



**Specialized Victim Assistance Programs
and
Sexual Assault/Woman Assault Programs**

**Year End Report
2001-2002**

Submitted by

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

Introduction

Specialized Victim Assistance (SVA) Programs

In the late 1980s, the Ministry of the Attorney General established and funded Community-Based Specialized Victim Assistance Programs in BC. Today there are fifty Specialized Victim Assistance Programs in BC funded by the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General. These community-based programs provide crucial emotional support, information, referrals, and justice system support for high-risk victims of crime; i.e.: violence against women in relationships, sexual assault and violence against children and youth. Some specialized programs provide support to victims of violence who have specific needs, such as adult male survivors and survivors from Aboriginal and multicultural communities.

Sexual Assault/Woman Assault (SA/WA) Programs

In the 1970s, three Ministries of the provincial government provided funding for six rape crisis centres across the province. Some changes were made in the late 70s, with two of the three Ministries removing themselves from responsibility in this area, leaving the Ministry of the Attorney General as the sole funder. After some disagreements between the funders and some of the centres regarding information management issues, one centre decided to continue without government funding and the others continued with the Ministry. While the 1980s saw the creation of numerous Specialized Victim Assistance programs, the BC government did not fund and establish more Sexual Assault programs until the early 1990s, when eleven additional programs were created. These programs provide crisis intervention, emotional support, counselling, justice system support, and referral services to survivors of recent and/or historical physical and/or sexual assault.

The BC Association of Specialized Victim Assistance and Counselling Programs is the provincial non-profit organization that supports and works on behalf of these programs.

The following report outlines some highlights of the Association's work to support Specialized Victim Assistance (SVA) and Sexual Assault/Woman Assault (SA/WA) programs in 2001/2002. Part I describes some of the Association's work supporting these programs and Part II provides a summary report of the regional conference calls, facilitated by BCASVACP, with workers in the two program areas in February and March 2002. Another report outlining our many projects and initiatives will be available at our AGM.



Part I: Direct Support to Specialized Victim Assistance and Sexual Assault/Woman Assault Programs

Referrals, Support and Information

The BCASVACP responds daily to phone calls, faxes, and email from SVAP and SA/WA staff across the province, and sometimes meets with workers in person when resources allow. We provide referrals, support and information for front line workers and administrators in SVA and SA/WA programs. Programs seek information and support in a number of areas, including: records management, child protection, case files being subpoenaed and the need for funding for the agency to hire legal counsel, the impact of trauma response on workers (known as secondary victimization or vicarious traumatization), referral problems to community-based programs, legal issues, the importance of survivors accessing their right to a forensic exam, alternative measures and other public policy issues, 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 SVA and SA/WA programs in the following ways: a quarterly 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; biannual regional teleconference calls supported by the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General provide support and information to SVAP and SA/WA workers; an Annual Training Forum reduces isolation and provides training to front line workers and administrators in SVA and SA/WA programs; our website 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 the Annual Report 2001/2002.)

This year, among numerous other support areas, the BCASVACP provided essential support to SVA and SA/WA programs both before and after the provincial government cutback announcements, which began in January 2002. In the period before the cutbacks, the Association supported programs dealing with high levels of stress and anxiety as they awaited a decision on whether their funding would be preserved. The Association worked closely with the programs to help communicate to the government how essential their services are to the safety of high-risk victims. Since the announcement of cutbacks began on January 17th, the Association has been a source of accurate and timely information for programs around the province.

The impact of the cutbacks-- and of the anticipation of the cutbacks-- cannot be underestimated. This has had a serious effect on the mental health of both client and staff of SVA and SA/WA programs, significantly raising levels of stress and traumatization, which were already of concern, as noted in the 2000/2001 report.



Recommendation 1

The BCASVACP provides essential support to SVA and SA/WA programs throughout the province. By providing annual core funding and specific project funding to the Association, the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General strengthens SVA and SA/WA 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 continuing to provide this 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 SVA and SA/WA programs.**

Training

Annual Training Forum

On November 23-24, 2001, the Association held our annual training forum titled “Transformative Strategies in Anti-Violence Work: Advocacy, Law and Healing for Personal & Social Change” in Vancouver. The forum was a response to specialized training needs identified by SVAP and SA/WA workers. The forum was overwhelmingly successful with over 130 front-line counsellors, advocates and administrators from across the province in attendance.

