Crime Prevention Responses to Criminal Activity
3. Police Core Responsibilities
4. Public Safety
5. Policing and Crime Prevention Resources

For each topic, participants were asked to identify key issues, solutions and priorities.

Key Themes

The following key themes emerged from the group discussions:

Mental Health Issues: Police have limited resources to accommodate individuals with mental health needs. There are limited or insufficient supports and facilities for individuals with mental health issues so they are continually cycled through the criminal justice system. A need exists for more support and programs to keep people with mental health issues from continually re-entering the justice system.

Breaking the Cycle of Criminal Activity: Long term solutions that focus on the root causes of crime are needed to break the cycle of criminal activity. Crime and violence are inversely related to a person's overall well-being, health, education and family environment.

Building a Stronger Sense of Community: Instilling pride in the community helps to create a heightened sense of accountability in the community. Community members are better prepared to prevent crime and enhance public safety when they feel connected to each other and their own communities. Social programs that engage individuals to play an active role, as well as programs that build upon community culture strengthen the community as a whole.

Community Responsibility: Enhance community accountability by inviting communities to step-up and take a role in watching out for criminal activity and taking steps to prevent crime. Creating awareness of the positive things happening in the community is essential for building momentum and reinforcing proactive community behavior.

Volunteerism: A dedicated (paid) resource or intermediary to manage, organize and attract volunteers would help to ensure better coordination and sustainability of community involvement.

Domestic and community violence: Violence and abuse in society, such as domestic violence or bullying is a major issue. It has a significant impact on personal well-being as well as the community as a whole. To reduce this impact, the root causes or social determinants of crime including, poverty, addictions, mental health, lack of support resources, historical violence and acceptable violence (cultural tolerance of violence) need to be addressed. Positive role models inside and outside of family structures for youth need to be increased. Establishing an early warning system for intervention will help support community members before an assault occurs. Commitment is needed to have dedicated local domestic violence officers. Treatment and services such as information and education must be available not only to women but also to men in an effort to reduce the likelihood of domestic violence occurring and re-occurring.

Youth Support: Early and sustained interaction with police, community role models, elders, and other community leaders is critical to crime prevention. Programs are needed to support families in providing youth with secure and stable environments in which to live. Youth mentoring other youths was also described as rewarding and worthwhile.

Gang activity: Youth are drawn to gangs for financial and social status. In order for communities to compete with gang recruitment, they must proactively offer something equally attractive to youth. Gang violence and recruitment are increasing. Having increased police visibility and presence on the street is an effective form of crime prevention. Police also need to be aware of high risk teens so they can establish safety plans and reach out to these teens in their communities. Police are able to keep up pressure on gangs by pooling community resources in a focussed manner. Different skills, standards and job descriptions are needed according to where police officers are stationed.

Information sharing and collaboration: The policing strategy should link to the education, health, finance, transportation, and social sector ministries and reflect the unique roles they each play in improving public safety and crime prevention. A better understanding across agencies is needed to outline the programs and services that exist in order to best utilize all resources.

Reduce overlaps and duplications in service providers by increasing their collaboration and information sharing. Provide longer term funding so agencies can plan longer term and don't have to reapply for funding each year. Address concerns over liability so that information can be shared safely – this will involve education and potential changes to legislation. Establish monthly meetings among law enforcement providers to discuss issues and solutions collaboratively and maintain cross agency awareness. Currently there are challenges with disseminating information across agencies and resources due to variation in Freedom of Information restrictions between agencies.

Summary by topic:

1. Problems with and Responses to Criminal Activity

Issues:

- There is a tendency to use a “one size fits all” response rather than looking at specific needs for specific regions or communities
- Programs around youth education and respectful relationships work well, but are constantly challenged due to lack of funding
- The policing strategy should include links to education, health, finance, transportation, and social sector ministries to reflect the role they each play in the continuum of social services and improving quality of life
- Incidents of crime are correlated with mental health needs: responses by law enforcement do not adequately address the mental health support needs of many individuals
- Mental health and addictions are often over diagnosed: many cases are dealt with using short term solutions which do not solve the long term problems
- There is limited or insufficient support facilities for individuals with mental health issues so they are continually cycled through the criminal justice system
- There are very limited services available for males who are victims - only for male offenders
- Need more diversionary and rehabilitation programs to keep people from re-entering the justice system
- There are challenges around disseminating information about programs to ensure the public is well-informed
- Rework how domestic violence is handled by social services to support families more proactively by providing information and education to both men and women upfront in an effort to reduce the likelihood that domestic violence occurs/continues

