



Spirit – Girls Identifying Real Life Solutions

Introduction

Spirit – Girls Identifying Real Life Solutions (Spirit) is an innovative school-based prevention program for girls from grades 7 to 9 at risk of delinquency and contact with the criminal justice system. Public Safety Canada's National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) provided funding for the implementation of *Spirit* from September, 2008 to August, 2011. The project was implemented by Calgary Family Services in partnership with schools and community partners.

NCPC defines innovative as prevention programs that test new approaches, theories and interventions with at-risk populations. They are based on a strong theoretical framework that links the proposed intervention to the risk factor(s), target population and desired outcomes. Innovative projects verify changes through limited research design and require causal confirmation using appropriate experimental techniques. These programs are recognized and encouraged with the caution that they be carefully evaluated.¹

Spirit was delivered in four Calgary, Alberta junior high schools and assisted 246 girls, aged 11 to 15 years who had limited resources, difficult personal issues and experienced a high number of risk factors.

Goals and Objectives

The overarching goals of the *Spirit* project were to:

1. Increase the participants' resiliency so they were less likely to enter or continue risky, negative or criminal behaviours that would have harmful consequences for them as individuals and the wider community;

2. Help the participants connect or re-connect with their schools, their communities, peers, families and positive role models.

Participants

Spirit was implemented in four junior high schools from 12 communities with below average incomes, highly transient populations, high crime rates, high proportion of single parent led homes, low to extremely low education levels in persons over 20, and high levels of child welfare involvement.

All girls in the schools were welcome to apply and participation was based on a self-referral process. Those who indicated interest completed a Risk and Protective Factors Scale and an Intake and Assessment Questionnaire and final decisions for admission were made by the *Spirit* staff in consultation with school representatives. Consideration was given to ensure a balance of issues and risk levels in the groups.

Final candidates demonstrated two or more of the environmental high risk indicators. In addition, candidates also had to experience two or more behavioural/lifestyle conditions proven to be precursors to more serious delinquency or crime such as use of illegal drugs, aggressive behaviour, bullying, poor attachment to school, crimes against property and/or persons, and threatening others.

The majority of the *Spirit* girls were between 12 and 15 (87%) years old, with a smaller number of girls starting at age 11 (13%). Approximately 13% of participants were of Aboriginal heritage and 8% were from immigrant families (the project goal for each category was 10%).

¹ Promising and Model Crime Prevention Programs – Volume I, 2008
– <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/prmsng-mdl-vlm1/index-eng.aspx>



Key Elements of the Program

Each cohort of participants was part of the program for 30 months, starting in the winter session of Grade 7 (January) and finishing at the end of Grade 9.

Programming was provided on a weekly basis throughout the summer months for the Grade 7 and 8 groups.

The core elements of the programs included:

- Education and information sessions to increase participants' knowledge of issues and resources related to healthy lifestyles and reduction of risky behaviours;
- Recreation and volunteer opportunities to demonstrate and practice healthy life-skills, improve relationships with peers, increase or maintain involvement in positive activities and increase participants' awareness of leisure opportunities and resources;
- Mentorship with female role models to increase involvement with positive peer groups, enhance self-esteem and improve school performance;
- Family support to develop mutually supportive relationships, reduce conflicts and encourage family stability and security;
- Individual and outreach support and counselling; and
- Graduation recognition to provide encouragement and support for *Spirit* graduates to complete high school and seek further education.

Staffing

Four full time *Spirit* facilitators were hired. Each facilitator had responsibility for the delivery of the program in one school.

The facilitators had a relevant academic background in Social Work and previous experience working with at-risk youth, including group facilitation experience, engagement and ethical decision making skills. They all received additional training from Calgary Family Services and other partners in the community.

In addition to the facilitators, the project received administrative support from a program manager and supervisor at Calgary Family Services. Calgary Family Services also provided free clinical counselling for *Spirit* participants and their families when it was required.

Partnerships

Schools:

As a school-based project, fully engaged school partners were essential for the success of the program.

Each of the schools provided a representative for the *Spirit* Project Advisory Committee, which also included community partner representatives.

School personnel also supported the referral process, negotiated solutions with *Spirit* staff for problems that arose, provided adequate space within the school for the program (including computer labs for the participants to complete surveys), and allowed the students to attend the program during school hours.

Community:

Community partners provided educational sessions and services for participants as required.

Recreation Partners provided reduced rates or free entrance for activities such as swimming, camps, events and access to community recreation centres and resources.

Financial:

The United Way, Education Matters and the Burns Memorial Foundation supported the program financially.