Highlights of the forum were:

- Critical and important opportunity for front-line workers to gain new information and skills that are needed on the front line, while also sharing experiences and knowledge with one another.
- A keynote address by Maureen McEvoy, trauma therapist, trainer and consultant, on secondary victimization. Maureen also presented two workshops on this topic where participants had the opportunity to explore the issues more in-depth.
- Keynote addresses by Cynthia Iannce Spencer and Jennifer Rose from the Domestic Violence Clearinghouse and Legal Hotline in Honolulu, Hawaii.
- Opportunities to network, connect with friends and colleagues and make new links to enhance coordination and collaboration.
- Workshops on a variety of emerging issues in anti-violence work

The workshops covered a wide range of topics including: civil legal issues; Aboriginal women, violence and the law; supporting culturally diverse adolescent girls; custody and access; male survivors of sexual abuse; criminal case flow management rules; violence against women with developmental disabilities; supporting lesbian, gay, transgender and intersex survivors; attachment theory for counsellors and advocates; violence against women and child protection issues; and secondary victimization. The vast majority of feedback about the workshops indicated that participants’ needs and expectations were met or exceeded and that they left the training with new skills and information.



On survey forms distributed in 1999, and during the core training and conference calls in 2001, workers repeatedly requested opportunities for learning, networking and information sharing, citing a strong need to acquire and strengthen new skills beyond the basic core training and to reduce isolation. The November forum was a response to these requests.

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.

The Association has organized and raised funds for other training events for SVAP and SA/WA workers (and STV counsellors), and the Ministry has provided some limited funding for these initiatives. Nonetheless, annual specialized training has not been funded.

Providing funds for training is a concrete way in which the Ministry can support the work of SVAP and SA/WA programs, and maintain quality service: training increases skills and knowledge and reduces levels of secondary victimization thus reducing staff turnover.

Recommendation 2

The Annual Training Forum provides an essential means by which new and emerging training needs can be met, as well a crucial opportunity for northern, isolated and rural programs to make connections with others. Particularly given the increased workloads for SVAP and SA/WA workers, new types of work (for example, increased court support), and reduced access to information (for example, from Legal Aid offices) in the wake of the recent cuts, it is essential that specialized training (in addition to existing core training) be regularly available. Training is also significant in reducing the impact of secondary victimization. **It is recommended that the Ministry continue to provide the annual sum of \$20,000 to assist SVAP and SA/WA workers to attend an annual specialized training event. This amount would help cover training costs, travel, accommodation and childcare.**

Support Worker Support Plan

Workers in SVA and SA/WA programs experience high levels of stress and secondary victimization. There is a serious need for these workers to receive “debriefing” time as well as case consultation. A program similar to the Counsellor Support Plan for Stopping the Violence Counsellors would be an effective solution to this problem. The Association provides support via phone, fax and email to STV counsellors and administrators who are developing and administering Counsellor Support Plans. STV counsellors and administrators have consistently expressed their deep appreciation for the Counsellor Support Plan, noting its important role in reducing isolation and secondary victimization, and improving the quality of their work with clients. A similar



Support Worker Support Plan would provide much-needed support for workers in Specialized Victim Assistance and Sexual Assault/Woman Assault programs.

“We do provide emotional support and crisis intervention. We need support.”

“Workers in our program are so isolated and marginalized. A support plan would definitely help.”

“Other staff in our agency have this support, but we don’t—this creates a serious inequity. We see the same issues at the crisis stage.; it is very complex and traumatizing.

Recommendation 3

It is recommended that in consultation with the Association, the Ministry implement a Support Worker Support Plan for SVAP and SA/WA workers, similar to the plan currently in place for STV counsellors, with funds from the Victim Surcharge Fund.



Part II: Regional Teleconference Calls

Introduction

This section of the report provides a summary of the regional conference calls coordinated and facilitated by the Association in February and March 2002 for staff in Specialized Victim Assistance and Sexual Assault/Woman Assault programs.

