

# Velocity Adventure Program

## Crime Prevention in Action - CPA-26

### National Anti-Drug Strategy

The Velocity Adventure Program (Velocity) is an adventure-based program for youth who are at risk of, or have already been involved in, criminal activity. The key risk factors addressed by the project are early aggressive and anti-social behaviour, early substance use, and lack of attachment to school. The project is supported by [Public Safety Canada](#), National Crime Prevention Centre's [Crime Prevention Action Fund](#) and is delivered by the Community Youth Network (CYN) in St. John's, Newfoundland. The project began in March 2009 and will be piloted through August 2012.

In the City of St. John's, reported occurrences of robbery committed by youth more than doubled between 2002 and 2007<sup>[Footnote1](#)</sup>. Although some crimes such as theft of a motor vehicle significantly decreased during that time, the trend for youth crime seemed to be shifting to more serious criminal activity<sup>[Footnote2](#)</sup>. Often these crimes were being committed by youth needing money to support an addiction. CYN staff report that youth themselves recognized that the options to obtain the money needed to support their drug habits were limited and that they were at high risk for committing crimes. In June 2006, CYN participated in community consultations with others in the areas of justice, housing, addictions, recreation, and health. One area of common concern identified was keeping youth engaged once they were beyond the age of 13. Programming available was not attracting or maintaining the interest of youth in this age group and as a result, they were not receiving support to address their addictions and delinquent behaviour. Velocity, with its adventure-based programming, was developed as a response to provide different types of opportunities to engage youth with addictions who were at risk of criminal activity.

Through participation in Velocity, youth participants are helped to reduce their substance use, learn and practise pro-social skills, increase their connections to the community, and increase their participation in school and learning opportunities.

One of the primary risk factors addressed in Velocity is substance use and/or abuse. For this reason, it has been identified as contributing to the [National Anti-Drug Strategy](#) (NADS). NADS is delivered by several federal government departments with goals to reduce the supply of, and demand for, illicit drugs and address crime associated with illegal drugs. The NADS approach is designed to lead to safer and healthier communities by taking action in three priority areas: preventing illicit drug use; treating illicit drug dependency; and combating the production and distribution of illicit drugs. Public Safety Canada's National Crime Prevention Centre is contributing to the knowledge about what works to prevent addictions related criminal behaviour.

# The Evidence Base

The project combines evidence from effective models and practices involving structured outdoor adventure activities, life skills training and mentorship.

## Structured Adventure Activities

Structured adventure activities provide participants with a series of physically challenging outdoor activities designed to prevent or reduce delinquent behaviour and recidivism.<sup>Footnote3</sup> Such activities are thought to reduce delinquency by providing participants with experiential learning opportunities that advocate "learning by doing" and facilitate opportunities for personal growth.<sup>Footnote4</sup> The physical activities are usually unfamiliar and demanding for the participants and present challenging problems with clear consequences and high possibility of failure. By mastering the difficult activities, program participants experience success and achievement that translate into positive attitude and behaviour changes and a more internalized locus of self-control.<sup>Footnote5</sup> Most activities require cooperation and communication in a group setting. Youth participants learn pro-social and interpersonal skills through positive and cooperative interaction with team leaders and supportive peers during the activities.<sup>Footnote6</sup> The theory is that these new skills will be applied to life outside the program allowing youth to make better informed decisions that decrease their likelihood of offending. The time spent in formal supervised activities also tends to decrease opportunities for youth to engage in deviant behaviours.<sup>Footnote7</sup>

The target population for structured adventure activity based programs can vary by location. A survey of therapeutic wilderness programs<sup>Footnote8</sup> found that program participants ranged in age from 11 to 17, though the vast majority of participants were older teenagers. Research also supports the use of adventure programs to reduce drug use and improve behaviour.<sup>Footnote9</sup> Specifically, adventure therapy is effective with offenders and addicted offenders because these populations seem to respond well to more structured programs.

Wilson and Lipsey's meta-analysis<sup>Footnote10</sup> of several different studies of wilderness programs, noted that the recidivism rates of program participants were, on average, 8% lower than the recidivism rates of control participants.

