

MEDIA RELEASE

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WOMEN'S GROUPS CALL FOR BETTER RESPONSES TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE ON INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE ELIMINATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

In the wake of several recent high profile cases of women and girls being murdered in the context of sexualized violence, the Central Okanagan Elizabeth Fry Society has issued a joint statement in partnership with the Ending Violence Association of BC calling for a better response to sexual assault in BC.

Gisele Duckham, a Princeton area woman, was found shot to death in her home with the prime suspect in her murder a high-risk sex offender who had been breaching conditions of his long term supervision order.

In Armstrong, a recent break in the murder investigation of Taylor Van Diest links the suspect in that case to an incident of sexual assault that was reported to police in Kelowna in 2005.

Also in Kelowna, there were no charges of sexual assault laid in connection with the trial of Neil Snelson for the murder of Jennifer Cusworth, though prosecutors told the court that Snelson beat Jennifer to death after he had abducted her as she walked home from a party, and sexually assaulted her.

Sexual violence is a key component in the many cases of missing and murdered women in Vancouver's Downtown East Side, the Highway of Tears, and across the entire province.

"For years we have been calling for a better response to sexual assault. In response, we've faced funding reductions, programs for survivors being dismantled, and the list of women and girls going missing or murdered keeps getting longer," said Aimee Thompson, Agency Coordinator for the Central Okanagan Elizabeth Fry Society. "BC needs to start taking this issue seriously. Address the link between the deaths of women and girls in the context of sexual assault."

Sexual assault is one of the most underreported crimes in Canada. Sex offences are less likely than any other violent offences to gain a conviction. The long term impact on the lives of women, girls, their families, and communities is devastating. Suicide or attempted suicide is common for survivors of rape.

The Ending Violence Association of BC has been calling for a provincial sexual assault cross-ministry policy for decades, similar to the one BC has for domestic violence. EVA BC's Executive Director, Tracy Porteous, stated "With BC facing such a high number of

murdered and missing women, and most of these we know or assume to be sexual violence deaths, we must act!” She went on to say that “in 2005, the RCMP outlined that if you are a sex offender in the province of BC right now, you have a 98.5% chance of getting away with it. Yet since this was uncovered, nothing has been done to address these issues.” Chronic waitlists are standard for most of BC’s specialized violence against women programs and not enough is being done to intervene upon early sex offender behavior before it escalates to deadly levels. “Serious sexual predators are not born,” stated Porteous, “but start by committing lower level sex offences which must be taken seriously and intervened upon.”

It is crucial that the justice, social service and health systems place a high priority on developing effective responses to sexual assault that run the gamut from sufficient funding for services and coordinated responses at the local level in BC communities, to comprehensive strategic planning and implementation of policy at the provincial level. Also key is enhanced specialized training for justice, health, social service and victim service workers on the dynamics of sexual assault, the needs of survivors, and best practices for investigation, prosecution, and intervention.

Solutions are needed at the highest levels of government to address sexual assault. Let’s learn from what is happening in other places such as Ontario, which recently went through its own process to develop a comprehensive sexual violence strategic plan for that province.

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