- Excellent work is being done across various agencies but these successful practices are not being well communicated or passed on to other agencies so they may take advantage of things that are working well
- Funding models should be flexible enough to account for unique regional issues as well as geographic challenges and population
- Gang violence and violence stemming from gang recruitment and initiation is a growing issue
- Human trafficking is a hidden issue that should be explored further
- Cross jurisdictional activity relating to gangs, drugs, and sexual exploitation as gangs have the ability to operate across different jurisdictions
- Urban centers provide the largest market for drug trafficking while the rural areas provide opportunity for cultivation of the drugs

Top Priorities:

- Establish funding for programs, agencies and education on community issues and social services
- Take inventory on services available to reduce duplication
- Use statistical reports to see what's working well and utilize that data to assess programs
- Support families where they live and find ways to bring services to them

Priorities and Solutions:

- People from smaller communities need treatment programs while they're in jail as well as when they get out on probation - without having to travel great distances
- Need to define and outline exactly what programs and services exist so that resources can be focused more accurately on where they need it most
- Need to ensure that services are available to both males and females
- Communities have experienced success using dedicated crown counsel for managing domestic violence
- Continue to establish collaborative relationships with other agencies who can each bring something to the table – much more effective than working in silos
- Connecting people to their culture and the culture of the community through programs to strengthen the sense of community
- Establishing domestic violence units similar to the prolific offender team to deal with chronic domestic violence situations police are continuously responding to
- Continue education on different cultures so that agencies can better support people across cultural silos
- Put funding in place for transition houses across communities to educate men and women in an effort to bring about long term change

- Expand the First Nations policing program based on relationships built at the community level. First Nations policing officers should remain in community for longer periods.
- Address privacy issues to allow for increased information sharing in support of programs such as the Homeless Intervention Program (HIP)
- Increase training and support to manage increased driving offenses and traffic volumes
- Establish an integrated court model like the one used in Victoria for people with severe, chronic mental illness

2. Crime Prevention

Issues:

- Communities are currently not supporting each other – Neighbours have a role to play in strength of community and community safety
- Violence and abuse in society, such as domestic violence or bullying is a major issue and has a major impact on the personal well-being of those affected and the community at large
- Observing the root causes or social determinants of crime including, poverty, addictions, mental health, lack of resources, knowledge and then mitigating these causes is a key supporting element of crime prevention
- There is a need for victim services to offer both immediate and long-term support
- There is a lack of positive role models inside and outside the family structure for youth
- Volunteer demographics is an issue – there is a need to attract younger individuals to fill imminent gaps in the aging volunteer population
- The media's focus on crime impacts public perception of safety and increases the perceived amount of criminal activity

Top Priorities:

- Need to work with and engage youth to reduce the likelihood of deviant or criminal activity
- Addressing poverty and how it can be managed
- Engagement with community in crime prevention
- Standardization and training related to VAWIR (Violence Against Women in Relationships) Policy
- Crime and violence are connected to a person's overall well-being and health – intangible costs related to these issues emerge in the future, by investing in the front-end we will save in health care, social service, and legal costs in the long term

Priorities and Solutions:

- Visible police presence works and is an effective form of crime prevention
- Early and sustained interaction with police, elders, community leaders throughout childhood will have a positive impact on youth crime
- Education on community issues, as well as personal development programs give people the tools to better support themselves and their families
- Social media can be used as a tool to address crime prevention by creating opportunities to connect with youth
- Need to provide education to youth through the communication channels they use most such as social media and electronic devices
- Increase the number of programs designed to allow youth to support and mentor others
- Make volunteering part of the education curriculum and give youth credits for the volunteer work they perform
- Community accountability – communities need to step-up and take a role in watching out for criminal activity and taking steps to prevent crime
- There needs to be a resource or intermediary to manage, organize and attract volunteers
- Engaging members of the community to participate and interact in community development helps create a better understanding of the big issues they face
- Crime prevention initiatives should focus on improving quality of life and increase access to services that support healthy living and personal well-being
- Reallocating of funds as opposed to new funding – community objectives can be met by sharing resources where they are most needed
- Ensuring that the sources of funding for law enforcement are being managed efficiently and allocated appropriately

