

Sept. 26, 2024

Victoria Family Court & Youth Justice Committee (VFCYJC)

Panel Discussion Notes

Greater Victoria Youth Issues and Youth-At-Risk

Panellists

- Mia Golden, Youth and Family Counsellor, Mobile Youth Services Team (MYST)
- Constable Gord Magee, MYST/Victoria Police Department
- Inspector Damian Kowalewich, Saanich Police Department
- Deputy Chief Constable Jamie McRae, Victoria Police Department

Regrets: Nicole Duncan, Chair, Victoria School District #61

Chair Little introduced the discussion, then handed to Communications Sub-Committee Chair Jeff Bateman to facilitate. He noted at the outset that this discussion meets the VFCYJC objectives of education and advocacy. It is an opportunity for members to learn more about the issues impacting vulnerable youth in Victoria ... and to that end we are honoured to have four bona fide subject experts join us. They collectively have a remarkable 97 years of front-line experience.

Through this discussion, we'd like to also identify our next advocacy targets for future work. We are an influential body, and we must use our collective power to do what we can in support of front-line service providers and the young people they serve.

School District #61 Chair Nicole Duncan was also invited to join us a follow-up to her attendance at the September, 2023 VFCYJC regular meeting re: the [School Police Liaison Officer](#) program, however she is unable to join us today.

The intent of the discussion, as shared with VFCYJC members and the participants beforehand, is the following:

** To identify challenges faced by vulnerable youth within Greater Victoria*

** To focus on how best front-line service agencies, school authorities, police and the Provincial government can collaborate to serve youth and their families dealing with issues such as gang recruitment, sexual exploitation, bullying and drug use, all of which lead to potential involvement in the youth justice system*

** To discuss solutions that may be either proposed, planned or underway to help ensure the well-being of Greater Victoria's most vulnerable young people and enable the VFCYJC to better advocate on their behalf.*

1. Inspector Damien Kowalewich, Saanich PD

- Police Officer and Inspector with Saanich PD since 2005
- Third-term councillor, Town of View Royal Council, 2017 to present
- View Royal representative on the Joint School District/Municipal Committee and Board Chair of the Society for Westshore Parks & Recreation

- see his [full script](#) here
- focused on two critical issues facing youth today: gangs and sexual exploitation

- Gang recruitment

- identifying early signs and risk factors is critical
- Gang Education and Trends safety seminars are offering to students in partnership with local police agencies, recreation and culture groups, and Parent Advisory Committees.
- Saanich PD has conducted 35 investigations into gang activity in Saanich schools since mid-2022
- significant increase in gang activity in 2023 directly related to one gang in Greater Vancouver that was recruiting members in Saanich
- patrol and community engagement officers patrol known areas where gangs gather

- Sextortion

- statistics are growing
 - victims as young as 12 are targeted in scams organized by criminal organizations mostly based in eastern Europe and Africa.
 - Saanich PD employs an Internet child-exploitation investigator
- officers receive special training re: diversity, addressing unconscious biases and how to deal with vulnerable people, including youth.

- Internal Saanich PD policies define vulnerable populations as the following:

- children and youth ages 0-18,
- Indigenous,
- low income or living in poverty,
- members of LGBTQ2+ communities,
- newcomers (immigrants, temporary residents and refugees),
- Official Language Minority Communities,
- people experiencing homelessness,
- people experiencing domestic or gender-based violence,
- people living in group homes or supportive living,
- people living with mental illness,
- people struggling with addiction,
- persons with disabilities,
- prison populations,
- all racialized groups, and

- seniors and elders (in and out of care).

- re: School Police Liaison Officer Program

- “Our removal from SD 61 have caused our communication lines with schools, students and staff to suffer. We have shifted to being reactive as opposed to proactive ... we are willing to work with educators and trustees to share our information and ensure that all academic stakeholders feel comfortable with our content delivery. That reason alone should never be the reason to cease a successful relationship between SLO’s and schools that has lasted for over 45 years.”

