

Safety from Domestic Violence: Using Evidence Based Practices to Keep Women Safe St. Paul Regional Consultation Summary

Regional Consultation Overview

- The consultation was held on July 6th, 2016 from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm
- A total of 17 participants attended the consultation
- Participants represented:
 - Alberta Health Services (Primary Care Network)
 - Alberta Justice and Solicitor General (Probation)
 - Bonnyville Victim's Services
 - St. Paul Victim's Services
 - Blue Quills College
 - Dr. Margaret Savage Crisis Centre
 - Human Services (Alberta Works)
 - RCMP
 - St. Paul and District Crisis Association (Columbus House of Hope)
 - St. Paul Journal

Common Themes

Relationships, Partnerships and Community Collaboration

Participants identified several areas of strength for collaboration in the region, including the relationship among partners; availability of resources in the community earmarked towards addressing women's safety; and an open dialogue between justice partners, community agencies and the St. Paul women's shelter. It appears from the discussion that the agencies delivering services to those impacted by domestic violence share a common goal of keeping women safe but lack the resources to develop local leadership.

While some action planning is already underway, community members identified several directions that they think will contribute to moving forward with collaborative action and increase regional capacity for implementing effective initiatives aimed at keeping women safe. These directions include:

- Building a 'road map' which would support the collaborative efforts that are already in place; such a road map will help strengthen the existing partnerships and help achieve a more sustainable collective impact;
- Developing stronger leadership capacity in the region, incorporating a systems level approach; and ensuring consistent service delivery;
- Developing policies and procedures for building consistency, particularly within sectors that experience frequent turnover or as the community members referred to it, "building the long-lasting legacy". If the legacy is lost, the likelihood of creating more barriers and bigger gaps in enhancing women's safety increases;
- Developing an action plan, particularly to guide the work of the front line staff as they collaborate across sectors.



The group highlighted several organizations that they described as successful in bringing community together to address the issue of domestic violence in the region. For example, the local RCMP detachments have established strong and positive relationships in the community, by bringing together community members; developing a working relationship with the local women's shelter; and supporting the process of clarifying partners' roles in the community. According to the participants, more open discussion is required to further clarify gaps and develop workable collaborative solutions involving all community partners.

Alberta Works was identified as another organization that effectively contributes to regional partnerships by establishing relationships with agencies in the community; helping align policy and legislation; and helping reduce service barriers. As a result of this work, the region has been selected to pilot an Alberta Works project that will help women access an array of services in one building; address women's immediate needs; and provide several modalities of service access – over the phone, in person or on line.

The Lakeland Primary Care Network is another example of successful partnerships in the region; helping develop relationships with doctors and nurses across the region and ensuring victims receive the medical services they need.

Domestic Violence Education and Awareness

Participants thought that community awareness initiatives were needed to address the growing number of domestic violence incidents in the region. They thought that ideally, such initiatives would be directed at public systems (e.g., schools, hospitals and medical offices) and would speak to the rates of domestic violence, signs of domestic violence, domestic violence dynamics, how to help those facing domestic violence and how cultural gender norms can perpetuate domestic violence and violence against women in general.

Beyond building public awareness, participants also talked about enhancing awareness within the legal and justice systems (i.e., judges, police officers, lawyers and Crown) as well as within organizations that do not have a specific domestic violence mandate but that work women and children whose safety is at risk. Education and awareness efforts with these groups should focus on intersections between trauma and domestic violence and its impact on the women and children who are fleeing from it; specifically, how trauma impacts women mentally, emotionally, physiologically, and behaviourally.

Wrap Around, Client Centred Services

Participants described provision of wrap around, client centred services as one of the best practices that help enhance the safety of women and children. Such a program ensures active participation of women in developing their service plans and provides advocacy based on the choices women make for themselves. Client-centred services are also most effective when they are able to balance empowerment and choice with service provision and advocacy – knowing when to lend a hand and when to let go is crucial in encouraging women to take ownership of their transition. The Family Liaison program in St. Paul is an example of a client-centred program led by the local women's shelter where the worker assists women with navigating the justice system.

