



National Strategy
on Community Safety
and Crime Prevention

Stratégie nationale
sur la sécurité communautaire
et la prévention du crime

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First Stop: Front-line crime prevention

Introduction

Thousands pass through the downtown bus station in Montreal every day. Amid the crowds of vacationers, families and business-people are individuals who are vulnerable to crime and victimization. Teenagers from out of town, seeking excitement in the big city or running away from abusive homes, are targets for pimps and drug dealers. People in crisis – women fleeing abusive relationships, individuals with mental health conditions or substance abuse problems, youths living on the street who are drawn to the station's warmth and crowds – are vulnerable to exploitation and crime.

The First Stop program is on site at the station to provide assistance to vulnerable people, and to help to prevent crime and victimization. The program is a partnership of the Downtown YMCA, *Dans la rue* (an outreach organization for street people) and Passages (a women's shel-

ter). It is supported by a number of partners, including the Community Mobilization Program, the Central Bus Station, the City of Montreal, the United Way/Centraide, the Montreal-Centre Regional Health and Social Services Board and the Quebec Department of Public Security.

Reaching out

Part of the work of First Stop is 'situational' crime prevention – helping to ensure that vulnerable people do not fall victim to pick-pockets, pimps and drug dealers in the area. By their presence and their actions, First Stop personnel help to discourage criminal activity in the bus station.

This immediate work is set within the framework of a longer-term social development approach that includes linking people in need with available community services. At the First Stop booth, trained personnel are on the lookout for people at risk. Staff respond to those who visit the booth, but they also look around the station and approach individuals who seem to need help. According to Henri-Charles Baudot, coordinator of First Stop, this proactive outreach is essential, as those who need help do not always

This publication is part of the Caledon Institute's crime prevention series of community stories, produced in collaboration with the National Crime Prevention Centre. The series documents promising approaches to crime prevention through social development.

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ask for it. First Stop personnel provide information about and/or referrals to community services such as shelters, emergency sources of food and clothing, legal aid, clinics, drug and alcohol treatment, and employment centres. By directing individuals to the services they need, First Stop helps reduce their immediate and longer-term vulnerability to victimization.

The First Stop booth operates seven days a week, 12 hours a day, during the times when the bus station is busiest, and is staffed at all times by two employees. Each month, staff assist about 100 people by providing information or referrals and by intervening in crisis situations. Staff also deal with about 2,500 inquiries from travellers seeking information on bus scheduling. Most inquirers are referred to the station's information booth, but as Henri-Charles Baudot notes: "This contact also gives people an opportunity to ask for other kinds of help."

Vulnerable people of all ages

Young people in transition are particularly vulnerable to victimization and to involvement in criminal behaviour. Most of those assisted by First Stop are young – more 40 percent are under 25 years old. About two-thirds have just arrived in Montreal, often with no idea how they will survive. Many of the others are in crisis – homeless and living on the streets without resources.

First Stop workers have intervened with young people suffering from overdoses, psychotic episodes and collapse brought on by exhaustion. Staff have referred youth in need to day centres, health services, crisis centres, drug treatment, community programs, employment and back-to-school programs and more. Whenever possible, staff follow up by telephone to see if the young people have acted on the referrals: Most of them do, some do not. Several contacts

National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention

The National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention aims to reduce crime and victimization by addressing their root causes through a social development approach. Social development is a long-term, proactive approach directed at removing personal, social and economic factors that lead some individuals to engage in criminal acts or to become victims of crime.

With an investment of \$32 million annually, the National Strategy enables the Government of Canada to help communities develop projects and partnerships that will prevent crime. The Strategy focusses particularly on children and youth, Aboriginal people and the personal security of women and girls. It includes the Safer Communities Initiative, a Promotion and Public Education Program and the National Crime Prevention Centre. The National Crime Prevention Centre is responsible for implementing the Strategy.

The Safer Communities Initiative is designed to help Canadians undertake crime prevention activities in their communities. It includes four funding components: the Community Mobilization Program, which helps communities develop approaches to crime prevention and undertake activities that deal with the root causes of crime; the Crime Prevention Investment Fund, which aims to establish reliable information on what works and what is promising in reducing the risk factors associated with crime and victimization; the Crime Prevention Partnership Program, which supports the involvement of organizations that can contribute to community crime prevention through the development of information, tools and resources; and the Business Action Program on Crime Prevention, which involves national and provincial/territorial business and professional associations in helping communities prevent crime, share information and encourage community mobilization.

