

Exploring the Potential for Implementing Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeping at Volatile Public Confrontations in British Columbia

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Although Canadians may have a reputation for being polite and courteous, one only has to read the news headlines to see volatile public confrontations are becoming common. British Columbia is witnessing a number of high-profile conflicts with regards to construction of hydro-electric dams, pipelines and ports related to expansion of extractive industries. Environmental groups, farmers and ranchers, and First Nations in these areas deem these developments to be problematic for a variety of reasons. Confrontations have escalated in some locations and there is some concern that violence may occur. In addition, other communities in British Columbia have become increasingly concerned about gang proliferation and there is worry that current law enforcement strategies and resources are either insufficient or ineffective. These situations present an opportunity to address conflict in ways that prevent violence, and lead to stronger communities, in which conflict transformation professionals may play an important role.

Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeping (UCP) is an innovative practice that has demonstrated to reduce violence and build cultures of peace by de-escalating conflict in volatile situations. Informed by the key principles of nonviolence, non-partisanship and primacy of local actors, unarmed civilian peacekeepers engage in protective accompaniment, monitoring, relationship building and capacity development in communities and scenarios where the threat of violence is impacting civil society.

In 2016, The Mir Centre for Peace at Selkirk College implemented the first post-secondary program in UCP and had 9 graduates from 3 countries. Four of these graduates, with the assistance of the Taos Tag Grant program, were able to apply their newly learned practical skills to determine the community interest in UCP in two British Columbia communities: Fort St. John and Williams Lake. Both of these communities are small and remote, but are facing different issues. Fort St. John is the location for the proposed Site C hydro-electric dam and Williams Lake community members are concerned about violence due to rising gang activity. The goal of this study was to gain an understanding of communities' interest in exploring UCP as a potential strategy to reduce violence.

The methodology consisted mainly of focus groups and interviews with community stakeholders. The format of the interviews was semi-structured and ethics approval was granted through Selkirk College's Research Ethics Committee.

The results were compelling. Community members who were interviewed stated they felt a real sense of insecurity. In Fort St. John, members of groups opposed to the Site C dam reported feeling fear from private security company personnel hired by the provincial government. People acknowledged that presently, the conflict is primarily managed through the courts but they expressed interest in receiving external support to help ensure they would

not be threatened by intimidation during their struggle, and support so they can continue with their non-violent activism.

In Williams Lake, the UCP graduates learned a lot about how and why some local residents do not feel safe in their community, due to gang and drug violence. It was also evident, however, that the community is already doing a lot to address the issue. Interviewees voiced interest in the practice of UCP as a supplementary service, an additional skillset of members in their own community.

Overall, this study helped raise the awareness of UCP in communities experiencing violence or potential violence. While many activists would welcome such practices, as it would help them do their work with added protection, it would also help raise awareness of their struggle in a time when the issue seems to have been forgotten by people beyond their community. Some members of these two communities have since expressed interest in studying more about UCP and Selkirk College is looking into ways to continue to support violence reduction strategies through community education.