



**Stopping The Violence Counselling Programs
Preliminary Year End Report
2002-2003**

Submitted by

**BC Association of Specialized Victim Assistance and Counselling
Programs**

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INTRODUCTION

Stopping the Violence Counselling Programs

In 1992, after numerous years of assessment and the release of the report begun by Carol Gran, previous Minister of State for Women's Programs under the Socred government, the Ministry of Women's Equality established and funded the Stopping the Violence (STV) Counselling programs. There are eighty STV Counselling programs in BC, now funded by the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services (MCAWS). These programs provide crucial counselling services for women who have experienced sexual assault, violence in relationships, and/or childhood abuse.

The Role of the BC Association of Specialized Victim Assistance and Counselling Programs

In 1992, after three years of development, the BC Association of Specialized Victim Assistance and Counselling Programs (the Association) successfully arose from its founding General Meeting. Since then, the Association has established a provincial voice for the community based service providers, women, children and others who are victimized by violence in British Columbia. We have created a network of communication amongst funded STV Counselling programs, Sexual Assault/Woman Assault programs, and Community Based Victim Assistance programs in BC. We have also established linkages with government and policy makers to enhance the effectiveness of programs, policy and legislation in BC. We believe it is our role to actively work to strengthen the overall capacity of anti-violence programs in BC.

About this Report

This report provides an overview of some of the Association's work to support STV Counselling programs in 2002/2003. Part I outlines some of the support, information and training that the Association provides to programs on an ongoing basis. Part II provides a summary of issues raised on the regional teleconference calls for STV Counsellors that were coordinated by the Association in 2000/2001 and 2001/2002. Part III outlines the issues brought forward by STV Counsellors during the regional teleconference calls facilitated by the Association in March 2003. Another report describing the many projects and initiatives that the Association engages in on behalf of these programs is available each year at our Annual General Meeting.



PART I: ONGOING SUPPORT TO STV COUNSELLING PROGRAMS

Referrals, Information and Support

The Association responds daily to phone calls, faxes, and email from STV Counsellors across the province, and sometimes meets with counsellors in person when resources allow. We provide referrals, information and support for front line workers and administrators in STV Counselling programs. Programs seek information and support in a number of areas, including: records management; child protection; court-mandated counselling; the impact of trauma counselling on the counsellor (known as secondary victimization or vicarious traumatization); accreditation; policy development; program management; working conditions and facilitating links with various government ministries; as well as various training and counselling issues.

In addition, the Association provides direct support to STV Counselling programs in the following ways: our newsletter provides a forum for information sharing, support and education; a toll-free line for members increases access to support and information by removing the financial barrier of long-distance phone costs; regional teleconference calls supported by MCAWS provide support and networking opportunities; an Annual Training Forum reduces isolation and provides training to front line workers and administrators; and our web site provides 24-hour access to information and resources.

Through special projects and initiatives the Association also provides support to programs in the areas of research, policy and legal analysis, and resource development. For further information on the Association's initiatives, see our 2001/2002 Annual Report.

This year, among numerous other areas of support, the Association has provided essential support to STV Counselling programs following provincial government cutbacks that have reduced and/or eliminated many of the community services that assist survivors to leave abusive relationships and heal from the effects of abuse. Over the past year, the Association has worked closely with STV Counselling programs to monitor the impact of the cutbacks and, where possible, to assist programs to find ways to address survivors' needs. The Association has also helped STV Counselling programs to communicate to the government how crucial their programs, as well as other programs and services, are to survivors in their communities. Since the announcement of cutbacks began on January 17, 2002, the Association has been a continual and much needed source of information and support for STV Counselling programs around the province.

The impact of the cutbacks cannot be underestimated. This has had a huge effect on the mental health of clients and staff of STV Counselling programs, significantly raising levels of stress and secondary victimization, which were already of concern, as noted in our 2000/2001 and 2001/2002 reports.

Recommendation 1: The Association provides essential support to STV Counselling programs throughout the province. By providing annual core funding and specific project funding to the Association, the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services strengthens STV Counselling programs and improves the quality of services for survivors of violence. It also improves cross-Ministry, cross-discipline coordination and collaboration, which in turn increases



the safety of vulnerable victims. **In addition to providing this existing funding to the Association, it is recommended that the Ministry continue to consult regularly and work collaboratively with the Association regarding the needs and priorities of STV Counselling programs.**

Training

Stopping the Violence Feminist Counselling Core Training

In 1993 the Ministry of Women's Equality funded the development and implementation of core training for all STV Counsellors. Since that time, the Ministry of Women's Equality and the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services have contributed to the area of service and program development by providing training subsidies for new STV Counsellors to attend the core training. The Association has worked collaboratively with the Justice Institute of BC (with support from MCAWS) to develop and revise the curriculum and to coordinate, deliver and evaluate the training. The training is essential to provide counsellors who are newly employed in an STV Counselling program with the skills and information required to do their work.

The last core training was held in January, February and March of 2003. We understand that this will be the last core training funded by the Ministry and are deeply concerned about the potential impact this will have on maintaining quality service in the field and in supporting the work of STV Counselling programs. Core training is particularly important in light of the high turnover in STV Counselling programs (due to isolation, secondary victimization and low wages) and in the current economic and social climate, wherein the demands on STV Counsellors are higher than ever before.

The core training curriculum encourages maximum participation from trainees. It provides vital skills and information for STV Counsellors in the following areas:

- A) foundations and ethics of feminist counselling;
- B) intake and assessment;
- C) the healing process (including trauma and dissociation, empowerment, substance misuse issues, eating disorders, mental health issues);
- D) group work with survivors of violence;
- E) program management;
- F) records management;
- G) secondary victimization and self-care.

The curriculum has been continually revised since 1993 based on the changes that have occurred in the field and on the guidelines established through the STV Counselling program standards document. As well, the curriculum reflects the input and suggestions of many experienced STV Counsellors.

We gratefully acknowledge the funding that MCAWS has provided to allow the Association and the BC/Yukon Society of Transition Houses (BCYSTH) to explore alternative methods of training for STV Counsellors, Transition House Workers, and Children Who Witness Abuse Counsellors (collectively referred to as STV Counselling programs).

Recommendation 2: It is recommended that MCAWS review the report regarding training alternatives for STV Counselling programs when it is released this fall, and make it



priority to meet with the Association and BCYSTH to discuss implementation of the report's recommendations.

Annual Training Forum

On November 22-23, 2002, the Association held our Annual Training Forum titled "Anti-Violence Work in Transition: Building Resilience in Changing Times" in Vancouver. The forum, which focused on providing the information and skills to address the current realities of cutbacks and program and policy changes was a response to specialized training needs identified by STV Counsellors, Community Based Victim Assistance workers, and Sexual Assault/Woman Assault Counsellors in response to our annual training needs survey, as well as on our 2002 Regional Teleconference calls. Despite the many challenges and losses faced by anti-violence programs over the past year, this year's forum was an overwhelming success. A record breaking 150 front-line workers, advocates and administrators, and 35 presenters from across the province attended the forum. The vast majority of feedback about the training forum indicates that participants' needs and expectations were met or exceeded:

"This training changed my life. Inspired me, filled me, and pushed me where I needed."

"I will take this home and use it!"

Highlights of the forum:

Sharon McIvor's inspirational keynote address set the tone for the forum by reminding participants about the power of resilience. Sharon spoke about her personal life experiences as a Nlakpmux woman who has been involved in the Aboriginal women's movement for over two decades.

- Keynote addresses by Morgen Baldwin, Gail Edinger & Gisela Ruebsaat from the Community Coordination for Women's Safety Project highlighted the current challenges of coordinating responses to violence against women in rural communities that are now faced with having to do much more with even less.

Critical opportunity for front-line workers to gain new information and skills that are needed on the front line, while also networking, making connections, and sharing experiences and knowledge with one another.

- Workshops on a variety of emerging issues in anti-violence work, including new "full day" workshops.

Workshops addressed a range of topics including: dissociation and memory; supporting Aboriginal women; vicarious trauma; the new Crime Victim Assistance legislation; working with male survivors; supporting lesbian, queer, trans and intersex survivors; feminist supervision; proposed changes to the VAWIR policy; violence against women with mental health issues; civil and criminal legal issues; supporting children and youth in criminal trials; immigration issues; restorative justice; and a community-school partnership model to prevent violence against women and girls.

Each year, the Association distributes a survey to programs to gather data about training needs and accessibility issues. Northern, rural, and isolated programs in particular face barriers to



accessing training: the costs of travel, accommodation, and childcare in order to attend southern/urban training; and the need for training that addresses their particular needs which may differ from those of urban or southern programs. These barriers have been intensified by the provincial cutbacks, which have had an extremely serious impact on rural communities.

Since the cutbacks, we heard from STV Counsellors that their workloads have increased dramatically. Many counsellors are facing significant changes in their work: for example, needing to learn more about criminal and civil court in order to fully respond to clients' complex cases, and needing to provide more support for clients to meet basic needs such as housing, transportation and food. (In Ontario, after similar cuts to social and legal services, sexual assault counsellors reported responding to a high number of calls from women who needed food and shelter and whose other options for support had been cut.) Because of cuts to other services, counsellors face reduced access to information or referrals (for example, from Legal Aid offices).

