

Domestic violence: a call for action

CRIME: Report finds gaps in service

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Women experiencing domestic violence in Niagara have difficulty accessing services across the region, getting timely court dates and finding affordable housing, a new report finds.

Niagara's Domestic Violence Report Card, to be released Monday by the Coalition to End Violence Against Women, is the first

The base-line 2008-09 report card analyzes how effective the system is in dealing with abused women's needs and makes 21 recommendations related to services and funding.

Coalition chairwoman Ruthann Brown, the executive director of Women's Place South Niagara, said agencies had anecdotal information about service gaps and projects that were working, but there was no compilation of specific information that addressed all the elements.

"We want to bring down systemic barriers because we're all working either to provide services to women who have been abused, are fleeing abuse, or to hold perpetrators accountable," Brown said.

"So we're all working together to say what's working, what's not working and what are the gaps."

The coalition, which is holding a two-day conference in Niagara Falls starting Monday, is made up of 26 agencies that deal with abused women, including police, shelters, children's aid and housing services.

Brown said some of the recommendations that deal with more funding may be difficult to achieve in this economic climate. The coalition hopes to do future report cards to track progress.

"This is the first time that we've looked at how many different agencies respond to domestic violence and what a big chunk of the work that is for each service," said Anne Armstrong, executive director of Gillian's Place, a St. Catharines women's shelter, and vice-chairwoman of the coalition.

"I think that speaks to the complexity of the issue and how it impacts all the members of the family. You need a variety of responses to help the whole family cope."

Among the findings of the report, researched and authored by Ian DeGeer, is that the lack of a regional transit system has had significant implications for abused women.

"For victims of domestic violence, not being able to travel can lead to additional isolation, inability to access services and an inability to access the legal system," the report says.

Getting to court in St. Catharines or Welland to file documents, meet with legal-aid lawyers and attend cases is an issue for those living in other Niagara communities.

The report said the closure of the Niagara Falls courthouse for criminal and family matters further aggravates the problem.

Another issue is the backlog of cases in domestic violence courts. Between 300 and 400 cases are open at any one time in the region and only 20 to 30 are resolved per month.

Housing is another concern for women going into and getting out of shelters. In 2008-09, 522 women and 144 children were housed in shelters in St. Catharines, Niagara Falls and Welland. One-hundred and eighty-three were referred somewhere other than their first stop because of lack of space.

Women who leave shelters can apply to the Niagara Regional Housing Authority for special priority status. In April 2009, there were 4,489 families on the waiting list for affordable housing, and 82 had special priority status.

The report applauded the housing authority for getting abused women into housing quicker than the general population, but says the waiting lists can complicate and delay the process of leaving an abusive partner.

Armstrong said the report card does show how well the Niagara community works together with specialized teams and collaborations.

"That really speaks well for abused women. It takes everybody working together to provide a consistent response, and that's very valuable to women," she said.

Since the report was researched, additional challenges have cropped up due to the economic downturn, demands for services and funding problems for agencies, Armstrong said.

"I guess overall what I feel sad about is, although there's more service and everybody's responding well, we're not stopping the problem," she said. "In fact, I think it's been increasing. All the services are reactive and we need to start doing something on a proactive basis."

Niagara Regional Police calls for service have gone up from 3,695 in 2006 to 6,532 in 2008.

Det. Sgt. Richard Ciszek, the NRP's domestic violence victim services co-ordinator, said that in addition to more cases, more reporting of abuse, improved education and awareness and better police training may also account for the increase.

Ciszek said having a comprehensive report will let everyone know where each agency stands, where they are going and how they are working together.

"I hope there will be a follow-up report to see how constructive this report card is," he said, "and to keep conversation going within the community and hopefully reduce risk for families in the Niagara region."

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Recommendations

There are 21 recommendations in the first-ever Niagara Domestic Violence Report Card. Some highlights include:

About housing:

The Niagara Region, in conjunction with the Coalition to End Violence Against Women and the Ministry of Community and Social Services, undertake a needs assessment about the feasibility of an additional women's shelter.

The Ministry of Community and Social Services establish and maintain adequate funding to women's shelters in Niagara and that shelters be given more allocation for beds.

The Ontario government increase the number of affordable housing units available in Niagara.

About the legal system:

The Ontario government reestablish a court house in Niagara Falls and ensure it contains a court dedicated to the issue of domestic violence.

Specialized domestic violence training be mandatory for any individual working within the legal system.

Court systems in Niagara establish a bail safety program designed to improve the level of specialization on the issue of domestic violence at bail proceedings.

About offenders:

Niagara Regional Police establish stable and permanent funding to the domestic violence unit and that it be adequate enough to offer the same service to each community in Niagara.

The office of the Crown attorney and probation services collaborate to better understand the formulation of probation conditions for domestic violence offenders.

About the community:

The Niagara Region shall develop and implement a comprehensive transportation strategy that provides public transportation across the region to improve accessibility between cities.

The Niagara Coalition to End Violence Against Women will develop a domestic violence training module that can be made available to community agencies for the purpose of education of staff .

The Ministry of Community and Social Services will ensure that training for agencies regarding domestic violence is appropriately funded.

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