## Life Skills Training

Life skills training seeks to prevent problem behaviours by preparing young people to meet the challenges of adolescence through a series of structured, progressive activities and experiences that help them build strong social, emotional, ethical, physical, and cognitive competencies. This "asset based" approach also views youth as having existing resources and builds on their strengths and capabilities for development within their own community. It emphasizes the acquisition of adequate attitudes, behaviours, and skills as a buffer against delinquent behaviour.<sup>Footnote11</sup>

Life skills training usually involves structured workshops on issues such as self-management and general social skills. These workshops allow students to examine their self-image, gain insight about their skills, set goals for their future, track their progress, embrace personal challenges, and analyze problem situations and learn how to react to them. Students also learn how to overcome shyness, gain communication skills, develop assertiveness, and realize that there are other choices in problem situations besides passivity or aggression.

Through life skills training, youth are provided opportunities to develop emotional literacy, self-control, social competence, positive peer relations, and interpersonal problem-solving skills. When well developed, these skills help provide youth with the resources to prevent or reduce behavioural and emotional problems. By learning how to react and behave effectively in common situations, youth increase their abilities to identify, label, express, and act to problem solve successfully. Research shows that adolescents with high skill levels in these components are less likely to use drugs and alcohol, are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviours including the use of weapons because they have the skills to cope and problem-solve through different and difficult situations. Building these skills is often referred to as building resiliency<sup>Footnote12</sup>.

## **Mentoring**

Mentoring is a process that focuses on relationships to teach, impart, or institute changes in behaviours or attitudes. When well-implemented, mentoring can be a useful strategy with at-risk youth who experience multiple risk factors for delinquency, such as few positive role models, few opportunities for community or after-school activities and poor school performance. The approach assumes that by creating pro-social attachments, commitment to socially appropriate goals, and involvement in conventional activities, youth will be less likely to engage in delinquent behaviours because they have more to lose from the negative consequences of crime.

## **Program Participants**

Velocity focuses on young men and women, ranging from 13 to 18 years of age, involved in substance use and at risk of criminal involvement and re-offending. CYN will deliver Velocity to 90 youth over 36 months through 12 month interventions. Intake will take place three times per year, once per priority group. Each intake will accept 10-12 youth per age group.

## **Program Components**

The Velocity Adventure Program is a 12 month program with three main components: group building sessions, 7 day adventure camp and the engage-connect-shift component:

1. *Group Building Process* - Youth begin their participation with the team building process during which they take part in **2 separate adventure based day outings** such as sea kayaking and rock climbing and group information sessions. The aim of these sessions is to help individuals feel comfortable in a group/team, build connections with staff and understand program expectations. Youth also participate in **3 group sessions** prior to camping to learn about rules and regulations for camp and establish group norms regarding behaviour, drug, safety, and other related issues. Conducting group building sessions also promotes teamwork, respect, and positive peer relationships.
2. *7-Day Adventure Camp* - Youth participate in a **7-day adventure camp** in the Gros Morne/Corner Brook region. The Adventure camp focuses on four main areas of programming: Life Skills & Personal Development; Experiential learning through outdoor adventure; Therapeutic & holistic components; and Health & Wellness promotion. The Adventure camp immerses participants in a wilderness environment, outside of their comfort zone, providing them with new learning experiences. Here, the program continues to build the necessary skills to inspire self-confidence. Most importantly, youth build friendships, have fun, and learn to make healthy choices. At the end of 7-day camp, all youth and volunteers are interviewed [Footnote13](#) to provide feedback on activities and their overall experience during group building and camping.
3. *Engage-Connect-Shift* - During this final phase, youth continue to participate in adventure-based day outings such as scuba diving, power kiting, and trapezing. During this phase of the program, youth are provided with individual support to help them deal with challenges in their lives, connect them with other community services, and provide them with ongoing encouragement to make healthy choices in their daily lives. Velocity staff also provide mentoring and coaching to youth to address their current issues, including:
  - Arrange guest speakers (i.e. health promotion, dealing with addictions, conflict resolution),
  - Provide training (e.g., life skills training, communication skills training, employment skills training, tutoring, homework clubs, cultural activities),
  - Refer youth to community services (i.e. addictions counselling, tutoring services, mental health services).

