

# Manitoba to start new aboriginal justice service

WINNIPEG (CP) - A new \$1.2 million aboriginal justice service aimed at cutting high repeat-offender rates among Winnipeg natives will hear its first case later this month.

"Look who's in the system, in the jails and youth detention centres," said Kathy Mallett, project execu-

tive director. "I think this can make a heck of an impact."

Aboriginals make up 10 per cent of the population of Manitoba, but comprise more than 60 per cent of the prison population.

Under the new program, adult and young offenders will be diverted from the courts to an aboriginal-

run forum where they try to reconcile with their victims.

The service is completely voluntary, must have the co-operation of both the victim and the accused, and is unlikely to include violent crimes.

A similar alternative justice program is already in its sixth year in Toronto. Regina also has a program while Thunder Bay, Ont.,

started one last winter.

More than 160 community justice programs have been organized in remote Yukon communities, including justice committees, sentencing circles and peace-making circles.

"It's making a difference because people, who otherwise would be going to jail, meet with the community and start looking seriously

at their lives," said Jonathan Rudin, program director of Toronto's Aboriginal Legal Services.

More than 75 per cent of offenders entering the Toronto program are repeat offenders.

"Jail, in itself, did not deter them. Jail is not a deterrent," Rudin said. More than 40 per cent of the offenders in the Toronto program were adopted or spent their youth in foster care, Rudin said. About 60 per cent of offenders had no connection to the aboriginal community.

Mallett said the Winnipeg program could order the offender to do things like pay restitution, perform community service, or enter an aboriginal treatment program.

"I think we can make them feel more responsible," said Mallett.

The concept has received positive feedback from the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, the Manitoba Metis Federation and the Aboriginal Women's Collective, as well as from a recent assembly of native elders, Mallett said.

The aboriginal justice service will not hear cases involving domestic violence, weapons offences, sexual offences, child abuse or neglect, criminal harassment, or property offences over \$5,000.

It will hear cases such as property offences under \$5,000, communication for the purpose of prostitution, assault, break and enter, possession of stolen property, vandalism and mischief.