

CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

BRIEFING DOCUMENT

ISSUE: Establishment of a Domestic Violence Death Review Committee

A Domestic Violence Death Review Committee is needed in BC.

KEY POINTS

- In Vernon, in 1996, nine members of the Gakhal and Saran families were murdered by the estranged husband of Rajwar Gakhal. Since that time, a number of other highly publicized deaths or serious injuries have occurred in the context of domestic violence in BC. In 2002, Tammy Lynn Miller was killed by her husband in Victoria and Rosella Centis was stalked and killed by her estranged husband in Nanaimo. In 2003, Denise Purdy was murdered in Nanaimo. In 2004, Sherry Heron and her mother, Anna Adams were killed in Mission. In 2006, William Bethell and Seth Thornett died in Nanaimo, Navreet Waraich was murdered in Surrey and Manjit Panghali's body was found in Delta¹.
- In many of these cases, coroners or other investigators were able to point to what had "gone wrong" in the system tasked with responding to domestic violence. It is critical that we learn from the increasingly long list of tragic deaths related to domestic violence in BC, not through "laying blame" but through constructive analysis that can result in system-wide changes that could save lives. Any approach must take demographic factors into account, including particular factors affecting marginalized groups, and document trends.
- In his 2006 *BC Children and Youth Review*, Hon. Ted Hughes acknowledged the value of specialized units within the Coroner's Office in "Recommendation 10 - That the Child Death Review Unit within the Coroner's Service be continued in order to ensure ongoing improvements to child death investigations."
- Models exist in Ontario, in Santa Clara County, California, and elsewhere for Domestic Violence Death Review Committees (DVDRCs) that could be utilized in BC.
- The BC Institute Against Family Violence, in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General (MPSSG), conducted a research project on femicide in BC in 1997. A final report has been drafted but has not been released by MPSSG. This draft report evaluated the feasibility of establishing a DVDRC in BC and recommended that the province pilot a process to review domestic violence related deaths, based on an existing Canadian or US model and incorporating a coordinated community response. The general results were summarized in an article in the BCIFV newsletter at <http://www.bcifv.org/resources/newsletter/2003/fall/femicide.shtml>.

¹ The Waraich and Panghali cases are under investigation at the time of this writing; domestic violence is suspected.

THE CONTEXT

- In 2004, the BC Association of Specialized Victim Assistance and Counselling Programs participated in a consultation with a senior official from the BC Coroner's Office, staff from the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, and Al O'Mara, Chair of the Ontario Domestic Violence Death Review Committee. Discussion focused on the possibility of establishing a DVDRC for BC, based on the Ontario model. At that time, the BC Coroner's office did not see a need for such a committee. However, given concerns raised about recent events in Surrey/Delta, it is time to reconsider such a decision.
- The Ontario Domestic Violence Death Review Committee provides a model for a DVDRC for BC. It is a multi-disciplinary expert advisory committee that assists the Chief Coroner to investigate and review deaths that occur as result of domestic violence, in order to identify systemic issues and shortcomings and make recommendations to help prevent future deaths. It maintains a comprehensive database on domestic homicide offenders, victims and their circumstances; helps to identify trends, risk factors and patterns in order to recommend strategies for intervention and prevention; reports annually to increase public education; and conducts appropriate research.
- Another model for a DVDRC exists in Santa Clara County. In this approach, the Department of Justice asked the County's Domestic Violence Council to create a DVDRC to review all domestic violence related deaths, identify any gaps in the system and recommend appropriate systemic changes. The DVDRC includes all system-based and community-based organizations dealing with domestic violence victims, offenders and their children.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

- Establish a Domestic Violence Death Review Committee based on one of the models already in use in Canada or the US, including experts from community-based anti-violence organizations. Any model utilized must take account of factors particularly affecting marginalized groups, including especially cultural and immigration factors, and document demographic trends.

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References

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