



Domestic Violence Community Protocols COVID-19



Domestic violence rates have increased three-fold in China and other jurisdictions just a few weeks and months ahead of Alberta's current COVID-19 outbreak.

During this global health pandemic, there has been a heavy focus on shelter-based supports for people impacted by domestic violence with increased funding for shelter beds, protocols designed for quarantines within shelter settings and capacity to manage an increased number of clients. While some victims of domestic violence will choose to leave an abusive partner only 8% of victims ever choose to access shelter supports. As seen through a 2011 Canadian population-based study most female domestic violence victims (80%) used their informal networks for support. (*Barret & Pierre 2011*) Friends and family, by their very nature, know an individual better than formal domestic violence program staff (*Goodman & Smyth, 2011; Latta & Goodman, 2011*).

During times of social distancing and self-quarantine/isolation most people who have been managing the domestic violence in their lives through the support of friends and family will be left with limited or no access to stabilizing supports and resources (*Parkinson & Zara, 2013*). Under the current state of public health emergency individuals experiencing domestic violence may have no choice but to rely on abusive partners to keep themselves and their children housed and relatively safe (*Fothergill, 1999; Fothergill, 2008; Houghton, 2009; Jenkins and Phillips, 2008; Phillips, et al., 2009*).



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Communities and community organizations play an important role in preventing and addressing domestic violence within times of public health epidemics. Community could mean many different things: a geographical community; a values or interests based community; a community based on common identity; etc. The communities that you served and identified before the public health epidemic remains in place even if you are now having to connect with them differently than before. Communities, especially in times of great social upheaval have important roles in preventing, identifying, responding and recovering from the physical, psychological, social and economic impacts of epidemics.

While our methods of engaging with communities has changed, the things we know about community engagement has not. No two communities are the same and when developing response protocols for domestic violence during these unprecedented times we need to ensure that we recognize that there is no one size fits all set of recommendations or protocols that will meet all agencies' and communities' needs. Below are considerations for communities and community agencies when developing epidemic response protocols to addressing domestic violence.

Remember, your community and community agency have important roles in addressing rumours, misinformation, fear, and anxiety. Consider as you work through your community response how you are leveraging your place in the community to make people feel grounded, safe or comfortable during these unprecedented times.



OFFICE CLOSURES

If possible, keeping your office, or some part of your office open to serve emergency clients is recommended.

- Reduce hours for clients, if necessary, to accommodate the reduction in staff and containment of public access
 - Reduced staff in the office, possibly alternating client staff while ensuring there is always two staff on site for safety reasons
- Create social distancing markers throughout your agency for clients who access services (such as putting waiting room chairs 2 meters apart)
- Increasing cleaning and disinfecting protocols
- Posting signs outside your agency with AHS information about COVID-19 symptoms, who to call if they have questions, etc.
- Clearly post on your door and through social media/website what programs and initiatives are open and what is not i.e.:
 - We are not accepting physical donations at this time;
 - No onsite meetings;
 - Open for client emergencies, etc.



SAFETY PLANNING

For individuals who are now self-isolating or quarantining with partners who are using violence, they will need to have new and unique safety plans created. Safety planning will need to be revisited with clients on a more regular or frequent basis based on community and governmental declarations and changes.

In addition to regular safety planning with clients the following considerations should be made based on the requirement to social distance and self-isolation

- Encourage clients and informal supporters to create a code word/text/gif that can spell danger if received
- Recommend to clients that they keep their phone fully charged at all times and on their person – always wear something with pockets
- Create physical indications for neighbours – turning on or off certain lights, opening or closing of particular blinds, etc.
- Suggest to clients to maintain their routines and patterns – if they always check in with their informal supporters on Tuesdays at 10:00 a.m., encourage them to maintain that behaviour
- Encourage clients to create physical distancing at home as best as possible – use outdoors as a way to get space if applicable
- Recommend to clients that they don't step into difficult conversations right now – try to avoid stirring the pot if it can be avoided
- Increased screen time could be good – movies, tv shows, non-violent video games can act as a distraction for people
- Support clients to understand how their abuser might use the virus as a mechanism for power and control by:
 - Restricted access to cleaning mechanism
 - Providing misinformation about the virus and current community protocols
 - Disregarding social distancing protocols for children



