

The eReview provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage. Below please find information on provincially legislated forced detox programs for youth.



A measure of last resort: Forcing teens into drug detox

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Most parents would do anything to help their child. When a young person is addicted to drugs, parents can find themselves in the difficult role of anxious observer. Even dedicated parents can do all the right things and still witness their children spiral out of control. For some, the final act of tough love means kicking their child out of the family home.

But parents in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta have another option. The three provinces have relatively new legislation enacted in 2006, which grants parents the legal resources to send their children aged 12 to 17 to stabilization programs—even against the teen's will. The legislation is controversial. Some argue the law infringes on youth rights and others suggest that the length of time spent in detox is too short. [1] Supporters of the Alberta bill which legislates a five day detox program, had hoped the legislation would mandate 90 days of treatment. [2]

The law varies from province to province but the common directive provides parents and legal guardians with the option to seek a court enforced order to have a young person evaluated by a doctor or addiction specialist for the purpose of entering a stabilization program. Manitoba and Saskatchewan require the approval of a second doctor to enroll a young person. The Saskatchewan program involves five days of stabilization with the possibility of two renewals. The court order must be enacted within seven to 30 days depending on the province and the young person must be examined by a doctor or addiction specialist within 24 hours of apprehension before the program can proceed. Young people are notified of their right to an appeal process, and a legal advocate is provided for them should they choose to appeal.

As the legislation is relatively new, limited data is available for evaluation, but a November 2007 report released by the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission suggests that province has had some success. There were 618 admissions between July 1, 2006 and August 31, 2007. [3] The report claims that 85 percent of youth would recommend the program to friends in a similar situation, and the majority of parents were satisfied with the process too. [4] The program has reportedly had a positive affect on many families as more than half of the youth reported having an improved relationship with their family one month after discharge. [5]

The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, an Ottawa-based agency that specializes in addictions, suggests that research indicates forced or coerced detoxification programs can be effective, but that internal motivation rather than coercion maybe more effective in the long run at helping addicts from relapsing. [6] It is encouraging that 49 percent of young people in the Alberta program voluntarily continued treatment after the mandated detox program was completed. [7] Further independent evaluation will be beneficial in determining the long-term outcomes of these programs.

Perhaps it is no surprise that among the most vocal advocates for such legislation are parents who have experienced the anguish of watching a child struggle with addiction. Resorting to forced detox is a serious measure and one of last resort. However, for some teens, the measure is the beginning of the road to recovery. The early evaluation of the Alberta program is encouraging. In time, more data will be available to evaluate the long-term potential of these programs. In the meantime, these programs provide an option for desperate parents. Other provinces ought to follow the lead of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta so that more parents can have access to this last resort for a harrowing situation.

Endnotes:

1. Alberta bill allows parents force kids into detox (2005, April 17) CTV.ca retrieved December 4, 2007 from http://canadiancrc.com/articles/CTV_Alberta_parents_force_kids_detox_17APR05.htm
2. Parents forcing children into detox thanks to new act (2006, July 12) CBC News retrieved April 2, 2008 from <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/edmonton/story/2006/07/12/detox-act.html>
3. Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (2007, November 27) More than 600 families benefit from provincial drug treatment program. (media release) retrieved December 3, 2007 from http://www.aadac.com/documents/AADAC_PCHAD_FINAL_nov_2007.pdf
4. Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (2007) Evaluation of the services under the Protection of Children Abusing Drugs Act: Summary report. Edmonton, p. 24. retrieved December 3, 2007 from <http://www.aadac.com/documents/PChADSumReport-electronic.pdf>
5. Ibid., 23.
6. Mugford, R., Weekes, J. (2006) Mandatory and coerced treatment. Ottawa: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. Retrieved April 3, 2008 from <http://www.ccsa.ca/nr/rdonlyres/379bfb3a-02a1-49b3-9abb-ccef7ef9a811/0/ccsa0036482006.pdf>
7. Evaluation of the services, p.23.