



CITY OF VANCOUVER

ADMINISTRATIVE REPORT

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TO: Standing Committee on City Services and Budgets
FROM: Child and Youth Advocate
SUBJECT: Child and Youth Advocate Mentor's Year in Review

INFORMATION

THAT this report be received for INFORMATION.

COUNCIL POLICY

That Council re-establish the Child and Youth Advocate in 2003, to work within the framework outlined and identified, utilizing the information contained in the report previously requested by Council on June 26, 2003, to guide implementation, and that this position:

- be independent and report directly to Council;
- be complementary to the existing childcare/child-development and youth-focussed Social Planner positions;
- focus on systemic advocacy, speak out on issues and concerns on behalf of the City to other levels of government, and identify issues and make recommendations;
- work with the community to ensure that a wide range of children and youth voices are heard and included in the City's decision-making processes.

Council also approved the position of a part-time Youth Advocate Mentor.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to outline the Youth Advocate Mentor's accomplishments since November, 2004, and to outline the breadth of youth community engagement initiated.

Furthermore, in April, 2005, Council requested a report back after the Coalition for Kids and A People's Project Gathering in December, 2005. This report will speak to that project as well.

BACKGROUND

In July, 2003, Mayor and Council approved the re-instatement of the Child and Youth Advocate for the City of Vancouver. A panel of City staff and community partners conducted interviews for the position beginning in January, 2004, with a start date of May, 2004. The position is considered temporary with a three-year term that may be extended to a maximum of five years.

In September, 2004, the job description, classification and posting was created for the position of Youth Advocate Mentor and in October, 2004, an interview panel of staff and community members interviewed eight individuals out of over 190 applications. In November, 2004, I was hired to work part-time as the Youth Advocate Mentor.

Working in Partnership

My work with the Child and Youth Advocate has been one of mutual support, guidance and shared learning. As a young person with a long history of youth engagement, activism and advocacy work, I have access, trust and relationships with many youth movements, "an ear to the ground" so to speak, and this has been invaluable to both, the Youth Advocate Mentor and the Child and Youth Advocate.

There are aspects of the Work Plan that I have taken the lead on, such as the Youth Network and the youth engagement piece of the Coalition for Kids, which later became A People's Project. In other areas, I have offered my ideas, opinions or critiques, my facilitation skills and my connectedness to various youth communities to help support the development and implementation of the Child and Youth Advocate's work.

The independence of the Advocates is a core principle that ensures our integrity and ability to be guided by the needs of the community and, moreover, young people within the community who may traditionally be marginalized and left voiceless. This position is real, it is tangible and it puts a face to advocacy that youth can relate to. It is a delicate balance of working "within the system", while being responsive to and trusted by the communities that we serve.

DISCUSSION

WORK PLAN: (From the Child and Youth Advocate's Work Plan, March 21, 2005)

There are four key areas that the Child and Youth Advocate's office is focusing on:

- Development of Advocacy Planning and Engagement in Child Care;
- Development of Youth Network;
- Coalition for Kids; and
- Youth Police Dialogue

I have worked directly with the development of the Coalition for Kids, A People's Project, the Youth Network, and have helped shape the work plan for the Youth Police Dialogue.

Report Back on Coalition for Kids, A People's Project and The Gathering

In early 2004, a group of youth-serving agencies identified difficulties with the Provincial government's Request For Proposal process and began discussing ways in which to deal with these difficulties. Under the facilitation of the Vancouver Foundation, discussion expanded to encompass a rights-based focus using the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. I was invited to the group several months into the process and, at the time, was the only young person at the meetings. The Coalition developed a Statement of Purpose which read:

Recognizing the interdependence of Vancouver communities and neighbourhoods, the Coalition for Kids is a broad citywide coalition of youth, adults, area service networks, advocacy organizations and community agencies, whose purpose is to work towards the creation of a Vancouver in which the rights of all children, youth and families, as agreed to within the UN convention on the Rights of the Child, are understood, protected and supported.

