**Victoria Times Colonist Op-Ed**

**Submitted by the Victoria Family Court and Youth Justice Committee**

**October 2, 2024**

**Mission Critical: The CRD’s Most Vulnerable Youth Are About to Lose Their Most Valuable Support Team**

The Victoria Family Court & Youth Justice Committee (“VFCYJC”) commends Les Leyne’s September 26 opinion piece, “*Youth-support team funding needs an immediate boost”* and its September 27 follow-up *“Youth safety threats mount as help retreats.”*

There is nothing more important than protecting our at-risk children from gangs, exploitation, drug addiction, and homelessness. As stated in the recent report by Athabasca University’s Dr. Rebeccah Nelems, “we have reached an urgent crisis point with respect to youth gang exploitation and entrenchment in our region.”

The Provincial and Federal governments have a continued responsibility to Greater Victoria families to fund the Mobile Youth Services Team (“MYST”). This team of two – a plain-clothed police officer and a youth counsellor – carries a heavy caseload that involves thousands of interactions a year with troubled youth. These cases are often urgent, where youth and families are at high risk or in crisis. MYST responds through a youth-centred, timely, non-judgmental, inclusive, confidential and trauma-informed outreach service.

The VFCYJC, comprised of elected councillors, school board trustees, citizens and support agencies from across Greater Victoria, has advocated for stable, long-term funding and additional MYST teams. So, too, in recent years have the CRD board and councils in Highlands, Langford, Oak Bay, Saanich, Sooke and Victoria. Despite this, MYST continues to be precariously funded.

MYST is often the first, if not the only, point of contact for hundreds of kids in crisis and their families. These critical interventions divert young people from an overwhelmed health care and criminal justice system. Just last month the National Gang Crime Research Centre in Chicago presented MYST with a 2024 award for “Superior Accomplishments in Gang Intervention.” Indeed, as noted by Dr. Nelems in her review of MYST, it is such an effective and cost-efficient approach to youth gang intervention and prevention that countless other municipalities would stand to benefit from replicating this model.

As Mr. Leyne pointed out, MYST’s counsellor position has recently been reduced to two days a week as the latest in a series of unsustainable, unreliable grants from the Province ran out. MYST is in immediate peril following confirmation fromthe Hon. Mike Farnworth, Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General and Deputy Premier, that it must look elsewhere for operational funding.

MYST has remained at the same staffing and funding levels for more than a decade. It’s a testament to the team’s commitment and dedication that it continues its vital work despite our region’s increased population, heightened gang activity, the alarming rise of online exploitation, the opioid crisis, and the growing cycle of poverty and homelessness, all of which affect our children, either directly or through their family situations.

We applaud the Province’s support for MYST to date and its commitment to specialized enforcement and intelligence initiatives related to guns, gangs and illicit drug trafficking across BC. However, at this critical point, we are seeking continued interim funding for MYST. An injection of $50,000 will return the counsellor to full-time until March 31, 2025, a small expense given the cost of prosecuting, supervising, or incarcerating a youth. (At this time, not all police departments in the region have confirmed their ongoing funding for MYST.)

With recent VFCYJC support, clear recommendations were identified for local agencies to work together to collaboratively develop a five-year business plan for MYST that would include long-term, inter-institutional, sustainable funding for two teams and a research-based approach to validate the investments in youth at risk.

The region needs more MYST teams, not less. This unique service bridges the gap between social services, health, education and justice systems, catching youth who might otherwise fall through the cracks. The potential loss of this vital and proven counselling resource is not in line with the Province’s announced goals to address the issues facing vulnerable youth and their families in our complex, anxious modern society.

Trusted relationships built through this specialized and high-functioning team cannot be lost due to an interruption of service.

(654 words)

Sincerely,

Victoria Family Court and Youth Justice Committee

*The VFCYJC is a Delegated Commission of the Capital Regional District. It was founded by the Province of BC with Letters Patent and has functioned for 60 years under the Provincial Court Act and the federal Youth Criminal Justice Act.*

**Fast Facts on MYST**

* MYST comprises a councillor and police officer. The latter is provided by Saanich, Oak Bay, and Victoria on a three-year rotation.
* Counsellor position entirely funded by grants, employed by Pacific Family Centre Services Association.
* Created to provide mobile support to engage and connect with youth, including those who might not access or be able to afford traditional counselling or diversion services.
* The two-person team carries more than 250 active files on a 24/7 mobile basis
* Provides responsive, youth-centred, ongoing counselling support and education to young people in crisis or at severe risk
* Supports and educates parents and families
* Advocates for diversion and strength-based supports and opportunities for positive life alternatives
* Assists in navigating complex web of health, education, housing, community services and justice system