Providing funds for training is a concrete way in which the Ministry can support the work of STV Counselling programs, and maintain quality service: training increases skills and knowledge, helps counsellors respond to changes in their caseload and reduces levels of secondary victimization, thus reducing staff turnover.

Recommendation 3: The Annual Training Forum provides an essential source of specialized training as well as a crucial opportunity for northern, isolated and rural programs to make connections with each other. Training is also significant in reducing the impact of secondary victimization. **It is recommended that the Ministry continue to provide training subsidies for STV Counsellors to attend an annual specialized training event. Subsidies would cover travel, accommodation, tuition and childcare.** (Having to approach the Ministry each year to request and justify the need for funding is not efficient and underestimates the importance of bringing workers together once per year).

STV Counsellor Support Plan

In response to the needs of STV Counsellors, the Association worked with the Ministry of Women's Equality in 1998 to develop and implement the STV Counsellor Support Plan, an invaluable resource. The Association provides support via phone, fax and email to STV Counsellors and administrators who are developing and administering Counsellor Support Plans. In our teleconference calls counsellors expressed their deep appreciation to the Ministry and the Association for the Counsellor Support Plan, noting its important role in reducing isolation and secondary victimization, and improving the quality of their work with clients.

Recommendation 4: **It is recommended that MCAWS continue to support STV Counselling Programs by maintaining funding for the STV Counsellor Support Plan.**



PART II: ISSUES RAISED ON PREVIOUS REGIONAL TELECONFERENCE CALLS (See 2000/2001 and 2002/2003 Reports)

2000/2001 Regional Teleconference Calls

- Appreciation for MCAWS/Association initiatives including teleconference calls, information sharing, core training, the fall training forum, and the STV Counsellor Support Plan
- Need for specialized and ongoing training to reduce isolation, provide networking opportunities and address issues that arise in STV Counselling work including: trauma and dissociation, substance use, mental health issues, developmental disabilities, diversity issues (racism, homophobia, and the need for improved skills for working with Aboriginal women and women with disabilities)
- Long wait lists and their impact on women who are not receiving services
- Pressure to offer support groups to address long wait lists and the barriers that exist within many communities (travel, child care, lack of physical space within agencies, difficulties finding appropriate co-facilitators and/or the funds to hire them, and ethical issues that arise in relation to attempting to substitute the one-to-one support that many clients need with group counselling)
- Lack of funding to meet the demand for STV Counselling services and frustration that the Ministry's budget has not increased since 1992 despite a dramatic increase in the demand for services
- Lack of time and resources for prevention, advocacy, community coordination, and policy development work despite having specialized skills and knowledge about violence against women that is desperately needed and not otherwise available in many communities
- Limited community resources and the negative impact this has on women survivors of abuse, their STV Counselling program, their agency and the community at large (gaps were identified in terms of legal advocacy, mental health, probation, drug/alcohol services, MCFD, counselling for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, services for women under 19 years old, children who witness abuse programs, and counselling for abusive men)
- Concerns that the Management Information System used by the Ministry to collect and analyze data does not accurately reflect the nature or amount of work being done in STV Counselling programs
- Concerns about MCFD including ongoing inappropriate court-mandated counselling referrals, unhelpful practices related to confidentiality and release of information, and the need for child protection workers to receive information and training regarding violence against women
- Extensive problems regarding custody and access, including ongoing abuse of women and children during court ordered access visits
- Lack of RCMP/police response to violence against women in relationships, and difficulties STV Counsellors face with RCMP/police in their role as advocates for abused women
- Lack of participation of justice system personnel on Violence Against Women In Relationships (VAWIR) coordination committees
- Accreditation challenges, including an increase in administrative work
- Working conditions in rural and isolated communities, including carrying several different contracts, having to travel to various communities – sometimes in difficult weather conditions, isolation, safety issues, and few resources for referral
- Need for resources to support basic organizational and policy development in some agencies
- Challenges regarding referrals from Community Living Programs, Mental Health, Police-Based Victim Services (PBVS) and Crown Victim Witness Services (CVWS)



- Issues facing women attending STV Counselling including: a history of childhood sexual abuse; severe and extensive trauma along with issues that result from this type and extent of violence (substance use, mental health issues, eating disorders and self-harming behaviour); the need for longer term counselling for severely traumatized women (e.g. ritual abuse, Dissociative Identity Disorder); an increase in substance use issues, women with developmental disabilities, and women who require support and advocacy in dealing with the legal system
- Barriers to accessing STV Counselling programs such as inability to travel between communities and difficulty obtaining child care, both of which are particularly problematic in rural areas
- Lack of funding for specialized or advanced training and how this negatively impacts their work as well as their own health
- Impact of work and working conditions for STV Counsellors including isolation, wage inequities, insufficient time off work, safety risks, and vicarious traumatization

2001/2002 Regional Teleconference Calls

- Appreciation for MCAWS/Association initiatives including teleconference calls, information sharing, core training, the fall training forum, and the STV Counsellor Support Plan
- Relief that funding for STV Counselling programs was not cut
- The need for a continuum of community services to allow survivors to access justice, remain safe, meet basic needs such as food and shelter, and begin to heal emotionally from the trauma they have experienced
- Concerns about the impact of cuts to Women's Centres on survivors, STV Counselling programs and communities
- Clients' awareness of their need for ongoing support and their concerns about the future of anti-violence programs
- Rise in depression and anxiety among women who have experienced abuse
- Increased poverty and increased levels of violence
- Cuts to social assistance which have led to women being unable to meet basic needs (food, clothing, shelter, transportation), returning to abusive relationships, and entering the sex trade
- Cuts to Bridging programs which have left women who wish to leave abusive relationships with even fewer options
- Cuts to Legal Aid and the consequent barriers for women requiring access to civil court
- Elimination of Crown Victim Witness Services (CVWS) and the fact that clients will no longer receive notification, court tours, or court orientation. CVWS also provided a key link between STV Counsellors and Crown that enabled STV Counsellors to access critical information on behalf of their clients
- Cuts to court-ordered assaultive men's treatment programs and the consequent risk to women and children's safety
- Concerns about the closure of courthouses in twenty four communities
- Cuts to healthcare, which will result in less access to critical services such as massage and physiotherapy which, in many cases, are key coping tools. STV Counsellors also expressed concerns about cuts to hospital-based emergency services such as sexual assault care, and the impact this will have for survivors
- Concerns about the fact that cuts to the Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD) are coinciding with cuts that put additional stress on families, such as cuts to Social Assistance and to respite services for parents with special needs children



- Lack of services for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse and lack of recognition that an analysis of violence against women must include all aspects of violence including child abuse and its impact on adult survivors
- Significant increase in demand for services and no increase in staffing levels
- Numerous grave concerns about the proposed Domestic Violence Prevention Act and the negative implications this would have for women who experience abuse
- Concerns about new restrictions on the number of sessions Mental Health workers can provide to clients and the subsequent increase in the number of women living with chronic and severe mental health issues who are seeking STV Counselling services
- Inappropriate referrals from Crown and chronic inappropriate referrals from MCFD
- Concerns regarding probation officers facilitating “Healthy Relationships” groups for assaultive men
- Intra-agency issues including lack of support for STV Counsellors within their agencies as a result of the STV Counselling Program Standards not yet being implemented
- Concerns about inappropriate outcome models/data collection methods being used to evaluate the efficacy of STV Counselling programs
- Client confidentiality and safety compromised by the absence of program standards in relation to sharing office space
- Creative strategies used by STV Counsellors to address some of the challenges that arise in their work
- Very high levels of work-related stress, exhaustion, and vicarious traumatization

Please refer to the Association’s 2000/2001 and 2001/2002 reports for recommendations made in response to issues raised by STV Counsellors on the teleconference calls.



PART III: 2003 REGIONAL TELECONFERENCE CALLS

Introduction

In March of 2003, the Association facilitated seven teleconference calls with STV Counsellors from across all regions in BC. MCAWS, through the use of Proxnet teleconference lines, generously supported these calls. These calls were in addition to the conference calls that some regions organize themselves to reduce isolation, provide support, and share information among STV Counsellors. Forty-four counsellors from thirty-two programs participated in the calls. Counsellors who were unable to participate at the time of their region's scheduled call participated in the call with another region. In addition to the communities listed below, numerous STV Counsellors who were unable to participate in the calls phoned the Association prior to or after the calls to communicate their issues and concerns.

The conference calls were two hours in length and were conducted using an open-ended agenda format. The purpose of the calls was to provide an opportunity for STV Counsellors to connect with each other and identify critical issues facing women survivors of violence and STV Counselling programs, and to strategize about ways to address these issues. Counsellors utilized this opportunity to identify gaps in policies, programs and systems response; to bring forward priorities for resource development work; to identify training needs; and to share information.

Although the Association greatly appreciates that the Ministry staff have been proactive in addressing some of the issues raised by STV Counsellors on previous teleconference calls, there is a need for immediate attention to all of the urgent issues outlined in our 2000/2001 and 2002/2003 reports. As yet, the majority of the recommendations have not been addressed. Consequently, counsellors are struggling with chronic issues and coping with a range of serious new challenges. The fact that there was not time for counsellors to reiterate the concerns still existing from previous years in no way detracts from the serious and ongoing nature of these issues.