The Association organized separate conference calls for SVA and SA/WA programs region by region. Due to the overwhelming similarity of issues raised by both program types and by each region, we have combined the reports of all conference calls into one report. Where issues are program specific, they have been noted.

The Association facilitated seven regional conference calls with SVAP staff and two with SA/WA staff from programs in all regions of BC. Victim Services Division of the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General generously provided the Association with use of Proxnet Teleconference Services for these calls.

The conference calls were two hours in length and did not have a fixed agenda. The purpose was to provide participants with an opportunity to network with other workers in the same field and share their experiences, ideas, issues and solutions. It was hoped that SVA and SA/WA program staff would highlight critical issues facing survivors of violence and bring forward priorities for program, policy and legislative change, and for training and information exchange, and this indeed was the case.

Although the Association is pleased that Ministry staff have been working to implement some of the recommendations stemming from last year's teleconference calls, it is important to note that the majority of the recommendations have not been acted upon.

On this year's calls, workers were overwhelmed by the cutbacks announced in January and February 2002. The fact that there was not time for workers to reiterate concerns still existing from last year in no way detracts from the serious and ongoing nature of these issues. We are still hearing about these issues from workers on a daily basis even though they are most focused on the immediate crises resulting from the cuts.

Participants

There were thirty-eight workers from thirty-two Specialized Victim Assistance programs, and fifteen workers from twelve Sexual Assault/Woman Assault



programs who participated on the calls. In addition to the communities listed below, some SVAP and SA/WA workers who were unable to participate in the calls phoned the Association prior to or after the calls to communicate their issues and concerns.

SVAP Region 1: Vancouver Island—February 4th, 2002
Duncan, Port Hardy, Victoria, Comox, Campbell River, Courtenay, Powell River, Bella Coola, Alert Bay

SVAP Region 2: Lower Mainland—February 5th, 2002
Vancouver, Sechelt

SVAP Region 3: Fraser Valley—February 6th, 2002
Chilliwack, Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows, Port Coquitlam area, Surrey, Vancouver, Abbotsford, Burnaby and New Westminster

SVAP Region 4: Interior—February 7th, 2002
Penticton, Vernon, Kelowna

SVAP Region 5: Kootenays—February 11th, 2002
Nelson, Trail, Golden, Kaslo

SVAP Region 6: North Coast—February 12th, 2002
Massett, Terrace, Smithers, Fort St James, Hazelton

SVAP Region 6: North East—February 27th, 2002
Prince George, Williams Lake

Sexual Assault/Woman Assault (all regions)—February 28th, 2002
Duncan, Nanaimo, Campbell River, Vancouver, Surrey, Terrace

Sexual Assault/Woman Assault (all regions)—March 4th, 2002
Fort St John, Dawson Creek, Castlegar, Cranbrook, Kelowna, Smithers

Issues Raised on the Teleconference Calls & Recommendations

Appreciations expressed for the conference calls

There was an enormously positive response to the conference calls. SVAP and SA/WA workers throughout the province expressed their appreciation, stating that the calls provided much needed support. Workers stated that the calls were extremely useful for reducing isolation, information sharing, support, networking and problem solving. Workers requested that the conference calls facilitated by the Association continue on a semiannual basis if not more frequently.

Programs 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 SVA and SA/WA programs. Participants are grateful for the link the Association provides between their programs and the Ministry.



The following comments reflect their appreciation:

“Thanks. We needed this.”

“What you’re doing is huge. I want you to know that—this sense of connection can offset what we’re going through right now. I’m really glad you exist.”

“Thanks for the opportunity to release, to talk about things.”

“I really appreciate the Association’s support: I don’t feel so isolated.”

Recommendation 4

It is recommended that Victim Services Division continue to provide the Association with the use of Proxnet Teleconference Services for the purpose of teleconference calls with SVA and SA/WA program staff.

Ongoing Funding for SVA and SA/WA programs, and for the Association

Programs expressed concern that (at the time of the calls) there had not been an official decision from the Ministry on funding for SVA programs, SA/WA programs, or the Association. The tension and stress resulting from uncertainty about their and the Association’s future was raised as a serious concern. With the announcement on March 28th, 2002 that contracts will be renewed only for six months, there has been continued stress and uncertainty for programs and for the Association.

