

THE NIAGARA REGION Domestic Violence Report Card: Supplementary Report

Continuing the conversation,



The Coalition
to End Violence
Against Women

Introduction

Collection of data for the Niagara Region Domestic Violence Report Card Project (DVRCP) ended in June 2009. The initial premise for the report card was to provide the community with a 'snapshot in time' of the response to the issue of violence against women. However, we were cognizant of the fact that this is not a static issue and that since June 2009 there have continued to be new and evolving issues in the Niagara Region that merit attention. This Supplementary Report is meant to highlight three additional themes that have emerged since the initial report card was written. They include; the impact of the economic slowdown, changes to Legal Aid, and innovations in practice.

*The Knowledge & Research Sub-Committee
The Coalition to End Violence Against Women Niagara*

*Anne Armstrong, E.D. Gillian's Place
Elizabeth Zimmerman E.D. YWCA
Gena Kaebe, Welland Heritage Council
Ruthann Brown, E.D. Women's Place of
South Niagara
Researcher: Ian DeGeer, MSW*



The Impact of the Economic Slowdown

The research for the Niagara Region DVRCP began in the fall of 2008 and data collection occurred during a time of global economic difficulties. At the time that the research was being completed it was difficult to ascertain what impact the economic downturn would have for those families where violence against women was an issue. The Niagara Region has been especially hard hit by the economic difficulties. Statistics Canada reports that in March 2009, the unemployment rate for this region was 10.6% and in March 2010 the unemployment rate was 11.0%.

These rates are the second highest in the country for these time periods. Many agencies and advocates have indicated that they worried about the impact of a recession on families, their ability to manage stress and the prevalence of violence against women as a result. Recessionary times are often marked by increased levels of stress, a reduction in new spending and a reduction in major life decisions. All of these factors have implications for women experiencing violence within their intimate relationships.

Despite the economic conditions there is no reason to believe that occurrences of violence against women have declined during this recessionary period. Statistics from the Niagara Regional Police Services Domestic Violence Unit for the 2009 fiscal period indicate that the police responded to and laid charges in approximately the same numbers of domestic violence calls as they did in the previous year (2008=916, 2009=930). Trends similar to those found in 2008 also continue; in the vast majority of cases men are the accused; approximately 33% of accused had a previous charge of domestic violence and 247 men were charged with either breach of recognizance or breach of probation. One of the more interesting statistics from the Niagara Regional Police Service Domestic Violence Unit was the increase in the number of dual charges.

In 2009, there were 20 cases of dual charges (both man and woman are charged) whereas in 2008 only 8 cases involved dual charges. This increase is a pattern that may deserve attention in the future as an indicator of concern regarding the failure to understand the gender dynamics of violence against women.

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Another interesting indication of the impact of the recession can be found within the occupancy statistics of women shelters in the Niagara Region. Each of the three women's shelters has seen a sharp decline in their occupancy rates during the course of the recession. This suggests that women are choosing not to leave their abusive partner, rather opting to stay with their partner and seek support services. Gillian's Place, located in St. Catharines indicated that during the recession,

they saw an increase in the number of outreach clients they were servicing. The data from the shelters also suggest that as the economic recovery has begun, occupancy numbers have increased at both shelters while the outreach numbers at Gillian's Place have remained high. For women in abusive relationships, leaving their abusive partner during an economic recession may be less of an option due to the heightened sense of uncertainty that exist. This may place them at greater risk of harm and increase their sense of isolation.

We also want to highlight that many social service agencies in the Niagara Region have experienced funding cutbacks over the course of this past year. One of the most significant funding changes was the restructuring by Employment Ontario. The resulting restructuring has led to cuts in Employment programs for vulnerable populations, newcomers, women and young people. No longer is there funding to specialized programs and the funding for the only women's focused employment program in Niagara, YWCA Job Route for Women, has been cut completely

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leaving a gap in service for women in the Niagara Region. One of the key indicators to success for women leaving violent situations is financial security. This reduces vulnerability of the women who leave abusive situations. The majority of cuts to employment programs in the Niagara Region have been directed at the most vulnerable populations, creating gaps in service for many in this region. ■

“What I was told would happen, did not in some circumstances. I had to do a lot of the leg work myself. Most of the people tried to help me but too often they could not because “their hands were tied”

Changes to Legal Aid

One of the most significant changes that occurred in the past year has been closure of the Legal Aid Offices in Welland and St. Catharines. Many other communities have also seen a reduction in the accessibility of Legal Aid and we attribute this shift, in part, to the \$65-66 million shortfall of the government. Additionally, we understand that the Law Foundation, a primary funding source to Legal Aid, suffered financially over the past 12-18 months resulting in less money being available to fund Legal Aid. Individuals in the Niagara Region who now wish to apply for Legal Aid must do so over the phone via a 1-800 number.

Legal Aid services that were once available in person, in Welland and St. Catharines are now accessible through a centralized call-centre and the offices are now managed from a Hamilton office. There are numerous concerns regarding this change. The first concern has to do with the lack of notice that was given to community agencies and service providers regarding this move. In many other communities, notification was given, however there is very little evidence of community consultation regarding these changes.

