

Crime Prevention in Nova Scotia

Keynote Speech for Minister of Justice Ross Landry

**Crime Prevention Symposium
March 28, 2012**

Hello again everyone.

What an impressive group!

Before I begin, I want to ask our Leadership Award recipients to stand for a deserving round of applause.

I hope you have enjoyed the morning so far.

Seeing so many here today is very encouraging.

We all believe that preventing crime and making our communities safer is a priority.

You are here to make a difference and we are here to help you.

Today, I am going to outline specific actions that we will take, in partnership with many of you, over the coming year to prevent and reduce crime.

I will also talk about some principles that will guide our actions and decision-making.

And finally, I will talk about how we will measure our progress.

So, where do we find ourselves in Nova Scotia in 2012?

First, 86% of Nova Scotians report feeling safe in their homes.

That's a good result.

But we still have work to do.

Let me outline the frame that we are working in:

- Our overall crime rate has been declining for several years. But the province's homicide rate is alarming and requires a proactive approach. As well, Nova Scotia's crime severity rates are still above the national average.
- Our rates of domestic violence are still very high – and that only reflects the incidents that are reported.

- While our youth crime rate is declining it is still well above the national average. Also, the number of youth committed violent crimes is rising. This is very troubling.
- This government has taken on the hard work of getting this province's finances back on track. We have a structural deficit in Nova Scotia and eliminating it will require reducing costs, not increasing them. We're not alone in coming to grips with increased costs. Organizations across the province are struggling with rising costs and shrinking budgets.

That is the landscape that is before us.

I don't see it as bleak ... I see it as fertile ground that offers great opportunity.

The theme of today's event is: Change is Possible. And it's very fitting.

With respect to the issue of domestic violence in particular, the evidence of change can be seen visually in the timeline displayed on the wall.

While the challenges may seem insurmountable, they are not.

We should not be discouraged but energized by the great work that is happening within the community, and within government, both on domestic violence and on efforts to make our communities safer overall.

Why?

Because:

- Government is committed to change, innovation and efficiency.
- There are new, exciting theories and tools available to help prevent crime.
- Enforcing the law and holding people accountable for their actions will always be a priority of this government, for the police and the justice system. There will always be a need to hold people who break the law accountable for their actions.
- Finally, and importantly, many, many groups and individuals across the province, like yourselves, are committed to making a difference. That commitment ... and our current and potential partnerships ... are our building blocks.

While we look for solutions, we know the answer to safer communities does not rest with more jails, more courthouses and more police officers.

We can't arrest our way into a crime-free society.

Irvin Waller, a professor of criminology at the University of Ottawa, and founding CEO of the International Centre for Crime Prevention in Ottawa, says that more police officers does not equate with “more order.”

And I agree.

He argues that if you want to prevent crime,

“...it is better to tackle the reasons why persons offend, than to wait until they offend and then try to correct them.”

Our job as leaders in crime prevention is to look beyond the crime to the person who committed it.

What is making people commit crime? Is it poverty, drugs, domestic violence, mental illness, illiteracy?

We need to find new ways of looking at crime and addressing the things that are causing people to get involved in criminal activity ... the root causes of crime.

One example that comes to mind is the Adopt-a-Library Program. Its slogan is “Fighting Crime one Book at a time.”

Literacy is an essential skill in all facets of life and there is plenty of research that links low literacy levels and involvement in the criminal justice system.

This program provides youth and offenders in Nova Scotia with books, promoting literacy and preventing criminal behaviour.

Again, this is but one example of working differently.

In the coming year, we will focus on two simple but effective approaches to tackle root causes and work differently to prevent crime:

- Community partnerships.... and
- Restorative approaches.

Let's start with partnerships.

Crime prevention crosses many boundaries. Just consider the broad range of people here today.

Crime is not specifically a government problem.

The entire community is affected by crime and, therefore, the entire community needs to be involved in the solutions – schools, governments, hospitals and individuals.

Too often we look to government for solutions, when what we require are the skills, determination and leadership from the community.

The issue of domestic violence, the issue that has brought all of you here today, is a great example of this.

Domestic violence is a community issue. It affects all of us.

It is not something individuals, government, support organizations or advocacy groups can fix on its own. It requires a coordinated, collaborative response. This is the very reason you, the experts and leaders on this issue, are here today.

The Domestic Violence Action Plan and the work happening under that plan is about community and government working together to prevent domestic violence and protect Nova Scotia's women and children.

Some of the things you will see this year are more opportunities for community and government to come together to talk about the issue and solutions. Today is a first step.

We will also launch Nova Scotia's first domestic violence court program, as a pilot in Sydney. We expect the court to begin hearing cases in late Spring. I am very hopeful about the impact this specialized court will have on domestic violence and stopping the cycle of abuse.

Domestic violence is but one issue that requires strong collaboration between government and community.

This year we will establish a Crime Prevention Advisory Circle, with representatives from across government and our justice and community partners. This Advisory Circle will be tasked to seek out opportunities to collaborate in new ways and to build our crime-prevention capacity.

Successful community partnership models are already at work.

Communities are building strong, cohesive crime-prevention capacity.

We will continue to support that growth at the local level through funding and other means.

We recently announced \$50,000 in annual crime prevention grants to help organizations and grass roots community groups who are working to make their communities safer.

Another great example of community partnership and crime prevention at the local level is the Lighthouses Program.

Our community-based Lighthouses partners help young people connect to their wider community.

Using a range of programs, such as teen centres, art projects, boat building, Lighthouses programs connect at-risk youth to positive adult mentors and positive social activity.