On this year's teleconference calls, STV Counsellors in all regions of the province described feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, and devastated by the impact of the provincial government's cuts to services. They articulated a range of critical issues impacting survivors and emphasized that the emergence of these issues has dramatically altered the nature of STV Counselling. Counsellors highlighted emerging trends, strategized together to find creative solutions to new and chronic problems, reaffirmed their commitment to supporting women survivors of abuse, and offered each other support and encouragement.

The issues raised by STV Counsellors reflect four general themes:

- A) Appreciation for MCAWS/Association initiatives
- B) Serious impact of the provincial cuts
- C) Barriers to accessing the justice system
- D) STV Counsellors' creativity and commitment

Throughout the report these themes will be used to categorize the issues raised on the teleconference calls.



This report is a snapshot of the issues, based on over fourteen hours of discussions with STV Counsellors from all regions of the province. Although there was insufficient time for counsellors to articulate in depth analyses of every issue impacting survivors in their communities, the report provides a grounded overview of many of the current issues and, therefore, a sound basis for the Association's recommendations. Addressing these recommendations, even by way of acknowledgement, would demonstrate that MCAWS is committed to supporting victims of violence and the programs they fund to respond.

Participants

Region 1, Vancouver Island – March 6th, 2003
Powell River, Nanaimo, Victoria, Duncan, Courtenay, Tofino/Ucluelet

Region 2, Lower Mainland/Fraser Valley – March 3rd, 2003
North Vancouver, Vancouver, New Westminster, Surrey, Tri-Cities (Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam, Port Moody, Anmore and Belcarra), Sechelt, Richmond, Abbotsford

Region 3, Thompson/Okanagan – March 4th, 2003
Oliver/Keremeos, Clearwater, McBride

Region 4, East and West Kootenays – March 4th, 2003
Golden, Invermere, Kimberly, Nakusp, Nelson, Kaslo

Region 5, Cariboo – March 5th, 2003
Dawson Creek, Chetwynd, Grand Forks

Region 6, North Coast – March 5th, 2003
Masset, Smithers, Terrace, Sechelt

ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A) APPRECIATION FOR MCAWS/ASSOCIATION INITIATIVES

STV Counsellors in all regions expressed appreciation for the regional teleconference calls, information sharing, core training, the fall training forum, and the Counsellor Support Plan. Counsellors repeatedly stated that the regional teleconference calls provide a critical opportunity to connect with others doing similar work and a chance to connect with the Association. Counsellors requested that the conference calls facilitated by the Association continue. The calls are particularly important for programs that are in isolated regions or are staffed by counsellors who are new to anti-violence work. Many counsellors emphasized that these calls reduce their sense of isolation, provide much needed support, information, problem solving opportunities and inspiration:

“I’ve found this whole time very validating, that everyone’s facing similar issues.”

“All of you have given us so much support.”



"I thank you for a really good call."

"Thank you, it's been very informative for me, just starting out..."

Counsellors also expressed their appreciation for the work that the Association does on an ongoing basis and particularly since the cuts, in providing information and updates to STV Counselling programs. They noted their appreciation for the link the Association provides between their programs and the Ministry, and expressed tremendous appreciation toward the Ministry for saving STV Counselling programs from the chopping block. It was 20-30 years in the making that these counselling programs came to be – and programs began to take shape in the early 1990's. Participants were very encouraged by MCAWS' ongoing support of the vital resources that these programs provide to survivors of violence across the province. They expressed relief that Association funding from MCAWS had not been cut and voiced frustration and concerns about the fact that the Association has lost some of its core funding from the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General. Counsellors were concerned, in particular, about how this might affect the Association's capacity to provide their agencies and programs with crucial, time-sensitive information, and training opportunities.

Both the STV Feminist Counselling Core Training and the Fall Specialized Training Forum were highly praised by counsellors and cited as primary means by which they manage their vicarious trauma and work-related stress. As mentioned in Part I of this report, STV Counsellors also consider the Counsellor Support Plan to be a vital resource in their work. Training and networking opportunities, as well as the Counsellor Support Plan, were seen to be particularly crucial given the increased stress that STV Counsellors are experiencing as a result of the provincial government's cuts to services.

Recommendation 5: It is recommended that MCAWS continue to provide the Association with the use of Provnet Teleconference Services for the purpose of teleconference calls with STV Counsellors.

B) SERIOUS IMPACTS OF THE PROVINCIAL CUTS

It is important to note that STV Counsellors' main focus on the calls was the impact of the provincial government cutbacks. While some additional issues were raised, counsellors were most preoccupied by the cuts. This reflects the highly detrimental nature of the cuts on women's lives and the counsellors' concern for their clients' well being. Again, this should not be interpreted to mean that all of the issues raised in previous reports have been resolved.

1) Relief that STV Counselling Programs Were Preserved

Participants in the conference calls expressed gratitude and relief that the Ministry did not cut STV Counselling programs. Clients have also told counsellors that they are relieved. Programs expressed gratitude to the Association for continuing to raise their concerns with the Ministry. We in turn would like to express our appreciation that the Minister and her staff seem to understand the importance of these services to the health and safety of women and their children. We are grateful for the Ministry's ongoing willingness to meet with us and consider the



issues that we bring forward. We applaud the decision to maintain funding to STV Counselling programs.

Unfortunately, STV Counsellors' and clients' sense of relief was almost completely overshadowed by the devastating impact of the cuts to other services. STV Counsellors were deeply concerned about their clients, who are, in many cases, struggling to survive.

As emphasized by STV Counsellors on previous teleconference calls and again this year, a continuum of services is needed to address the safety and well being of survivors of violence and abuse; protect their legal rights; and support their access to the justice system. That is, violence affects all aspects of survivors' lives. While counselling is invaluable for many survivors, it is not enough on its own. Survivors need sufficient income, housing, health care, child care, legal services, systems liaison, and so on, in order to be able to leave an abusive partner, participate effectively in court processes, live independently after leaving the relationship, and enter into the counselling process.

Survivors of violence usually require the support and advocacy of a number of programs in order to access justice, maintain relative safety, meet basic needs such as food and shelter, and rebuild emotionally. STV Counselling programs work closely with, and often depend upon, other services. In some communities, various programs that serve survivors of violence work closely together in community coordination programs. In some cases, STV Counselling programs are housed in agencies that depend on a number of contracts—some of which have been cut—in order to cover the agency's overall budget, or are housed in Women's Centres, whose core funding will be eliminated.

STV Counsellors clearly articulated the multiple ways in which this essential continuum of services and community coordination of services and response systems is needed. As the following sections illustrate, survivors have been further harmed and as a result of addressing the essential needs of survivors, STV Counselling programs have been profoundly impacted. Coordination of violence against women response programs is critically needed at this time.

Recommendation 6: It is recommended that the Ministry fund a new provincial program that focuses on community coordination for women's safety. The Association has been administering a 2.5-year pilot project that has created a cost-effective way to support the enhancement of women's safety through community coordination. We recommend that the Ministry sit down with the Association to discuss how this infrastructure, built over the last 2.5 years, can be made into a provincial program. We would be pleased to provide the Ministry with more background detail and a proposal. (Please also see Section 9 - Loss of VAWIR Coordinators).

2) Cuts to Social Assistance

The severe cuts to Social Assistance and the eligibility changes continue to have a profoundly negative impact on recipients and particularly women survivors and their children. STV Counsellors emphasized that the women they work with are going hungry, are unable to afford safe shelter or transportation, and are experiencing increased anxiety and panic as a result. The Social Assistance cuts coupled with cuts to other essential support services such as child-care have left their clients feeling desperate and focused on simply surviving. The women's desperate circumstances are, in turn, impacting the nature of the work that STV Counsellors are



doing. The focus of counselling has shifted from recovery to survival. In many cases, counsellors are spending time searching for food and housing for the women that they see:

“The safety just isn’t there so you’re just not going to open up if you’re hungry.”

“Lots of women are coming in for appointments in crisis. Workers are trying to find food for them, housing.”

“The focus of counselling has shifted since the cuts because the reality of women is they’re on survival mode much more. They have a lot of anxiety, anxiety exacerbated by their daily living... The focus gets shifted to their immediate needs not recovery - the main focus of the [STV] mandate - one of them [immediate needs] is hunger. I’ve had women provide their food to their children. Their health is going down because of that. Their energy is going down because of that. It’s much more trying to find the resources to eat.”

“Younger women...there’s a lot of anxiety being created in them [as a result of the eligibility rules for Social Assistance]. They’re trying to juggle kids and home. It’s really not an effective way, it’s putting women in a crisis state.”

Though many women are in a crisis state as a result of the cuts and need support, STV Counsellors, particularly from rural communities, reported that the cuts to Social Assistance and cuts to child-care subsidies and spaces frequently results in women missing appointments or bringing their children to counselling sessions. Many women simply cannot afford to spend their very limited income on gas to get to the counselling session, or maintain a phone line, or cover child-care expenses:

“I’ve had clients had to cancel because they just don’t have the gas money.”

“Financially, they can’t afford a phone...It’s been quite challenging.”

