

## **Safety from Domestic Violence: Using Evidence Based Practices to Keep Women Safe Edmonton Regional Consultation Summary**

### **Regional Consultation Overview**

- The consultation was held on June 7th, 2016 from 2:30 – 4:30 PM
- A total of 30 participants attended the consultation
- Participants represented:
  - A Safe Place
  - Action Coalition on Human Trafficking Alberta (ACT)
  - Alberta Justice and Solicitor General - Crown
  - Alberta Justice and Solicitor General - Research Planning Policy Development
  - Alberta Justice and Solicitor General - Victim's Services
  - Child Adolescent and Family Mental Health (CASA)
  - City of Edmonton
  - Edmonton Police Service
  - Edmonton Women's Shelter (WIN House)
  - Edmonton YWCA
  - Enoch Cree Nation
  - Families First
  - Human Services (Housing & Homeless)
  - LaSalle
  - Lurana Shelter Society
  - Men Edmonton (ME)
  - The Centre to End All Sexual Exploitation (CEASE)
  - The Today Centre
  - Wings of Providence

### **Common Themes**

#### **Relationships, Partnerships and Community Collaboration**

The participants emphasized that partnerships are essential for effective service delivery and to minimize service gaps. Edmonton is home to multiple victims' services which do not appear to be working as closely as the participants would like. They spoke to a need for a coordinated effort in Edmonton that will clearly outline the responsibilities of various community members and develop effective service integration processes, particularly at the front-line level. They particularly highlighted, as those needing improvement, connections with public health services, police, family and counselling services. The participants also identified several directions for action that will help the region establish an effective and sustainable collaborative:

- There is lack of resources in general and lack of predictability of future resource availability, suggesting a need for streamlining existing resources within and across agencies as well as advocating for additional funding;
- Existing protocols and policies guiding collaboration need to be shared with front-line staff in order to guide their work with services in the community;

- The training and resources needed to help develop and sustain collaboration should answer several important questions, including: Who will lead the collaboration? How can community work to address the multitude of unique issues for women and children fleeing domestic violence? How does the community prevent a collaborative breakdown?
- Once established, the collaborative could assist in sharing training and resources across broader community, related to education about domestic violence, its dynamics, and how to move to action when engaging with women who are being abused;
- Policing agencies need to be able to convey that they are a safe place for victims to access, to feel supported and to disclose;
- The effectiveness of the collaborative can be strengthened by including and networking with services for newcomer women and helping account for the complexities they have to manage in negotiating various systems and services;
- The complexity of the work requires that collaboration is developed at both the service/ community level as well as at the government level. The government should make community collaboration a priority, because without their support community work cannot be effective or efficient;
- There is a need to develop best practice standards guiding the treatment of women fleeing domestic violence. Such standards will increase community accountability and help guide evaluation of community impact.

### Women Centred Approach to Service Provision

The participants emphasized the need for women-centred approach to service provision, requiring service providers to be present and consistent in their work, ensuring that women do not feel dismissed and not heard or disempowered by continuously needing to prove that they are in danger. They described several elements of women-centred approach that they thought were essential for effective service provision:

- Services should place the woman in the centre and as an expert with her safety as a priority.
- The complexity of trauma experienced by women fleeing domestic violence means that services should be provided for as long as she needs them, which is often incongruent with the pressure agencies currently experience to move women through programs quickly;
- Use of a gender-based perspective is necessary to help women feel safe in accessing services and, ultimately, increase service effectiveness;
- Protecting woman's privacy is an important component of her safety and requires clear understanding among service providers regarding what information can and cannot be shared;
- Different types of violence including sexual violence and economic violence need to be considered in the current discourse to ensure that service provision reflects the power and control dynamics that characterize abusive relationships;
- Services should provide women with opportunities to develop her support networks and establish a sense of normalcy;
- Having a consistent service provider along with protocols linking different agencies and a co-location of services will help women navigate through the myriad of services and systems and ensure that she stays safe.