COVID-19 AND FAMILY LAW ISSUES

- Coparenting during this pandemic may be especially challenging for families impacted by domestic violence. Co-parenting parents might adhere to different guidelines around social isolation and virus prevention leading to challenges and abusers might use this time to further perpetrate coercive control.
- Support individuals who traditionally exchange children in public spaces for safety (school, mall, etc.) to identify alternative spaces that are open, safe and comply with their parenting orders (grocery stores, police station parking lot, etc.)
- Support individuals to follow AHS guidelines and try to negotiate with the co-parent to do so also. Encourage all clients to keep a record of what has transpired. In cases where a client can legitimately prove their child is in danger, they should contact a lawyer to determine if this constitutes an emergency and the next steps.
- Client may also experience difficulties with support payments due to COVID 19. In cases like this encourage the client to keep a record of what has transpired. If they are the ones unable to make a support payment encourage them to communicate this to the other party, give as much notice as possible and seek legal advice around amending payments, if possible.
- Although the courts in Alberta are closed for routine matters, mediation and arbitration are still available and are alternative ways to resolve issues. In addition, the courts are open for emergency matters.



24 HOUR HOTLINE SUPPORT

As always, it is important for clients to have access to support 24/7 as we know that domestic violence happens at all times of the day and days of the week. During times of social distancing and self-isolation or quarantine 24-hour hotlines with access to chat or texting functions are very important as an alternative for clients who are unable to access space to make a phone call to ask for support.

Family Violence Information Line 310-1818

Available 24/7 in over 170 languages



SUPPORTING INFORMAL SUPPORTERS

80% of individuals impacted by domestic violence access support and connection from informal supporters (friends, family, neighbours, co-workers) rather than reaching out to community agencies or supports. These informal supporters also need to be supported, they will be better able to offer ongoing, effective support, if they have the knowledge and capacity to engage in domestic violence intervention. It is also critical that these individuals get support when they are helping their friends or family to deal with the violence.

- Encourage informal supporters, community members, health care professionals, grocery/pharmacy staff to screen for domestic violence:
 - Recognize domestic violence
 - Empathize with the person experiencing
 - Ask what they need and how we can help them
 - Listen to what they want for support and find ways to stay connected even in times of social distancing and isolation
- Engage in online training of how to support community-based clients during social distancing and social isolation
 - <https://www.eventbrite.ca/e/real-talk-tickets-100425054040>



FUTURE PREPARATIONS

While communities and community agencies are currently in crisis management mode, it is important to remember that as the pandemic moves on and eventually ends, we will likely see a massive influx of cases and supports required. Where possible, investing in building structures, programs and plans for future growth and demand will help to alleviate the need to scramble when the time presents itself.

- Continue to recruit and training volunteers
 - There are more people than ever with time available to support communities and community agencies, use these volunteers to prep for increased clients and demand
- Build program readiness to address increased client demand and community needs
- Continue fundraising and sponsorship activities to ensure fiscal viability of agency and ability to increased demand
- Inform Collective Impact Bodies (such as IMPACT) of your agency's need so they can communicate it to stakeholders such as funders, the government of Alberta and local foundations.
- Plan how you will reintegrate your staff as a team once you are all back together in a physical office space.



STAYING CONNECTED

It can be isolating for community agencies working to address domestic violence to know the best steps to take in a sea of constantly changing information. Agencies want and need the most updated information to provide the best service delivery possible. In addition, agencies also want to make sure stakeholders, other community agencies, and funders understand what is needed to address the impacts of this pandemic on domestic violence.

Agencies can get and share information by participating in the provincial collective impact initiative IMPACT. IMPACT will be providing the following resources to the sector related to the COVID-19 epidemic:

- Trainings on emerging issues in the domestic and sexual violence sector related to COVID-19
- Information sharing with funders, stakeholders, local/municipal governments and the Government of Alberta
- Leverage learning about responses, patterns, themes, etc. from IMPACT members to share across the province
- Social media posts relating to rates of domestic violence increases we expect to see as a result of this pandemic
- Documentation to help the sector address emerging issues related to domestic violence



CONTACT INFORMATION

If you would like more information about this document, please contact Carrie McManus, Director, Innovation and Programs at Sagesse at Carrie@Sagesse.org.

You can also reach the Sagesse office, which is open with a limited staff, at

EMAIL: INFO@SAGESSE.ORG

PHONE: [403-234-7337](tel:403-234-7337)

WEB: WWW.SAGESSE.ORG

