

Item No. 11.1.3
Halifax Regional Council
March 1, 2011

TO: Mayor Kelly and Members of Halifax Regional Council

Original Signed by 

SUBMITTED BY:

Wayne Anstey, Acting Chief Administrative Officer

Original Signed by 

Mike Labrecque, Deputy Chief Administrative Officer

DATE: February 23, 2011

SUBJECT: Youth Advocate Program Sustainability

ORIGIN

Federal funding for a 4 year pilot project provided from Public Safety Canada's Youth Gang Prevention Fund.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Halifax Regional Council maintain the Youth Advocate Program as a Municipal service by:

1. Allocating an additional \$550,000 to Community Development's operating budget to sustain staffing and program costs;
2. Expanding the service to include priority communities beyond the 6 pilots; and
3. Pursuing funding partnership opportunities including federal and provincial governments and others.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Youth Advocate Program is a four year Federally funded pilot program targeting youth between the ages of 9 to 14 years who are at risk of becoming involved in criminal activity and/or gangs. The primary goal of the Program is to prevent these youth from engaging in anti-social and criminal behaviours leading to involvement in gang related activities. A condition of the Federal grant was that after four years, if the pilot program proved worthwhile, the Municipality would attempt to continue the program with sustainable funding.

The program has successfully reduced isolation and negative rushes among youth at risk that have entered the program. It has also successfully increased their pro-social and life skills competencies, and reduced the incidences of factors associated with criminality. Federal funding for the program is nearing its end. Based on the positive result of the project, staff is recommending that this service should continue on a permanent basis.

Studies show that investments in prevention and intervention programs are a cost effective way of reducing crime. Research carried out by the *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime* shows that an investment of public money in community-based programs and individualized services for youth at risk results in significant and meaningful improvement in the child's quality of life. Successful programs focus on reducing the negative influences that youth are exposed to both within the home and the community.

The gross direct cost of the program is \$690,000 annually. It is proposed that \$140,000 be transferred to the program from existing funds. An additional \$550,000 in new funding is required. Consistent with HRM's approach to the addition of new services, it is proposed that this portion be funded through an increase to the tax rate. Approval of the staff recommendation would be an approval in principle. Actual approval of the program and budget is dependent upon Council's consideration of this service with respect to all other budget and service considerations that will be considered in the draft 2011/12 Operating Budget.

BACKGROUND

In the spring of 2007, HRM was awarded 1.9 million dollars by the National Crime Prevention Centre to operate a 4 year pilot program called the "Youth Advocate Program". The funding ceases as of April 2011. Therefore, HRM is faced with a decision as to whether or not to sustain this program and service. The following offers an overview of the program, the youth clientele, and the results of a four year evaluation of the program and its impact.

1.0 What is the Youth Advocate Program?

The Youth Advocate Program is a neighbourhood-based program targeting youth between the ages of 9 to 14 years who are at risk of, or involved in, criminal activity and/or gangs. The primary goal of the Program is to prevent these youth from engaging in gang related activities, and anti-social and criminal behaviours. The key objectives of the program are to:

- a) Reduce the key risk factors of isolation, stress and negative rushes that make youth vulnerable to engaging in gang related activities.

- b) Increase the protective factors including self reliance, resiliency, life and pro-social skills by engaging youth in constructive behaviours with family, school and community.
- c) Increase and share knowledge of intervention strategies to prevent youth at risk of engaging in gang activities.

1.1 The Pilot Neighbourhoods

While many youth throughout HRM maybe considered “at-risk”, not all of HRM’s communities were included in the pilot. The program was limited to six urban neighbourhoods noted below. These neighbourhoods were selected based on information on local gang activity in HRM. The exclusion of other communities was merely a resource matter, not because gang or criminal activity was/or is absent:

