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Province strengthens mental health and addiction programs

Edmonton... Alberta has bolstered its commitment to crime prevention and crime reduction by strengthening programs for those vulnerable to mental health and addiction issues and victims of domestic violence with support of \$11.8 million this year.

The increased funding from the Safe Communities Initiative expands the Provincial Diversion and Family Violence Treatment programs to six new communities and broadens addiction prevention efforts for youth and young adults.

"With early intervention of treatment and support we can make our families and communities safer," said Ron Liepert, Minister of Health and Wellness. "In the past, the success of these programs has been measured by the reduced contact these individuals have had with the health and justice systems, but the real success and value to their families is immeasurable."

Diversion is a coordinated, government response to redirect adults and adolescents who commit low-risk, minor offences from the criminal justice system to community-based addiction and mental health treatment and support.

"Not everyone who ends up before the courts needs to be there," said Minister of Justice and Attorney General, Alison Redford. "Long-term crime reduction requires that we address the root causes of crime and give these Albertans the opportunity for a better life."

Piloted in Calgary, the Provincial Diversion Program expanded to St. Paul and Lethbridge in 2005 and with the increase in funding for 2009/10, is now operating in Airdrie and Edmonton, and being implemented in Fort McMurray, Medicine Hat, Grande Prairie and Red Deer.

Last year, approximately 80 per cent of participants successfully completed the voluntary diversion program and had their charges withdrawn. Pre- and post-program evaluation of the pilot showed significant reductions in participants' emergency room visits, in-patient admissions to hospitals and court appearances.

"The success to date of the Calgary and Lethbridge diversion programs is a clear indication that innovative approaches can be utilized within the traditional criminal justice system that will serve the public through reducing re-offending behavior," said Provincial Court Deputy Chief Judge Allan Lefever. "Extending this program throughout Alberta can only benefit the public."

The expansion of the Family Violence Treatment Program has increased services in Calgary, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Red Deer, and in Edmonton, all of which received initial funding in 2005. Safe Communities funding also allowed for implementation in Fort McMurray and Grande Prairie, and development of specialized treatment services for Aboriginal populations in First Nations and Métis settlements. It provides treatment to mandated offenders who have

either pled guilty in a specialized domestic violence court or are found guilty in trial court.

“As offenders participate in domestic violence treatment, they learn to model new, more appropriate behaviors which contributes to a healthier environment for their families,” said Laurie Beverley, Executive Director, Community Treatment and Support, Addiction and Mental Health, Alberta Health Services, “Victims in many of the existing communities have expressed their support for mandated treatment, indicating that it has had a positive influence on their families.”

The Safe Communities Initiative has also supported expansion of school-based prevention to provide early and ongoing education for children and youth to build their life-skills and reduce the risk of involvement in alcohol or other drugs, violence, gangs or other crimes.

Funding has also been provided for enhanced mobile street intervention teams to meet the needs of street involved individuals and provide early and ongoing assessment as well as treatment and referrals to existing treatment programs.

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