## Group Building Sessions

During the first two months of the program, a group building process is implemented. This process includes participation in three 2.5 hour group sessions and two adventure based outings. The group sessions focus on strengthening life skills, respect and on building a team environment. Youth learn about program expectations, receive training in general skills to prepare for the camp experience, and establish relationships with their peers and leaders. Two adventure based activities take what is learned in the group sessions and apply it to real life experience. They put the team to the test and give hands on experience for working together and respecting one another.

# Adventure Camp

During the 7-day camp youth participate in adventure based activities designed to challenge them physically, emotionally and mentally. The Adventure Camp focuses on four main areas of programming: life skills and personal development; experiential learning through outdoor adventure; therapeutic and holistic components; and health and wellness. Given that most of the youth participants are struggling with addictions, half a day is dedicated to addressing substance use. The youth are challenged to think about their current substance use, the impact or potential impact of substance use on themselves and the people in their lives, and they are helped to identify practical realistic strategies to reduce their substance use. Addiction Services are a key partner in this project and provide the professionals to facilitate this part of the Camp and to follow up with the youth on the implementation of their plans.

Using a specific sequence of activities, youth learn basic life skills starting with relatively easy activities and gradually building to high levels of intensity and challenge. Every activity is discussed in depth and through skilled leadership, connections are made between the feelings the youth encounter and the skills they are building for use in day to day situations. The youth experience achievement, challenge, trust, problem solving, communication, teamwork, support, leadership, healthy stress, fun, humour, and reflection.

In addition to camp staff, specialized facilitators and guest speakers participate in the camp. These facilitators bring specific skills and knowledge that enhances the camp experience. Examples include conflict resolution facilitators, meditation and yoga instructors and canoeing/kayaking instructors.

## "Engage-Connect-Shift"

After the completion of the group building and adventure camp components of the program, youth enter the Engage-Connect-Shift stage. This eight month phase involves staff and youth supporting each other to apply new found skills and resources in everyday life. Each participant is contacted at least once per month by program staff mentors and they participate in a minimum of 5 adventure based day outings. Youth are connected with an enhanced support network and program opportunities to help them navigate situations that arise and deal with the real issues they face. For example, if a youth identifies struggling with substance use/abuse, the program staff will work to connect the youth to appropriate services and will provide on-going support and guidance to ensure that the supports for success are in place.

Through increasing the connections and access youth have to services and by providing them with meaningful support to address the risk factors present in their lives, it is believed youth will begin to shift the decisions and lifestyle choices they make to more healthy, safe, and positive ones. The Engage-Connect-Shift component helps youth transfer the learning, skills, and growth gained through the group building and

adventure camp into their everyday activities and decisions. It is anticipated this will help sustain the changes youth make.

To maintain strong peer relations and connections to healthy leisure pursuits, youth will continue to participate in bi-monthly adventure day outings. This will further enhance their sense of community, supportive peer relationships, and their connections to positive adult role models.

## Key Partners

The partners in this initiative are the Eastern Health Corporation, Service Canada, Health and Community Services, City of St. John's, YM/YWCA, Provincial Airlines, Community Youth Network, The Lantern, Sobeys, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Janeway Family Centre, Royal Newfoundland Constabulary, Addictions Services, Newfoundland and Labrador Sexual Assault Crisis Centre and the Printing Place.

Community partners are critical for the success of the Velocity project. Key organizations involved include:

- Jill Dreddy Dance Co.
- MacMorran Community Centre
- Eastern School Board
- District School Board
- Royal Newfoundland Constabulary
- Addictions Serviced
- Department of Corrections
- Native Friendship Centre
- Wallnuts Climbing Gym
- Stan Cook Sea Kayaking
- Obrien's Boat Tours
- Frontline Paintball
- Acro-Adix
- Holiday Lanes
- Outfitters
- Planned Parenthood
- Canadian Ski Patrol
- Addictions Services
- Waypoints
- Choices for Youth
- Virginia Park Community Centre
- City of St. John's
- College of the North Atlantic
- Department of Justice

## **Evaluation Design**

The Velocity Program will undergo a process evaluation led by CYN and an impact evaluation conducted by a third party evaluator. The purpose of the evaluation is to thoroughly document the project's implementation and impacts in order to contribute to the knowledge of what components work best to prevent or reduce drug and substance use and related criminal behaviour. The impact evaluation began in March 2010 and ends November 2013.

