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Community Coordination to Improve Women's Safety

Context is everything

Twenty years ago, most Canadians thought that violence against women was uncommon, that it was a private matter and that women somehow brought the violence upon themselves. In the 1970s, wife assault was considered to be a domestic problem best handled outside the criminal justice system. Few arrests were made. Calls to the police resulted in inconsistent and mixed messages. Police response was to 'mediate or separate' by directing couples towards counselling or reconciliation services rather than dealing with the criminal nature of the assault. This approach was ineffective in reducing the incidence of violence against women in relationships and was inadequate in terms of protecting women.

In the 1980s, reforms began in several areas. Status of Women Canada directed officials at the three levels of government to provide an integrated response to the problem of wife assault. In 1982, the federal Department of the Solicitor General sent a directive to the executive of the Canadian Association of Chiefs

of Police. The directive was to encourage cooperation in ensuring that officers lay charges in all cases of wife assault in which there were reasonable and probable grounds to believe that an assault had taken place. Canada adopted a nationwide charging policy, recommending that police and other justice system personnel treat wife assault as a criminal offence.

While the 1970s saw a building of rape crisis centres and transition houses by grassroots feminists all across Canada, the early- to mid-1980s saw a strong network of victim support programs develop, also growing out of grassroots activity. Many of these victim support programs have a specialized component and focus solely on violence in relationships, sexual assaults and child sexual abuse to provide justice-related support to these victims of crime. In the late 1980s, BC's Ministry of Attorney General called for a provincial inquiry into the accessibility of the justice system. The inquiry panel heard testimony at community meetings from women who spoke about the level of violence in their lives and the need to improve the justice system.

But it is so often tragedies that bring about the greatest reforms. After the 1989 Montreal massacre in which 14 women were murdered, increased attention was paid to the issues of prevention and intervention and the need for more coordinated provincial and local responses to stop violence against women. It was clear that the problems associated with

The Caledon Institute is collaborating with the National Crime Prevention Centre's Community Mobilization Program to create the Crime Prevention series. The goal of this series is to document initiatives that build safe communities. The series seeks to enhance public awareness of and support for community-based partnerships on crime prevention through social development.

crimes of violence against women and implementation of policies could not be addressed by the justice system alone – partnerships with the community needed to be established.

In 1989, the Ministry of Attorney General established seven funded community coordination initiatives in both urban and rural communities in the province. These initiatives were modelled on the Victoria Wife Assault Coordination project, the Coordination Committee in London, Ontario, and the Duluth Minnesota Domestic Abuse Intervention program. The initiatives' mandates focus on:

- facilitating an effective community response to violence against women in relationships
- developing protocols for intervening agencies
- identifying systemic issues by reviewing problems related to specific cases
- maintaining a process for interagency sharing
- identifying failures in the flow of services to victims and sanctions on abusers
- reducing victim-blaming in the system.

In the early 1990s, both the federal and provincial governments continued to focus on the devastating impact of violence against women. In 1993, Statistics Canada released its nationwide survey, which showed that one out of eight women are assaulted by their partners, and that 48 percent of all

female homicides are committed by spouses or ex-spouses. The Ministry of Attorney General released the Violence Against Women in Relationships Policy and a Framework Document to Guide Community Coordination to Stop Violence Against Women.

Key to improving protection for women and implementing the Violence Against Women in Relationships policy is a coordinated response among justice system, health and social service agencies. This response must be grounded in the experiences of abused women and in the commitment to build safer communities for women and children. Currently in British Columbia, there are 30 Violence Against Women In Relationships Coordination Committees and a number of committees which are in the beginning stages of formation. Community coordination must not be seen as an end in itself but a means to achieve the goal of victim safety and offender accountability.

Our project: Moving Coordination Forward

The community and the Ministry of Attorney General recognize that a key component to improving women's safety is to strengthen the working relationships among the legal, health and social service systems with community-based organizations serving women. A key player in improving coordination



Members of the Planning Committee for the North Region 'Moving Coordination Forward' Forum.

between government and community is the BC Association of Specialized Victim Assistance and Counselling Programs. This Association is the provincial umbrella that works on behalf of BC's funded sexual assault centres, specialized victim assistance programs and other similar programs. It serves as a coordinating, centralized organization that supports individual agencies providing victim and survivor-related support and counselling services, and acts as a bridge between the programs and government.