Centralizing services decreases the community capacity for the Niagara Region to serve its residents. While there is speculation that smaller offices will re-open in both the Welland and St. Catharines court houses, it is anticipated that these will be significantly understaffed. Previously there had been upwards of 5 full-time employees in a Legal Aid office, we understand that now there will be only one employee in each of the Welland and St. Catharines offices and a 'floater' position that goes between both. Further, applying for Legal Aid is now much more complicated. Anecdotal reports suggest that wait-times to the new call centre range from 60-90 minutes.

For women who are victims of violence, the centralizing of Legal Aid services has the potential to be problematic. Many women are unable to wait 60-90 minutes on a phone to fill out an application for fear of being discovered

by their partner. Additionally, given the lack of community awareness regarding these changes it is now more difficult for women to find out how to access Legal Aid. This shift to centralized service provision makes it increasingly difficult for women to access legal services and places them at greater risk of isolation and abuse from their partners.

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It is accurate to say that Legal Aid services in the Niagara Region are in a state of flux. There are many aspects of the day-to-day workings of the system that are no longer clear. These include the appeal process, how individuals are going to submit their financial forms and what is the role of duty counsel. It is also important to add in that lawyers who take certificates are also very frustrated due to lack of communication and losing the local offices and as a result some have questioned whether it is worth them continuing to take certificates. In general, this shift is detrimental to the delivery of service for residents across the Niagara Region. ■

Ongoing Funding Concerns

The Domestic Violence Report Card highlighted the tenuous nature of the funding for many of the agencies working on the issue of violence against women in the Niagara Region. Since that report was completed funding has continued to be an issue for many agencies and is likely exacerbated by the current economic climate.

Fundraising has continued to be a major source of funding for many agencies in the region. The observed cutbacks in service in the Niagara Region signify that the issue of funding continues to be of concern in this region and will likely result in the further reduction of service. The following are examples of the tenuous funding in the Niagara Region; The funding for the collaboration between Gillian's Place and FACS continues is not secure, neither is the allocation for the Domestic

Violence Unit of the Niagara Regional Police Services. Niagara Victim Crisis Support Services administers both the Domestic Violence Emergency Response System (DVERS) and Victim Quick Response Program (VQRP). Both of these programs assist victims of domestic violence. The DVERS program receives no funding allotment and the VQRP is funded on a year-to-year basis. Additionally, the funding for the High Risk Review Team (see below) ends in July 2010. ■

Innovations in Practice

As part of this supplementary report, we wanted to highlight two projects that had just begun to be developed and implemented during the course of researching the DVRCP. We believe that each of these projects offer an opportunity to improve collaboration, improve practice regarding domestic violence and are significant achievements in this community.

Family and Children's Services Niagara/Gillian's Place Collaboration Project

Funded by the Ministry for Children and Youth Services as a community capacity building initiative, this project embeds an Outreach Support Worker (Domestic Violence Advocate, DVA) from Gillian's Place into FACS Niagara to work and consult with intake staff about families where violence against women has occurred. This program offers women improved access to VAW services, a streamlined method for service delivery

and is providing child welfare workers knowledge with an on-site domestic violence specialist.

This program is also beginning to provide insight into the demographics of child protection referrals where violence against women has been alleged. Of the 329 families referred to the DVA at FACS, 137 (42%) had one or more children under two. This indicates that in almost half of the families where this collaboration occurred, child welfare was dealing with children who could be considered the most vulnerable. This is significant insight into the demographic of families where a

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referral is made to FACS where domestic violence is a primary issue and (take this section out) will allow FACS to tailor the services it provides to these families and enhance child safety.

Considerable research has been done on the need for collaboration between child welfare services and the violence against women sector. Many other models of collaboration exist across the province. Unfortunately, the funding for this project is tenuous at best, being provided on a year-to-year basis, which does not allow for long term planning or expansion. The funding allocation for this project allowed for the possibility of the creation of only one position. Currently, the DVA works only with workers from the Intake department and is primarily located in the FACS St. Catharines location. The FACS response to this collaboration has been tremendous. The demand for the assistance of the DVA currently exceeds the capacity of the position. Increased, stable, and long-term funding is required for this project in order to involve other community partners such as Women's Place of South Niagara. A more community based model of collaboration would consider the involvement of the localized shelter workers in Welland and Niagara Falls who could collaborate with FACS offices in both of those cities. This would enhance the provision of community based collaboration and continue to offer the expertise and knowledge of DVAs to child welfare workers.

High Risk Review Team

This past year has seen the development and implementation of a High Risk Review Team in the Niagara Region. The development of a high risk team came out of a strategic planning process of CEVAW and a sub-committee was developed to review high risk team models across Ontario. Separately a high risk team was implemented by the Justice Sector partners. With the support of NRPS, Niagara Victim Crisis Support Services (NVCSS) received a grant from the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services in 2009 to work collaboratively with community and justice partners on issues of concerns regarding victims of "high risk" offenders. This is an 18 months grant which ends July 2010.

This team involves members of Probation and Parole Services, Niagara Regional Police Services, Victim Witness/Assistance program, Crown Attorney, Niagara Victim Crisis Support Services (NVCSS) and FACS Niagara (for child related matters). This team is charged with the task of reviewing domestic violence cases considered high risk. They meet as required (typically once a month) with a focus on planning and service provision in order to improve victim safety and offender accountability. One of the challenges facing this project is balancing the desire of CEVAW to have community agencies be included as part of the Review Team and the Justice Sector partner reservations regarding confidentiality. This is a similar struggle that other communities have encountered and will require attention if the High Risk Review Team is to be seen as a collaborative community-based process. ■



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