The Coalition for Kids and A People's Project in 2005

- The Vancouver Foundation funded the Society for Children and Youth to help develop a monitoring tool on child and youth rights, and a youth-driven working group was formed. A Youth Coordinator, Sara Kendall, was hired by the Child and Youth Advocate, to work in partnership with the Youth Advocate Mentor, Society for Children and Youth, the working group and the community;
- Building on existing networks of trained youth facilitators, a "train the trainers" series prepared teams to work with community organizations and established youth groups to undertake the monitoring process which formed the basis for A People's Project;
- 20 diverse youth facilitators were trained during a retreat and ensuing workshops in the summer of 2005;
- 18 workshops were held with 140 children and youth, using the monitoring tool, to engage children and youth in discussions on how the UN convention on the Rights of the Child can impact them and to encourage discussion on how the Convention can be used to improve circumstances for children and youth in the City;
- 2 workshops were held with 8 service providers, using the monitoring tool, to engage service providers in discussions on how the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child impacts the children and youth they provide services for and to encourage discussion on how the Convention can be used to improve circumstances for children and youth in the City;
- Through the use of the monitoring tool, key rights violations identified in Vancouver were mostly poverty-based, with an emphasis on youth interactions with police, youth in care, and violations based on discrimination of race, age and gender. Participants also identified community assets that support the rights of children and youth, which included educational institutions, community centres, social service organizations, recreational services and arts-based programs and services throughout Vancouver;

- A conference was held on December 2-3, 2005, called The Gathering. Approximately 40 youth attended this conference and engaged in analysis of project findings and preparation of a performance piece expressing these findings through the media of visual art, spoken word and song, and theatre. Youth presented this performance to approximately 25 adult allies on December 3, 2005, and using Open Space Technology, adults and youth discussed issues that arose from their performance and from the project findings;
- Key discussions revolved around youth agreements and issues for youth in care, working with various jurisdictions and levels of government to promote policy that recognizes children's rights and serves to meet those needs, creating arts-based forums and programs for youth to be heard throughout Vancouver, and solution-based discussion of youth interaction with police;
- Key findings of A People's Project will be made available in a report to be published in February, 2006. This report will be used as an accountability tool for funders and project partners and as an advocacy tool for the promotion of children's rights and as a model for future youth engagement in rights-based approaches.

This initiative has been precedent-setting in that it is the first time in Canada that youth have engaged in human rights monitoring and it is a credit to our city and the many partners involved in the project that A People's Project was initiated.

Ongoing Work of the Youth Advocate Mentor

Vancouver Youth Network

Vancouver is a city full of dynamic and engaged young people and their supporters. Youth are involved in issues, action and advocacy, addressing everything from poverty and homelessness to immigration and culture. Many youth are participating in projects, working in youth serving and youth driven agencies, sitting on advisory committees and councils, and much more. While there is incredible energy and momentum around many of these initiatives, all too often, many of the participants are so involved that they do not have the opportunity to network, to partner, or to share ideas and inspirations with each other. There is no broad-based system or network in Vancouver that youth, or youth services providers can "tap" into.

Through many initial consultations and discussions during my first few months as Youth Advocate Mentor, it became clear that the idea of a city-wide network resonated well within the diverse youth communities. The Youth Advocate Mentor has a unique position, well suited to the network. My work focus is broad-based and city wide, with links to the City, City staff and City initiatives, as well as to the diverse youth community and its partners. The Youth Advocate Mentor has the ability to ensure that adequate representation and resources are available for youth in order to have meaningful participation to remain adaptive and responsive to community needs, and be aware of where certain voices may be missed or under-represented. The Youth Advocate Mentor is also in the position of a listener, hearing about attitudinal and systemic barriers that may challenge youth's engagement and capacity to engage on both a community and municipal government level.

The Vancouver Youth Network is linked and is compatible with the work done by the Youth Outreach Team. The Youth Outreach Team has supported the Network in communication outreach and technical support on their web-site.

While the Youth Advocate Mentor has been responsible for the initial facilitation and development of the Network, long-term planning, development of goals and its continuation will be determined by the youth community.