Last year, Nova Scotia funded 20 programs and connected with twelve hundred (1200) at-risk youth.

The province is committed to continuing the Lighthouses program and is looking at ways to engage other partners and develop a stable four-year funding model for the Program.

We will also bring together resources in housing, health, education, employment, recreation, and social services to ensure the successful reintegration of offenders into our communities.

The research is clear: if we lower the chance of reoffending, we enhance community safety.

That requires a planned, co-ordinated and supportive integration of offenders back into the community.

It starts with a coordinated case plan in custody, and continues with a well-structured transition back into the community.

Key to a successful reintegration is the person's family and community.

That's why we will collaborate with government and community partners to pilot a new parenting program to target vulnerable and high-risk populations, in both institutions and community settings.

In addition, we are working actively with our community partners to develop a pilot of what is termed a "Housing First" approach. It supports reintegration through safe, affordable housing and social supports.

These evidence-led, community-linked initiatives rely on the strong partnerships we have built and will continue to build across Nova Scotia.

A critical element in any prevention framework is the ability to effectively and swiftly enforce our laws and ensure our streets and communities are safe on a daily basis. We will look for opportunities to police smarter, more effectively and more efficiently.

What do I mean by that?

While we look for new ways to respond to crime, address root causes and focus on prevention, we will also strengthen our response to crime so we can be proactive in our enforcement efforts.

It is a fact that a small proportion of offenders are responsible for most criminal activity.

Research suggests that 15% of alleged offenders are responsible for 58% of all alleged crime in Canada.

For this reason, it makes sense to focus efforts on active offenders.

When governments, police agencies and communities work together strategically, with a focus on the small group of offenders responsible for the majority of crime, we can prevent crime more effectively.

To help move to that model, this year we will introduce regional police crime analysts.

These experts will look at criminal trends and patterns.

Police can then develop priorities, focus resources and target their activities.

We will also host an important knowledge exchange about gun violence, in collaboration with Halifax Regional Police, the RCMP and community leaders in the Halifax region.

In May, we will all come together to explore innovative ways to build a community-wide responses to gun violence. Joining us for the discussion will be representatives from the internationally acclaimed Ceasefire Chicago Program.

The program says it uses science and street outreach to track where violence is heating up and stop it.

And it works. Ceasefire has reduced gun violence in inner city Chicago neighbourhoods by over 65%.

The premise of the program is that violence is like a disease that can be prevented and controlled.

It will certainly be very interesting to see whether any of the techniques and learnings from this program can be applied here in Halifax.

I also want to point out that we will continue to support policing at both the local and provincial level.

We invest forty-seven million dollars (\$47-million) in direct policing every year. This includes the Additional Officer Program which puts 176 additional resources in communities across the province. It also includes centralized services like major crime investigators and emergency response units.

I would like to talk now about restorative approaches.

Nova Scotia's Restorative Justice Program is the most comprehensive of its kind in Canada, and, indeed, is one of the most well-developed in the world. We intend to continue our international leadership in the field.

The restorative process sets out to hold the offender accountable, offers victims both a voice and support, and creates an important leadership role for the community.

Underlying this approach is a focus on the relationships between people, and the need to guide behaviour change. These restorative approaches are now being used widely across Europe and North America outside the criminal justice context, as a way to manage conflict and build citizenship.

We are seeing tremendous outcomes in schools.

Essentially, this is about targeting our most vulnerable groups -- youth.

In our own province, we have found that restorative practices when used in schools improve attendance, reduce behavioural problems and improve the time teachers spend on classroom learning as opposed to discipline issues.

The facts are clear. When students can stay in school, their life opportunities improve and they are less likely to offend.

A recent one day snapshot of our adult correctional institutions found 62% of adult offenders had not finished high school.

In the general population, this figure is about 19%

We have been piloting restorative practices at several schools in our province since 2008 with very positive results. Yarmouth Consolidated Memorial High School reported an over 80 per cent reduction in suspensions. Shelburne Regional High School reported a shift from 65 lost teaching days per year due to classroom disruptions to only 14 lost days.

These results speak for themselves.

Over the next year, we will explore options for expanding this approach to more schools.

We will start building the tools and resources that school administrators will need to start using a restorative approach with their students, teachers and school communities.

This is really about helping our youth change their behaviour before they ever get involved in criminal activity.

I am very excited about this work, and I know my colleague, Minister of Education Ramona Jennex, shares my excitement.

I also want to compliment Minister Jennex on her leadership with respect to issues surrounding cyber-bullying.

We are also excited about an important new partnership with Dalhousie University and Halifax Regional Police to pilot the nation's first comprehensive restorative program for university students.

The Dalhousie Restorative Response Program will be an alternative for students who come in conflict with the law and for student conduct issues on campus and in the surrounding community.

If successful, we will consider expansion to other post-secondary institutions in the province.

These are just some of the actions we will pursue in 2012-13. In your packages you should find a summary of our plans for the coming year.

But this is only a start.

Our intention is to be flexible and adaptable so that we can respond to feedback from our stakeholders and partners.

We want our actions and investments to reflect your experience, knowledge and ideas.

We are also committed to working smarter and ensuring our investments have maximum impact. So we will be tracking their effectiveness through a number of measures, including how they change the provincial crime rate, enhance intelligence based policing and reduce the severity of crime.

The coming year is going to be an exciting one.

I am very much looking forward to working with our partners as we build on existing crime prevention investments and introduce new measures

And I will close by saying this to our partners: You are doing important work, very important work, out on the front-lines of crime prevention.

We will continue to look for ways to support you as you help us make Nova Scotia safe and secure.

Thank you.