Recommendation 5

Community-based victim assistance programs are an essential part of responding to sexual assault, child abuse and violence in relationships. **It is recommended that the province not dismantle the safety network for victims of sexual assault, child abuse, and violence in intimate relationships; and that the Premier of British Columbia ensure that all Ministries respect his promise not to cut programs for survivors of violence and abuse.**

The Elimination of Crown Victim Witness Services (CVWS)

The Association has been in ongoing close communication with Victim Services Division regarding the elimination of CVWS and the needs of SVA and SA/WA programs in the wake of this cut. Key issues have been identified, particularly regarding what would be needed for SVA and SA/WA programs to take on the court-related work that CVWS has been doing.

There is a great willingness among SVA and SA/WA programs to take on the work that CVWS was doing with high-risk victims. However, as both SVAP and Police-Based Victim Services made clear in meetings of the Transition Committee set up by Victim Services Division, it is impossible to plan for this transition in the absence of stable contracts for SVAP and PBVS. At the time of the writing of this report, the programs have only received six-month contracts. Programs wonder whether they would enter into transition planning now only to



re-do the planning if contracts were revised or terminated at the end of six months.

Relationships between SVA and SA/WA programs and CVWS varied from community to community. In many communities, CVWS was an important link to information for programs, particularly SVAPs, and their clients, as well as providing court tours, preparation, and accompaniment. In some communities, CVWS did not provide this link, and/or did not followed protocol and served victims of violence in relationships, sexual assault and child abuse instead of referring them to SVA or SA/WA programs. Therefore it is difficult in some cases for programs to predict what the impact of the elimination of CVWS will be. However, workers have concerns that without CVWS, victims will have significantly less access to information about, and support through, the court process. Given the ten- percent cuts to Crown Counsel offices, programs are also concerned that Crown prosecutors will be less available to victims.

“Crown prosecutors cannot take on the function of CVWS, though this is the myth that we hear. They’re already very swamped.”

“Crown counsel won’t have time for victims, and less time to talk to workers.”

In the conference calls, SVA and SA/WA programs identified a number of issues to consider in taking on CVWS work:

- Potential increase in workload
- The need for SVAP and SA/WA workers to have access to JUSTIN
- Barriers created by the Federal Privacy Act and the provincial Freedom of Information Act
- Problems with referrals from Crown Counsel, police and PBVS to SVAP and SA/WA
- The use of volunteers
- Training needed for some SVAP and SA/WA workers

Potential Increase in Workload

SVA and SA/WA programs are committed to doing what they can to ensure court support for their clients in spite of concerns about the potential extra work for their programs. It is important to note that some programs are already struggling to meet the demands of large caseloads on part-time hours.

“I’m working with 80 clients in a 26 hour week.”

“I’m concerned about the travel time it would take to do all the accompaniments, especially with the court closures. Going to court with one client could take all day.”

“I am already seeing a higher caseload since CVWS was cut.”

Some programs speculate that they would need to give up other parts of their work.



“We’d need to give up the closeness of our contact with women.”

“I don’t know what we’d give up; we’ve streamlined as much as possible already.”

“We may need to start a waitlist or refer elsewhere.”

A number of programs stated that they would have to give up the work they do supporting women through civil court, including custody and access cases. This is a particularly difficult decision, as the Legal Aid cuts will all but abandon women needing assistance with family court.

“It bothers me when kids are involved and the mom is trying to keep them safe and I have to say, ‘No I can’t help you.’”

Recommendation 6

It is recommended that the impact of the elimination of CVWS be closely monitored, and that if necessary, extra funds be provided to Specialized Victim Assistance Programs to provide adequate staffing to meet victims’ needs.

The Need for SVAP and SA/WA Workers to Have Access to JUSTIN

All SVA and SA/WA programs agreed that in order to take on the work of supporting victims they would need to have access to JUSTIN. The Association is aware that with the elimination of CVWS there will be seventy JUSTIN terminals available. The ideal situation would be that each SVA and SA/WA program would have access to JUSTIN in their office. Currently, many programs have difficulty accessing Court Registry information. Court Registry in some communities will not release the information to SVA or SA/WA programs, and workers must scan the docket each day to obtain information for their clients. Generally, Court Registry will not provide tentative trial dates, only the dates of trial confirmation hearings. SVAP and SA/WA workers are concerned that they may need to travel to the nearest courthouse in order to get information, which could take a considerable amount of time, especially in communities without courthouses. It has been suggested that SVA and SA/WA programs might have access to the first screen of JUSTIN; it is important to note that adjournments are not recorded here. It has also been suggested that individual workers be named as designates to receive JUSTIN information.