“Women are having to put all other issues including child-care ahead of their counselling...they’re not getting into the deeper work.”

“It’s harder for people to arrange to come to groups...they miss appointments.”

“They’ve had funding [for child-care] taken away...they need to use the money for job search. Their resources are more limited.”

“If they have young kids they can’t get child care [subsidized]. They bring the kids to counselling.”

Disturbing yet not surprising, the cuts to Social Assistance are forcing women to remain in or return to unsafe situations. Many counsellors reported that without sufficient income for food and housing, women are staying with abusive partners. Several counsellors noted this was the case for older women who see few options for themselves. Other counsellors reported seeing more women going back to the sex trade. STV Counsellors also emphasized that because women are living in poverty, with the consequent lack of choices regarding housing, transportation and food sources, women are being harmed and are at an increased risk of



violence. Counsellors have shifted their focus in order to address the serious circumstances facing their clients:

“There’s an increase in women going back to the sex trade. They can’t live on Social Assistance.”

“It’s becoming incredibly difficult to support people moving ahead, not a lot of jobs, BC Benefits cut, legal services...it makes it difficult to leave a relationship.”

“I can give her skills to cope within the relationship.”

“Poverty’s really big. The housing that’s available is substandard, moldy. Women live in trailers...a lot of women hitch-hiking to services...our food bank lost its paid coordinator. I don’t get a lot of abuse [cases]. I believe it’s because they’re not leaving.”

“We’ve always had problems with women getting assaulted and harassed at the food bank.”

“It’s put women at more risk of violence, out there hitch-hiking...walking alone, not having affordable housing, living in a park, in a camper by yourself. It’s put women at risk. We’ve gone backwards about twenty years.”

Recommendation 7: It is recommended that MCAWS report to the Minister of Human Resources the serious hardship that cuts to Social Assistance create for all adult and child survivors of violence and abuse. It is recommended that this MCAWS report be made available to the Ministry Executive, Minister and Ministries of Children and Family Development and Public Safety and Solicitor General – Victim Services Division.

Recommendation 8: The current system of replacing closed Social Assistance offices with a 1-800 line for MHR clients to call is not working. The Association recommends that a meeting be convened with MCAWS, VSD, MHR and the Association to discuss the issues and create a solution.

3) Instability of Funding for the Bridging Employability Program

Bridging Programs have been an essential resource for many women who have experienced abuse and require specialized support and training to re-enter the work force. Through these programs women begin to regain their confidence, get referrals to STV Counselling programs and other relevant services, acquire necessary skills, make employer contacts, gain work experience, and much more. For many women, completing this program makes the difference between remaining in poverty or finding employment that will allow them to support themselves and their children. It is an essential service, particularly in light of the Social Assistance cuts and eligibility changes. STV Counsellors expressed concern about the provincial government’s plan to cut Bridging programs and the current instability of funding:

“It’s such a useful program...to not be stuck on Social Assistance...Now there’s one less place for people to get support to increase their employment skills.”



“Bridges cuts...they keep getting last minute little bits of funding...it’s really impacting their students...potential cuts are having such a negative effect on students...I’ve really seen that a lot.”

Recommendation 9: It is recommended that MCAWS be closely involved in the current RFP process for Bridging programs and stay connected to the programs in a support capacity.

4) Loss of Services

STV Counsellors raised serious concerns that the cuts and changes to Social Assistance coupled with the loss of other services such as Community Law Offices, MHR offices, Women’s Centres, Bridging programs, Specialized Victim Assistance programs¹ (SVAP) and Sexual Assault/Woman Assault² (SA/WA) programs and so on was forcing women to move, turning some rural communities into ghost towns. In other communities, the loss of services has transformed the nature of STV Counselling programs such that counsellors are spending their time hunting for services and addressing women’s multiple barriers, with implications for counselling and wait-lists:

“A lot of the women have left here. It’s quickly becoming a ghost town...There’s no services left...I won’t be surprised if in a year’s time there’s nothing left.”

“The Social Assistance office has closed...looking for five jobs a day has had a big impact...there’s a decline in the number of women coming to services. I’ve seen a lot move.”

“It becomes routine, the routine of hunting [for services]. Also the frustration...because the women are barely surviving...The kind of counselling I’m doing has changed. I’m not going as deep as I used to because the other stuff is encroaching.”

“As other services are cut there aren’t that many resources. We’re getting women with multiple barriers because there aren’t other services. The turnover is much slower because we have to address multiple issues. We have longer wait-lists.”

Recommendation 10: It is recommended that the Ministry be aware that survivors of abuse require a continuum of services in order to escape and heal from violence, and that the Minister of State for Women’s Equality encourage all ministries to closely monitor the impact of the cutbacks on women who have experienced abuse and their children. The Association’s Community Coordination for Women’s Safety Project has a working advisory committee made up of the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General – Corrections and Victim Services Divisions, RCMP ‘E’ Division, BC Chiefs of Police, criminal, family and immigration lawyers, the Justice Institute of BC, and representatives from First Nations, disabled women’s, and immigrant women’s organizations. We see this committee as the basis for a new inter-ministerial committee that could expand to include the Ministries of Human Resources and Attorney General, and other relevant provincial organizations.

^{1,2} These programs are now collectively known as Community Based Victim Assistance programs, and will be referred to as such throughout this report unless differentiation between program types is required.



5) Disability Benefits Review

Formerly part of Mental Health Services, Disability Benefits have been amalgamated into MHR's general welfare system. With this change, people with disabilities will no longer be able to maintain permanent disability status. This is an extremely serious concern because many disabilities are recurring or cyclical in nature. Without permanent disability status, people with disabilities will no longer be assured of a secure income.

STV Counsellors raised critical concerns about the Disability Benefits Review, which clients must complete in order to re-qualify for Disability Benefits. The review form is twenty pages long and requires people to reveal highly personal information. Despite the intimate knowledge, skills and relationship counsellors have with their clients, they are not seen by the Ministry as qualified to complete the form. Instead women are forced to try to find a willing registered social worker or doctor to complete much of the form.

Counsellors emphasized that many women do not have access to, or a trusting relationship with a doctor. In rural communities, women have even fewer choices of and less access to doctors. Additionally, many doctors, for a variety of reasons, are unwilling to spend the time required to complete these cumbersome forms. STV Counsellors stressed that the overall review process, the requirement to find and confide in a willing doctor, and the fear of getting cut off has increased women's anxiety, set them back in their recovery process, and impacted the kind of work that counsellors are doing:

"It puts a lot of trust issues in place...when doctors are not willing. For women to have to ask their medical doctor, they may have a fragile relationship with their doctor. The fear is, it'll push it over the edge and they won't get good medical attention."

"I've seen lots of anxiety because of the reassessment. They're afraid they're going to get cut off...it's difficult getting their doctor to do the paperwork. Some don't have doctors...occasionally they're asking for support letters."

"I'm concerned that the whole disability issue has become more important in women's lives than survivor issues. It's thrown a curve ball into our work."

"I've really noticed how far it sets them back in their process. Appointment after appointment is spent preparing themselves...it's been a lot of work."

"For many women on Disability there's just terror. 'Maybe they shouldn't be alive' [is what they're thinking]."

Several STV Counsellors from rural communities reported that their clients are experiencing increased anxiety because they are terrified they may get cut off and be forced to find a job. The counsellors stressed that the women, because of their disabilities, are unable to hold down one job let alone several jobs, which is required to make ends meet in their communities, and there are few jobs available. The counsellors feared that these women would ultimately lose any job they might get, be blacklisted in the community, and have no options for surviving:



“They don’t have the means to move...they’re stuck in a community that doesn’t have enough jobs or they’ll be stigmatized [if they lose their job]... It’s a huge barrier. I’m trying to support a woman that may have to get a job and can’t...she’s in shambles.”

An STV Counsellor from another rural community reported a different situation in her community – an exodus of people out of the community and into another province. She noted that many of her clients were refused Disability status and put on the wait-list for the new assessment process. They ‘chose’ to leave the province:

“The trend has been in our community, people chose to go to Alberta...a lot of people moved who were on Disability.”

Recommendation 11: It is recommended that MCAWS evaluate the impact of the Disability Benefits Review process on survivors of abuse and the STV Counselling programs that support them and report the results of their findings to MHR.

6) Cuts to Mental Health Services

The narrower Mental Health mandate and the dramatic seventy percent staff cuts in the Adult Mental Health Division continue to have a profound impact on people requiring Mental Health services. STV Counsellors reported that fewer women are qualifying, or women are qualifying for fewer services, and that Mental Health will no longer see women who identify survivor issues.

STV Counsellors emphasized that as a result of the cuts and changes, Mental Health and other agencies are making far more referrals to STV Counselling programs. These referrals are frequently inappropriate and, overall, include women with far more serious issues and disorders than would normally be seen by STV Counselling programs. Counsellors stressed that, as a consequence, the nature of their work has intensified and their workloads have increased. Faced with these extremely difficult circumstances and without support, counsellors are struggling to address some of the needs of the women they are seeing:

“I see women with more and more Mental Health issues being told they don’t qualify for Mental Health.”

