



Poverty Reduction Coalition

**Using narrative analysis to
understand the pilot Fine Fund
Program
at the
Elizabeth Fry Society of Calgary**

Interim Report

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The Poverty Reduction Coalition is a community collaborative, supported by United Way of Calgary and Area, aimed at reducing poverty in Calgary. We work together in the belief that poverty **can** be reduced in Calgary and that we have the human and capital resources to do it.

In 2004, the Sustained Poverty Reduction Initiative was formed with the hope of instigating thoughtful social innovation in government policies, in the provision of social services, in systems reform and within the business community. Since that time, our name has changed, but not our intention.

The newly-coined Poverty Reduction Coalition works with all orders of government, the business community, social service organizations and community members to address the systemic barriers and policies that prevent low-income individuals and families from moving beyond the cycle of poverty.

We partner and collaborate with others to ensure sustained change.

Executive Summary

- ❖ Clients of the Fine Fund Program (FFP) express immense gratitude and restored hope from receiving support
- ❖ The FFP fits well within the mandate of Elizabeth Fry (EFry) and with their overarching goal of supporting women to avoid incarceration
- ❖ Many of the FFP's clients concurrently engage in various types of programming within and external to EFry
- ❖ Although there were some initial challenges with delivering the program at its inception, staff has taken agency over its delivery. Such examples include revising the program's intake form, fund payment requisition process, and creating a computer database for FFP client fund applications awarded and denied
- ❖ The primary intake worker of the FFP does not have access to the J.O.I.N courthouse system, which delays providing efficient support to clients
- ❖ The work hours of the primary intake worker are split between several different positions whereas the FFP requires full time staffing
- ❖ The limit in funding has required staff to devise a screening process which has resulted in many women having been denied support to pay off their fines
- ❖ Agency transition is having an impact on staff retention and morale
- ❖ Negative experiences with building management border on violations of Human Rights and harassment. This has been impacting staff morale and client services.
- ❖ Interviews with staff revealed a desire for a new location which would be closer to downtown and/or C-train access, include store-front access for the increase in outreach clients and their various needs, include an increase in private office space and group meeting space, and include an increase in administrative support and the creation of a program coordinator position

Background

Collaboration between the United Way of Calgary's Poverty Reduction Coalition (PRC) and the Elizabeth Fry Society of Calgary (EFry) has led to an in-depth exploration of survival crimes. Also known as crimes of desperation, relevant stakeholders recognise poverty as the root cause of these crimes. In response to this reality, the PRC supports EFry in finding ways to reduce and eliminate the criminalisation of women due to poverty.

In 2006, generous support from the United Way and an anonymous donor helped EFry establish the pilot Fine Fund Program (FFP). The goal of the FFP is to assist women in avoiding incarceration and is done by paying off fines.

This pilot program ends December 2008 and as a result the Poverty Reduction Coalition has requested an evaluation and a review of its process of development. This interim report provides the to-date results of that evaluation and review.

Methodology

People's lives are stories. Stories are narratives that focus on human experience. Theory surrounding narrative analysis tells us that "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, pg.2). Narrative is a way of characterizing the phenomena of human experience (ibid.). Situated within the matrix of qualitative research, narrative analysis allows us to gather rich data to expand our understanding of phenomena.

The qualitative methodology of narrative analysis (also known as narrative inquiry) included collecting oral narratives from clients and staff involved in the Fine Fund Program. The narrative is a fundamental way of giving meaning to human experience and opens horizons for interpretative investigations (Hydén & Överlien, 2004).

This was done through several ways. One-on-one interviews aided with clients drawing family trees, allowed women to explore their stories. Collecting the oral narratives of staff involved in FFP was also accomplished in the form of one-on-one interviews and one focus group with EFry staff. One-on-one interviews were also conducted with staff external to EFry who has referred clients to its programs.