Results

Overall, *Spirit* participants were positively impacted by the program:

- 84% of *Spirit* participants graduating from the program had resiliency and developmental strength scores in the "resilient" or "very resilient" range. 38% had increased their developmental strengths from their baseline scores, and 29% of clients previously considered vulnerable had moved into the resilient category.
- External resiliency outcomes showed that participants improved their peer and family relationships, their ability to stay in school, and their ability to avoid risky behaviours. During program duration, none of the participants experienced an early pregnancy, nor had any new criminal charges leading to conviction.
- 91% of *Spirit* girls increased their knowledge scores on key topics such as healthy lifestyles, positive sexuality and peer relationships, staying out of trouble with the law, and the effects of substance use/abuse.
- In terms of dealing with bullying and conflict, data showed a 23% reduction in the number of girls

- experiencing recent incidents of bullying. Furthermore, at post test, girls were 67% less likely to resort to physical fighting in response to a bullying incident and more likely to use a verbal response.
- 10% of the *Spirit* participants and their families accessed the optional free counselling service offered at Calgary Family Services (this rate was the initial target). On the other hand, a four session Parenting Workshop developed as a supplement support to the program for parents was attended by only 1% of the families.
- To enable participation, it was critical to meet basic needs of the participants including provision of food, transportation, hygiene supplies and support to help access appropriate housing.
- The overall positive impact of the program on the larger school community was better than expected. Many non-*Spirit* students and teachers accessed the *Spirit* facilitator for support and advice.
- All the components of the program were highly valued by the participants. *Spirit* staff and school partners had a strong shared vision for the project and reported being very satisfied with program implementation and delivery processes.

Lessons Learned

- In a school environment, programming is subject to interruptions due to school holidays, professional days, and other school priority events. Communication and cooperation with school partners was essential to ensuring strong program support to maintain the momentum of the program and balance the girls' participation in it with their school commitments.
- Providing dedicated homework support for the participants was successful in ensuring school work was kept up to date.
- Providing ongoing training and support for *Spirit* staff helped them remain committed for the full three year period. This commitment reduced the staff turn over and is important for program success.
- Engaging consistently with families was not easy, due to their work schedules, busy lives, family issues (family breakdowns, substance abuse, violence, etc.) language and other cultural barriers or transient nature. Several families moved out of the community before their daughters completed the program. Some initiatives such as the parenting workshop were undertaken, but were not as successful as hoped.

- Implementing the program requires professionally trained, clinical staff. It is best suited to a social service agency experienced with serving similar clients. This increases access to other necessary in-house resources/ supports such as basic needs, parenting, mental health and counselling support.
- Obtaining matched pre/post data for evaluation outcome analysis was limited due to the long term nature of the program and reporting timelines. Since the program operated over a three year period, only one set of Grade 9 post test data was available for reporting within the NCPC reporting timelines.
- Differing data collection methods appeared to provide conflicting responses in some areas. More one-to-one and small group support to encourage more careful reflection in answering questions is recommended. Data collection works better after solid relationships are established with the facilitator.
- A database should also be developed to facilitate future data collection and program research.

The *Spirit* pilot project demonstrated the value and benefit of the program for the Calgary participants. This gender specific, school-based approach focused on girls in early adolescence could be replicated in other schools and communities.

Cost

Total cost to implement the pilot *Spirit* project was \$1,279,684 (73% funded by the NCPC).

Sustainability

The United Way of Calgary, a partner involved in the pilot project, provided funding to continue *Spirit* in three of the four schools where it was implemented under the NCPC funding. The United Way provided funding for full program costs for one year and then provided funding for half the on-going costs for a second year, given the results of the program, and that it fits with their initiative "All In" for Youth².

Calgary Family Services matched the United Way funding to keep the program running and is actively seeking funding to continue the program at its current levels.

² To know more about this initiative, go to: <http://www.calgaryunitedway.org/main/major-giving/special-projects/all-in-for-youth>

Sponsoring Organization Contact Information

Calgary Family Services

200, 1000 – 8th Avenue SW
Calgary, AB T2P 3M7

Phone: 403-269-9888

For more information, please contact the *Spirit* Program
Supervisor: 403-205-5228

<http://www.calgaryfamily.org/>

*For more information or to receive a copy of the final
evaluation report, please contact the National Crime
Prevention Centre by e-mail at prevention@ps-sp.gc.ca*

*If you wish to register for the NCPC mailing list to receive
information from the Centre, please visit the subscription page
at: <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/cp/ml/index-eng.aspx>*