“People in the hospital for drug and alcohol and other issues, they’re also being sent here for ongoing support. I have one client right now who I don’t feel I can give her what she needs. I feel over my head with her...I’ve made an agreement with her [regarding setting limits on the counselling]...I felt very frustrated, didn’t want to shuffle her off into the hinterland.”

“If there’s survivor issues [identified during the Mental Health clinical assessment process] they’re not dealing with them there...a lot more women are coming to us referred from Mental Health on a whole plethora of, names of, medications I can’t even pronounce...I did get a training with Drug and Alcohol...The challenge for me is to try to do the best work with women who have all these issues.”

“There’s an increase in frequency and severity. Now that their [Mental Health] mandate’s changed, there are access problems and they’re full.”



“Many come to STV counselling who don’t need STV. Many have increasing mental health needs. My number of contacts has been increasing...I find myself working harder...the workload has greatly increased.”

“The work has been very intense, without limits.”

STV Counsellors repeatedly emphasized that they are being “flooded” with work that is outside their mandate of mid-range counselling with women who have experienced abuse. They talked about feeling ill equipped, frustrated, drained, isolated and hopeless. Counsellors stressed that the intensified nature of their work and increased workload is already, and will continue precluding them from doing work that they find sustaining and inspiring such as in-depth counselling and self-exploration groups:

“I wasn’t prepared to deal with quite as much and quite as severe.”

“A sense of hopelessness that I’m not going to be able to do that [facilitate self-exploration groups].”

One counsellor in a rural community also stressed that her sense of isolation and self-doubt was related to her unequal status in the community in relation to Mental Health workers. These workers have larger salaries and contracts and are viewed by others as “objective.” Though she receives referrals from Mental Health workers, they also dismiss her as biased because she practices from a woman-centered rather than a medical-centered model of care.

Recommendation 12: It is recommended that MCAWS put pressure on Mental Health Services to provide funding to STV Counselling programs to cover the costs of all the clients they are referring and expecting to receive services. Because of the Federal Transfer payments now coming back to the province, we strongly urge the Minister to address the historic lack of contribution from the Ministry of Health to anti-violence counselling. We believe there is a strong case to be made for STV Counselling programs to access funding from the Ministry of Health.

Recommendation 13: It is recommended that MCAWS maintain their commitment to fund counselling programs for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse (STV Counselling) in recognition of the impact of the range of violence that women may experience throughout their lives (eighty percent of women in abusive relationships were sexually abused as children).

Recommendation 14: It is recommended that the Minister of State for Women’s Equality work with the Association to explore strategies for improving the mental health of STV Counsellors, including creating a means of reducing workload, increasing staffing support, and increasing compensation and benefits.

Recommendation 15: It is recommended that the Minister of State for Women’s Equality and the Minister of State for Mental Health ensure the provision of regular training for STV Counsellors in mental health issues and for Mental Health workers in violence against women issues.



7) Particular Impact on Rural Communities

Funding cuts to Community Based Victim Assistance programs, closure of courthouses, Community Law Offices and MHR offices, cuts to Legal Aid, Social Assistance, Mental Health, and upcoming cuts to Women's Centres – each of these cuts, along with cuts to child-care and other support services, has had a disproportionate effect and serious impact on rural communities. STV Counsellors from rural communities clearly articulated how the continuum of services required by survivors of abuse and violence to ensure their own and/or their children's security and well being has been dangerously compromised by these cuts and changes.

In Ontario in 1999, The Joint Committee on Domestic Violence was created in response to the jury recommendations of the May-Iles Inquest. It was chaired by Madame Justice Lesley Baldwin and made up of senior government officials and community experts in the field of domestic violence prevention. It listed "essential victim services" that should be available in communities:

- Long term counselling
- Sexual assault services and transitional support workers [who provide the same type of services as Community Based Victim Assistance programs including system liaison]
- Emergency shelters
- Hospital-based emergency and other health services
- Transitional housing
- Transitional supports (including access to housing, employment assistance and child care)

Many rural communities in BC do not have access to this basic level of services.

Recommendation 16: It is recommended that MCAWS work with Association, BC Women's Hospital, the BC/Yukon Society of Transition Houses, and the BC Institute Against Family Violence to review the cuts made to services in rural communities in light of their impact on those who experience violence, particularly those marginalized by poverty or other issues and make recommendations to other relevant Ministries.

8) STV Counselling Program Mandate, Caseload and Measurement Tools

On this year's teleconference calls STV Counsellors stressed that their programs are being "flooded" with women who have nowhere else to go. Counsellors emphasized that the cuts and changes to Legal Aid, Community Based Victim Assistance programs, Social Assistance, Disability Benefits, Mental Health, and the loss of other support services, have turned their programs into the "dumping ground" for women in crisis and for women with complex mental health issues.

As a consequence of the new demands upon their programs, STV Counselling has changed dramatically and is no longer reflective of the STV Counselling program mandate. Without sufficient training and support, counsellors are doing court preparation and legal advocacy on top of mid-range counselling. Survival work such as crisis intervention and finding food and shelter for women, and struggling to support women with complex mental health issues and disorders have also become regular requirements of STV Counsellors.



STV Counsellors' workload has increased and the nature of their work has shifted and intensified. Yet STV Counsellors frequently have shared or part-time contracts, which provide no benefits, security or opportunity for stress-leave. For STV Counsellors in rural communities the work is even more intense, as a result:

"Three different agencies, three different places, I'm commuting...It's almost like I can't get sick...it puts a lot of pressure on trying to fulfill the needs of the community when you're the only person in the community and you're only there one day a week."

As noted throughout this report, STV Counsellors are deeply concerned that the nature of their work has shifted and intensified. They are also concerned that the current MIS form of MCAWS cannot capture this shift or the intensity of the work. In previous teleconference calls and in the STV Counsellor survey regarding the MIS form, counsellors stressed that the current form does not adequately capture the full nature, complexity or breadth of their work – it provides "an incomplete picture."

Counsellors also emphasized that some of their work such as community outreach and education, networking and systemic advocacy are essential elements of contributing to a coordinated response to ending violence against women, and that engaging in this work keeps them inspired and hopeful. Yet these kinds of activities are not written into their contracts and therefore cannot be tracked. One counsellor talked about her experience taking part in a forum coordinated by the Community Coordination for Women's Safety project:

"Research on rural women...we spent the whole day together...great forum...nobody else is talking about it...I'm the only one in this [area] talking about violence against women. There's a fair bit of personal risk. Not to have that acknowledged anywhere is kind of a bummer."

Recommendation 17: It is recommended that the MCAWS collaborate with the Association in the evaluation and revision of the MIS forms.

Recommendation 18: It is recommended that the Association be consulted in the development of all evaluations or measurements of STV Counselling programs and their outcomes.

Recommendation 19: The Ministry is engaged in at least two of its own projects where the needs of women in transition houses are being studied. It is recommended that this work expand to include the needs of women receiving STV Counselling as well as women receiving SVAP and SA/WA assistance. As only 14% of women dealing with intimate violence utilize transition houses it is critical that the Ministry not limit its focus to only those 14%, but expand its focus to include all forms of violence against women, including recent and historical sexual abuse, stalking and homicide.

Recommendation 20: It is recommended that the Ministry give close consideration to reports from the Association regarding increases in demand for STV Counselling services, and address these increases through future Treasury Board submissions.



9) Loss of VAWIR Coordinators

In recognition of the value of cooperation and coordination between community groups and systems that are involved in addressing the problem of violence against women, beginning in 1989, VAWIR Coordination Committees were established throughout the province. The purpose of coordination committees, as was outlined in the program contracts was “to ensure that the intent of the VAWIR Policy is being met and that relevant social, health and criminal justice agencies are working together to provide consistent and appropriate assistance to women who are victims of relationship violence.”

With the loss of funded coordinators for the six VAWIR Coordination Committees that existed in BC, there is no longer any core financial support for ensuring facilitation of an effective community response to VAWIR cases. For many years, the Association has been working with the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General to ensure that coordination at the local level was being supported. There are currently approximately fifty communities across BC with community coordination committees. These committees have been functioning without support. While the loss of funding to the six communities that used to receive funding was a devastating blow to those communities, the other communities across BC that never had funding have expressed concern over the inequity of some communities being funded while others are not.

STV Counsellors in a number of communities raised the issue of coordination committees. Some counsellors emphasized that their community coordination committees had broad-based participation, were meeting regularly, and overall, were working very well:

“The RCMP sergeant initiated this...the first meeting was last May. We’re meeting almost monthly...a core group of ten to twelve people.”

“Everybody’s involved in our community...that’s all we talk about [violence against women]. Awareness has increased over the years, there’s no minimization of family violence...even the RCMP has been very responsive. Everybody’s part of it...the newspaper does articles...we submit articles.”

STV Counsellors in other communities raised concerns that the loss of paid VAWIR coordinators has negatively impacted their community’s ability to coordinate an effective community response to violence against women cases or even identify where women are falling through the cracks. One counsellor noted ongoing challenges related to some coordination members’ lack of interest in participating, namely Crown, indicating the ongoing need for more, not less, systems support for coordination committees:

“Our VAWIR does meet now and again. It’s challenging, people who want to be there, people who are mandated to be there.”

“Ours has been meeting for many years. It’s difficult to keep it going with no paid chair.”