- Kowalewich concluded by recommending a recent report titled [*Assessing the Effectiveness and Efficiency of School Liaison Officers in British Columbia: A Qualitative Study of School Liaison Officers and School District Administrators*](#). It was produced by the University of the Fraser Valley’s [*Centre for Public Safety and Criminal Justice Research*](#) and sponsored by the [*Crime Reduction Research Program*](#) (CRRP), a joint-research model in British Columbia administered and funded by the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General in collaboration with the RCMP.

2. Deputy Chief Constable Jamie McRae, Victoria Police Department

- *Appointed Deputy Chief of Operations for Victoria PD in February 2024*

- *25 years’ experience as a police officer*

- *joined VicPD as a volunteer in 1996, sworn in as a constable two years later.*

- *former head of the human resources section, inspector and lead investigator*

- McRae thanked Inspector Kowalewich and noted he had covered the waterfront expertly. He also highly recommends the aforementioned study.

- “Our community and the world at large have changed dramatically,” he said while also citing gang activity and sexploitation as primary concerns. Police departments are having to quickly readjust for these new realities in collaboration with multiple partners.

- gang activity is not new to Greater Victoria, however recruitment is now more frequent, sophisticated and happening both in-person and online at a younger age

- Vic PD and other regional agencies are eager to intervene through education and positive engagement with young people to steer them away from activities and influences that may lead to youth court and criminal records.

- He noted that Vic PD is a proud partner in MYST and the crisis response teams that pair mental health professionals with police officers.

- Troubled kids need engagement. “It might be a teacher, a coach, a councillor like Mia or a caring police officer – our job is to be sure there is that connection.”

- School Police Liaison Officer Program

- “It has been frustrating to be on the outside ... We need police officers back in SD #61. The MOU with the SD #61 is a starting point.”

- McRae closed by explaining the dramatic evolution in policing since he joined the force in his 20s some three decades ago. Where once a standard officer was a “tall white man who was skilled at breaking up bar fights,” today’s police force is educated, diverse, peer-oriented and expertly trained. The old cliches need to be retired.

3. MYST’s Youth & Family Counselor Mia Golden and Victoria Police Dept. Constable Gord Magee

- *Golden and Magee were recently in Chicago to present at Gang School 2024 hosted by the [National Gang Crime Research Centre](#). The organization honoured the pair for their leadership and service in dealing with public safety issues posed by gangs.*

- *Their film [Tied to a Lie](#) about human trafficking won best short documentary at the recent International Police Awards Arts Festival*

Golden

- *Youth Gang and Exploitation counsellor with the Pacific Centre Family Services Association’s (PCFSA) Crime Reduction and Exploitation Diversion program*

- *27 years of experience with PCFSA*

Magee

- *Constable with Victoria Police Department*

- *26 years policing experience*

- *appointed to MYST since 2019*

- *received the Police Exemplary Service Medal from BC’s Lieutenant Governor in 2016*

- The pair thanked the committee for its support over the years and ongoing advocacy

- They shared that MYST is the first call for the majority of issues of concern in Greater Victoria school system

- The team acts as a quarterback to assist youth in navigating system; it is not an investigative unit

- First-hand knowledge of trends and areas of concern impacting the region

- Confirmed that gang recruitment and sextortion are huge issues

- Golden continued that AI filters can make a 50-year-old male look and sound like a 13-year-old girl on screen; victims have no idea who they’re talking to and can be led into escalating trouble.

- Education about this technology and the behaviours of predators is the key in MYST's work within the school system
- language: "Minor Attracted People" (MAP) is the new buzzword for pedophiles/predators, which downplays the crime and is to be challenged

- Restoring SPLO is critical

- at no other time have we seen such significant challenges with mental health among young people, i.e., anxiety disorders, skyrocketing rates of depression
- lack of safety within schools; "we get reports all the time that students are not using the washroom because they fear being bullied, pepper-sprayed or having to face a student brandishing a knife."
- members of the BIPOC community are targeted
- police liaison officers in the schools allows for a sense of safety for our students
- If someone breaks into your house, if someone is assaulting you, you call the police
- it's unfortunate if we send messages to youth that police are villains
- Youth are starting to question careers in law enforcement

Q&A

- The BC Coroner's Annual Report for 2022 indicated that, for BC youths (up to age 18), deaths from illicit drugs were the second highest in the province in Greater Victoria-Island Health second only to Fraser Health. The panelists were each asked to provide their thoughts as to why Greater Victoria youth deaths are so high?

