



Projects “Journey” and “Sunset” build connections for positive community impact

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ABSTRACT

In 2011, the Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario released the *Death Review of the Youth Suicides at Pikangikum First Nation, 2006-2008* following an alarmingly high number of youth suicides that occurred in that community. Persistent social, health, infrastructure, economic, capacity, and governance deficits that exist contribute to vulnerability and at-risk behaviours among youth including crime, substance abuse, and suicide. The Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) sought ways and means to work to address these challenges in collaboration with communities. After securing funding support through Public Safety Canada, the OPP implemented an experiential youth development program called Project Journey, modelled after Project Venture, a program from the United States specifically designed for at-risk Indigenous youth. So promising are the results from Project Journey that a sister program, Project Sunset, came into being to help expand the proactive work with community partners. These OPP-led programs help address the root causes of youth crime, social disorder, and crisis. At the same time, they support relationship-building and community engagement, and empower individuals and community partners to take positive action for sustainable change.

Key Words Indigenous; Project Journey; Project Sunset; aboriginal; youth; innovation.

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INTRODUCTION

The Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) is committed to turning creative ideas into actions. We are using new approaches to help solve complex policing challenges which also promote open communication, respect, and collaboration. This involves a basic change—a paradigm shift—as we move from more reactive policing practices toward proactive programming to strategically support systemic reform. Demonstrating this commitment, the OPP has recently implemented Projects Journey and Sunset in communities in northwestern Ontario. These projects use innovative and proactive strategies to address the root causes of crime and social disorder for at-risk Indigenous youth. We are already seeing successes with the projects, suggesting that these practices could prove beneficial for other police services and community partners.

Lay the Groundwork

The OPP-led programs Projects Journey and Sunset are based on an experiential youth development program originating in the United States specifically designed for at-risk Indigenous youth. Project Venture was developed in 1990 by the National Indian Youth Leadership Project, a community-based, non-profit Indigenous organization.

Project Venture aims to prevent substance abuse and to provide participants with opportunities to engage in positive activities to develop leadership, social, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. The program runs over the course of one year and includes four components: classroom activities, outdoor activities, adventure camps, and community service learning projects.

Project Venture

Project Venture reflects a strengths-based approach to teaching and guiding youth. This involves promoting and building strengths rather than eliminating undesirable behaviours. In keeping with Indigenous cultural values, the program also relies on an indirect approach by engaging participants in positive alternative activities to prevent substance abuse and related issues. Activities are designed to challenge participants to develop a positive self-concept, effective social and communication skills, a community service ethic, as well as enhanced decision-making and problem-solving skills. The goal is to build generalized resilience that can be transferred to attitudes towards substance abuse. The model is realized through the idea that an indirect, positive, experiential learning approach is one of the most powerful and culturally appropriate means to educate and develop Indigenous youth (Carter, Straits, & Hall, 2007).

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Project Venture

Development funding was provided through the Centre for Substance Abuse Prevention and the program is designed for early adolescent youth in grades five through nine.

- Classroom activities: About 20 hourly sessions are delivered over the course of the school year with lessons delivered through socialization and team-building activities.
- Outdoor activities: A smaller number of youth are recruited from the classroom setting to participate in community-based activities, including challenging outdoor activities that are used as metaphors to teach young people valuable lessons about life.
- Adventure camps: The youth engage in adventure camps and wilderness treks varying in duration from three to ten days.
- Community service learning projects: There are 150 hours dedicated to community-based activities in which youth engage in meaningful service learning opportunities designed to help develop leadership skills. Throughout the year, family and community events are held to provide the participants an opportunity to demonstrate their skills. (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2007)

Build on Recognized Success

Positive evaluation results have earned Project Venture recognition. In 1996, the National Indian Youth Leadership Project was invited by the Centre for Substance Abuse Prevention to participate in a National Cross-Site Study of High Risk Youth Programs. The results indicated youth that completed Project Venture showed significantly less growth in substance use over time when compared to a control group, particularly for alcohol use. These findings suggest that positive youth development through Project Venture is effective in preventing substance use with Indigenous youth (Carter et al., 2007). Following this evaluation, Project Venture received effective program status in 2002 through the Centre for Substance Abuse Prevention and the National Registry of Effective Prevention programs (National Indian Health Board, 2016). The program has since been replicated and implemented in the United States, Canada, and Europe and has been adapted for other cultural/ethnic and socio-economic groups.

