

Safety from Domestic Violence: Using Evidence Based Practices to Keep Women Safe

Grande Prairie Regional Consultation Summary

Regional Consultation Overview

- The Grande Prairie Regional Consultation was held on July 28th from 11 AM to 3 PM
- A total of 22 participants attended the consultation
- Participants represented:
 - Alberta Health Services (Addictions)
 - Alberta Justice and Solicitor General (Grande Prairie & District Victim Services Unit)
 - Community Service Provider
 - Crossroads Resource Centre
 - Elders Caring Shelter Board
 - Grande Prairie RCMP
 - Domestic Violence Unity
 - High Prairie and Area Prevention of Family Violence Association
 - Human Service (Northwest Alberta Child & Family Services)
 - Native Counselling Services
 - Northern Haven Slave Lake Women's Shelters
 - Odyssey House
 - PACE Sexual Assault and Trauma Centre
 - Peace River Regional Women's Shelters
 - Sucker Creek Emergency Shelter

Common Themes

Relationships, Partnerships and Community Collaboration

Strengthening and building community collaboration and relationships was identified as one of the key priorities for Grand Prairie community members. Currently and primarily due to the lack of funding, most of the relationships in the community are informal, relying on expertise of individual agencies and agency personnel, challenging sustainability and consistency of collaborative efforts. Participants made the following suggestions towards improving collaborative work in the region:

- Training is needed to build knowledge about the agencies involved in the sector and to develop clarity with respect to the roles everyone plays, with a view to reducing territorial issues that often occur in collaborations;
- It is important to establish parameters that allow for frequent and continuous communication and relationship building, so that the community can work together on a systemic level;
- More opportunities are needed for multi-disciplinary case consultations, involving community partners as well as victims;
- Collaborative efforts need to include all levels of service including professionals, para-professionals as well as front-line service providers, because they all have important perspectives and information to contribute;
- Review of the legislation related to information sharing is an important step in improving communication, and enhancing the safety of women fleeing from domestic violence;

- Justice response can be substantially improved with partnership initiatives that include police and women serving organizations. Such partnerships allow the police to manage the enforcement-related issues, while community staff help address women's trauma and build rapport, thereby increasing the chances of positive engagement by women with the justice system.

Domestic Violence Education and Awareness

Reiterating again the need for service provider training, the participants thought that such training could help build awareness among service providers about the complexities of the situation that women face when fleeing domestic violence. In particular, they thought that it was important for service providers to understand the power and control dynamics inherent in domestic violence relationships, financial challenges associated with the experience of domestic violence, and how trauma that women experience complicates their ability to effectively navigate legal and justice systems and access services that are critical for keeping them safe.

Women Centred Approach to Service Provision

Participants spoke to the importance of individualized, flexible and long-term services when working with women fleeing domestic violence, reflecting the fact that women's healing trajectories can differ, that it may take more or less time for them to become ready to address issue, and that women may choose to return to the abusive relationships, even after receiving a considerable amount of support. The participants highlighted several important practices that help develop a personalized and flexible response:

- Developing strong relationships with women and ensuring that they feel supported provides the basis of establishing rapport and a working alliance;
- Working with women to understand where they are in terms of their stage of change and developing a service plan reflecting this;
- Developing safety plans to reflect all circumstances, including a possibility that the woman may return to the abuser and acknowledging the grief and loneliness associated with leaving the abusive partner;
- Making services available when the woman asks for help;
- Helping women understand their experience and the traumatizing impact of the abuse;
- Finding ways to streamline services, so that the woman only has to tell her story once, and feels heard and acknowledged.

Emotional support and flexibility are not sufficient to help women create the change they set for themselves. It is also important to empower women by helping them build capacity and independence, while inviting them to take the time they need to heal. On-going assessment of woman's needs and her level of readiness is necessary to inform service delivery and her gradual transition to independence. While ideal, this long-term approach is not always possible given the resources and commitments service providers have, creating significant service delivery pressures for them.