Victim Services Division has been working hard to obtain access to JUSTIN for SVA and SA/WA programs; the Association is greatly appreciative of VSD’s support to improve programs’ ability to support high-risk victims.

Recommendation 7

It is recommended that SVA and SA/WA programs, particularly those in communities where there is difficulty in accessing information from Court Registry, have JUSTIN terminals in their offices; or, alternatively, that they have access to JUSTIN through 1-800-VICTIMS.



Barriers Created by the Federal Privacy Act

The Criminal Justice Branch of the Attorney General prohibits the disclosure of victims' names and contact details to community-based victim assistance programs, based on a ruling by the Federal Privacy Commissioner.

Recommendation 8

It is recommended that the BC Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) be amended to state that Victim Services Division is responsible for ensuring that victims receive information regarding their court case.

Recommendation 9

It is recommended that once the VOCA is amended (see Recommendation 8), VSD approach the Federal Privacy Commissioner to change the ruling barring SVAP and PBVS from having access to victims' names, under the "consistent use" clause.

Problems with Referrals from Crown Counsel, Police and PBVS

An ongoing difficult issue for SVA and SA/WA programs in many communities is the lack of referrals from Crown, police, and Police-Based Victim Services, in spite of coordination protocols. In many cases, referrals are not made at all, and PBVS and CVWS serve clients who do not fall within their mandates. Often when referrals are made it is when the victim is in crisis, or inadequate information is provided to the victim regarding the SVA or SA/WA programs. There is also concern among workers that the VOCA letter sent out in many communities by Crown or CVWS no longer mentions specific programs (some programs have never been listed on the letter). This lack of referral is a major barrier in the way of SVA and SA/WA programs taking on the work of CVWS, and seriously undermines the safety of victims.

It is essential that victims have access to community-based victim assistance programs. While police-based victim services provides critical support, many survivors of abuse will more readily accept services from an agency which is (and is perceived to be) separate from the justice system. SVAP and SA/WA workers are able to be "victim-centered;" that is, they do not have additional and potentially conflicting loyalties. For example, they are in a position of being better able to support a victim to address problems that arise from a lack of police response, as they are not part of the police system. Josiah Wood, in his recommendations to RCMP E Division following the attacks on Rajwar Gakhal and Sharon Velicek by their violent ex-partners, addressed the issue of police response to "reluctant victims" of violence in intimate relationships. He emphasized that it is community-based victim assistance programs that have the "training and expertise necessary to meet [the] unique needs" of these victims, and not PBVS. This support, he continued, will make it more likely that the victim will cooperate with the investigation and prosecution of her case.

A number of programs expressed interest in the idea of SVA and SA/WA programs being given the mandate to contact victims proactively, in order to facilitate quicker and more effective intervention.

"If they figured out the referral issue we'd be much quicker and more efficient."



“We could do CVWS work but we need better communication with Police-Based Victim Services.”

Recommendation 10

The BCASVACP applauds Victim Services Division for taking a proactive approach to resolving the referrals issue. **It is recommended that VSD continue their commitment to this work and act quickly to ensure that SVA and SA/WA programs receive appropriate referrals.**

The Use of Volunteers

There is some concern among SVA and SA/WA programs that they will be encouraged to use volunteers to fill the gap in court accompaniment left by the CVWS. While a few programs use volunteers for court accompaniment already, most stated that coordinating a volunteer program creates more work as opposed to decreasing workload. Many programs have tried to implement volunteer programs, and have been unsuccessful for this very reason. Other issues raised were the difficulty in ensuring that volunteers can provide long term consistent support to clients, and concerns regarding skill level, competency and confidentiality.

“It takes a few appointments with the client to get them comfortable with court support. I can’t imagine having a volunteer meet them at court without having established a relationship.”

“Confidentiality is a problem in small communities where everyone knows each other.”

