
Program cut

Province quietly ends alternative justice program; focusing on corrections instead

*BY DAVE BARTLETT
THE TELEGRAM*

Kelvin Parsons says the Williams government has thrown 15 years of work on an adult alternative justice program out the window, without any explanation as to why.

According to the Liberal Justice critic, four people in the Department of Justice working on the program were either laid off or moved to new jobs on Jan. 4, the first day back to work after Christmas.

On Jan. 8, Justice Minister Felix Collins submitted a revised strategic plan for the department with the House of Assembly as per the Transparency and Accountability Act.

The only difference between the revised plan and the original — filed by former minister Jerome Kennedy in June 2008 — is that all mention of an adult alternative justice program has been stripped.

The cover letter on the revised plan reads that “during the past few months, the department has made changes regarding its strategic approach to adult alternative justice. This has made it necessary to adjust the 2008-11 Strategic Plan.

[\(To page No A2\)](#)

Years of work wasted, Parsons says

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We cannot determine any reason why 15 years of work has gone down the tubes. Liberal MHA Kelvin Parsons

[\(From page No A1\)](#)

Focus on corrections reform

Government sneaky: Parsons

Parsons said the province began work on an alternative or restorative justice programs in 1995. It was the only province at the time that didn't have one and that's still the case, according to Parsons.



Kelvin Parsons

He said in 2007 the government started to fund the program to "put some flesh on the bones," and set up an advisory committee which included staff from the department, legal aid, public prosecutions, the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary and victim services.

" We cannot determine any reason why 15 years of work has gone down the tubes," Parsons told The Telegram this

week.

Parsons points out the move is ironic because in late November a national conference was held in St. John's on restorative justice, less than two months before the "axe fell."

Parsons said the purpose of restorative or alternative justice is to take a lot of people out of the court system.

He said putting an offender in non-serious case on a legal "treadmill" and tying up lawyers and judges for months and years doesn't do anything for the victim.

"Instead of starting on that treadmill and that time-consuming, wasteful approach let's have an approach where by we can take the offender, have him or her recognize the improprieties of what they did, have them deal directly, in some cases with the victim and work it out together ... outside of the court process," Parsons said.

He said restorative justice can save the province money and help prevent clogging up the courts with minor cases. Parsons also accused the government of being sneaky because it killed the program with little fanfare.

But the minister told The Telegram Friday afternoon that he's been trying to reach Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones, without success, to let her know the adult alternative justice program has been bumped for other priorities.

"No doubt the program has merit. We never, ever denied that the program doesn't have merit," Collins said. But he said the department needs to concentrate on reforms in corrections.

Collins said many services which a restorative justice program would offer are already available in one form or another in the province, such as through small claims, family or mental health court.

Still, he said, the program may be resurrected down the road.

Collins also said only two employees were affected by the decision to scrap the program, as the other positions were never filled.

He said at least one of the workers may be able to bump someone for another job within the public service.