The OPP Approach

In 2011, the Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario released the *Death Review of the Youth Suicides at Pikangikum First Nation, 2006-2008* following an alarmingly high number of youth suicides that occurred in that community. The document highlighted the persistent social, health, infrastructure, economic, capacity, and governance deficits that exist within Pikangikum First Nation. These stressors contribute to vulnerability and at-risk behaviours among youth including crime, substance abuse, and suicide. Police service for the community is administered through the OPP and, as such, the

organization is well-aware of the significant socio-economic challenges that exist and their influence on high rates of crime and social disorder. The OPP's approach was to seek ways and means to work with communities to address these challenges collaboratively.

Invest in Indigenous Youth

The OPP became aware of Government of Canada's funding available through Public Safety Canada to provide crime prevention programs designed for Indigenous communities. As part of the Government of Canada's efforts to address crime and build safer communities, Public Safety Canada maintains the National Crime Prevention Centre. The Centre supports programs contributing to the prevention and reduction of crime in Canada, with a focus on youth and First Nations communities, particularly those with high and persistent rates of crime (Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police, 2012). The OPP submitted a proposal to the National Crime Prevention Centre for grant approval through the Northern and Aboriginal Crime Prevention Fund to reduce crime in Pikangikum First Nation through the implementation of an approach based on the Project Venture model. This time-limited funding is intended to assist Indigenous communities experiencing multiple risk factors by supporting culturally sensitive initiatives that foster the development and implementation of crime prevention approaches (Public Safety Canada, 2015).

In 2013, Public Safety Canada agreed to provide federal funding for a five-year period. This funding enabled the OPP to implement Project Journey, a program to reduce crime and anti-social behaviours among youth in Pikangikum First Nation. Project Journey contributes to community safety by providing proactive programming and investing in at-risk youth to reduce offending and actively engage the community to build a safer Ontario.

Project Journey: a Profile of Community Engagement

Project Journey is the first such program to be modelled on Project Venture and to be administered directly by a police service. As recognized in the Chief Coroner's report, the OPP has a steadying effect in Pikangikum First Nation as the police represent one of the few pillars of stability in the community (Office of the Chief Coroner for Ontario, 2011). In 2013, Project Journey was implemented through the OPP Detachment in Red Lake as a community-based program that reflects a collaborative partnership between the OPP, Pikangikum First Nation, and Eenchokay Birchstick School. Sergeant Chris Amell has led the development, implementation, and delivery of Project Journey, providing relevant and culturally appropriate activities as a critical alternative to unhealthy and high-risk choices available to young people in Pikangikum. While the target demographic is between the ages of six and eighteen, the program provides opportunities for the broader community. By focusing on supporting youth, families, and the community, Project Journey is creating a basis for long-term and sustainable change.

With community support and engagement, Project Journey provides an innovative approach to policing that utilizes activity-based learning, modelling and mentorship within a culturally sensitive frame. The program consists of five components: Project Venture, Police Athletic League,

family activities, community service, and arts and culture. The Police Athletic League program is embedded in many police services in which police officers coach young people in sports activities and provide support with school-related activities to foster development and strengthen police-community relationships. All programming is designed to build a connection between youth and other key people including youth mentors, family, teachers, Elders, police, and community members. With positive activities and increased connection, youth are developing skills to engage in positive decision-making, thereby reducing engagement in high risk behaviours (Figure 1).

In the interest of program success and sustainability, Project Journey works to address mentorship at the individual, organizational and community levels.