3. Police Core Responsibilities

Issues:

- Core responsibilities have evolved rapidly over time and depend on the size and location of the community
- There is a need for different skills, standards and job descriptions depending on where a police officer is stationed
- Citizens need to be educated on when it is appropriate to call the police, and to understand the role police play
- Due to the lack of funding provided to support services, police absorb additional responsibilities such as managing individuals with mental health issues or children in group homes
- Expectations of what police are responsible for must be realistic: if the expectation of police is to be first line responders for everything, they will need the appropriate training and funding to meet these expectations

- Although all core police functions are vital, due to an increase in demand and limited resources, police have to prioritize which services they focus on
- Due to limited availability of social services in both capacity and operating hours, people call the RCMP because they are the only service available
- Roles and responsibilities of police have increased through legislative changes and societal pressures
- Strong leadership is necessary for managing the relationship between law enforcement and the community
- Need more integrated, multi-agency response notably in prevention and intervention between law enforcement and social service entities

Top Police Core Responsibilities:

- Maintaining Public safety
- Catching criminals (keeping peace: serve and protect)
- Investigating crime
- Preventing crime (multi-faceted prevention)

Priorities and Solutions:

- Understand the younger generation of law enforcement officers and capitalizing on their understanding of current methods of communication such as social media in reaching out to youths
- Educate the general public about law enforcement responsibilities
- Maintain high visibility through physical police presence in communities
- Look at developing a provincial framework to help communities set up integrated teams of health, housing, addiction services, police, and other related services
- Encourage community members to utilize the opportunity of the RCMP Annual Performance Plan: used by RCMP to establish priorities by consulting with community leaders and elected officials
- Establish monthly meetings among law enforcement and community service providers to discuss issues and solutions collaboratively and maintain cross-agency awareness
- Look at revisions to the Freedom of Information Act (FOI) to allow for greater information sharing among agencies and police
- Public attitudes and perceptions toward crime need to be changed through positive awareness campaigns about what the real issues are
- Generating more involvement takes leadership - communities need more people to take charge
- Police need to remain current in their skills and abilities by continuously training to reflect current practices

4. Public Safety

Issues:

- Both traditional media and social media portray crime in a manner that skews public perception and does not necessarily reflect the reality of criminal activity or the key issues facing communities
- Legislated privacy rules don't allow sharing of sex offender information in certain circumstances
- The community needs to be aware of the big issues and the social programs that are available in support of solutions
- In certain areas of the community people do not feel safe, and feel that these areas are unsafe for others as well
- Women are far more likely to be victimized and likely feel less safe.
- Increased aggressiveness and proliferation of gang activity greatly reduces any perception of safety in the communities that are affected
- Gangs are recruiting from First Nations and are feeding into the gangs operating in larger centres like the Game Tight Soldiers.
- Youth are joining gangs to address family needs that are not being met

Top Priorities:

- Communicate the facts to the public so that the real issues are correctly understood
- Break down negative stereotypes
- Create awareness of the positive things happening in the community
- Instill pride in the community, with pride comes a sense of ownership by the community
- Increased RCMP visibility on the streets of the community
- Addressing the issues with gangs and organized crime
- Some of the responsibility for public safety needs to be shifted to community
- Need to increase long term thinking and solutioning focused on preventing criminal activity as opposed to short term solutioning focusing on stopping criminal activity

Priorities and Solutions:

- Acknowledge the positive contributions of local youth
- Team up older kids with younger kids – this helps youth transition more effectively when they have a role model
- Use youth as facilitators for community events
- Supporting youth to embrace their culture and heritage to build a sense of community
- Having a program where elders welcome kids as they enter schools, this helps with relationships
- Police need to respond to negative media coverage with their own positive campaigns

