

***Rev. Norm Johnston Youth Services Inc.-  
Historical Perspective***

The Ministry of Community & Social Services invited members of the community to attend a public meeting in Smiths Falls on October 16, 1986 to discuss the establishment of an open custody home for young offenders to serve Lanark, Leeds & Grenville Counties.

On March 5, 1987 ten members formed the Board of Directors. At this time, Executive Officers were elected. Mike Ross, a Smiths Falls lawyer, was hired to begin processing the time consuming application for incorporation, and the Board with consensus agreed to become registered under the name "Reverend Norm Johnston Youth Residence". (Reverend Norm Johnston was the founder of the "Operation Go Home" program for runaway adolescents.)

Initially, in the process of searching for and selecting a home, the Board deliberated at length over the issue of a rural versus urban location. Integration within the urban environment and accessibility to community services became the key factors in the Board's decision to search for a location within the proximity of Smiths Falls.

On April 2, 1987 the Search Committee plus other members reported having toured a suitable facility in Smiths Falls which was used for a "group home" for the developmentally handicapped, in a very good location. The Board, along with Dave Sewell from the Ministry, visited this location at 55 George Street on April 16 to seek their impressions of the prospective home. Individuals came away with mixed feelings over the good and bad points of the site and no decision was reached regarding the suitability of the location.

Also, during this time, given the erroneous local radio reports that the Board had chosen this site for an open custody home, the Directors felt compelled to plan holding public meetings in the near future to address public concerns.

A most significant meeting occurred on April 30, 1987 and David Sewell from the Ministry was invited to add his support. Approximately 60 members of the general public attended, with the majority opposing the establishment of an open custody home in Smiths Falls. Members of the audience generally felt that a home of this nature should not be located within any residential area in Smiths Falls and that the government should produce statistics to prove that this type of home works. The fear of the public, especially seniors, was acknowledged, especially since the community hadn't recovered from the effects of a rape and murder of a 16 year old resident which occurred during the previous year.

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On May 14, 1987 the Board decided against the George Street site as a possible location because the home was too large and would require extensive renovations. Also, a Program Committee was formed to develop a proposal for the youth residence.

The Search Committee continued to seek out potential sites and several homes were toured. More open custody homes were visited, such as Ventures in Gananoque and Betty Laronde's home in Gloucester. With Smiths Falls Town Council deciding to review and possibly amend their zoning by-laws regarding group homes, the Board decided to monitor developments.

The Program committee prepared a treatment model incorporating a multi-disciplinary approach to correctional and rehabilitative programming, which included work from Dr. Ron Kimberly, Dr. Robert Ross, and Dr. Stanton E. Samenow. This program would be largely based on the Cognitive Model (Ross & Fabiano 1981) which suggests that the offender needs training in cognitive skills, not therapy.

On July 23, 1987, Rev. Norm Johnston Youth Residence became a legal entity by officially becoming incorporated. The Board of Directors could now handle their own finances, receive Ministry funding, and thus have purchasing power.

In January 1988, the Search Committee visited 11 Elmsley Street North in Smiths Falls, and on February 11 the Board unanimously approved an offer to purchase the property. Members went door-to-door in the neighbourhood to talk about the proposed program and drop off information kits, immediately after an offer was made to the owner of the property.

Also, Mr. Russ Elliot, then Executive Director of the agency, initiated discussion regarding the addition of the Community Service Order, Transportation Escort, and Alternative Measures programs becoming consolidated under the Rev. Norm Johnston Board. The Ministry fully supported this direction and members were keen on expanding services under this program.

The owner of the property accepted the Board's bid to purchase, although several conditions were attached to cover possible circumstances, i.e. major capital funding timelines, possible OMB hearing, etc.

On April 7, Mike Ross forwarded a re-zoning application to the Smiths Falls Town Hall. Upon hearing about the Board's application, a delegation of neighbours made a presentation to the Town Council after Mr. Ross made his submission. Council deferred the matter until the public had more opportunity to voice their support/concerns.