Wrap Around, Client Centred Services

The group discussion identified several important barriers for women's service access. There is lack of financial support or time to secure permanent housing and/or manage health issues that women may experience. This situation is made worse by limited funds that are available to help support the transition and to cover medical costs. If women are unhealthy and homeless, it is difficult for them to find employment to support themselves.

Isolation is another significant barrier for women transitioning to stability. Isolation is often a reality for women who are abused, and whose abusive partners gradually separate them from their sources of support. Women living on reserves or in rural and in remote areas are particularly vulnerable experiencing additional challenges in accessing child care, food, transportation and services in general.

Grande Prairie community is currently looking into ways to address those barriers. One suggestion includes a systems navigator that would help women learn about resources available to them and provide them with consistent access to different resources and services. Expanding options for affordable child care was another suggestion, so that women can use the time to access needed services, secure housing and/or find employment. Shelter staff also thought that having a qualified psychologist on site would help provide accessible mental health supports to women in shelter. For women managing addictions, Alberta Health Services plans to implement a mobile addiction service or an integrated addictions crisis team that women will be able to access outside of regular office hours.

Legal and Justice System Processes

The participants identified several challenges women experience when accessing the legal and justice system in Grande Prairie, including:

- Sentences imposed by the court system do not correspond with the abuse women have experienced, minimizing their experience and voice;
- Women in the midst of custody battles are often required to share custody with the abuser who may exhibit dangerous behaviours and pose a risk to both the woman and her children;
- There is a problem with dual charging, where the women who defend themselves from the abuse are charged as perpetrators of abuse. A better assessment and investigation process is needed that takes into account the history and impact of abuse.

Offender Treatment Programs

Community representatives voiced significant concerns about offender treatment services currently delivered in the region. In general, they were concerned that offender treatment programs do not reflect best practices and may actually place women in danger. Specifically:

- The programs require that women participate in treatment with their abuser, resulting in woman's perception that they deserved the abuse and jeopardizing her safety;
- Woman's perspective is not being taken into account when holding offender accountable;
- The programs' focus is on anger management rather than impact of the intersection of power, control and anger as the root causes of violence;
- Programs are ultimately teaching abusers at becoming better in their use of power and control to the detriment of their partners.

Directions for changes to the offender treatment programming included:

- Developing thorough assessment procedures to inform assignment of the offender to the appropriate treatment modality;
- Running separate groups for offenders and victims; and using proven practice approaches that include focus on victim safety, offender responsibility, and acknowledgement of power and control as root causes of violence;
- Making offenders aware of how their actions put their partners and children at risk, with breaking the cycle of abuse as the goal of treatment, ensuring that the children of the abusers do not become abusers themselves;
- Sharing information with the victims about how offender is doing in treatment and ensuring their safety;
- Implementing program evaluation to ensure that women are safer and that offender recidivism is reduced.

Culturally Sensitive and Inclusive Practices for Vulnerable Groups

Some discussion in this area highlighted the challenges associated with serving clients with complex needs, including language barriers, mental health issues and/physical disabilities. There appears to be a lack of services or capacity in the area to support these women.

With respect to culturally sensitive practices, one suggestion focused on supporting Indigenous women through the use of cultural ceremonies (e.g., talking circle), which may help them stay safe and provide opportunities for the women as well as service providers to understand the impact of intergenerational trauma.

Lack of Specialized Services for Children who have Experienced/Witnessed Domestic Violence

There is recognition in the region of the serious impact of trauma on children's brain development. This, coupled with the acknowledgement, both in best practices and legislation, that children are not bystanders and are significantly affected by the exposure to violence, requires that children's safety be addressed alongside their mother's safety.

Unfortunately, there appears to be a significant gap in the area in programming for children exposed to domestic violence. Such programming could be combined with community child care options that do exist in the community, but this would be complicated to implement, given the need for consistency and standards and barriers associated with parental consent.