- Have a communication plan that is very accessible for the public, with the goal being to keep the community updated on crime statistics and news
- Police need to put high risk teens on safety plans, need to speak to these teens when they come to our community
- Use social media to channel messages from law enforcement to the public
- Have a visible presence of uniformed officers
- Citizens on Patrol makes people feel safe, same with Block Watch
- Build communities with Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) in mind
- Having a visible presence of citizens in and amongst the community also helps to increase public safety
- Empower communities to take responsibility for themselves and inspire community members to be more involved
- Long term transitional housing for women is working (5 years' placement vs 1 year)
- The community needs to take back some responsibility so that RCMP can focus on the job they have

5. Policing and Crime Prevention Resources

Issues

- Vacancy patterns in the policing detachments – filling vacancies is challenging as operating at full staff capacity would result in funding challenges
- There is no solutioning for housing support for individuals post incarceration
- Allocation of resources is not in sync with the supports needed for victims of crime
- The ineffective transfer of information and the high approval threshold for the charge approval process has made the system ineffective
- Restorative justice is not being utilized enough. The criteria for alternative measures programs/extrajudicial sanctions (e.g. offender must accept responsibility) and the absence of consequences for failing to successfully complete a restorative justice program when used as an extrajudicial measure is discouraging referrals to restorative justice programs.
- There is a lack of resources and education within law enforcement to manage relationships with different cultures
- The RCMP has an image and trust issue with the public as it only takes a few negative experiences to overshadow the good work being done
- There are not only “silos of excellence” but funding silos as well that create an atmosphere where agencies are competing for the same funding
- There are multiple overlapping support groups that are working independently and are trying to draw on the support from the same individuals or groups when they should be working together

- There needs to be a policy at a higher level encompassing the sharing of information between agencies within the social services continuum
- Victims services which work very closely with the RCMP are poorly resourced, resulting in lack of staff to adequately meet demand
- There are no transition homes for men post incarceration
- Rural areas are “getting what they pay for” - municipal officers can come in and provide coverage but provincial policing resources need to be increased

Priorities and Solutions

- Creating a presence of the local police force in the schools and in the community – being proactive and building relationships
- Commitment locally from superintendent, having a dedicated domestic violence officer
- Longer terms for first nations policing liaison - increasing the length of tenure would allow officers more time to integrate themselves within communities
- Allowing the RCMP to support small communities by having detachments in the communities even though the numbers may not justify it
- RCMP able to keep up pressure on gangs by focusing their resources
- Ability to front end load on incidents using “Surge” capacity such as in a small detachment – if a homicide happens you can get the extra resources in to support
- Creating programs to address specific issues within the community such as the Prolific Offender Program, which is working well and involves multiple agencies collaborating and working together
- Consolidation of services is working well in terms of saving money – single agency handling several different funding contracts
- The concept of public service triage which involves housing all the services required in one place and providing wrap around support to individuals providing all the services they need
- The public perception of law enforcement is very important and various strategies and policies to achieve this have and are being developed
- Continue to build upon the concept of locums/relief squads - move in when quickly needed and required
- Need to support the RCMP to perform their primary duties without having to take on responsibilities that should be managed by social services
- Put in place resources so that the police do not have to fill the gaps of other agencies that don’t operate 24/7; the RCMP are the only ones available to respond to calls after hours
- Use a more consolidated approach by establishing working groups with joint vision or cause
- Address concerns over liability so that information can be shared safely – this will involve education and potentially changes to legislation

- Establish a sustainable long term funding approach that is integrated and connected across all ministries providing human services
- Shift more of the funding into treating problems and not the symptoms - start a new generation that is more proactive
- Open shelters for men; remove them from the home rather than the women and children: need to stop the revolving door and give them the same information we give women – shelters for men providing education and life skills
- Refer individuals to the appropriate service provider instead of law enforcement trying to be all things to all people
- Set up only a few consolidated service agencies and provide longer term funding so that they don't have to reapply year after year, and change the model so that funds not spent by March 31st do not have to be sent back
- Make the provincial government departments just as accountable for the money that they receive as the provincial government makes agencies accountable for the comparatively small amount of money they receive