



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: Effective Referral to Community-Based Victim Services

There is an urgent need to develop effective strategies to ensure that women who are victims of violence or at risk of violence are referred to community-based programs.

KEY POINTS

- One of the issues raised in the aftermath of a number of recent tragic domestic violence deaths in the South Asian community was the availability of services for abused women. However, the issue is not just one of available services but of ensuring that women know about and are referred to these specialized services.
- A number of other official responses to deaths resulting from domestic violence have found that the involvement of community-based services to support abused women is key to women's safety, especially where women are "reluctant" to proceed:
 - 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 Bruce Heron (deaths of Sherry Heron and Anna Adams) (2004)
 - Inquest into the deaths of William J. Bethell and Seth K. Thornett (August 2006)
- There are 62 specialized Community-Based Victim Service programs, with specially trained staff, funded by the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General (MPSSG) specifically to provide services (information, support, safety planning) to victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse and criminal harassment in communities with populations over 20,000.
- Three important sources of referral to these programs are police, Crown counsel and Police-Based Victim Services. Police-Based Victim Services are contractually required to refer these victims to these community-based programs.
- Historically, there have been two primary barriers to the effective referral of victims of power-based crimes to specialized, community-based victim service programs:
 - Lack of clarity about contractual obligations and lack of understanding of the importance of referral to Community-Based Victim Services

- Police and Crown concerns about privacy restrictions on releasing victims' names to community-based victim service programs so that they can contact victims
- Referral to community-based services is especially important when victims are "reluctant" to report to police or to proceed with charges, because staff are specially trained to support women in these situations.

THE CONTEXT

- Current RCMP and municipal police policy includes police referral of women to Community-Based Victim Services (whereby police simply inform a woman about Community-Based Victim Services), but does not specifically include *proactive* referrals (whereby police pass a woman's name on to the Community-Based Victim Service so that the agency can contact her to offer services).
- The Community Coordination for Women's Safety Program, funded by the Ministry of Community Services (MCS), is currently working in partnership with the RCMP E Division Operations Policy Unit and MPSSG's Victim Services and Crime Prevention Division to have RCMP operational policy clarified to mandate seamless referrals by RCMP to Community-Based Victim Services specializing in violence against women cases.
- In January 2007, Policing and Community Safety Branch of MPSSG issued a bulletin to all police departments/detachments and all victim services in BC reminding them of victim service programs' contractual obligations to refer victims of power-based crimes to Community-Based Victim Services "in an appropriate and timely manner," where they exist. The bulletin also directs detachment commanders to meet with their local Police-Based and Community-Based Victim Services to ensure that referral protocols are in place and policy is being followed. Policing and Community Safety Branch and Victim Services and Crime Prevention Division are to be commended for this key step.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

- Immediate steps should be taken to amend the *Victims of Crime Act* to locate victim service programs as part of the criminal justice response, to facilitate appropriate information-sharing under the consistent use provisions of the provincial *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* and the federal *Privacy Act*.
- Current efforts to have RCMP operational policy amended to mandate proactive referrals by RCMP directly to Community-Based Victim Services specializing in violence against women cases should be supported.
- Appropriate steps should be taken to mandate proactive referrals by municipal police to Community-Based Victim Services specializing in violence against women cases.
- Appropriate steps should be taken to mandate proactive referrals by Crown counsel to Community-Based Victim Services specializing in violence against women cases.

- Training¹ and educational resources for Police-Based and Community-Based Victim Services, police and Crown should emphasize the nature and importance of effective, proactive referrals to and coordination with specialized community-based victim service programs, and accurate interpretation of relevant privacy legislation. Training should be cross-sectoral wherever possible in order to familiarize each sector with the other, break down barriers and build strong working partnerships.

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¹ "Training" includes basic education, in-service training and advanced, specialized training, as appropriate.