Impact and Early Success

The impact of coaching and mentoring individuals is seen in a group of five youths who started with Project Journey in 2013 and are emerging as leaders within the program and community. This group has completed between 402 and 933 hours with the number of program activities ranging from 89 to 153 over the past three years. Members of this core group began by taking part in key events during the first year of the project, including constructing community resources (e.g., ball diamond, play grounds) and engaging in cultural activities (e.g., canoe trip). In the last academic year, these youths took on various leadership roles within Project Journey, including opening athletic events, leading drumming ceremonies, serving as youth leaders at retreats, constructing a pavilion and boardwalk, as well as maintaining the ball diamond they helped build the previous year. In the current academic year, this group of youth continues to emerge as leaders by leading project activities, cultural activities and earning community service credits through school.

Collaboration and mentorship can also be seen at an organizational level. Between 2014 and 2016, teachers at Eenchokay Birchstick School played a critical role supporting and leading the delivery of Project Journey. In the current academic year, Eenchokay Birchstick School has made significant commitments to Project Journey. While providing a classroom for the program, the school has dedicated one individual to support Project Journey. Another individual is being partially dedicated to assist Project Journey with cultural activities, which involves clearing a trap line to provide a canoe route.

Finally, the impact of collaboration and mentorship can be seen at a community level with the success of the 2016 Stormer Lake Retreat. A total of 44 youths from grades six and seven participated in the three-day retreat. The success of the weekend hinged on a variety of individuals and groups coming together to provide leadership, structural support, and skills. The weekend was supported through the Pikangikum Health Authority, which provided access to Stormer Lake and support staff for the operation of the facilities. Additional support was provided by members of the OPP Aboriginal Policing Bureau and a community Elder who offered leadership, education, and mentoring during cultural and outdoor activities. By providing transportation to and from Stormer Lake, the Education Authority assisted with ensuring high levels of youth participation. The young leaders identified previously encouraged and guided participants

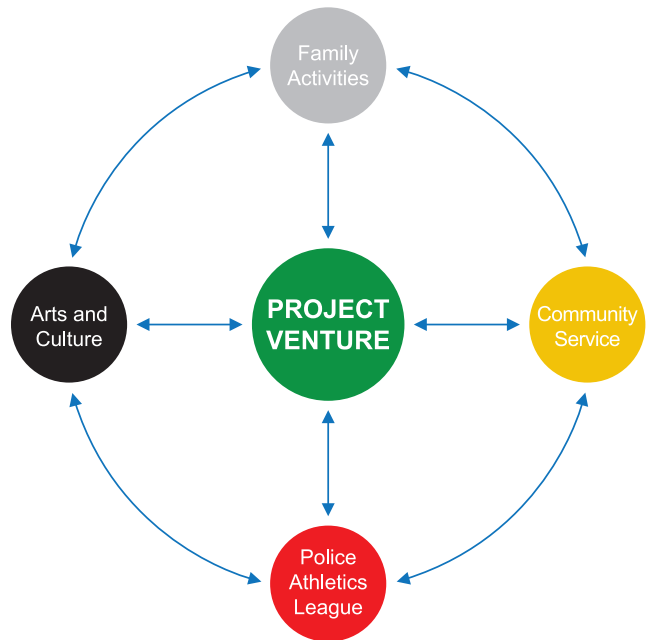


FIGURE 1 Project Journey program model.

through the weekend events. Teachers, police, community leaders, and family members contributed to the success of the retreat. When asked to report on Project Journey and their overall experience at Stormer Lake, participants highlighted the value and importance of cultural activities (e.g., fishing, drumming, singing, dances, snowshoeing), positive experiences (e.g., having fun, making friends), and outdoor and athletic activities. Some students noted the importance of guidance and direction (e.g., learning to make positive choices and being leaders), which reflects the essence of Project Journey.

In August 2016, members of the National Indian Youth Leadership Project attended Pikangikum First Nation to provide training. Their observations were included in a summary report based on the training experience and Project Journey. It was noted that the process of gaining community support, engagement, and collaboration was impressive, with a number of service initiatives having been completed during the three years of Project Journey. These achievements included the construction of a playground, baseball field, an outdoor hockey rink, a boat dock, and boardwalks along the lake.

