

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

### **Regional Consultation Overview**

- The Lethbridge Regional Consultation was held on June 24th, 2016 from 8 AM to 12 PM
- A total of 12 participants attended the consultation
- Participants represented:
  - Domestic Violence Action Team (DVAT)
  - University of Lethbridge
  - Lethbridge Police Service (Major Crimes)
  - YWCA Harbour House
  - Alberta Health Services (Justice Initiative – Family Violence, Diversion and CTT)
  - Human Services (Family and Community)Standoff

### **Common Themes**

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

There is significant energy in this region and commitment to develop an effective, sustainable and long-lasting collaborative effort. Much work is already underway and its success is illustrated in how service providers connect with each other (e.g., to discuss high risk cases); how they acknowledge the value and importance of each others' work; and how all sectors – community, justice, government, as well as the newcomer and Indigenous communities – are present at the collaborative table. In the course of discussion, the participants shared some of the lessons they have learned as they worked to strengthen collaborative community initiatives:

- Active mentorship of new members is needed in order to support their effective engagement in the collaborative;
- Frequent and regular opportunities for networking and/or planning meetings are important to help community members share ideas and work together to implement new initiatives either in the community or within their own organizations;
- It is critical that members of the collaborative share the same vision and collective goals, and that each member has a responsibility to ensure that the collaborative achieves those goals;
- Individuals with decision-making power need to be part of the collaborative to support problem free implementation.

The participants highlighted two projects that, in their view, represent the emerging promising collaborative practices in region.

1. Domestic Violence Action Team (DVAT) provides community leadership and helps energize and organize the community to move towards a collective goal. New funding has been the key factor in the initiatives' success – it helped provide resources to formalize existing partnerships, build community involvement and contributed to overall sustainability of collaborative efforts in the sector.
2. The Sexual Violence Action Team (SVAT) similarly brings together community members to address the issue of sexual violence, however, it does not have access to resources in the same

way as DVAT. Lack of funding makes it challenging for SVAT to take on the leadership role and implement significant collaborative initiatives.

### Domestic Violence Education and Awareness

Participants spoke to the need for increased public awareness with respect to domestic violence and its impact. To that end, several projects are underway, engaging with local schools, sports teams and the community:

- University-led SHIFT project seeks to end domestic violence in schools by focusing on peer-led prevention and healthy relationships. Although challenges exist with integrating the project in the school curriculum, its evaluation demonstrated an improvement in girls' ability to identify inappropriate behaviour directed at them.
- The University has also struck a new committee to address gender based violence.
- Domestic violence service providers have made attempts to engage university sports teams; this has not always been successful however, and largely depended on the willingness of individuals involved with managing university athletics.
- YWCA's Wise Guys as Allies program works to engage men and boys in the broader community.

Next steps for the region with respect to public awareness included inviting school and university representatives to become members of the community collaborative; working to develop alternative approaches for domestic violence education in schools (e.g., e-portfolios); and, advocating for additional funding to support regular education and awareness programming.

### Wrap Around, Client Centred Services

Lethbridge community members talked about how women fleeing from domestic violence need wrap around services and supports, particularly with respect to addressing issues related to housing, mental health, child care, and poverty. However, multiple barriers exist for women in accessing these supports and the service providers that support them:

- In general, there are limited resources for community services, particularly to support issues experienced by the most vulnerable and marginalized women;
- Long waitlists, limited subsidies and insufficient income supports create significant barriers when women attempt to build an independent lifestyle;
- Families with multi-generational shelter or Child Welfare involvement are often afraid to ask for help and are difficult to reach;
- Issues related to confidentiality and information sharing create challenges for effective collaborative case management.

Participants proposed several solutions or potential actions that the region could consider to move forward in addressing these barriers and building community-based wrap-around service delivery:

- Linking clients with one consistent service provider to help them navigate the system and not have to repeatedly tell their story;

- Helping build clients' awareness about different services available in the community, so that they can access whatever services they need when they are ready for change (to this end, one organization in the community provides free chat rooms for women; however, it will soon be discontinued due to lack of funding);
- A mobile abuse support team that travels to rural areas has been proposed and attempts are underway to secure funding for this service;
- Better access and availability of clinical services are required, particularly for those women who are unable to maintain housing and stable lifestyle due to years of exposure to the trauma of domestic violence.

### Legal and Justice System Processes

Participants noted significant improvements in how legal and justice system processes work to support women's safety, highlighting, in particular, the work with the police and their openness to collaborate with local agencies. One direct result of this work was increased reporting and charging of the offenders, although participants acknowledged that this could also be interpreted as an increase in domestic violence and would have to be better measured and understood. Conversely, there were concerns that some women are reluctant to contact the police because of their previous experiences with partners being charged rather than the family being given access to assistance and mediation.

Lethbridge is also home to an innovative Domestic Violence Court, which, while overall an important and needed program, is associated with several issues and concerns.