“When we lost our coordinator, we tried to run it off the side of the desk. We’re losing members...we used to meet once a month, now we’re meeting every three months. We had a prosecutor and police chief on board. Now it’s all, like it’s just gone. We used to have a very good committee. It’s not the same.”



When asked whether this impacts her counselling work, this same counsellor noted:

“Now everyone’s working separately, not a community thing of working together on violence against women...Where were people falling through the cracks? We used to have that kind of information...We’re not identifying if we have gaps because we’re not meeting...you don’t know who’s falling through the cracks.”

The lack of financial support for a coordinated community response to violence against women may also contribute to ongoing problems with referrals. Several STV Counsellors noted that they continue to have problems getting referrals from Police-based Victim Services (PBVS) or, in some cases, are getting referrals from PBVS that should have been directed to Community Based Victim Assistance programs. VAWIR Coordination Committees serve as useful venues for addressing these sorts of matters, as well as the critical cross-sectoral negotiations of responses that increase women's safety.

The Association applauds MCAWS for recognizing the vital role of community coordination initiatives, particularly in rural communities. MCAWS' involvement in the Community Coordination for Women's Safety project exemplifies this commitment to enhancing coordination between anti-violence services.

Recommendation 21: It is recommended that MCAWS continue to support the Community Coordination for Women's Safety project, and consider making this project an ongoing program to address coordination issues and enhance service delivery in rural communities.

10)Integration of Services, Safety Issues and Intra-Agency Issues

Some STV Counselling programs are housed in agencies, which have lost partial funding or in Women's Centres, whose core funding will be eliminated. STV Counsellors are concerned about how these cuts and closures will impact their own programs, in addition to being concerned about the loss of Women's Centres, which provide crucial services to survivors such as referrals, information, crisis counselling, and advocacy, as well as a wide range of critical and irreplaceable services for women in desperate need.

In partial response to this instability of funding, counsellors from several communities reported that they were considering housing their program in the same building with other agencies or had already done so. One counsellor reported that her community had participated in a lengthy process to bring together a range of agencies and programs including STV Counselling, Alcohol and Drug Counselling, MCFD, and Family Services and have them all housed together in a local building, providing different entry points for each service. She characterized the process as one that pulled the community together and the outcome as, overall, successful. However, historically, as well as on teleconference calls, compelling arguments have also been made about the need for agencies that administer women's anti-violence programs to be housed independently from government programs, in particular, those government programs where the state is sometimes seen as an authority in people's lives. Counsellors in some communities stated although funding cuts have forced them to consider housing their program in the same building as other services, such a move could seriously compromise their clients' perceived as well as actual sense of safety, anonymity and confidentiality.



STV Counsellors in numerous communities raised critical concerns about workplace safety and client confidentiality, and the impact this has on themselves and their clients. They emphasized the need for safety and confidentiality in order for survivor's to open up and participate in the counselling:

"Their ex's could conceivably show up here...We're out of town...It would take police awhile to get here in case of an emergency."

"It's an ongoing problem in the agency, with soundproofing our walls."

"With sex abuse, I always start out with safety...some of my clients, they don't feel safe in my office."

In addition to raising issues related to the integration of services and serious workplace safety and confidentiality concerns, programs continue to raise concerns about the hierarchical structure and lack of support that they receive within their agencies, as emphasized in the 2000/2001 and 2001/2002 reports. It is unfortunate that the STV Counselling Program Standards have not yet been implemented. If the Ministry is not able to implement the standards, the Association would be very willing to take on this task in whatever way the Ministry would find useful. The development of the standards and performance indicators was an important and extensive process with the involvement of STV Counsellors across the entire province, and their implementation could greatly improve the working conditions of counsellors.

Recommendation 22: It is recommended that MCAWS either implement the STV Counselling Program Standards in consultation with the Association, or give permission for the Association to do so.

Recommendation 23: It is recommended that the Ministry support STV counselling programs to explore strategies, as outlined in the Program Standards, for protecting safety and confidentiality within shared office spaces. It is further recommended that the Ministry provide support to STV Counsellors who are working within agencies that are not protecting safety and confidentiality.

Recommendation 24: It is recommended that the Ministry assist Women's Centres in getting other funding—for example, from Status of Women Canada—and that the Centres' provincial funding not be cut until new funding is in place.

C) DENIAL OF ACCESS TO THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

1) Cuts and Changes to Community Based Victim Assistance Programs

Funding cuts to Specialized Victim Assistance programs (SVAP), the loss of funding for Sexual Assault/Woman Abuse (SA/WA) crisis lines and the amalgamation of these programs will have, and in some communities already has had, far-reaching consequences for survivors. SVAP programs provide the critical emotional support, legal advocacy, court accompaniment, and assistance across all the systems that survivors have to deal, while SA/WA programs provided specialized emergency counselling, accompaniment to hospital and police, and a myriad of other services.



As a result of the cuts and changes to these programs, many survivors say they do not feel comfortable going to the hospital emergency ward or engaging with the justice system without this specialized support and accompaniment. For the majority of women who do not report sexual assault or wife assault to the police, SA/WA programs were the primary source of emergency counselling and referrals to other relevant services.

STV Counsellors in communities throughout the province addressed the impact of these cuts. In communities that were able to retain their SVAP program, counsellors expressed gratitude, and in one case noted an influx of people to the community because of the existence of services:

“We’re grateful for the return of the SVAP program.”

“We’re fortunate we have a Specialized Victim Assistance.”

“I do think my community is fortunate. We still have a Specialized Victim and RCMP Victim Assistance program. A lot of women are coming to our community because we do have more services.”

In communities without Community Based Victim Assistance programs, several counsellors noted that Women’s Centres (whose core funding will be eliminated) are supporting women through the legal process. The loss of SA/WA programs has in some communities resulted in no specialized emergency services for survivors; a lack of back-up for STV Counselling programs; and increased demand on STV Counselling programs, a shift in focus from mid-range counselling to crisis counselling:

“When the [SA/WA program] closed...there was nowhere to go...the community decided it was impossible to fill that gap.”

“The big one that affects clients is changes to our crisis line. It was twenty-four hours...we’re asking people after eleven o’ clock to call only if it’s a real emergency.”

“Within our program, a lot of women seen through SA [the sexual Assault program] are on the STV wait- list...We’re just doing survival not a lot of recovery.”

Recommendation 25: It is recommended that MCAWS carefully monitor and evaluate the impact on STV Counselling programs of cuts to Community Based Victim Assistance programs and the loss of BC’s Sexual Assault/Woman Assault programs and offer support to STV Counselling programs in communities that have been affected by these cuts, by way of increasing funding.

Recommendation 26: It is recommended that MCAWS evaluate the impact on STV programs of cuts to the above-mentioned programs and utilize the results of this evaluation to communicate to the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General – Victim Services Division the essential nature of these services.



2) Courthouse Closures and the Move Towards Alternative Measures

The closure of twenty-four courthouses continues to have a profound impact on victims of violence. Their ability to access the justice system and receive the necessary support to go through the court process has been dangerously compromised. In communities that have lost their courthouses or have extremely limited court days, STV Counsellors reported that this has resulted in women not proceeding through the courts at all, and counsellors are also reporting a loss of lawyers in their communities. In communities that have kept their courthouses, counsellors reported an increased demand from outlying communities with consequent backlogs:

“They come in, they can’t make it through the custody and access hearing. They file papers in [small community]. Everything else is in [larger community]. We’ve been doing work and faxing it to [larger community]. They can’t get a lawyer.”

“Everybody’s been booked up the ying yang. No lawyers.”

“It’s way busier, crazier here for court dates. It’s really disheartening for women to wait for their court cases.”

Recommendation 27: It is recommended that the Ministry monitor the impact of the court closures and make the results of this monitoring process available to the public Ministry of Attorney General. It is recommended the monitoring process note any change in the number of: reports of high-risk crimes to police; charges laid and stays of proceedings; and the reasons for the stays.

Although no formal changes had yet been made to the VAWIR policy at the time of the teleconference calls, several STV Counsellors identified an alarming trend occurring in their communities. They identified the informal implementation of recommendations proposed in the Attorney General’s Criminal Justice Branch Spousal Assault Policy. In relation to VAWIR cases, counsellors reported the increased use of Crown and police discretion; greater use of alternative measures; and greater use of peace bonds. They also noted the practice of removing the offender from the home rather than taking the woman to a shelter, as recommended in the proposed Domestic Violence Act (STV Counsellors have expressed extensive concerns about the content of this Act as articulated in the Association’s 2001/2002 report). Offenders are then returning back to the community and back home even more angry, and therefore more dangerous:

“Plea bargaining for peace bonds. That’s happening a lot over here. It’s a real trend. The consequences for assault is peace bonds...a real move toward male rights as opposed to female rights.”

“[Safe houses]...are not very busy. RCMP are removing offenders from the home. It doesn’t work for the women...The charging is much less frequent. They use measures like counselling and reconciliation. It’s really difficult. The legal piece of helping women, there’s only one court here...one time a month. If charges are laid, he’s taken to [larger community], held and then released...I don’t think the system’s working very well.”



Recommendation 28: It is recommended that the Ministry set aside the proposed Domestic Violence Prevention Act and instead work to strengthen existing policy, legislation and programs to support survivors of violence in intimate relationships.

