



Community & Neighbourhood Services  
Eric Gam, Commissioner

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To: Community Services Committee  
From: Commissioner of Community and Neighbourhood Services  
Subject: Update on Toronto Response for Youth (TRY)

Purpose:

The purpose of this report is to update members of City Council on the progress of the Toronto Response for Youth (TRY) project.

Financial Implications and Impact Statement:

There are no financial impacts. The Toronto Response for Youth project is fully funded by Human Resources Development Canada.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that this report be received for information.

Background:

At its meeting of October 2, 3, and 4, 2001, City Council adopted a motion authorizing the Commissioner of Community and Neighbourhood Services to enter into an agreement with Human Resources Development Canada for “the provision of a youth peer program to mitigate hatred related activities at no net cost to the City.” The motion came in response to concerns about a significant increase in the number of incidents of hate and racism directed against members of Toronto’s Muslim communities following the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001.

A project proposal prepared by City staff and a reference team comprised of community representatives, staff from the Toronto District School Board and the Toronto Catholic District School Board, and members of the Toronto Youth Cabinet was approved by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) in January 2002. Funding of \$291,600.00 was authorized for the project which was named Toronto Response for Youth (TRY). It was proposed that the project use a peer leader model to prepare a group of Muslim and non-Muslim youth to assist other young people deal with issues associated with Islamophobia—the fear or hatred of Islam and its

adherents. As well as building youth leadership, employment and life-skills, the project was intended to serve as a model that other communities could adopt. It would run for 30 weeks.

The format and content of the project were developed during the winter by staff from the Social Development and Administration Division and the CAO's office in partnership with Muslim Educational Network Training and Outreach Services (MENTORS). Their work was guided by a project reference group composed of representatives of MENTORS, the Toronto District School Board, the Toronto Catholic District School Board, Afghan Women's Organization, Jaffari Youth, Canadian Arab Youth Association and the Toronto Youth Cabinet as well as City staff. Working groups to deal with curriculum development and project evaluation were also established. The project goals were identified as:

- (1) providing at-risk Muslim and non-Muslim youth with employment and life-skills;
- (2) reducing the number of hate motivated incidents; and
- (3) to create a template for program replication.

#### Discussion:

The need for TRY was borne out by crime statistics released in the spring of 2002 by the Toronto Police Service which revealed that hate crimes in Toronto had more than doubled after the attacks of September 11. The largest rise was in hate crimes against Muslims which increased from one incident reported in 2000 to 57 incidents reported in 2001.

Two staff were hired to run TRY—a co-ordinator and a life skills councillor—who used contacts with community networks and ethno-racial organizations as well as public information meetings to recruit at-risk youth to the project. To be eligible to be TRY peer leaders, youth were required to be between the ages of 16 and 24, unemployed and out of school. On April 15, 2002, 17 Muslim and non-Muslim youth commenced the project which was located in city-owned space. Peer leaders are paid a weekly stipend and will receive a completion bonus at the end of the project.

The first five weeks of the TRY project were devoted to skill building, employment assessment, and learning facilitation skills. A variety of educators and facilitators worked alongside project staff to train and support the peer leaders.. During the next four weeks of the project, peer leaders have worked on developing the content for workshops and discussion sessions on identifying and countering Islamophobia and other forms of racism. Both project staff and participants report that the training phase of the project has resulted in stimulating interactions and experiences which have significantly broadened their knowledge and skills.

Between June 17 and October 21 the peer leaders, working in teams, will lead discussion sessions with young people at schools, community centres and other venues. It is hoped that during this phase of the project, TRY will reach out to several hundred young people throughout the city. An outreach campaign is now underway to identify host sites for the workshops.

During the final four weeks of the TRY project—which concludes on November 8, 2002—the peer leaders will finalize their planning for their long-term education and employment goals.

TRY's objective is to have 80 per cent of the peer leaders employed or in school three months after the project's completion.

Conclusion:

Toronto Response for Youth is a unique city-run project, which has been built on a foundation of community partnerships. It is effectively addressing Islamophobia and other forms of racism and is providing a group of at-risk youth with important leadership, employment and life-skills. It has the potential to be a useful model for other communities to use in dealing with discrimination or other issues that confront them.

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