While housing options are currently lacking in the St. Paul region, transitional and affordable housing options were identified as essential and successful elements of wrap around services that keep women safe in St. Paul. Specifically, transitional housing provides the supports women need as they begin to



develop life skills, regularly engage in safety planning, heal from their trauma and build trust with those who want to help them. For women leaving transitional housing, affordable housing helps women navigate this very difficult period of transition and helps prevent their return to partner for financial reasons.

Coordination of Communication and Information Sharing

While participants talked about effective information sharing processes that have been established between RCMP and the women's shelter, they also identified several challenges associated with information sharing in the community. There is lack of clarity about what information can and cannot be shared about victims and/or offenders; recognition that provincial and federal guidelines can create barriers for information sharing; and confidentiality concerns for women who are accessing services in a small community and who may be personally known to service providers. Community members in the region would like to learn more about cross-system information sharing and how this process can be enhanced.

Offender Treatment Programs

Work is underway in the region towards developing effective offender treatment programming. Concurrent groups for offenders and victims conducted in separate locations but occurring at the same time is one model that is currently being tested. These groups educate the offender and victim about domestic violence and what healthy relationships look like, so that both parties can engage in conversation about what they individually learned in their respective groups. However, there are serious concerns with this model; women may feel responsible for the abuse they experience as well as potentially feeling less safe.

Participants emphasized the importance and the value of offender treatment in keeping women safe. However, such treatment is not easily accessible in the region. Current practice of prioritizing access for men who are mandated for treatment results in the lack of spaces for men who self-refer. Thorough readiness assessment that is used to inform treatment assignment, although essential, can create additional access barriers for voluntary clients. Addressing the issue of treatment access, the need for all treatment options to ensure offender accountability for their behaviour, and the need for after-care services to prevent offenders' relapse were gaps identified in the region.

Culturally Sensitive and Inclusive Practices for Indigenous Women

The participants spoke about a positive developing relationship between community agencies and surrounding Indigenous communities. They particularly emphasized how reconnecting women with their culture, through ceremonies or by engaging with elders, is both effective for Indigenous women and helps build understanding and empathy among service providers about unique challenges Indigenous peoples have navigating services and systems.

The region is also engaged in learning about intergenerational trauma and the history of Indigenous people. They describe as essential, when working with Indigenous women, services that take into account the trauma context; that make the connection for women with their spirituality and bloodlines; and that acknowledge the impact of residential school both on those who were directly affected as well as on their children and other family members.

Lack of resources for surrounding on-reserve communities is a significant problem, as is access to transportation and services outside of the community. This is further complicated by issues with confidentiality as they relate to personal relationships between service staff and clients that exist prior to service access.

Finally, while much work has been accomplished in the region in developing culturally sensitive and inclusive practices, the participants thought that more needed to be done in order to ensure that leadership positions in various service sectors represent regional diversity.

Racism and Stereotypes

Racism and stereotypes create challenges for women in accessing services – particularly for Indigenous women, and particularly when accessing housing or when reporting domestic violence incidents to RCMP. Participants believe that building community trust of RCMP, by positioning RCMP as a safe place for victims and children to turn to in times of crisis, is an important step towards enhancing women's safety in the region.

Barriers to Shelter and Housing Access

The region identified barriers for women attempting to secure shelter and housing. The barriers were as follows:

- Young women under the age of 18 without children continue to have difficulty accessing shelter services due to issues of consent and lack of mature adult status.
- Women who access shelters with both male and female children require several bedrooms, increasing the likelihood that they will be declined housing.
- Most people accessing the shelter are not from St. Paul so they will not be making connections with the local community, requiring advocacy with resources outside of the region.
- Access barriers related to transportation and particularly for those living outside of St. Paul limit women to telephone and often intermittent contact.