Questions

The overarching questions explored in this study were to:

- understand the program's process of development
- understand the impact the program has had for staff at EFry
- understand the impact the program has had for clients of EFry

The implications of this study:

- are to build on the initial research conducted through the United Way of Calgary and the Poverty Reduction Coalition
 - are to provide empirical evidence to inform future practice
 - are to engage experiential participants to develop an understanding of crimes of desperation and the merit of the Fine Fund Program
 - are to review the program's development
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Preliminary Findings

The staff dedicated to EFry and the Fine Fund Program deserves recognition. The passion and compassion they deliver to their clients is evident not only in their accomplishments but from the narratives expressed by clients. The sense of direction and hope staff of EFry instill in their clients cannot be measured, and without which, cannot address the criminalisation and incarceration of women in Calgary. Despite the transition and certain difficulties within the agency, clients do not experience any lack of care from EFry staff. This alone deserves to be honoured.

Fine Fund Program's process of development

There appears to have been a lack of clarity concerning the goal and procedure of the Fine Fund Program when the pilot program was established in 2006. Although such guidelines were articulated on paper, not all staff involved presented as aware of the guidelines and had several questions as the program evolved.

The first fine was paid in May 2007 and to date staff have taken agency over its direction and streamlined its delivery. Such examples include revising the program's intake form, funds requisition process, and creating a computer database for FFP client fund applications awarded and denied. Additionally, staff has chosen to revise their screening and selection process due the limits of the program's funds.

The primary intake worker for FFP has begun a two-month sabbatical effective July, 2008. Three other staff members have coordinated in order to continue the Fine Fund Program without any disruption in service to clients.

The FFP's impact for staff at EFry

Staff at EFry makes a difference in the lives of women in Calgary. In addition to workload and client needs, an increase in outreach clients and their needs, the agency has been under transition. The past few years has seen a transition in governance with many long term and short term staff having left the agency and with two more staff scheduled to leave before autumn of this year. Additionally a search for a new Executive Director is currently underway.

Staff has expressed continued frustration and feelings of harassment from the building management. Tensions with that relationship have impacted staff morale and some clients have also experienced difficulties from on-site management.

Although all staff interviewed has acknowledged the value of the Fine Fund Program and its fit within EFry to serve the needs of their clients, many have expressed concern over its resources and future. Specifically noted is that the Program is staffed .6 and as with other EFry programming, staff expresses feeling overwhelmed with paperwork responsibilities while keeping up with an increase in clients and client needs.

As a result of the funding limit of the FFP, staff has had to devise an ad hoc screening process when selecting clients who qualify for fine payment. Although staff has acknowledged that this is necessary, for various reasons, it has also resulted in some staff feeling conflicted and helpless when unable to provide support to all women who seek it.

The primary intake worker for FFP does not have access to the J.O.I.N courthouse computer system. Although other non-profit justice agencies have access to J.O.I.N., EFry has been told that there are currently too many users on the network and therefore cannot join at this time. As a result of not having access to this system, the primary intake worker must fax a request for the client's record to each of the court offices and/or wait in line to do this task in order to learn the full extent of a client's

file, fines, warrants, court dates and applicability for the program. The primary intake worker has been relationship building to streamline this process, but in an already busy and fractured work day, time is diverted away from serving clients efficiently.

This interim report presents on the Fine Fund Program but the structure at EFry must be taken into context when understanding the impact FFP has on staff and clients. The FFP is one of many necessary programs offered by this valuable agency. Elizabeth Fry Societies across Canada direct need to criminalised women and Calgary is no different. The needs of its women are many and often as a result of poverty, women continue to be criminalised, incarcerated and stigmatized. The FFP is one of the many programs Calgary's EFry office offers the women of Calgary but the reality of an increase in clients, client's needs and staff workload, coupled with a continuous reduction in staff, stresses with building management and an unclear future, will pose a challenge.

EFry fills a niche in Calgary. For our city to be without this agency would put the clients it currently serves, their families, potential clients, and their families, at greater risk for poverty, criminalisation, incarceration and stigmatization. A resolution to these concerns is encouraged including the possibility of a move from the existing office space.

The FFP's impact on clients of EFry

Without question, clients who have accessed FFP have benefited tremendously. Case workers associated with these clients can readily notice a change in their client's sense of hope and direction. Clients also expressed renewed hope and a peace of mind without fear of the criminal justice system when pursuing their goals. Yet some staff indicated that they perceive some clients are "ashamed" to ask again for help when any subsequent fines have been incurred, or any other issue relevant to accessing EFry. Staff is concerned that some clients believe this may be due to actual and/or perceived limitations of the Fine Fund Program; however, staff believes that those situations are few compared to the renewed hope many clients experience as a result of EFry's work.