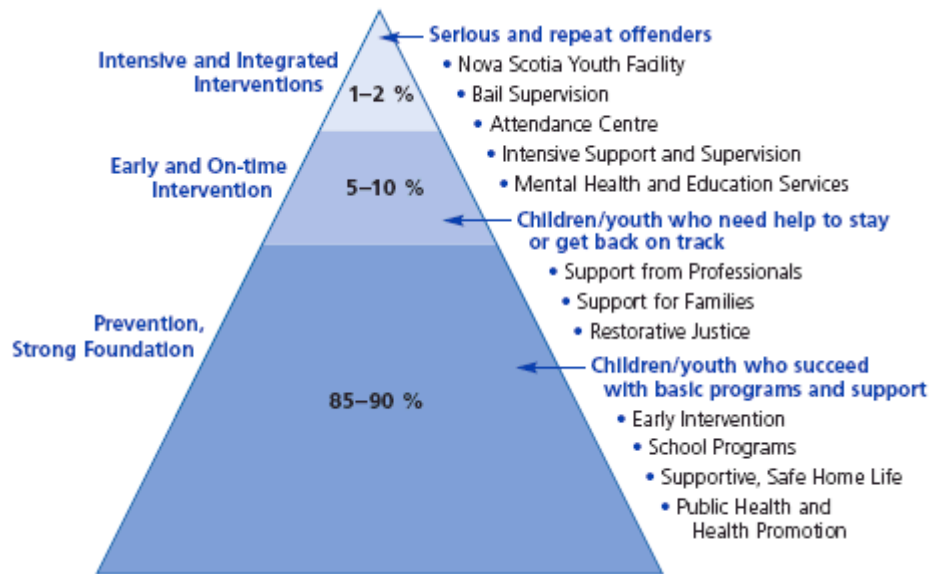
- a) Uniacke Square
- b) Dartmouth North (Victoria Rd.)
- c) Woodside / Gaston Road
- d) Spryfield
- e) Bayers-Westwood; and Fairview
- f) East Dartmouth

2.0 Who Are HRM’s Youth-At-Risk?

Figure 1 illustrates that the majority of HRM youth (85-90%) will lead successful lives as long as they are afforded a basic level of support. However, there are many youth that require a more preventative approach to ensure their successful development (5-10%). At the top of the pyramid, are the 1-2% of youth who require intensive intervention by government and other agencies to address the negative factors posing challenges to their development. When these youth do not receive such services, they are far more likely to engage in delinquent behaviours. Such negative behaviour is further exaggerated when risk indicators are present including:

- a) Social disorganization, including high poverty and residential mobility
- b) High crime neighbourhood
- c) neighbourhood youth in trouble
- d) Presence of gangs in the neighbourhoods
- e) Availability or perceived access to drugs in the neighbourhood
- f) Availability of firearms
- g) Cultural norms supporting gang behavior
- h) Feeling unsafe in the neighbourhood

Figure 1



2.1 What Is Life Like for HRM's At-Risk-Youth?

Youth within the 1-2% often reside in substandard homes that are chaotic and dysfunctional. Typically, households are lead by a single parent or guardian, who is either under or unemployed. More often than not, the parent or guardian lacks a local support network to rely upon for assistance with their children. Their parental practices (i.e. supervision, rules, discipline) are inconsistent, and there may be a weak bond between parent and child, and an inability to establish clear parental boundaries.

Youth may not have a bedroom or even a bed in which to sleep. They may go without food, they may not be bathed or even have clean clothes. More often than not the homes are violent, with acts of abuse and bullying. Usually these homes include members involved in crime/violence. Overall, this dynamic reinforces and fosters delinquent behaviours, drug use, poor academic performance and membership in gangs.

2.2 Why are 1-2% of HRM's Youth Particularly Vulnerable?

Youth within the 1-2% are generally more vulnerable because of the level of intervention required and the assumption that their parent/guardian has the knowledge to access the services required. In HRM, most of the service providers required to assist this category are not operating or organized in an integrated manner; meaning, there is not a "single" point of entry for anyone seeking services. Consequently, it is not uncommon for a youth-at-risk to be dealing with upwards of 10 different agencies at anyone time. The sheer number of service providers and/or agencies involved for one youth proves often to be too daunting for the parent/guardian. Parents or guardians become frustrated, give-up on seeking assistance, and often remove the youth from existing services. They will also disengage from communicating with the service or program provider.

