

**COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY
CONFERENCES:
A VITAL ADDITION TO JUVENILE FIRESETTING INTERVENTION
PROGRAMS**

by

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Identification, evaluation, education and referral are essential components of all juvenile firesetting intervention programs. In Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, residents of five inner-city neighborhoods are working in collaboration with fire, police and mental health practitioners by expanding their firestop program to include a face to face meeting between the child or youth responsible for intentional firesetting and the victims affected by the fire.

This conference becomes the catalyst to assist in the design of an individualized intervention strategy based on the youth's level of risk, the degree of family or community supports, amenability to treatment and the availability of relevant programming. The inclusion of fire department and mental health personnel at the meeting ensure that access to appropriate educational and treatment programs is readily available. Information sharing and monitoring of the agreement by participants are critical components of the process and minimize the risk of children or youth "falling through the cracks".

A community accountability (or family group) conference brings together all those individuals impacted by the fire in what is often an intense emotional discussion of the incident, its effects, and the steps needed to make things right. Typically the conference is attended by the child or youth, parents, extended family and /or any persons of significance to the child and the victims and their supporters. Responding fire and police personnel as well as mental health and treatment professionals (whose services may be enlisted as part of the outcome agreement) may also attend.

Conferences offer significant benefits for all participants. Youth recognize the true impact their actions have had on others and are given the opportunity to apologize, make amends to the extent possible and perhaps be forgiven. The presence of supporters who can reaffirm their worth as members of the community while condemning their behaviour is a key element of the process.

Within the supportive environment of the conference, youth, families and their supporters can openly discuss the underlying issues that may have contributed to the wrong-doing and assume an active role in finding solutions.

Victims come to the conference with their family and friends for support. Conferences allow victims to tell the youth how they feel and how the fire has affected them. Allowing victims to ask questions about the incident and have a say in how the harm should be repaired is empowering and allows the process of healing to begin. The presence of fire and police personnel at the conference is an additional source of comfort and safety for victims. Mental health professionals who have observed conferences add that the conference setting creates an important opportunity for fire, police and rescue personnel to speak of the incident and the associated emotional stressors that are inherent in their respective professions. Ignored, these accumulated stressors can lead to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder.

The community plays a crucial role in conferencing. In the Saskatoon project, conference facilitators are community residents recruited from the five neighborhoods the project serves. They receive specific and comprehensive training as well as ongoing support and evaluation from the project co-ordinator. Referrals to the project are received from the fire department, the police service, community school coordinators and concerned parents. Follow up contacts with community conference participants indicate an extremely high level of satisfaction with both the process and outcome.

A community accountability conference is a particularly relevant addition to the intervention strategy for children and youth engaged in firesetting. Youth are held accountable for their actions and recognize the true impact their actions have had on others. Many parents report that conferences help their children learn empathy. Victims and families are engaged and actively participate in finding solutions and reaching consensus. Community tensions are lessened and opportunities for healing and closure are created. Creative agreements increase the possibilities for reparation and restitution.

CASE EXAMPLE - ARSON

The following story illustrates the role that a community conference can play in responding to a serious incident from a restorative justice perspective. While the youth involved was 15 years old, the principles and practices applied have equal relevance to younger children. Pursuant to the [Young Offenders Act](#), information that would lead to the identification of the young person involved has been altered or omitted.

The maintenance manager of a large government building discovered a pile of burning material on the floor of a second story washroom. Fire department and police personnel responded and the 450 building tenants were evacuated. The fire was quickly contained. Subsequent investigation lead police to a 15 year old youth who admitted to igniting the fire because he was angry. The youth was charged with arson.

The case was referred to the writer for consideration of a community accountability conference. Key participants (the youth, building manger, fire & police personnel) were contacted and interviewed. A conference was convened in the building where the incident had occurred. Invited to the conference were the youth; his parents; the building manager; the fire department liaison; the responding police constables; and tenants from the building.

The conference began with the youth describing his actions on the day of the fire. He told the group he attended the Social Services office because he had been kicked out of his home by his parents. When he learned from the intake worker that his parents would not take him back, and that he would be placed in emergency foster care, he took his backpack (containing all of his worldly possessions) into the washroom and lit them on fire with lighter fluid. He said he then tried to put the fire out, and exited the building because he panicked and was "afraid of getting into trouble". The youth went on to describe his arrest and detention. Asked by the facilitator what he felt now about what had occurred he said he felt "sad".

The assembled group described in turn how the incident had impacted them. The building manager described the fear that he had felt when he discovered the fire, and his concern for the tenants of his building. He reminded the youth that the building housed many different services, for children, the elderly, and "even for kids like him who were in trouble". He produced a letter from a woman who worked in the building, and had to take time off because of stress. Apparently, she had lost relatives in a house fire and the recent event had triggered strong feelings in her.

The Fire Department representative informed the youth of the risks of a fire in a large structure to the occupants, the fire personnel who respond and even to bystanders. He described the feelings that firefighters experience when they respond to a call.

The Police representative stated that he was relieved that there had been no loss of life or injury because of the incident. He asked the youth how he would have felt if someone would have died. The constable agreed that he seemed like a "good kid" and said it would have been a shame to see him charged with the death of someone. The constable then described how sad he would feel with seeing a good kid who did a dumb thing go to a place like prison.

The youth became very emotional at this point in conference and began to weep. The young man said how sorry he was for what had occurred.

Each of the attendees were asked what they wanted to see come from the conference. The building manager said that he was satisfied that the young person now had a greater awareness of "what happened and what could have happened", but he felt that the youth should apologize to the tenants in the building. The youth agreed to write a letter and the manager agreed to distribute it to the offices in the building.

The Fire representative asked if the youth would be willing to attend the Fire Stop program to learn more about fire, and to "give something back to the community". The youth said he did not have any money to pay, but he would be willing to volunteer his time. The Firefighter asked if he would help him in teaching younger children about the dangers of fire. The youth agreed.

The Police constable felt that the agreement was a good one. He expressed concern that the youth's parents had not attended the conference. He inquired about the youth's

current living arrangements and the relationship between him and his parents. The youth responded by saying that things were "not very good". The constable offered to help the young man if he could, and said he was willing to go with the youth to meet his parents and talk about "what help they might need". The youth seemed genuinely touched by this offer.

As the conference concluded, the youth was praised by all assembled for the courage he had shown in participating in a difficult process.

A written agreement was prepared by the writer and signed by the attendees. The youth fulfilled all of the commitments he had made. One tenant from the building read the youth's letter of apology and wrote him back informing him of how she now felt better about what had happened, and congratulated him for the steps he had taken to "put things right again."

The criminal charge was withdrawn by the Crown Prosecutor.

This example of a community conference highlights the key principles of a restorative community response to intentional firesetting. The parties impacted have a voice and a say in the outcome. They are given a voice to talk about how and in what way the incident has affected them. Their inclusion in the intervention strategy contributes greatly to the youth's awareness level.

The youth is held accountable and responsible for his actions, and faces those he has harmed. His actions are condemned, but he retains his worth as a valued person. Community bonds are strengthened. Referral to the intervention program is easily accomplished.