The evaluation methodology involves a non-matched comparison group design. Experimental and comparison group youth will be tested pre and post program as well as one year following program completion. This design will be supported with other data sources such as site-visit observations; parents, referral agency and teacher surveys; focus groups with youth participants; document review; and key informant interviews to enhance the validity of the findings.

## **Implementation Observations**

### **Participant Recruitment**

The number of participants in 2009/10 was lower than originally planned. This was due to longer than anticipated start up activities such as securing facilities, arranging adventure activities and systems for intake taking longer than anticipated. Since the program got established and word began to spread, recruitment has not been a problem. In 2010/11, Velocity staff received 45 referrals from 25 different organizations. Of those, more than 30 youth were interviewed and agreed to participate in the program.

Promotional materials were developed and posters were given to schools, community centres and steering committee members. Meetings took place with five community centres and three schools to explain and advertise the program. An email was sent to all guidance counselors in St. John's as well as CYN's list serve with information about the program. Promotion of the program is on target and ongoing and appropriate referrals for the males 13-15 years age group have been received.

Recently, response to the program has been very positive from the community, schools and families. Many boys 13-15 years who meet the criteria for Velocity are interested and a very positive relationship with them has begun. Meeting with individual schools and community groups proved to be the best method of program promotion.

### **Participant Retention**

Like many other programs and services that target youth, a main challenge for Velocity is to maintain youth involvement and commitment. The youth Velocity is designed for

generally have limited experience participating in pro-social programs or group activities. They are often not attending school and lack commitment to programs and schedules.

This inexperience with following through on commitments shows up in areas such as arriving to the program on time. To help with this, Velocity staff make lots of reminder phone calls and extra efforts to locate the youth and get them to activities. Staff has learned that unforeseeable challenges and obstacles such as court appearances, summer school and injuries often get in the way of participation. In response, staff work hard to make the program flexible and work with youth to deal with individual situations to keep them coming. This builds commitment and decreases the discouragement youth feel about missing Velocity activities. That discouragement is often the beginning of a cycle of disengagement and return to negative patterns and behaviours that is familiar to the youth participants.

## **Parental Engagement**

Program staff often assist parents of youth involved in Velocity. For example, they have connected parents with parenting workshops, information sessions and provided guidance on appropriate programs and services for their children. When parents are getting support, they are better able to assist their children and support their involvement in the program.

## **Balancing Individual Needs**

Since the program has a large group component, participants are grouped by their age and gender. However, staff have found that group differences in the ethnicity, interests, habits, and comfort levels of the participants has created challenges for working with participants. Velocity staff are exploring alternative ways to organize the groups and activities so they are more responsive to both individual and collective needs.

## **Transportation**

Most of the youth participants in Velocity do not have access to free transportation and cannot afford the public transportation to attend the daily program activities. The program provides some transportation through staff cars and taxies. In addition, travelling for 7-day camp is farther than anticipated due to changing the destination in order to provide the outdoor activities that better suit the objectives of the program. To address these challenges, the sponsor was able to secure a bus which was large enough to transport all the participants to the camp and daily transportation issues are managed through staff and subsidized public transportation in St. John's.

## **Participation in the evaluation**

Program staff find that some youth and their parents refuse to participate in the evaluation due to distrust about the study. To mitigate this factor, staff frequently remind youth and their parents of the confidential nature and importance of the study and emphasize how the study will improve the program for them and the youth who follow. Staff have noted that where they are successful in creating trusting and lasting relationships, youth are more honest in answering questions, particularly questions related to individual and peer delinquency.

## **Interaction of different treatments**

A program evaluation challenge arises if youth in the client or control groups simultaneously become involved in other programs designed to have similar effects. To address this issue, interviews will be conducted with program staff and youth to determine what other programs youth are participating in, if any, and this will be taken into consideration in data analysis.

For more information on this project please contact:

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