On May 4<sup>th</sup>, Town Council announced a public meeting would be held the next month (June 7<sup>th</sup>) to consider the proposed zoning by-law amendment. The Board spent the following

weeks leading up to the meeting mustering support and making preparations. Betty Laronde, owner of the young offenders home in Gloucester, and Ross Anderson from Sampson House in Gananoque agreed to attend on the Board's behalf. This was to support the research on young offender homes with the views of group home operators on property values and violence within the neighbourhoods. The Board focused on these two basic issues, while Mike Ross keyed on the town's official plan and zoning requirements. The chosen site was compatible with the town plan.

The public meeting was held at the Youth Centre Community Hall as planned. After hearing that Board's presentation, and several delegations from the community, the Town Council unanimously rejected the application.

At its July 21 meeting, the Board unanimously agreed to proceed with an Ontario Municipal Board hearing, and Mike Ross initiated proceedings during the following week.

The Board continued to communicate with the Mayor regarding compromises and alternatives; however he made it clear there would be no compromises as far as 11 Elmsley Street North was concerned.

The Board assumed responsibility for overseeing the Transportation Escort program on September 8, with the signing of a contract received from the Ministry of Community and Social Services.

On March 9, a CSO proposal was approved and sent to the Kingston area office. The Board officially became empowered to oversee this program. Also, the Board received its charitable status number at this time.

The Ontario Municipal Board hearing took place during March 20-23, at which time Paul Weber, a lawyer from Bell-Baker in Ottawa represented the Board. Bob Butterworth from Perth represented Town Council, which Mr. D.S. Colbourne represented the O.M.B. and chaired the hearing. Mr. Weber concentrated on the zoning question as it pertained to the wording of the town's by-laws. Also, various witnesses, statistics and studies were presented at the hearing. A decision was to be rendered within a couple of weeks. Russ Elliot made a presentation on the Board's behalf in which he addressed the need for the program, the number of young offenders locally, and why Smiths Falls was chosen.

On July 11, 1989 Mr. Colbourne rejected the Board's application and noted the following in his decision: the Board was proposing a group home, not an institution; the communication was poor between the Board and the town; a site plan was not submitted; and security concerns were not addressed adequately. The Board agreed to meet with Mr. Weber to determine the next step.

The Board unanimously agreed to change the name from "Rev. Norm Johnston Youth Residence Inc." to "Rev. Norm Johnston Youth Services Inc." on July 13, and a new name search was to be carried out by Mike Ross.

On September 14, Mr. Weber gave his opinion on the outcome of the hearing and in light of the decision, the Board decided not to pursue another appeal. This was largely because the Ministry of Community and Social Services did not feel that the Board had clear grounds for doing so, and there was some question as to whether the Ministry was fully prepared to continue offering support. Probation Fostercare seemed to be meeting some of the young offender needs in this area, and the Ministry seemed keen to support this direction. Members still felt the Search Committee should continue to look at other sites, possibly a parcel of land belonging to the Rideau Regional Centre.

On December 14, members met with Ms. Wynn Turner (Administrator of Rideau Regional Centre), to discuss the possibility of acquiring government property under her auspices. The Administrator was fully supportive of the idea and indicated that the land was available for use. She advised that there was a lot of red tape associated with inter-ministerial transfer of government property. Dave Sewell from the Ministry agreed to look into the matter.

Members of the Board expressed interest in taking over the Probation Fostercare program currently being operated by Mr. Bob Eaton on March 8, 1990. A delegation of members met with Mr. Eaton on April 26 to obtain an overview of the program. He noted that the Board would require a license from the Kingston area office in order to operate the program. The Directors agreed to further study this option.

On May 10, the Board learned from Mr. Sewell that the government site located near Rideau Regional Centre would not be available due to "unsettling state of change" at the institution. As a result, members felt group home development should be put on hold until the Ministry clearly demonstrated more support for the program. On July 24, a letter was received from the Ministry indicating group home development funding would be terminated. The Ministry of Community and Social Services was satisfied with the services of Probation Fostercare, Ventures and Sampson House at this time because of limited funding. However, it was suggested that the Board consider preparing a proposal to take over the Fostercare program in the near future. A letter was sent to Peter Burbidge on December 10 outlining details of a budget proposal.

To date, the Board serves as a focal point for young offender issues, while it continues to oversee the management of the Alternative Measures, Community Service Order and Transportation Escort programs in this area.