



BC Association of
Specialized Victim
Assistance &
Counselling Programs



B.C./Yukon
Society of Transition
Houses



BC Institute
Against Family Violence

CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

BRIEFING DOCUMENT

ISSUE: Coordination of Responses to Violence Against Women

The complexity of responses to domestic and sexual violence in terms of legislation, policy, procedures, practices, standards and accountability measures for all involved ministries and agencies requires that specific attention and resources be focused on coordination and collaboration.

KEY POINTS

- The response to domestic and sexual violence is necessarily inter-sectoral, involving federal and provincial justice, health and social service ministries, the child protection ministry and community-based anti-violence agencies. Within each of these bodies, complex and often-changing legislation, policy, procedures, standards and accountability mechanisms guide interventions. In order to facilitate the most effective response possible to ensure safety for women and their children and justice and accountability for offenders, all players need to know the roles, responsibilities and constraints of the others and be prepared to work collaboratively.
- The essential nature of coordination, collaboration and consistent, timely information sharing in these cases has been emphasized in a number of coroner's reports and other enquiries following tragic deaths resulting from domestic violence. These include:
 - Josiah Wood's report to the RCMP following the "Vernon Massacre" (1998)
 - Inquest into the Deaths of Arlene May and Randy Joseph Iles (1998)
 - Judgement of Enquiry into the Death of Tammy Lynn Miller (2002)
 - Inquest into the death of Bryon Heron (deaths of Sherry Heron and Anna Adams) (2004)
 - Inquest into the deaths of William J. Bethell and Seth K. Thornett (August 2006)
- An essential feature of effective coordination, collaboration and information sharing at provincial and local levels is that these take time and sufficient staff. The assumption that service providers (whether working within police, ministries, or the community) can effectively coordinate with other players "off the corners of their desks" is not only erroneous, but potentially dangerous for women and their children. Workers who are already over-extended often face challenges in sharing information with others in a timely fashion, attending coordination meetings or case conferences, or consulting with each other on matters that cross-jurisdictional boundaries. Furthermore, with high staff turnover in many sectors, building and maintaining the strong working relationships that are essential to effective coordination and collaboration is challenging and time-consuming.
- The Community Coordination for Women's Safety (CCWS) Program, funded by the Ministry of Community Services (MCS), serves a crucial coordinating, problem solving and training role for those responding to domestic and sexual violence province-wide. A unique function served by

CCWS is its key role in bringing together senior representatives from police, relevant ministries and representatives of relevant community-based agencies on its Working Group to identify and negotiate solutions to systemic issues and challenges facing domestic and sexual violence interveners. This process has proven itself both efficient and cost-effective over many years of successful resolution of problems at both the local and provincial levels.

THE CONTEXT

- The central importance of coordinated responses to domestic and sexual violence is well documented, both in research and coroners' reports. In a BC study of factors that empowered women who were victims of violence and who used the justice system (Russell 2002), the importance of service providers working as coordinated teams rather than as isolated units was the theme that emerged most prominently from the findings. The report of the Ad Hoc Federal-Provincial-Territorial Working Group Reviewing Spousal Abuse Policies and Legislation (2003) devotes an entire section to coordinating mechanisms.
- Conflict between criminal and civil orders presents challenges for women who are victims of violence who are involved in child access matters. For example, orders regarding access to children may conflict with no-contact orders between offenders and victims. In other situations, orders for supervised access to children may be made in the absence of supervision facilities.
- Coordination is especially important in domestic violence cases where allegations of child abuse are made in the context of custody and access matters. When such allegations are made, in the interests of children's safety, thorough investigation is required, involving coordination with support services involved with the mother. If no support services are involved, the woman should be referred to community-based victim support services for help with safety planning.
- Coordination among justice system personnel, Legal Aid and community-based victim support services is also key in those cases where abusive men are using the courts as a mechanism of control in order to continue their abuse of women.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

- Government should consider establishing a senior inter-ministry violence against women coordinating body to be formally linked with the CCWS Provincial Working Group (the only provincial coordination committee which has, over the last five years, been instrumental in identifying and addressing province-wide issues related to violence against women), with authority to take action on recommendations from the CCWS Provincial Working Group to develop policy, programs, protocols and procedures to respond to concerns.
- Ministries, police, hospitals and community agencies should highlight the importance of coordination, and teach skills to support it, in all relevant training on violence against women.
- Senior management in all relevant ministries and all police forces should provide leadership by directing/encouraging staff to participate in relevant local coordination initiatives, as an important step towards creating a "culture of coordination" at both local and the provincial levels.
- MCS should maintain funding for CCWS, as a provincial program with a proven track record in coordination, issue identification and collaborative problem solving with respect to inter-sectoral responses to domestic and sexual violence across the province.

- Consideration should be given to funding for local coordination initiatives directed to the safety of women and children.
- A committee of criminal justice and family justice personnel and representatives of community-based victim support services should be struck to identify domestic and sexual violence areas where criminal and family justice issues intersect, to seek solutions to problems.
- A committee of criminal justice and family justice personnel, immigration officials and representatives of community-based immigrant-serving and anti-violence organizations should be struck to identify domestic and sexual violence areas where criminal and family justice issues and immigration and sponsorship issues overlap, to seek solutions to problems.

CONTACT: Tracy Porteous, Executive Director
 BC Association of Specialized Victim Assistance and Counselling Programs
 Telephone: 604-633-2506
 Email: porteous@endingviolence.org

Gisela Ruebsaat, Legal Analyst
 Community Coordination for Women's Safety Program
 BC Association of Specialized Victim Assistance and Counselling Programs
 Telephone: 250-592-3073
 Email: gisela2@horizon.bc.ca

Mary Clifford, Executive Director
 BC/Yukon Society of Transition Houses
 Telephone: 604-669-6943
 Email: maryclifford@bcysth.ca

Colleen Varcoe
 Board of Directors
 BC Institute Against Family Violence
 Telephone: 604-827-3121
 Email: resource@bcifv.org

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