Recommendation 29: It is recommended that MCAWS work with the Ministries of Attorney General and Public Safety and Solicitor General - Victim Services Division to monitor the growing trend toward use of Alternative Measures and the consequences to of this trend to women's safety.

3) Cuts to Legal Aid

Many survivors and their families served by anti-violence programs are living in poverty and require Legal Aid for legal assistance. The 38% cuts to Legal Aid, as well as the closure of sixty Community Law Offices, are having a devastating impact on survivors of abuse. While applications for domestic violence restraining orders are still funded, there has been a dramatic reduction in funding for civil matters such as custody and access, and a proposed further increase in the use of mediation and out of court alternatives.

Extensive research has shown that family court is an arena in which abusers can and do continue to have contact with and abuse their victims. Women and children are particularly vulnerable without legal advice and representation, or when they are forced to participate in alternative dispute resolution measures such as mediation, which have repeatedly been shown to be inappropriate, and frequently dangerous for dealing with violence against women or other power based crimes. The reality of subtle or overt intimidation precludes fair settlement and the need for ongoing contact prolongs exposure, putting women and children at risk of ongoing harm.

Even before the most recent cuts, the Legal Aid system in BC was criticized for its inaccessibility and for its inadequate coverage for women, who are the primary civil legal aid applicants. The Association is concerned that the revenue from the tax on legal fees, approximately \$90 million per year, is not used to fund Legal Aid, as the tax was intended to do.

On this year's teleconference calls STV Counsellors raised multiple and serious concerns about the impact of the Legal Aid cuts and changes. Key among their concerns was how women's security and access to justice has been dangerously compromised and how the nature of their work has shifted from mid-range counselling to crisis intervention and advocacy, though most counsellors have no legal advocacy training or background:

"Most of the work has shifted from recovery to just survival. One of the most concerning things, women aren't leaving relationships...if they have kids and custody and access issues...the cuts to Legal Aid...Our work has shifted from recovery to survival and safety planning."

"It's not only the time...middle of the line counselling...crisis intervention, advocacy."

"I've had to become much more knowledgeable about custody and access and the legal system."



"It's really hard to hold onto hope. No Legal Aid office...no lawyers who'll take it on. And women have really serious custody and access issues. It makes the work much more difficult. It takes much more time."

"Women have to do it by themselves. I have to tell them what to say. I build up their self esteem...It takes a lot of time...the women are still so confused...what forms to use, why to use them...It's a huge learning curve for me. My job was to refer to good lawyers."

"I'm also really frightened. I hate the idea when somebody asks me a legal question. I might be really wrong."

Women who attempt to protect themselves and their children through seeking protective custody and access orders require access to accurate legal advice and strong legal representation at the outset of their cases. The initial orders that result not only affect women and children's immediate safety and well being but have serious implications for any future variations. Yet even women who qualify for Legal Aid are negatively impacted by these cuts. The unrealistically low number of hours allotted for family law matters coupled with low tariffs has resulted in an extreme shortage of good Legal Aid lawyers willing to take on these cases, particularly in rural, isolated communities, which have few lawyers to begin with:

"We have only one lawyer in town, then only one of you gets him."

"We don't even have a lawyer here. We don't have a legal aid office."

STV Counsellors reported that the Legal Aid cuts and changes have resulted in some women not leaving their abusive partner, and other women simply not accessing the justice system. Fear of facing their abusive ex-partner alone in court, and a lack of confidence in representing themselves in an intimidating court environment were key factors in not pursuing custody and access matters. Counsellors raised concerns that women continue to be impacted by their abusive ex-partners' aggressive behaviour, and disregard for the terms of custody and access orders, when they are in place:

"A lot of obstacles to go through...comes up all the time. You can advocate for women but there's nothing to advocate for, for women. Women aren't leaving or taking a lot longer to leave."

"It's just not as easy for women to get a Legal Aid lawyer. [Intake office] They're making some judgements around the extent of violence. We have a Salvation Army pro-bono lawyer, at least a two month wait-list. Often women coming out of abusive relationships, their self-esteem is so crushed. They're intimidated by the legal system...It's very difficult for most women to consider going in...they give up, tolerate aggressive ex-partners. They leave, live in a separate residence...when they have children with an abusive ex-partner...the abuse continues even when they're not residing together...they get tired of going back [to court]."

"As abusers are breaching their custody and access...women aren't pursuing avenues like they used to."

STV Counsellors also reported that without access to sufficient Legal Aid, or no access at all, many women were forced to represent themselves against their abusive ex-partners in court.



This was particularly so for women being legally harassed by their ex-partners' excessive use of variation applications. Counsellors raised serious concerns about women's safety and well being and the potential for very negative case law to developed in BC:

"It's very frustrating when the tool a woman needs...she doesn't have access to it...She needs legal representation in court. The thought of going to a court room is so intimidating...it's custody and access...They [men] have lawyers at their beck and call. She has no money and she's up against that."

"A lot of women are taken back to court many times. It's now just part of the abuse...need to deal with that reality. They [men] have money...women have to go back...variances to custody and access orders are very common."

"Because of Legal Aid cuts I do think frequency has increased...men were phoning the Legal Aid office to find out when the cuts would be implemented."

"Lack of Legal Aid...a lot of women trying to figure out how to self-represent."

"Women are going into court quite ill-prepared."

STV Counsellors expressed a great deal of hopelessness and despair about the cuts to Legal Aid and its impact on women and children addressing custody and access. Without support, STV Counsellors have had to shift their counselling focus to crisis intervention and advocacy. They are now overwhelmed with confronting the systemic injustices so clearly revealed in the ways in which custody and access matters are funded, processed and resolved:

"I find it quite discouraging, the unfairness, the imbalance in the courts. It's ludicrous."

"It's hard to keep up my sense of hope. The trend is fifty/fifty [of retaining custody]. I myself don't have a lot of hope."

"I find it very difficult...I have small kids myself. It's tormenting and heart-wrenching [when children are court-ordered to have access with sexually abusive fathers]. Women are so desperate."

Recommendation 30: It is recommended that the Attorney General create a new program for Legal Aid where violence is a factor. We recommend that funding be provided for staff Legal Aid lawyers that would be housed in Community Based Victim Assistance programs. We advise that MCAWS work with the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General – Victim Services Division and the Association to develop this model.

Recommendation 31: It is recommended that MCAWS work with the Association and Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General – Victim Services Division to further develop a proposal to the Attorney General for them to fund paralegals to be housed in Community Based Victim Assistance programs to assist with the development of affidavits and other civil law related requirements. This program would cut lawyer costs substantially.



Recommendation 32: It is recommended that mediation not be used in cases of violence in intimate relationships or other power-based crimes, and that MCAWS provide some proactive leadership in this area.

Recommendation 33: It is recommended that former levels of Legal Aid funding be reinstated using the revenue collected from tax on legal fees.

The Association would like to applaud the Ministry for providing support to the Association for the development of a new Family Law Manual. This new resource will be ready this fall and will assist front-line service providers greatly in their efforts to support women through the justice system. However, this resource will not be enough – the previous recommendations are highly recommended solutions.

D) STV COUNSELLORS' CREATIVITY AND COMMITMENT

As reflected in the issues they raised and comments they made, STV Counsellors in every region of the province are facing enormous challenges in supporting survivors of violence and abuse. Though the shift in the nature of their work and the intensified and increased workload is a problem that requires urgent attention, it was impressive to hear how counsellors were addressing challenges in order to accommodate the needs of women and maintain their own well being.

To address cuts and changes to SVAP and SA/WA programs, Legal Aid, Social Assistance, Disability Benefits, Mental Health and cuts to other support services such as child-care, counsellors are shifting their focus and:

- Compiling legal resources
- Educating themselves regarding legal advocacy
- Assisting women in drawing up access agreements
- Developing a food bank for women
- Setting up satellite services to address problems related to transportation and child care
- Helping women write their own part of the Disability Review form
- Spending time on accessing resources (food, housing, legal matters)
- Providing crisis counselling geared toward women's needs
- Exploring fee for service models for counselling groups (through Crime Victim Assistance)
- Fundraising through participating in live performances of Vagina Monologues
- Exploring/pursuing sharing space with different agencies to save money and ensure a building for the program

To address the systemic injustices confronting women, STV Counsellors emphasized the need for engaging in community outreach, education and prevention work, community coordination, ongoing research, training, and systemic advocacy. Numerous counsellors expressed the importance of recognizing that their counselling work is also anti-violence work and that maintaining this social awareness and involvement was an important way to stay empowered and maintain hope, particularly in light of their intensified and increased workload. In this regard, counsellors are:

- Engaging in community outreach and community awareness activities



- Facilitating prevention work
- Participating in community coordination committees
- Organizing a community education campaign
- Working together with the Community Coordination for Women's Safety (CCWS) project
- Inviting BC Women's Hospital Woman Abuse Response Program to their VAWIR Coordination Committee
- Participating in research forums and networking
- Engaging in internet research to compile resources on eating disorders
- Participating in workshops on eating disorders and with others have developed a core group of health and counselling practitioners able to provide integrated case management
- Participating in discussion groups on the internet such as PARL
- Writing and submitting articles to newspapers

To further reduce their isolation and maintain their well being in order to meet the increased demands of their work, STV Counsellors are:

- Practicing meditation and yoga, spending more time walking in nature and limiting their own exposure to TV violence
- Engaging in monthly debriefing with a Mental Health counsellor
- Utilizing peer supervision
- Job sharing and working in supportive agencies
- Utilizing helpful workplace policies (four day work week, sick time days)
- Conferencing on a weekly basis with co-workers
- Networking with STV Counsellors
- Participating in regional STV Counselling program teleconference calls



PART IV: SUMMARY OF 2002/2003 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: The Association provides essential support to STV Counselling programs throughout the province. By providing annual core funding and specific project funding to the Association, the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services strengthens STV Counselling programs and improves the quality of services for survivors of violence. It also improves cross-Ministry, cross-discipline coordination and collaboration, which in turn increases the safety of vulnerable victims. **In addition to providing this existing funding to the Association, it is recommended that the Ministry continue to consult regularly and work collaboratively with the Association regarding the needs and priorities of STV Counselling programs.**

Recommendation 2: It is recommended that MCAWS review the report regarding training alternatives for STV Counselling programs when it is released this fall, and make it priority to meet with the Association and BCYSTH to discuss implementation of the report's recommendations.