3.0 Program Design

The issue of youth-at-risk is very complex and poses unique challenges requiring a specialized strategy. Over the years, there have been several initiatives and programs designed to address youth at risk, but none have proven overly effective. Recognizing this complexity, and the numerous failed attempts, the Youth Advocate Program acknowledges the inherent weaknesses of the existing social service system in HRM, and focused the program design to facilitate a more integrated and coordinated approach for youth-at-risk.

3.1 The “Wrap-Around Model

The “WrapAround” model was adopted as the basis for the Program. This model is an integrated model designed to eliminate the systemic organizational barriers that govern effective delivery of social services in HRM. The model facilitates a more effective, whole-systems approach to service delivery.

The successful application of this model requires both the cooperation and commitment of several different levels of government and agencies to deliver their respective services, perhaps in unconventional and unplanned ways. (See Appendix 2) The model provides formal and informal support to families or individuals who have challenges supporting and advocating for the rights of their children. The program facilitates collaboration among different levels of government, community organizations, volunteers and family members. Both professionals and lay people are involved to ensure services and supports are in place for each youth and their family. Families play a pivotal role, and are afforded opportunities for training, therapy, integrated treatment plans or other effective strategies.

3.2 The Youth Advocates

HRM’s Community Relations division managed the Youth Advocate Program. The staff team comprised of a project manager, administrative assistant, program assistant, and 6 youth case workers. A unique aspect of the Program was that many of the youth advocate workers were once at-risk-youth themselves. Many of the workers were raised in the pilot communities, and continue to reside there. Their real life experiences, and their capacity and resiliency that allowed them to overcome personal challenges, were important factors leading to their employment. HRM believed that the success of the program, in part, would be achieved only if the workers had an in-depth understanding of a youth-at-risk’s life, the families, and their struggles.

4.0 Youth Advocate Program Evaluation

An important feature of the pilot was an independent evaluation conducted throughout its duration. Dr. Michael Ungar, Director of the International Resilience Centre at Dalhousie University, and an internationally recognized researcher of at-risk youth, managed the evaluation. Dr. Ungar developed an evaluation design framework to assess the program over the four year pilot. Many aspects of the program were evaluated (See Appendix 2), but the following outcome evaluation questions were paramount:

- a) Did the program reduce isolation and negative rushes among youth at risk for gang involvement?**

- b) Did the program increase the pro-social and life skills competencies in participating youth?**
- c) Did these changes reduce the incidences of factors associated with criminality?**

4.1 The Evaluation Results

An annual report by Dr. Ungar provided findings on the overall effectiveness of the program as it related to the specific evaluation questions noted above. Depending upon the stage of the project and evaluation, the results differed, but generally found that “progress was made for those youth participating in the program”. Specifically, the evaluation found that the program effectively reduced isolation and negative rushes among youth at risk of gang activity, and increased pro-social and life skills competencies in the participating youth. The following highlights some of the key evaluation findings:

- occurrence of poor youth conduct are less evident
- number of incidents of delinquency have declined
- delinquent behaviour for both older and younger youth has decreased
- risk levels have fallen
- attitude towards aggression, guns, violence and gangs have become less permissive.
- youth have higher levels of resilience, which is expected to be a buffer against criminal activity and gang involvement
- pro-social behaviour and self-esteem, respectively, have both increased.
- attachment to school has increased
- family relationships and cohesion have slightly improved
- youth victimization has slightly decreased.
- problems with peer relationships have decreased
- increased ability to form age appropriate relationships with peers
- decreased engagement in risk taking behaviour, specifically substance use
- attitudes towards gangs have become more negative
- clear reductions in impulsivity levels

DISCUSSION

The funding for the Youth Advocate Program will cease as of April 2011. The results of the evaluation indicate there will be value in continuing the program, and that Council may wish to consider transitioning the pilot project into a permanent service. Transitioning this program into a permanent service will require additional Municipal funding. The following discussion aims to address several pertinent questions that will assist Council in its deliberations on the future of the program.