Women's shelters were described as successful in providing women-centred services as they place women in the centre when developing service plans, use innovative strategies, are flexible in working with newcomer women with precarious immigration status and offer harm reduction approaches. Transitional housing with supports were also described as important in providing woman-centred service and supplementary to the emergency shelters that are only able to house women for a relatively short period of time.

### Legal and Justice System Processes and Challenges

Participants highlighted three areas they perceived as primary challenges associated with legal and justice system processes:

- First, they spoke to current policies that guide safe exchange of children in supervised access and visitation cases, expressing a concern that a gender neutral perspective informing the basis of the exchange puts women and children at risk.
- Second, they identified the need for legal service providers to develop a better understanding about how the woman's readiness to leave the abusive relationship as well as the dynamics associated with staying, factor in her decision-making regarding her legal options.
- Third, they were concerned about current immigration/sponsorship laws and how they prevent newcomer women from seeking help and create extreme resource demands for settlement agencies that support these women.

### Culturally Sensitive and Inclusive Practices for Indigenous Women

Consultation participants discussed the importance of culturally sensitive and inclusive practices for Indigenous women, identifying several important requirements that must guide work with these women:

- Indigenous women's voices must be included in any collaborative and consultation processes;
- When working with Indigenous women service providers have to consider women's reality – their cultural experience and historical context (e.g., impact of intergenerational trauma);
- Developing partnerships between police and Indigenous communities can help strengthen relationships and build trust;
- It is imperative that champions be identified within on-reserve communities who can provide culturally competent services to women who live there;
- Service providers should review and possibly revise those rules and regulations that may be perceived as institutional and that can re-traumatize Indigenous women;
- On-reserve programs that showed promise and that had to be discontinued due to funding should be brought back and sustained;
- The community should use the recently released Truth and Reconciliation report to identify intentional and mindful ways to implement actions that enhance the safety of Indigenous women and their children.

### Culturally Sensitive and Inclusive Practices for Newcomer Women and Other Vulnerable Groups

The region has a large and diverse newcomer population. Newcomer women fleeing domestic violence may present with multifaceted and complex concerns all of which impact their ability to ask for help or receive the help that they need. The complexity of their needs also strains available resources and capacity that currently exists in the region – women may have special needs, mental health issues and large families; they are often living in poverty; and they may have language or cultural barriers. They are at significant risk of losing their community and support system when they leave.

The participants identified several practices that have proven to be effective in Edmonton when working with newcomer women:

- Recruiting diverse staff who can offer services in different languages as well as help build cultural competence amongst agency staff;
- Providing space for meditation and other cultural practices;
- Incorporating work with men to combat some of the challenges related to cultural norms;
- “A softer hand” to help newcomer women build trust with services that can offer protection;
- Developing policies that are reflective of the needs of different groups including the groups’ cultural and social positioning within the broader community and their cultural practices and beliefs.

### Other Vulnerable Groups

When discussing the needs of other vulnerable groups, the participants thought that LGBTQ community is often overlooked when community addresses the issue of domestic violence and that policies, definitions, service consistency, training and supports need to be developed to address this gap. Intersections of race and class also contribute to the complexity of working with vulnerable populations. In general, the participants thought that service provision is more effective in diverse and multicultural groups, rather than in single culture/background groups because they enhance learning and sharing opportunities.

### Service Gaps

There is a significant risk that women and children who do not fit within eligibility policies and/or definitions will fall through the cracks and will not receive the help they need to stay safe. The discussion identified several such considerations, including:

- Changing definitions for service eligibility to be more inclusive, especially when determining who should be considered to be a victim of violence;
- Addressing a gap for services that exists for older women between the ages of 50 and 63 years;
- Addressing a gap for services for younger adults who live with their parents but who are too old to access youth services;
- Build organizational capacity to work with children with behavioural problems that result from their exposure to domestic violence and address the need for consent from both parents;
- Streamline and reduce information required for intake and assessments; provide more training to help staff to gather information while providing support and building relationship;
- Update policies to clarify parameters for content and focus of service delivery.