Recommendation 3: The Annual Training Forum provides an essential source of specialized training as well as a crucial opportunity for northern, isolated and rural programs to make connections with each other. Training is also significant in reducing the impact of secondary victimization. **It is recommended that the Ministry continue to provide training subsidies for STV Counsellors to attend an annual specialized training event. Subsidies would cover travel, accommodation, tuition and childcare.** (Having to approach the Ministry each year to request and justify the need for funding is not efficient and underestimates the importance of bringing workers together once per year).

Recommendation 4: It is recommended that MCAWS continue to support STV Counselling Programs by maintaining funding for the STV Counsellor Support Plan.

Recommendation 5: It is recommended that MCAWS continue to provide the Association with the use of Provnet Teleconference Services for the purpose of teleconference calls with STV Counsellors.

Recommendation 6: It is recommended that the Ministry fund a new provincial program that focuses on community coordination for women's safety. The Association has been administering a 2.5-year pilot project that has created a cost-effective way to support the enhancement of women's safety through community coordination. We recommend that the Ministry sit down with the Association to discuss how this infrastructure, built over the last 2.5 years, can be made into a provincial program. We would be pleased to provide the Ministry with more background detail and a proposal. (Please also see Section 9. Loss of VAWIR Coordinators).

Recommendation 7: It is recommended that MCAWS report to the Minister of Human Resources the serious hardship that cuts to Social Assistance create for all adult and child survivors of violence and abuse. It is recommended that this MCAWS report be made available to the Ministry Executive, Minister and Ministries of Children and Family Development and Public Safety and Solicitor General – Victim Services Division.



Recommendation 8: The current system of replacing closed Social Assistance offices with a 1-800 line for MHR clients to call is not working. The Association recommends that a meeting be convened with MCAWS, VSD, MHR and the Association to discuss the issues and create a solution.

Recommendation 9: It is recommended that MCAWS be closely involved in the current RFP process for Bridging program and stay connected to the programs in a support capacity.

Recommendation 10: It is recommended that the Ministry be aware that survivors of abuse require a continuum of services in order to escape and heal from violence, and that the Minister of State for Women's Equality encourage all ministries to closely monitor the impact of the cutbacks on women who have experienced abuse and their children. The Association's Community Coordination for Women's Safety Project has a working advisory committee made up of the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General – Corrections and Victim Services Divisions, RCMP 'E' Division, BC Chiefs of Police, criminal, family and immigration lawyers, the Justice Institute of BC, and representatives from First Nations, disabled women's, and immigrant women's organizations. We see this committee as the basis for a new inter-ministerial committee that could expand to include the Ministries of Human Resources and Attorney General, and other relevant provincial organizations.

Recommendation 11: It is recommended that MCAWS evaluate the impact of the Disability Benefits Review process on survivors of abuse and the STV Counselling programs that support them and report the results of their findings to MHR.

Recommendation 12: It is recommended that MCAWS put pressure on Mental Health Services to provide funding to STV Counselling programs to cover the costs of all the clients they are referring and expecting to receive services. Because of the Federal Transfer payments now coming back to the province, we strongly urge the Minister to address the historic lack of contribution from the Ministry of Health to anti-violence counselling. We believe there is a strong case to be made for STV Counselling programs to access funding from the Ministry of Health.

Recommendation 13: It is recommended that MCAWS maintain their commitment to fund counselling programs for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse (STV Counselling) in recognition of the impact of the range of violence that women may experience throughout their lives.

Recommendation 14: It is recommended that the Minister of State for Women's Equality work with the Association to explore strategies for improving the mental health of STV Counsellors, including creating a means of reducing workload, increasing staffing support, and increasing compensation and benefits.

Recommendation 15: It is recommended that the Minister of State for Women's Equality and the Minister of State for Mental Health ensure the provision of regular training for STV Counsellors in mental health issues and for Mental Health workers in violence against women issues.



Recommendation 16: It is recommended that MCAWS work with Association, BC Women's Hospital, the BC/Yukon Society of Transition Houses, and the BC Institute Against Family Violence to review the cuts made to services in rural communities in light of their impact on those who experience violence, particularly those marginalized by poverty or other issues and make recommendations to other relevant Ministries.

Recommendation 17: It is recommended that the MCAWS collaborate with the Association in the evaluation and revision of the MIS forms.

Recommendation 18: It is recommended that the Association be consulted in the development of all evaluations or measurements of STV Counselling programs and their outcomes.

Recommendation 19: The Ministry is engaged in at least two of its own projects where the needs of women in transition houses are being studied. It is recommended that this work expand to include the needs of women receiving STV Counselling as well as women receiving SVAP and SA/WA assistance. As only 14% of women dealing with intimate violence utilize transition houses it is critical that the Ministry not limit its focus to only those 14%, but expand its focus to include all forms of violence against women, including recent and historical sexual abuse, stalking and homicide.

Recommendation 20: It is recommended that the Ministry give close consideration to reports from the Association regarding increases in demand for STV Counselling services, and address these increases through future Treasury Board submissions.

Recommendation 21: It is recommended that MCAWS continue to support the Community Coordination for Women's Safety project, and consider making this project an ongoing program to address coordination issues and enhance service delivery in rural communities.

Recommendation 22: It is recommended that MCAWS either implement the STV Counselling Program Standards in consultation with the Association, or give permission for the Association to do so.

Recommendation 23: It is recommended that the Ministry support STV counselling programs to explore strategies, as outlined in the Program Standards, for protecting safety and confidentiality within shared office spaces. It is further recommended that the Ministry provide support to STV Counsellors who are working within agencies that are not protecting safety and confidentiality.

Recommendation 24: It is recommended that the Ministry assist Women's Centres in getting other funding—for example, from Status of Women Canada—and that the Centres' provincial funding not be cut until new funding is in place.

Recommendation 25: It is recommended that MCAWS carefully monitor and evaluate the impact on STV Counselling programs of cuts to Community Based Victim Assistance programs and the loss of BC's Sexual Assault/Woman Assault programs and offer



support to STV Counselling programs in communities that have been affected by these cuts, by way of increasing funding.

Recommendation 26: It is recommended that MCAWS evaluate the impact on STV programs of cuts to the above-mentioned programs and utilize the results of this evaluation to communicate to the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General – Victim Services Division the essential nature of these services.

Recommendation 27: It is recommended that the Ministry monitor the impact of the court closures and make the results of this monitoring process available to the public Ministry of Attorney General. It is recommended the monitoring process note any change in the number of: reports of high-risk crimes to police; charges laid and stays of proceedings; and the reasons for the stays.

Recommendation 28: It is recommended that the Ministry set aside the proposed Domestic Violence Prevention Act and instead work to strengthen existing policy, legislation and programs to support survivors of violence in intimate relationships.

Recommendation 29: It is recommended that MCAWS work with the Ministries of Attorney General and Public Safety and Solicitor General - Victim Services Division to monitor the growing trend toward use of Alternative Measures and the consequences to of this trend to women's safety.

Recommendation 30: It is recommended that the Attorney General create a new program for Legal Aid where violence is a factor. We recommend that funding be provided for staff Legal Aid lawyers that would be housed in Community Based Victim Assistance programs. We advise that MCAWS work with the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General – Victim Services Division and the Association to develop this model.

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CONCLUSION

Serious and, often, chronic issues facing survivors of violence in British Columbia are continually brought forward to the Association STV Counselling programs. Many of the key issues currently impacting survivors of violence are outlined in this report. It must be



emphasized that the funding cuts implemented by the provincial government have not only put women and children at greater risk, but also greater increased the barriers that counsellors face in trying to keep them safer. The fact that STV Counsellors are coping with expanded mandates, reduced resources, and the elimination of many of the essential social service, justice system, and healthcare services in their communities suggests that even the current level of support for survivors is not sustainable. It is, therefore, strongly recommended that the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services make it a priority to meet with the Association early in the Fall of 2003 to discuss the issues raised and the recommendations made in this report.