The Vancouver Youth Network in 2005

- In March, 2005, the Youth Network was presented to Council as part of the Child and Youth Advocate's Work Plan;
- Two initial visioning meetings were held, one at YouthCO AIDS Society, and one hosted by the Knowledgeable Aboriginal Youth Association (KAYA) in the Aboriginal Friendship Centre, to establish a youth-driven direction for the Network. Over 30 youth attended from 20 different organizations;
- In May, 2005, in conjunction with Youth Week, the Youth Network hosted "A Sushi Social" in Council Chambers, with Acting Mayor Sam Sullivan hosting the event and Councillors Ladner, Bass, and Roberts in attendance. Over 40 youth had the opportunity to ask the Councillors questions, to feel welcomed by City Hall, and to eat sushi of course - a first for City Hall;
- The Summer Schmooze in June, 2005, at the Roundhouse Community Centre, was attended by over 50 youth, and over 20 organizations. Participants had the opportunity to talk about what they wanted to learn, what skills and resources they had to share, and thoughts for the future. Surveys were also completed to help shape the direction of the Network and key areas that were identified were civic engagement, local government 101, advocacy skills, and the need for increased communication between diverse youth projects and initiatives;
- In the months and weeks leading to the Municipal Elections in November, 2005, the Youth Network, in partnership with the Youth Outreach Team, the Youth Elections Troupe, Get Your Vote On, Check Your Head, My Own Back Yard (MOBY), and the Child and Youth Advocate, hosted a series of workshops called Confused? Frustrated? and Connected? to explore the City "system" and culminated in the Candidates Debate November 16, 2005;
- The initial workshop entitled "Confused?" was hosted in Council Chambers, and sought to demystify the civic political system by inviting youth to Council Chambers to ask questions and better understand how the municipal system works.

In development

The Vancouver Youth Network's interactive website is reaching the final stages of development. It is an on-line forum for youth-driven policy discussion, and a vehicle to engage youth in social change and advocacy. It meets the need for greater communication and linking between youth initiatives in the city, in a technological medium which suites the skills and schedules of youth today.

Key features of the website include:

- The ability to plan, discuss and post events and workshops;
- Discussion boards to explore current issues;

- Polls to vote on topics and ideas;
- A level of anonymity to raise concerns and explore issues that impact the lives of youth, and to suggest strategies to create change.

The Vancouver Youth Network website creates an opportunity for youth to connect locally, nationally and internationally to share best practices and strategies for youth-driven policy change.

The Potential of the Vancouver Youth Network

The Vancouver Youth Network is not limited to current initiatives, agencies and projects, nor will it limit participation or membership to youth who are already a part of a project or agency. Independent individuals may seek out the Youth Network to learn about projects that exist, to participate in skills-sharing or to partner with others to start a new project or advocate for a specific issue. It is a platform for future engagement as well. Once youth are linked to the Youth Network, it can be a vehicle to disseminate information or generate interest. The Youth Network has become a mechanism for many marginalized youth, such as youth with disabilities, street-involved youth, immigrant and newcomer youth, lesbian, gay, transgender/trans-sexual, two-spirited and bisexual (LGTTB) youth and aboriginal youth, to become engaged and be heard in the larger youth community.

The Network creates opportunities for collective advocacy, social change and participatory action, and to build awareness. It has the ability to strengthen that commitment that young people have to issues that are relevant to them, and to create avenues for support and resources. The Vancouver Youth Network, supported by the Advocate's office, offers a continuum of opportunities for engagement on an individual, collective and systemic level.

Additional Community and City Engagement

Youth Speak Out!:

Youth Speak Out! (YSO) is a project aiming to provide opportunities for street active (at-risk and street-involved) young people to engage politically by developing tools and building capacity to advocate for themselves and their communities. The role of the Youth Advocate Mentor has been to support the development of advocacy skills, to provide training and to help YSO develop pathways for policy recommendations. This project recognizes that many young people face societal barriers that limit their access to housing, various services, employment and many political processes. *Youth Speak Out!* addresses the social injustices and the impacts of the social determinants of health as defined by the street active young people involved in the project.

Youth Speak Out! began during the BC Provincial election from a pilot project of the BC Nurses Union (BCNU). The BC Health Coalition (BCHC) and Check Your Head (CYH) - with the support of Knowledgeable Aboriginal Youth Advocates (KAYA) and Broadway Youth Resource Centre (BYRC) - and the participation of student nurses, street nurses, individual volunteers and various youth drop-in centres in Vancouver servicing street active youth. Because of the very positive response from everyone involved, *Youth Speak Out!* is continuing to grow. Asian Society for the Intervention of AIDS (ASIA) has now joined in, and many of the same people who were involved in the pilot project are still on board.