1.0 What would it cost to continue this service?

A condition of funding by the Federal Government required a rigorous financial reporting process and an independent assessment of the program’s costs. An audit of the program’s finances was conducted on a quarterly basis, and at the end of each fiscal year. The audit included an assessment of each budget line item.

A positive outcome of the auditing process is that staff has, with a relatively high degree of certainty, an understanding of the full cost of operating the program. Based on the same program outcomes and service delivery model applied over the last 4 years, it is anticipated that a Gross Cost of \$690,000 will be required to maintain the program. This would exclude the annual budget that HRM currently provides to support services that complement the program (i.e. police, recreation programming).

1.1 Potential Funding Partnerships

Since the outset of the project, staff relied heavily on the voluntary participation of strategic partners at the provincial and federal government levels. In fact, without their participation, the project would not have been a success. Specifically, their participation was critical for implementing the “wrap around” model – the primary factor for the project’s success.

While HRM has proven to be the government body most ideally positioned to successfully deliver the youth advocate program, the cost of maintaining this service should not be entirely borne by HRM. Rather, it is staff’s opinion that the Provincial government is integral to the solution and an essential funding partner.

In fact, beyond program model design, staff recognized that the active participation of Provincial partners was important because most, if not all have a mandated responsibilities and budgets to serve the at-risk-youth populations. Recognizing this, staff wanted to ensure these partners were well positioned to advocate for funding from their respective departments should the program prove to be successful and there was a consensus to sustain it beyond the four year pilot.

1.2 Absence of Provincial and Federal Funding Partners

While staff believe this program should be a shared funding responsibility with the Provincial government, it is important to decide what level of service, if any, HRM can sustain in the absence of such support.

At the launch of the project, two fulltime FTEs were seconded from Community Development for its duration. It is suggested that these two FTEs be permanently realigned in support of the program. This decision would permanently reduce staff’s ability to perform other community based services such as community outreach, capacity building and mobilizing, as well as recreation administrative support.

2.0 What it Costs Not To Continue the Youth Advocate Program:

Whether or not HRM continues with the Youth Advocate Project, there will be costs associated with managing youth at risk. The question is whether or not the public’s money is better spent on prevention/intervention, such as the Youth Advocate Program, or enforcement, prosecution, and incarceration, the more traditional response. The following case study depicts the impact – both financial and societal – of one local “youth-at-risk” before and after entering the youth advocate program:

a) Case Study:

An eleven year old boy living in an HRM neighbourhood is involved/responsible for a host of

offences including, but not limited to, arson, break and enter, assault, property damage, and theft. HRP responds to over 50 incidents involving this one individual.

The youth's neighbourhood is outwardly stressed and anxious. Residents are placing their home for sale. They plead to HRM for help from police. The family is ostracized by the community; youth's parents become the subject of the neighbourhood's fear and ridicule.

HRM expends considerable police resources, time and energy addressing the youth and the family. Repeatedly police respond and investigate the various criminal acts. HRP works with the family, meets with Community Services, and members of the public to attempt to improve the situation. Unfortunately, HRP can only do so much. It requires the support of numerous service organizations and government departments to address the needs of the youth and the family.

This youth represents a growing challenge for HRM in general, accessing and managing the increasingly complex set of services needed by at-risk youth is too much for a single division, and in some instances, beyond the scope of the front line responder (HRP). The number of organizations required to assist this particular youth are numerous, only amplifying the problem of determining service options, making successful referrals, and tracking client progress over an extended period of time.

Following acceptance into the Youth Advocate Program, a marked reduction in the number of negative encounters between the family and school, police and neighbours was noted. The criminal activity stopped and the parents began exercising greater control over their child's behaviour. The final outward sign that there was a significant reduction in the youth's risk factors and that life was improving was when the Department of Community Services removed the family from their case load.

BUDGET IMPLICATIONS

The Gross Direct Cost to maintain the Youth Advocate Program is \$690,000 annually.

It is proposed that this be funded by:

- 1) transferring \$140,000 of existing funding (2 FTE's); and
- 2) increasing funding by a further \$550,000. Consistent with HRM's approach to the addition of new services, this portion of the service will be funded through an increase to the tax rate.