In 1997, the Ministry of Attorney General brought together key players from community coordination committees, provincial associations serving transition houses and specialized victim assistance programs, and representatives from several government departments to address the issue of coordination. This meeting resulted in a provincial forum in 1998 with system and community representatives from all 30 local committees. One of the recommendations from this forum was to build and strengthen regional networks to improve the safety of women and their children.

A project was then conceived between the Ministry of Attorney General and the BC Association of Specialized Victim Assistance and Counselling Programs to focus on the development of six regional meetings across the province. This initiative, now in progress and jointly funded by the National Crime Prevention Centre and the BC Ministry of Attorney General, is bringing together representatives from coordination committees in each region to discuss emerging issues in the criminal and civil justice systems that affect women and to share strategies with each other.

The goals for the first forum, which took place in Prince George, March 1999, were as follows:

- To build victim safety as a central focus into institutional actions, procedures, policies and protocols.
- To advance interagency collaboration – building effective coordination committees whose central focus is on safety and advancing an understanding of the individual roles of coordination committee representatives.

- To initiate institutional responses pertinent to the unique demands of northern and rural communities.
- To discuss how government, justice system and advocacy groups can work together to improve implementation of the Violence Against Women In Relationships Policy and community protocols that address sexual assault and other forms of violence against women.

Committee members agree that they will embrace the notion of building victim safety into current practices and assessing dangers, challenges and solutions to coordinated community responses.

After consulting with each region's local coordinators to ascertain their perspective on the successes and the barriers their committees face in relation to women's safety, participants go back to their respective committees to get broader feedback on the same issues. They brainstorm what they would like to see at a regional meeting and ask for interested representatives from the justice system to volunteer to be part of the regional forum planning committees.

This process is proving to be quite important because involving people at the ground level encourages them (and the sector they represent) to be more committed to the outcome. Discussions are revealing that support is needed in three areas:

1. To provide information about the numerous changes in legislation, policy and practice of the various systems with which women who have been abused come into contact. Committee members need to know these changes to improve their local response.
2. To focus on women who are already discriminated against including Aboriginal women, women of colour, immigrant women, women with disabilities, older women, lesbians and low-income women. Geographic or cultural isolation can be a major barrier facing all of these women.
3. To help deal with differences of opinion and perspective at coordinating committee tables.

The need for support in these areas comes as no surprise, as we know historically that the ‘system’ has been slow to embrace a feminist perspective and approach in dealing with violence against women. The reality is that while all those involved are working towards the common goal of ensuring that women are safe, each player in the system has a unique responsibility and often comes to the table with a different philosophical framework.

The police have a mandate to protect the public, to determine if a crime took place and to investigate that crime; they are not there to provide victim support. The Crown is not the counsel for the abused woman, nor is it there to offer support to victims. The provincial Correction ministry’s responsibility is to supervise offenders and ensure that bail and release conditions are followed.

From the community perspective, specialized community-based victim services are concerned primarily with the physical safety and psychological well-being of abused women, and most often work from a women-centered or feminist perspective.

Various other players are often present at local coordination committees, such as health care representatives, child protection officers, members of the multicultural community, legal aid workers, survivors themselves and other social service representatives. Balancing the needs for information of an ever-changing legal landscape with the various personalities and philosophies poses a dynamic challenge for all the committees.

It is crucial to honour differences and build ‘buy in’ for the regional forums. We have developed a set of goals, operating principles to which we look for guidance and a list of program topic areas from which everyone can choose. We try to balance the regional planning team structure with both system and community-based representatives.

An ongoing process

Improving our community response to violence against women is an ongoing process. In

recent years, and as a result of several tragedies in British Columbia, the Ministry of Attorney General has ordered more in-depth training for police, Crown, probation and victim service workers; tougher screening and review processes for all gun permits, licences and certificate applications; and improved electronic linkages between jurisdictions. The Ministry also has created a Protection Order Registry, accessible seven days a week, and developed extensive educational campaigns on stopping violence against women.

Violence against women and children can no longer be tolerated. Keeping women safe and holding offenders accountable are the main priorities for the work being done in BC. We need to build on the foundations of political commitment, ensure effective implementation of policies, learn from the experiences of women who have been abused, debate and discuss our differences, and improve how we work together to support women and their children. It is through these actions that we can help strengthen communities’ ability to increase the safety of women and children.

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