Project Sunset: a Profile of Partnerships

Implementing Project Journey in Pikangikum First Nation has provided a framework for subsequent and similar programming within Indigenous communities. Recently, Project Journey staff have been working with and mentoring OPP Sergeant Anne McCoy and others in implementing a sister program, Project Sunset.

Project Sunset is another OPP-led community safety strategy designed to address the root causes of crime through programming based on the Project Venture model. In 2014, the OPP secured a five-year funding commitment through the Northern and Aboriginal Crime Prevention Fund. Project Sunset covers the communities served by Dryden Police

Service, Treaty Three Police Service, as well as the OPP Detachments in Kenora, Dryden, Sioux Lookout and Fort Frances. The Project includes annual intakes of students in grades four to twelve with referrals from schools, police services, child and family service agencies, police record databases, caregivers, parents and community members.

The OPP maintains two goals for Project Sunset.

Goal #1: create sustainable community partnerships with the goal of supporting innovative solutions that proactively address the root causes of youth crime, social disorder, and crisis.

The OPP has adopted Ontario's Mobilization & Engagement Model for Community Policing, which emphasizes that all community members and service agencies must work together to keep communities safe, secure, and healthy. Police service providers increase safety by reducing crime, victimization, and social disorder in partnership with communities (Hawkes, 2016). For Project Sunset, community partners include Treaty Three Police Service, Dryden Police Service, school boards, education authorities, health and medical services, First Nations communities, substance abuse prevention services, child and family service agencies, as well as the industrial and private sectors. These partnerships have collectively contributed over \$600,000 worth of resources, both human and services, in addition to the federal program funding.

The OPP role during Project Sunset is to support assembling resources from community partners as needed. Partnerships at the local level are essential to coordinate efforts and ensure risk factors associated with crime are assessed at every angle. According to the *Crime Prevention in Ontario: A Framework for Action* document, police are most effective when their crime prevention efforts are combined with multi-sectoral collaborations, as schools, governments, communities and other key players play a vital role in community safety and well-being (Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police, 2012).

Project Sunset has already forged significant partnerships. The OPP and the Rainy River District School Board have collaboratively applied resources to develop a new framework for partnering to proactively address the root causes of youth crime, social disorder, and crisis. This applied focus supports joint program delivery, planning, implementation, and evaluation. Lessons learned and best practices are shared to support policy recommendations.

Goal #2: build protective factors through a community-centred approach that mitigates risk of substance abuse or related problems in youth.

Project Sunset relies on a strength-based approach and encourages young people to move beyond the risk behaviours and recognize their potential. This approach identifies positive resources and strengths to create a foundation to effect change. There is a focus on building relationships and empowering individuals to take initiative and work in collaborative ways to create meaningful and sustainable change (Hammond & Zimmerman, 2012). In order for OPP efforts to be meaningful, they must build on existing strengths in order to facilitate self-determination.

Project Sunset contributes to community safety by assisting at-risk youth in ways to reduce the likelihood of

offending by actively engaging communities to create a safer Ontario. The Project aims to deliver programming to respond to crime issues and risk factors that exist at the community level. To facilitate this, program planning is flexible and interchangeable to encourage interagency partnerships to move successful components forward by identifying impacts using evaluation.

CONCLUSIONS

The Ontario Mobilization & Engagement Model for Community Policing provides the OPP an opportunity to build mutually supportive partnerships and capacity. While collaboration with multiple community partners may sometimes be a challenge, the OPP is dedicated to developing innovative and proactive programs such as Project Journey and Project Sunset.

A key component of these programs will be to transition from being police-led to community-led within the five-year funding term. The OPP is identified as the lead agency to guide these programs from their infancy through the stages of community engagement toward sustainability. The OPP is committed to providing leadership, encouragement, and developmental opportunities for community partners to ensure long-term program sustainability to promote community safety and well-being.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest.

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