It should be noted that this is an approval in principle, not an actual budget approval prior to the adoption of the 2011/12 Operating Budget. If Council approves the staff recommendations contained in this report, staff will incorporate them into the draft 2011/12 Operating Budget. Final approval of this program and funding is dependent upon Council's consideration of this service and expenditure with respect to all other budget and service considerations. Continuation of the program and the additional funding proposal is not approved until the 2011/12 Operating Budget is approved.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT POLICIES/BUSINESS PLAN

This report complies with the Municipality's Multi-Year Financial Strategy, the approved Operating, Project and Reserve budgets, policies and procedures regarding withdrawals from the utilization of Project and Operating reserves, as well as any relevant legislation.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

None

ATTACHMENTS

Appendix 1 – Evaluation Criteria

Appendix 2 - Wrap-Around Principles

A copy of this report can be obtained online at <http://www.halifax.ca/council/agendasc/agenda.html> then choose the appropriate meeting date, or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 490-4210, or Fax 490-4208.

Report Prepared by: Sharon Martin, Program Manager, 490-4567

Report Approved by: _____
Andrew Whittemore, Manager, Community Relations & Cultural Affairs, 490-1585

Financial Approval by: _____
Cathie O'Toole, CGA, Director of Finance, 490-6308

Report Approved by: _____
Paul Dunphy, Director, Community Development

Frank Beazley: _____
Chief Frank A. Beazley, Halifax Regional Police

Attachment 1

Evaluation Criteria

- ☐ Reduction in the number of youth and/or family experiencing isolation, stresses and negative rushes with potential risk of engaging in gang activity.
- ☐ Youth and their families are demonstrating positive changes in behaviours and attitudes.
- ☐ An increase in protective factors of self reliance, resiliency, life and pro-social skills to address risk factors of isolation, stresses and negative rushes.
- ☐ Youth and their families build protective factors which helps youth cope and reduce their specific risk factors.
- ☐ Increased commitment on the part of youth and family members to change their negative behaviours that place youth at risk of engaging in gang activity.
- ☐ Increase and share knowledge of intervention to prevent youth at risk of engaging in gang activities.
- ☐ Thoroughly document project implementation in order to contribute to the knowledge of what types of projects and project components work best to prevent or reduce gang involvement.
- ☐ Collect information from or regarding participants, which will allow for a determination of their level of risk of becoming involved in a gang.
- ☐ Collect baseline and follow up information at several intervals, which will indicate if there has been a change over time in their level of risk.
- ☐ Measure those particular risk and protective factors, which the Project is expecting to address through its activities.
- ☐ Use a variety of data collection sources and methods, both quantitative and qualitative: e.g. surveys, interviews, official records, and observations.
- ☐ Employ a variety of data collection and analytical techniques to rule out alternative explanations of results and enhance the generalizability of the results (i.e. address concerns related to internal and external validity).
- ☐ Track the costs of implementing the project.

Attachment 2

Wrap-Around Model Principles

1. Family voice and choice 2. Culturally Competent	Family is at the center of the Youth Advocate Program. They are actively involved in all decisions, their perspective, choices, values, culture, beliefs and preferences are incorporated into all stages of the plan.
3. Team based. Collaboration	The Youth Support Team is made up of individuals agreed upon by the family. The youth and parent are members of the team. They all share responsibility for creating and implementing the plan
4. Natural supports.	The Youth Support Team seeks out and encourages full participation of team members drawn from family members' networks of interpersonal and community relationships.
5. Community-based.	YAP promotes healthy integration of the child and family into community life.
7. Individualized.	A customized and highly individualized plan is developed that includes strategies, supports, and services for each youth.
8. Strengths based.	The YAP identifies and builds on the capabilities, knowledge, skills, and assets of the child and family.
9. Persistence.	Despite challenges, and set backs the team persists in working toward the goals.
10. Outcome based.	The team ties the goals and strategies of the WrapAround plan to observable or measurable indicators of success, monitors progress in terms of these indicators, and revises the plan accordingly.