“This is important work and deserves to be paid. You don’t have volunteer police officers or volunteer doctors.”

Recommendation 11

It is recommended that volunteers not be used to do the work of paid SVAP and SA/WA workers.

Training Needed for Some SVAP and SA/WA Workers

While some SVAP and SA/WA workers are already familiar with the court process, others will require additional training to provide court services. VSD has already committed to providing four court orientation trainings in April 2002.

Recommendation 12

The Association is pleased that VSD has recognized the need for court training for SVAP and SA/WA workers. **It is recommended that the Ministry continue to fund this type of training for SVA and SA/WA workers.**

Loss of “Witness Area” in Courthouse

SVAP and SA/WA workers raised concerns that with the elimination of CVWS, some courthouses would lose the CVWS “witness area” where SVAP and SA/WA



clients have been able to have a certain level of safety while waiting for court to start or during breaks in proceedings.

Recommendation 13

It is recommended that VSD work to ensure that there is a safe area for victim witnesses in every courthouse in BC.

Court closures

SVAP and SA/WA workers are still unsure about the exact impact of the closure of twenty-four courthouses, but it is undeniable that this will affect victims of violence in serious ways. Travelling to another town, perhaps hours away, may deter or prevent women from participating in court cases; some women, who do not have access to a vehicle or public transportation, or who lack child care, will be unable to attend proceedings unless there is funding to enable them to get there. In parts of the province, bad road conditions in fall, winter and spring may make travelling to court dangerous or impossible.

Workers in communities that have kept their courthouses foresee a rise in demand for services due to victims in outlying communities coming in to attend court. Many courts are already backlogged.

“There is no bus service between our town and the town with the nearest courthouse. Will women be forced to hitchhike?”

“The courthouse is forty minutes away. To do accompaniments, the SVAP worker now has to travel with no additional money or time.”

“It’s so clear that more efficient does not mean more effective. For example, with the courthouse closing in our community, women now can’t afford to travel to the closest courthouse or call long distance for information.”

Recommendation 14

It is incumbent upon the provincial government to track carefully any results of the court closures, particularly any negative impact on British Columbians’ access to justice. **It is recommended that the Ministry monitor the impact of the court closures and make the results of this monitoring available to the public on a quarterly basis. It is recommended the monitoring 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 15

It is recommended that the Deputy Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General work with the Deputy Minister of the Attorney General to ensure that the transition plans of Crown provide access to justice for victims. It is recommended that the Ministries consider the impact of the elimination of CVWS and the court closures, as well as barriers created by lack of funds, geography and weather, in exploring ways to ensure victims’ access to justice. It is further recommended that the Ministries collaborate with the BCASVACP in this endeavour, and that the Ministries



work with service providers to explore strategies such as designated court days for cases involving violence in relationships, child abuse and sexual assault.

Impact of other cuts to services

Continuum of Service Needed

Although cuts have not been announced to SVA and SA/WA programs at this time, and the Premier has pledged not to cut anti-violence programs, SVA and SA/WA programs are still affected by the cuts to other services, besides CVWS and the courthouses. Workers on the teleconference calls repeatedly emphasized that a continuum of service is needed to address the needs of survivors of violence and abuse. That is, violence affects all aspects of survivors' lives. Survivors need sufficient income, housing, health care, child care, legal services, systems liaison, and so on, in order to be able to leave a violent relationship, participate effectively in the court process, or to live independently after leaving the relationship. If a victim of abuse perceives that such services will not be available to her, it is often difficult for her to begin to plan to leave the abusive situation, as she cannot ensure that she and her children will be safe after leaving.

Survivors of violence usually require the help of a number of programs in order to access justice, maintain safety, meet basic needs such as food and shelter, and begin to heal emotionally. SVA and SA/WA 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, SVA or SA/WA 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.

“We have a holistic approach to how we work with women. So increased poverty, increased housing costs, increased homelessness, and decreased access to food: all this impacts on our work.”

“As more programs close, we are left with nowhere to refer women to besides expensive private services.”

“We can't refer to Family Services or to MCFD because they're so overwhelmed already.”