The key issues that young people have prioritized in *Youth Speak Out!* are:

- police brutality;
- housing and safe shelters;
- accessibility to health and other services (with focus on racism & ageism);
- addiction services.

Prevention Strategy

The Youth Advocate Mentor worked with the City of Vancouver Drug Policy Team and the Youth Outreach Team to provide feedback and recommendations to the development of the youth engagement plan for the Prevention Strategy.

McCreary Society Next Steps Toolkit

The Youth Advocate Mentor participated on the Advisory Board for this initiative.

Family Services of Greater Vancouver - Directions Youth Centre

The Youth Advocate Mentor is a member of the Community Advisory Committee.

The International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD)

The Youth Advocate Mentor has participated in a variety of events hosted by the IICRD and has been consulted in the area of meaningful youth engagement and participation.

Emerging Themes

In my 14 months as Youth Advocate Mentor, I have attended and facilitated countless events, including: youth community meetings, workshops, dialogue sessions, youth platform discussions, World Urban Cafés, and debates. The themes listed below are the ones that were the most resounding and that were highlighted by youth participants at every single event. It is my commitment to the youth who have spoken about these pressing concerns to highlight them before Council.

Housing

The lack of affordable safe housing for young people is a crisis facing the City of Vancouver. Housing can take many forms including more shelter beds for youth, shelters and safe houses where youth can bring their pets, second stage or transitional housing, subsidized housing, and affordable housing that are not centralized in the Downtown Eastside. Housing is a fundamental human right and this issue must be addressed, advocated for and acted upon at a Municipal, Provincial and Federal level on behalf of some of our city's more vulnerable citizens.

Youth and Police

The concerns voiced by youth, service providers and parents about the Vancouver Police Department include police harassment and brutality, the practice of "relocating" youth to a different part of the city, racism and profiling. Youth most targeted by police and who most often voiced concerns included street involved youth, aboriginal youth, youth of colour and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered and transsexual youth.

The Child and Youth Advocate is developing a plan to work with both the Vancouver Police Department and the youth community to address these concerns. Her work will include training for both police and youth, and youth-police dialogues. Further strategies include police sensitivity and anti-oppression training, youth and police dialogue sessions, a police watch, and an elected Police Board.

Translink

One of the issues often raised was the increase in transit fare prices and the lack of affordability for youth and students who do not attend high school or university and have to pay full fare.

Another growing concern is the Greater Vancouver Transportation Authority Police Service that has the full powers of Provincial police, including the ability to arrest people for outstanding warrants, enforce drug laws, and the ability to enforce the criminal code outside TransLink property. The concerns regarding the Transit Police are almost identical to those listed above regarding the Vancouver Police Department.

Youth have requested lower fares for all youth and students and that the Vancouver Translink Board Representatives advocate for Transit police sensitivity and anti-oppression training and advocate against Transit Police carrying guns.

Services for Aboriginal Children, Youth and their Families

The issues facing the Aboriginal youth community are complex. As the Youth Advocate Mentor, I have had the opportunity to work closely with several initiatives within this community and seen the commitment of many youth to strengthen their community. However, the statistical information shows that Aboriginal youth continue to be over-represented in the care of the Ministry for Children and Families and the Justice System. They face continued challenges within the education system. The Youth Advocate Mentor has a continued role to play in supporting initiatives within this community.

Conclusion:

I began my work as the Youth Advocate Mentor with no precedent to follow, having been the first to hold this position. In the past year, I have gained information and insights into issues that are inspiring, invigorating, hopeful, challenging and complex. I have been welcomed into diverse communities and have had access to many levels of government and policy makers.

The position of Youth Advocate Mentor is unique and the only one of its kind in Canada. Vancouver is renowned for youth engagement and youth community advocacy, and Council approval of this position demonstrates the leadership and dedication of Vancouver to valuing, supporting and being accountable to its younger citizens. It provides a platform for youth and a focal point for youth advocacy at a Municipal level. The Youth Advocate Mentor, in cooperation with the Child and Youth Advocate, has the ability to facilitate widespread connection between communities in Vancouver and serves a vital role in the self-empowerment of youth in this city.

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