- Lengthy court processing results in frustration for all parties and concerns that cases may not be allotted the time that they need for fair and comprehensive review;
- Court delays also result in consequences that may not appropriately reflect offender's need for treatment vs. incarceration;
- A diversion model is being considered in the region to work with low-risk offenders who are serious about rebuilding and restoring their families;
- There is a perception that, in some situations, offenders are not consistently supervised or held accountable for their actions.

Participants suggested that more work needed to be done in the region to establish a better functioning court process, possibly including a thorough assessment of the offenders so that proper sentencing and conditions can be put in place.

### Offender Treatment Programs

Participants expressed many different and sometimes conflicting opinions with respect to the effectiveness and access provided by the local offender treatment programs. First, there was a discussion as to whether offender treatment accounts for or reflects the circumstances of women who are abused. The participants saw as valuable and important the requirement that offenders consent to information exchange between treatment providers and allowing them to share critical information with the victims. On the other hand, they were concerned with increasing numbers of women who are charged with domestic violence offences, suggesting that better assessment and investigation is needed to identify instances when women act in self-defence.

Second, there were varied opinions with respect to the offender treatment service delivery model, particularly focusing on the fact that many offenders are mandated into treatment. Mandated clients receive 30 hours of treatment which includes sessions on partner safety and is based on core standards that can be tailored to the offender level of risk; and those that have mental illness may be eligible for a diversion program that includes three-month long therapy. Some thought that the model of mandating offenders into treatment was not working, raising questions about treatment effectiveness, the timeliness of referrals to treatment and ultimately, the desired impact on the offenders.

The participants identified several steps for action in this area, including opportunities to work with the whole family or provide couple counselling; putting in place offender treatment assessment and evaluation; and enhancing access to treatment, programming and counselling for victims.

### *Culturally Sensitive and Inclusive Practices for Indigenous Women and Their Children*

The issue of domestic violence was identified as a significant concern for on-reserve and Indigenous communities in the area. Two projects were highlighted as currently addressing this issue, both of them with leadership from the Indigenous communities and developed around cultural ceremonies, norms and traditions.

- In situations where the risk for abuse is low, Justice Circles bring the woman and their abuser together, avoiding the need to engage with the traditional court system, and being open to both on-reserve and off-reserve communities.
- Using relationships established between the women's shelter and on-reserve teachers and counsellors, Project Child Recovery helps support children by bridging shelter and on-reserve expertise with respect to impact of trauma and cultural understanding.

While describing these projects as promising, the participants also spoke about the issue of confidentiality and how it can impact women's involvement with programming. Specifically, they talked about women who may not feel safe remaining on reserve, or who would worry about being identified by service providers whom they know. Programs must make the utmost effort to ensure that their efforts to be culturally inclusive do not put clients in a vulnerable position.

### *Culturally Sensitive and Inclusive Practices for Vulnerable Groups*

Lethbridge has seen a significant influx of newcomers from different backgrounds, leading to much conversation and planning to ensure that services available to these groups are accessible and culturally appropriate. Participants spoke about several challenges associated with supporting newcomer communities in addressing the issue of domestic violence:

- It is challenging to find a translator outside of the woman's immediate community;
- Many newcomer women do not intend to leave the abusive relationship, possibly increasing risk to their safety;
- Newcomer women often share their homes with other family members, creating additional complexity for service delivery;

- Newcomer communities bring different cultural beliefs as well as attitudes about gender roles and domestic violence that may be difficult to address while attempting to keep women safe and in their communities.

Community efforts and plans to address these challenges are underway, with particular focus on:

- Helping newcomers understand Canadian laws with respect to domestic violence;
- Working with the newcomer leaders to help them acknowledge that domestic violence is occurring in their communities;
- Inviting experts from different cultural backgrounds to help develop cultural competency of service delivery staff.

The service providers achieved some success in this area as illustrated in an example of their work with the Syrian community to support influx of Syrian refugees into the community. A representative of the Syrian community became a member of the community collaborative and helped prepare the community by sharing some very valuable information with respect to Syrian culture and traditions and potential for domestic violence.

#### Other Vulnerable Groups

The participants also talked about the issue of domestic violence in LGBTQ communities, including lack of services for this community; hesitation of the LGBTQ individuals to access services given the possibility of being “outed”; and the need to raise awareness of and promote services that support LGBTQ clients experiencing domestic violence.

They also spoke to the lack of services for individuals involved in sex trade and those who are victims of trafficking. They emphasized that it is important to acknowledge the serious plight of these women and gather more information about how to help them most effectively.

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

Children are particularly vulnerable to trauma associated with exposure to domestic violence, but their voices are not heard and few services are available for them in the region. Services that are available come with long wait times, or are resource-poor as is the case with the local shelter’s Project Child Recovery. When children are able to access treatment, requirement that both parents consent may prevent children from receiving the treatment they need.