Survivors May Not Seek Help

A key concern raised by workers during the conference calls was that survivors of abuse will be so discouraged by cutbacks in services that they will not reach out for help at all. This is disturbing, given the fact that Victim Services programs were set up by the Social Credit government precisely because crimes of abuse are chronically under-reported.

“I don't know how to keep stats on this. Women might not ever call me at all.”



“It takes a lot of strength to contact police in the first place. But if all your doors are being closed...”

“If we weren’t there, clients would question entering the system at all. People say things like, ‘I could never go through this without you.’”

“Our clientele is impacted. There is a level of desperation. They are being told ‘no’ everywhere.”

“It’s very difficult for women to come to our program thinking it will be lost. It’s hard for them to commit to counselling.”

Recommendation 16

It is recommended that the Ministry be aware of the possibility that survivors of violence and abuse may not access any services in the future due to lack of support and outreach, and that the Ministry take this possibility into account when analyzing overall program statistics.

Rural Communities Especially Affected

The cutbacks have had an especially serious impact on resource-based, rural communities, as was very apparent in the comments from rural SVAP and SA/WA workers. Communities that already suffer from isolation and lack of resources are now facing even more difficulties. This makes it increasingly difficult for victims of violence to break free from abuse.

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:

- Emergency shelters
- Hospital-based emergency and other health services
- Long term counselling
- Sexual assault services and transitional support workers [who provide the same type of services as SVAPs including system liaison]
- 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.

“Services are centered in big communities. It seems like rural communities are being discarded.”

“We had just gotten the sexual assault program set up at the hospital and now we’re losing our hospital.”



“The cuts to services here are like an oxygen tube being cut off. People are saying, ‘I’m barely making it now. What am I going to do?’”

Recommendation 17

It is recommended that the provincial government 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.

Increased Poverty and a Rise in Violence

Many rural communities, particularly those with resource-based economies, are deeply impoverished. With recent job losses in the resource sector combined with the cutbacks, SVAP and SA/WA workers in many communities are reporting a rise in violence already. It has been well documented that the stress and uncertainty arising from job loss can lead directly to an increase in violence.

“Less employment means more violence. We were a fishing and logging village. But not anymore. We’re seeing increased alcohol and drug abuse, more child apprehensions, and more suicide. What’s going to happen to our people?”

“The mill closed for four to five months last year. There is a definite increase in violence when the mills are closed. There has been an increase in spousal abuse cases, especially recently.”

“An increase in stress on families could increase demand for our services. We already have an unacceptable waitlist.”

Recommendation 18

It is recommended that the Ministry closely monitor the levels of violence and abuse in communities suffering from unemployment and provide adequate services for survivors.

Cuts to Social Assistance

Unfortunately a rise in poverty will coincide with the severe government cuts to Social Assistance. Workers expressed concern about the impact that this will have on all recipients, and particularly families fleeing violence and abuse. Social Assistance has been a key support for women seeking a new start for themselves and their children after leaving abusive relationships. Workers are concerned that survivors will not be able to support themselves after leaving and that this will deter them from leaving or force them to return once they have left.

“Most women go on Social Assistance after leaving transition houses—how long will this be there for them?”

“Moms have no money; they say, what’s the point? It’s better to stay in the relationship and have some money. That’s what people are saying. As a worker, I feel like my hands are tied.”



“Young women are really at risk of staying in abusive relationships because of the restrictions on getting welfare after leaving home.”

“Women whose kids are getting older are being called in for long talks with their Financial Aid Workers. They’re being told to ‘cut the frills.’ Some women are talked down to, threatened, or intimidated by their FAWs.”

“I’m worried about women leaving relationships who will not get retraining, who will be expected to work for \$6 an hour. They may get discouraged and return to the violence. And what about the lack of daycare?”

Recommendation 19

It is recommended that VSD report on the serious hardship that cuts to Social Assistance create for all adult and child survivors of violence and abuse. It is recommended that this report be made available to the Ministry Executive, Minister and Ministries of Child and Family Development and Community, Aboriginal and Women’s Services.