Client stories

One client indicated that her goals include maintaining employment and getting her children back from Children's Services. If any of her fines were to have remained outstanding, the act of applying for work requiring a record check would be barred. Additionally, she would not be able to move in the direction necessary to meet the expectations of Children's Services.

Another client who was 8 ½ months pregnant was fearful of being apprehended near her delivery date or apprehended immediately after delivering her baby, either of which she believed would have resulted in the apprehension of her child. She therefore decided it would be a "better option" to turn herself into police and pay off the fine by doing time in the Remand Centre. Her case came to the attention of EFry staff who directed her to the Fine Fund Program where she qualified to have her fines paid; she

avoided apprehension, gave birth and kept her child, and is accessing EFry for assistance in other matters.

Another client expressed her goal to be able to secure employment and live independently. She owned a vehicle but had outstanding fines related to her driver's license. Also complicating matters was that another woman, who shares the same name as this client, had used this client's name and information when arrested on other charges. This resulted in that the FFP's client had several fines on her record which impeded her from getting her driver's license and vehicle registration renewed and from seeking and obtaining employment. The FFP was able to eliminate these barriers and continues to work with this client to clear off any outstanding charges that are a result of the other woman.

For Consideration

All of the clients interviewed for this project expressed immense gratitude to the Elizabeth Fry Society of Calgary for the support and assistance the Fine Fund Program provided. Many of the clients served were also enrolled in other EFry programming and/or programming within the community and/or continue to access EFry services. As a result of the preliminary findings from this study, the following are offered as consideration:

- All of these clients asked to be kept informed of the decisions and outcomes as a result of this project and some routinely check in with me for any updates. An idea for consideration may be to host a community forum involving all the staff and clients involved with the Fine Fund Program and this study. The sense of empowerment in being able to share their stories and perspectives on the program was evident in all women interviewed.
- For some of the various reasons noted above, the six and 12-month follow up of FFP clients has not yet been completed. The primary intake person for the program returns from her sabbatical September 2008. In the interim three staff

have collaborated to run the program in her absence while juggling their concurrent caseload demands. The FFP pilot program is scheduled to end December 2008, and an idea for consideration may be to further explore the experiences of these clients and the staff involved after that time.

- The Board of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Calgary is encouraged to seek a resolution to the concerns with the building's management and with staff morale. An additional consideration is to explore moving the EFry office closer to downtown and/or C-train access with a new location having store-front access for the increase in outreach clients and their various needs. Additional benefits with a new location would include an increase in private office space and group meeting space, an increase in administrative support and the creation of a program coordinator position.

Adjustments

Budget and Timeline

The project is expected to be completed as originally planned by September 30, 2008.

The budget proposed however, will *not* be spent in full.

| Item | Estimated total | Actual cost to date |
|---|-----------------|---------------------|
| Course release | \$5400 | \$5435.95 |
| Honoraria to 6 participants \$20/hr x 2 hours | \$480 | \$240 |
| Primary researcher fee \$50/hr @ 219 hours | \$10,950 | 132.75hrs = |

| | | |
|---|--------|-------------|
| | | \$6637.50 |
| Primary researcher fee projected 25 hours remaining | \$1250 | |
| | | |
| Total to date | | \$12,313.45 |
| | | |
| Total estimate by project end | | \$13,563.45 |
| | | |
| Initial estimate | | \$16,878.00 |

Methodology

With the exception of one client interview, all interviews with EFry staff, staff external to EFry, and clients of the FFP have been completed. The one missing client interview has been rescheduled to accommodate the participant's pregnancy and delivery.

As a result of the dynamics involved, the valuable data collected to date, and the timeline's progress, I feel that conducting a focus group with the client participants would not be suitable contrary to my initial project proposal. However, as previously stated, all of the client participants expressed interest to learn the results of this study and any outcomes generated and would most likely appreciate a group forum for a report consultation.



Poverty Reduction Coalition

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The Poverty Reduction Coalition is a community collaborative initiated and supported by
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