- Kowalewich: Port cities are the entry points for opioids. We are in close proximity to the US. The opioid crisis touches all ages.

- McRae: This demonstrates that the opioid crisis knows no boundaries. It underscores the importance of SPLO, especially the drug safety talks and guidance offered to students

- Golden: We're seeing youth experimenting with drugs and telling us "I got it from safe drug supply." We repeatedly hear this -- older adults selling safe drug supply to youth

- One member asked about the burden of responsibility faced by SPLO officers and their need for specialized training. Does this create challenges in recruitment and retention?

- McRae: School liaison positions, in his experience, are highly sought after. The failure to renew SPLO in SD #61 was met internally with “great, great disappointment” by officers. Vic PD has active liaison officers in SD #63 and private schools. The positions attract caring, compassionate, specially trained officers who sign on for two- and three-year postings. “It takes a special person.” Our officers hear from students-turned-adults who share the importance of the SPLO relationship. Otherwise it is hard to quantify building a relationship, which is both qualitative and quantitative.

*** A VFCYJC member noted that police officers are engaging with youth in a trauma-informed way.**

Damien: We are thoughtful, patient and proactive. The addictions and mental health crisis can see removal, separation and loss that impacts children and families. Very interested in hearing from all sides of the conversation. Some parents say they’re incredibly ill-equipped to prepare their children for the world. They depend on our community to help them and set them up for the most success for healthy and happy futures

McRae: All our officers have trauma-informed training. They have not just taken the course, it is built into almost every training that we do. My vision is fairly clear: We need more police and mental health nurse partnerships, and more police and councillor partnerships. The proven success of the MYST team is not easily quantifiable.

Magee: The scope of training is large. When the lights go out at the school, the only call goes out to us. We have a trauma informed youth councillor in Mia who cares so very deeply about the people we work with. Our officers all take training on every single lens we apply to vulnerable communities.

*** Regarding SPLO, what role might the VFCYJC play in helping all parties reach a positive outcome?**

* The [Ministerial order from the Minister of Education](#) is very significant. [<clip> “The Board of Education of School District No. 61 (Greater Victoria) (the “Board”), in collaboration with the Victoria Police Department, the Saanich Police Department, the Oak Bay Police Department and the West Shore RCMP (the “Police”), will develop a proactive, coordinated safety plan (the “Safety Plan”) in accordance with this administrative directive.”]

The response will hopefully get us to a better place. Not a lot more to be done at this point.

*** A question re: the return of the SPLO program to SD #61**

McRae: We will need to build a new framework for how officers work within the schools. Recommendations have been put forward to the school board via a proposed VicPD MOU. It explores how we would interact, what the police officer might be wearing, communications between officers, teachers, students and school staff. Open to edits, changes, recommendations. "We remain at the table and are part of the conversation."

*** Next steps for MYST to be undertaken by the VFCYJC? We can advocate by writing letters, but these are seemingly falling on deaf years.**

Golden: Programs need to expand, not shrink. Regional way in which youth gravitate to Victoria needs to be emphasized. "Just because a student lives in Colwood doesn't mean that same student isn't coming to Saanich or Oak Bay or Centennial Square."

Magee: We require proper funding in place for the councillor, and then expand it and do better. Ad hoc funding one year at a time is unsuitable.

Golden: Pushing back hard on the [letter from the Ministry](#) (that denied extended funding for the program), and momentum is growing. Victoria MP Laurel Collins spoke of MYST funding in the House of Commons. Jagmeet Singh has signed off on his commitment to it. Premier Eby was asked about it in a recent press conference. Thank you for everything VFCYJC has done and continues to do.

Conclusions

The panellists and the VFCYJC members in attendance agreed that the School Police Liaison Officer program and the Mobile Youth Services Team are essential services for youth in Greater Victoria. Both provide critical education, support and guidance for young people and their families as they deal with the potential and often very real impacts of gang recruitment, sexual exploitation and other issues that may lead to involvement with the youth justice system. An encouraging multi-party process led by the Ministry of Education is now underway that will ideally ensure the long-term continuance of both SPLO and MYST in regional schools and the community at large.