Cuts to Legal Aid

Many survivors and their families served by anti-violence programs turn to Legal Aid for legal assistance. The 38% cuts which have been announced, as well as the planned closure of sixty Legal Services offices, are serious for survivors of abuse. While applications for domestic violence restraining orders will still be funded, there will be a “substantial reduction” in funding for civil matters such as custody and access disputes, and an increase in the use of mediation and out of court alternatives. It is well known that family court is an arena in which abusers can continue to have contact with and abuse their victims. Women and children will be particularly vulnerable without legal representation, or if they are forced to participate in measures such as mediation, which have been repeatedly shown to be inappropriate for dealing with violence against women. Even before the most recent cuts, SVAP and SA/WA workers had been providing more and more support to women who were going through civil court, particularly those who did not qualify for Legal Aid but could not afford a lawyer, and therefore were self-representing.

Even prior to the 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.

“Very few women will get Legal Aid now.”

“If the abuser gets custody, the woman tends to return home. The children are a tool that the abuser uses. Up until now, we have always connected women with Legal Aid so they knew their rights.”

“Women [in this isolated community] can sometimes talk to a Legal Aid lawyer by phone but it’s more effective to see them in person.”



“Clients get mixed up about the differences between criminal and civil. They go back because nothing’s accessible to them.”

“Women call crying. They’re having anxiety attacks and incredible extra stress. They’re scared they’ll have to start paying their lawyers.”

“The new regional LSS office will not be accessible at all to people in our community; it might as well be non-existent.”

“The regional LSS office will be over six hours from our community.”

Recommendation 20

It is recommended that the Solicitor General encourage the Attorney General, in recognition of the considerable damage to access to justice caused by the cuts to Legal Aid, to reinstate former levels of funding, and reverse plans to close the sixty Community Law Offices.

Cuts to the Ministry of Children and Family Development

SVA and SA/WA workers raised concerns about the cuts to MCFD (\$460 million and 1,100 ministry staff over three years [BCIFV, 2002]). They reported that clients were already feeling the impact of these cuts.

“The staff cuts at MCFD will have an impact; I’m already hearing more complaints about how families are dealt with.”

Recommendation 21

It is recommended that the Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General encourage the Minister of Children and Family Development to review the cuts to MCFD in light of their impact on clients, particularly survivors of abuse.

Cuts to Assaultive Men’s Treatment

SVAP and SA/WA workers are concerned about the impact of cuts to treatment for assaultive men. In providing information and support to men, these programs have provided some measure of safety for their partners and children. The programs are also an important part of efforts to break the inter-generational cycle of violence and the eventual goal of eliminating violence and abuse.

Recommendation 22

It is recommended that, in light of their role in teaching non-violent behaviour and increasing the safety of women and children victims of violence, assaultive men’s treatment programs be fully funded by the Ministry.

Cuts to Violence Against Women Community Coordination Committees

SVAP and SA/WA workers emphasized the importance of coordination committees in their communities, where representatives from a range of sectors



work together to improve services for adult and children survivors of violence in intimate relationships. Some workers reported that a number of programs in their communities have stopped attending coordination committees due to increased workload since the cutbacks, and expressed concern about a potential decrease in quality of service because of lack of coordination. Since the conference calls, the Association has learned that funding for the five provincially funded programs has been cut.

Recommendation 23

Numerous studies in Canada and the U.S. have demonstrated the benefits of community coordination; such programs have been shown to decrease levels of violence and improve services to survivors. **It is recommended that the Ministry continue to support VAW Community Coordination Committees in all the ways they can and to seek to replace the lost funds once the economy advances or access to the Victim Surcharge Fund is provided.**

Cuts to John Howard Society programs

John Howard Society programs provide assessments to Crown Counsel in cases where alternative measures are being considered. SVAP and SA/WA workers on the teleconference calls raised concerns that proposed cuts to the John Howard Society may reduce the quality of assessments that the JHS provides. This could in turn put victims at risk.

Recommendation 24

It is recommended that funding for John Howard Society programs be maintained.

Mediation

SVAP and SA/WA workers are concerned about the planned increase in the use of mediation. The Ministry of the Attorney General has been clear that it will work with LSS to expand the use of mediation, and the Ministry's work plan refers often to alternative measures. Research has shown that the use of mediation in situations where a woman is experiencing violence in her relationship is unsafe. The potential for intimidation makes fair settlement unlikely and the need for ongoing contact prolongs conflict, putting women and children at risk.

Recommendation 25

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