Some Examples of First Stop in Action

- A bus station employee alerted First Stop staff that an older man was sitting with a young girl in the restaurant. First Stop staff found that the man had paid for the young girl's meal and offered her a free place to stay. They intervened rapidly to say that First Stop could find her 'a safe place to stay,' and the girl agreed to leave the restaurant with them. They talked to her about the dangers she could face in the downtown area and referred her to a shelter. They also followed up with the shelter to make sure that she arrived there safely.
- A 21-year-old who was 'squatting' in the area of the bus station had a long-standing addiction to PCP and seemed to have no friends. First Stop staff gave him information on several sources of shelter and assistance. He did not seem to follow up on the referrals, but continued to pass by the booth two or three times a week. Eventually, he told the staff that he had been accepted at one of the shelters.
- A 20-year-old woman appeared to have been beaten up. She had spent the night at a hospital and could barely talk. She had no fixed address and appeared to have a substance abuse problem. First Stop staff called an appropriate shelter and she was admitted that day.
- A middle-aged woman sat on a bench in tears, surrounded by bags of clothing. She had left her violent partner, but when she got to the bus station, she found that he still had her bus ticket. She had no money, although she had a cheque that could be cashed the next day. After ensuring that she would be safe that night staying with a friend, First Stop paid to store her bags in a locker. The next day, she passed by the booth to pay back the money and thank the staff before catching a bus to the Maritimes, where she had family.
- A mother and her two children passed through the station en route for Fredericton. Talking with the woman, First Stop staff learned that she had been the victim of domestic violence. They referred her to an appropriate organization in Fredericton.

may be necessary before a person agrees to go to a shelter or seek help.

First Stop also assists people who have been victims of pickpockets or lost their money. Sometimes a person needs only to use a phone to call a friend or relative. In other cases, individuals need help to make statements to the police or find emergency shelter.

In older age groups, a common need is for addresses of rooming houses and advice on where to seek employment. Middle-aged men

and women often arrive in Montreal with the intention of 'starting over' but have no idea how or where to find accommodation and employment. By helping these newcomers find the assistance they need, First Stop personnel reduce the likelihood that they will be victimized or end up on the streets.

From time to time, First Stop staff must intervene to defuse potentially violent incidents by calming people who are inebriated. On other occasions, bus station personnel find seniors wandering through the station in a confused and

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disoriented state. Some have Alzheimer's disease or other memory problems. Wandering on their own, they are vulnerable to harassment, robbery or assault. First Stop assists by trying to track down relatives or by seeking medical care from outreach medical teams.

A haven of safety

The First Stop booth is a comforting presence for many. Students, seniors and families waiting for buses often sit near the booth. Parents seeing off their children have told staff that they are reassured by the presence in the station of an organization like First Stop. The existence of the First Stop program helps to contribute to a sense of community safety.

However, not everyone has been happy to see First Stop. In the early weeks of the project, several older youths and adults attempted to intimidate staff of the organization who were working at night. The First Stop booth is located near the lockers and the area where buses arrive, and staff suspect that the lockers were being used as drop-off points for drugs. After a few months, as it became obvious that First Stop was there to stay, the atmosphere improved.

First Stop has a good working relationship with bus station personnel, who often refer people in need: More than one-third of those who approach First Stop have been referred by station personnel. First Stop staff have access from a computer at the booth to a database of more than 80 organizations. These include day centres and shelters for youths and adults, medical centres, groups providing assistance to people with mental health problems, drug treatment centres and social service agencies. Staff have made contact with all these organizations and have good knowledge of their services and hours of operation.

First Stop personnel continually research new resources in response to specific needs, and these are added to the database. Staff also keep in touch with organizations that work with street people in the vicinity of the bus station. Sometimes, social agencies contact First Stop to request 'accompaniment' for clients who are coming to the station to catch an out-of-town bus.

By linking vulnerable individuals with the services they need, First Stop helps to reduce the potential that they will be victimized or, in some cases, become involved in crime. "Many of the people we have helped have thanked us for listening and for offering advice and support," notes Henri-Charles Baudot. "For us, there is no doubt as to the impact of the First Stop program."

Ann Simpson

Ann Simpson works on the 'community stories' series for the Caledon Institute.

For more information on First Stop, contact Henri-Charles Baudot at (514) 849-8393, ext. 208.

For more information on the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention, call (toll-free) 1-877-302-6272, or visit the website at www.crime-prevention.org.

Limited quantities of this publication are available in alternate formats (Braille, disk and audiotape).

Cette histoire communautaire est également disponible en français.

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