

Wet'suwet'en Unlocking Aboriginal Justice Program

In response to the general dissatisfaction of the Western Judicial System – the Unlocking Aboriginal Justice Program proposal was developed and implemented in 1992. Cost shared by Department of Justice – Canada & Attorney General, British Columbia Government. The Wet'suwet'en Unlocking Aboriginal Justice Program (WUAJ) is a community-driven restorative justice project initiated and operated by members of the Wet'suwet'en First Nation.

The Wet'suwet'en territory is located in Northwest British Columbia, Canada. There are approximately 5000+ people living in the Wet'suwet'en Nation. The word *Wet'suwet'en*, means people of the lower drainage. The Wet'suwet'en Territories are defined by the Bulkley River drainage, the headwaters of the Fraser River drainage, and the Babine Lake drainage.

The process of the justice system we have is within the Traditional Territories and not a matter of creating a new system, but rather a matter of UNCOVERING our LAWS AND PRACTICES and having them RECOGNIZED.

In the Wet'suwet'en system, both the offender and the victim are drawn into the process. The Western justice system concentrates on the offender; usually the only victim involvement consists of providing a victim impact statement. In the Wet'suwet'en approach, decisions are made by consensus, aiming to restore balance and harmony in a fair, just way.

“Because our relationships and our kinship within the Wet'suwet'en nation, we're all connected to each other one way or another, and those are the people that are making the decisions. They know our strengths and weaknesses, and they know the dynamics of the families and what the issues are without trying to analyze it by justice system reports—criminal records, police reports and so on.” - Bonnie George, previous Program Coordinator

We have drawn from our own experiences through, work and continual learning. The Western Justice System has been very successful in standing in the way in our efforts in dealing with our problems. The ultimate responsibility for justice relies on all of us, as House members, as Wet'suwet'en.

All clients must be involved in the WUAJ program by voluntary consent and be willing to take responsibility for their actions. When all parties have accepted the referral, a house group meeting is scheduled for the development of adequate support and construction of a rehabilitation plan, or contract. All parties (offender, victim, clan and family) must reach a consensus as to the terms of the contract. An agreement for services is drawn and signed by all parties. Copies of the contract agreement of services are distributed to the members involved. If the participant is sentenced to serve a term of probation, the WUAJ justice worker supervises the court order. If the client re-offends, a house group meeting is scheduled to address the concerns, either by redesigning the plan of action or terminating the file. The

advisory board determines if the file is closed and referred back to the referring agency.

The contract may require that the offender participate in a culture camp. Culture camps educate children, youth and adults about Wet'suwet'en culture and traditions through guidance and counsel by elders and hereditary chiefs, including instruction in legends, songs and dancing, as well as traditional hunting and food preparation.

An important component of Wet'suwet'en justice is the denii ne'aas, or potlatch (feast), "a powerful traditional governing system for us," said George. At a potlatch, which is sometimes attended by hundreds of people, all the clans and chiefs come together and a public apology is made.

The Wet'suwet'en Unlocking Aboriginal Justice Program has gone over and above their call of duty by providing opportunity for change within the 8 communities they service. The WUAJ program has contributed to a number of programs with their intervention and prevention services ie. providing internet cyberbullying workshop for elementary to high school students, sexual abuse prevention to children ages 7 - 12, respectful relationship training to men charged with domestic abuse who were court ordered to attend and also various teen group sessions.

WUAJ offers a wide range of topics of discussion for youth including but not limited to; consequences of hosting parties with minors, Sexual intimacy with minors, self-esteem workshops, and signs of abuse in relationships.

"WUAJ means to achieve the alternative that will allow our traditional laws and practices as Aboriginal people to combine with the existing Canadian justice system." She stressed that Aboriginal laws and practices had been in use "for thousands and thousands of years before contact" with non-natives. "For the Aboriginal people, justice is part of our life," she said, adding, "Problems that occur are looked at holistically." - Bonnie George.

Staff:

Sherry McKinnon, Program Coordinator

Andrew Tom, Youth/Victim Justice Worker

For further information please contact the WUAJ program via email at wuaj@wetsuweten.com or telephone (250) 847-3630 we'd be happy to assist you.