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REPORT RECOMMENDS COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO CHRONIC OFFENDERS, STREET CRIME

VANCOUVER – The creation of a new community court that would provide ‘wrap-around’ services to address the social and health issues of chronic offenders in downtown Vancouver is one of the key recommendations of a report on street crime released by members of Justice Review Task Force today.

“We recognize there is a growing problem with street crime, particularly within urban centres,” said Donald Brenner, Chief Justice of the B.C. Supreme Court and a member of the Justice Review Task Force. “Right now, a relatively small number of chronic offenders are responsible for the majority of property crime, putting significant demand on the criminal justice system. A community court would be able to impose a broad range of responses – everything from jail sentences to rehabilitation or a combination with an emphasis on repaying the community for harm done. ‘Wrap-around’ social and health supports, would help us tackle the underlying causes of crime – alcohol dependency, drug addiction and mental illness – so that we can break the cycle of chronic offenders.”

In a community court, the judge is provided with a system of better information about the offender, so he or she can better tell which offenders must go to jail to protect the public, and which offenders may benefit from rehabilitation – leading to longer term protection of the public. In order to be considered for rehabilitation, the offender must plead guilty and make a clear choice to deal with their addiction or mental health issues. The offender must also meet the criteria established by the Community Health and Justice Committee.

“The report of the Street Crime Working Group reflects a significant collaboration between Justice, Health, and the City of Vancouver,” said Chief Judge Hugh Stansfield of the Provincial Court of B.C. “The Provincial Court believes it is reasonable to anticipate that a Community Court - with its commitment to the problem-solving approach, community involvement, and justice being swift and visible - could be effective in addressing the challenging problems associated with chronic offenders and, in the process, enhance public confidence in the administration of criminal justice.”

The Street Crime Working Group report also recommends:

- a stronger relationship between Vancouver Coastal Health and the justice system, recognizing most chronic repeat property criminals are drug addicted or mentally ill.

- a stronger connection between the public and the criminal justice system. The report asks for a role for the public in the criminal justice system through the creation of Community Justice Advisory Board and annual Street Crime Plan.
- an examination of what services are available, whether they're being efficiently used, and whether there are gaps in services that need to be addressed. This is in response to concerns about the lack of co-ordination among social service providers in downtown Vancouver.

“A one size fits all justice system has not worked,” said Dave Jones, Director of Crime Prevention Services at the Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association. “At the street crime level, real justice addresses human needs on an individual basis, poses the question why are you here, provides resources as needed, allows for restorative payback to the community and, where people become chronic offenders, imposes meaningful sanctions. This is not a soft approach. Offenders must repay the community, work to get well and stop committing crimes. The alternative to those who don't engage in this process is progressively more serious jail time.”

“The recommendations made in the report, if enacted, will help youth with drug and alcohol addictions to deal with those challenges, so that they have a real chance to rebuild their lives and become contributing members of society,” said Sandy Cooke, Executive Director of Covenant House. “I have worked for years with marginalized youth and I know first hand the challenges they face. Too many of them end up becoming repeat offenders, going from jail to the street, then back to jail again. We urge the provincial government to put in place the funding and an implementation plan to make these recommendations a reality, so our young people can build a healthy future within our community while making our streets safer for all Vancouver residents.”

The Justice Review Task Force was established on the initiative of the Law Society of British Columbia in March 2002. The Task Force consists of representatives of the judiciary of the Provincial and B.C. Supreme Courts, the Law Society, the Canadian Bar Association and the Ministry of Attorney General. The purpose of the Task Force is to identify potential reform initiatives that may help make the justice system more responsive, accessible and cost-effective.

The task force struck the Street Crime Working Group in March 2004 to develop strategies to target street crime and disorderly behaviour in downtown Vancouver. The working group conducted two public forums, as well as extensive consultation with all levels of the justice system, businesses, community groups and social service agencies. The working group also did a data analysis and a review of approaches undertaken in other jurisdictions.

The final report of the Street Crime Working Group is available on the Justice Reform Task Force website: www.bcjusticereview.org. The recommendations will be presented to the public at the Roundhouse Community Centre from 7:00 to 9:00 pm on Wednesday, October 18, 2005.

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