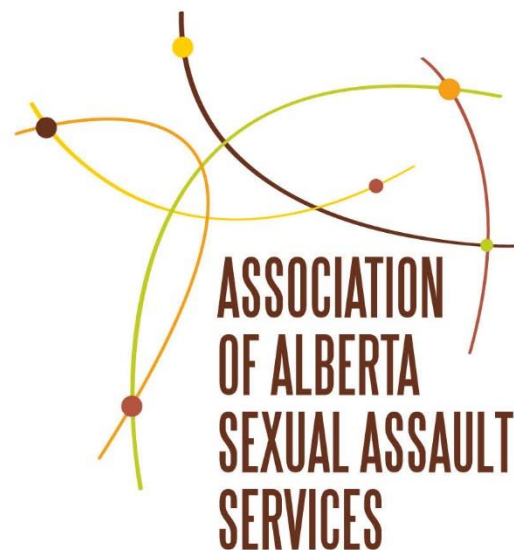


# **Sexual Violence Community Protocols COVID-19**

*Recognize, Respond, Refer*



In the recent *Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse and Sexual Assault in Alberta* study<sup>i</sup> we learned that 45% of Albertans had experienced some type of sexual abuse either as a child or an adult; in total, it is estimated that **1.8 million Albertans have experienced some type of sexual abuse in their lifetime**. While women are twice as likely as men to experience sexual abuse, the research shows that approximately 60% of females and 29% males in Alberta have experienced sexual abuse in their lifetime.<sup>i</sup>

There is emerging evidence around the world demonstrating that self-isolation to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 is creating the perfect storm for a spike in domestic and sexual violence and child sexual abuse. With domestic and sexual violence rates increasing three-fold in China and other jurisdictions, who are just a few weeks and months ahead of Alberta's current COVID-19 outbreak, anti-violence experts anticipate that the impacts of this global health and economic crisis will reach far into the future.

We know that destabilizing events, like the current global pandemic combined with physical distancing measures and social isolation, can not only increase the risk for both domestic and sexual violence and child sexual abuse but can also exacerbate barriers to accessing services and supports.

In response to the current crisis, it is our hope that all Albertans will be able to **recognize** sexual violence, **respond** to disclosures in a positive and supportive way, and **refer** survivors to specialized supports when needed.

This protocol intends to provide guidance to those working with people who have experience sexual violence and is informed by the innovative and responsive work of the Sexual Assault Services of Alberta.

## RECOGNIZE

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### CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Child sexual abuse is the improper exposure of a child to sexual contact, activity, or behaviour. This includes all forms of sexual contact, including oral contact (forced kissing), sexual touching, oral-genital contact (forced oral sex), and/or vaginal or anal penetration. Showing a child sexually explicit material (pornography) or genitalia (flashing) are also sexual abuse, as is the invitation to sexual touch, even when no physical contact has occurred.<sup>ii</sup>

Given the current public health recommendation to stay home, it is important to acknowledge that children are most likely to be sexually abused by a family member or someone the child knows and trusts<sup>iii</sup>. Depending on the type of abuse experienced, between 14-37% of Albertans are sexually abused by someone living within their home.<sup>iv</sup>

Children and youth may also be spending more time online, therefore may be at increased risk for online sexual harassment and internet luring.<sup>v</sup>

In general, children and youth tend to be disconnected from external supports. With school and extracurricular activities on hold, children and youth are likely to experience additional barriers to accessing support. When relevant, it is important to assess for children at risk when speaking with those accessing services.

### SEXUAL ASSAULT

In Canada, the Criminal Code defines sexual assault as “any unwanted sexual act done by one person to another or sexual activity without one person’s consent or voluntary agreement.”<sup>vi</sup> Sexual assault occurs when a person experiences unwanted oral contact (forced kissing), sexual touching, oral-genital contact (forced oral sex), and/or vaginal or anal penetration. [Click here](#) for more information on consent.

Over one quarter of Albertans, an estimated 919,549 Albertans, have experienced sexual assault when they were over the age of 18<sup>vii</sup>.

Similar to child sexual abuse, youth and adults are also most likely to be sexually assaulted by someone that they know. In 87% of police-reported sexual assaults, women knew the person who sexually assaulted them: 26% as a casual acquaintance or friend, 24% as a family member and 19% as an intimate partner<sup>viii</sup>. Therefore, even with social distancing measures in place, Albertans continue to be at risk for experiencing sexual assault and may also be disconnected from natural supports.

With 1.8 million Albertans having experienced at least one incident of sexual violence in their lifetime<sup>ix</sup>, it is also important to acknowledge that while some people may not currently be at risk for experiencing sexual violence the mental, emotional, physical and social impacts of historical sexual violence are long-lasting and significant. While some are suppressing their needs in order to cope with the imminent crisis caused by the pandemic, others may be overwhelmed by pandemic induced anxiety - which in some cases is exacerbating existing trauma symptoms.

## RESPOND

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Despite the prevalence of sexual violence, it remains one of the most underreported violent crimes in Canada. It is estimated that 5%, or less, of sexual assaults in Canada are ever reported to police<sup>x</sup>. Practice experience and evidence based research suggests that people do not disclose sexual violence because they fear that they will not be believed and/or will be blamed for their own victimization.

These barriers not only impact reporting but also help seeking. The normalization and minimization of sexual violence in our society makes it difficult for survivors to recognize and make sense of their experiences and the impacts. Now more than ever, survivors may also minimize their own needs for support and safety given the challenge of meeting their basic needs as a result of the current pandemic.

Many survivors do not initially access formal support services such as sexual assault or health services. Instead they may choose to disclose first to trusted friends and family members; commonly referred to as informal supports. Therefore, it is important to be prepared to respond to a disclosure of sexual violence in both a personal and professional capacity.

### KEY MESSAGES

When a survivor receives a positive response to their disclosure, they are far more likely to access support services and to consider their options for reporting and seeking medical attention.

If someone discloses their experience of sexual violence to you: **Listen, Believe, and Support.**

A positive and supportive first response can enable healing. Albertans are encouraged to convey the following key messages:

- I believe you
- It is/was not your fault
- Your feelings are normal and valid
- Your needs are important
- I support your decisions

Visit [www.ibelieveyou.info](http://www.ibelieveyou.info) for more information on the power of a positive response to disclosures of sexual violence.

## REFER

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Alberta's One Line for Sexual Violence is a province-wide, toll-free, talk-text-and chat service that provides Albertans with support, information, and referrals to specialized sexual violence services. Support is available 9:00 am to 9:00 pm seven days a week with access to interpretation services in over 200 languages, including Cree.

Individuals who have experienced sexual violence, or are supporting people who have, can talk or text 1-866-403-8000 or chat via [www.aasas.ca](http://www.aasas.ca).

Alberta's One Line for Sexual Violence can connect those in need to the Sexual Assault Service nearest to them. Since the start of pandemic, Alberta's One Line for Sexual Violence has seen a 57% increase in the number of people reaching out for support via call, text, and chat.



## SEXUAL ASSAULT SERVICES IN ALBERTA

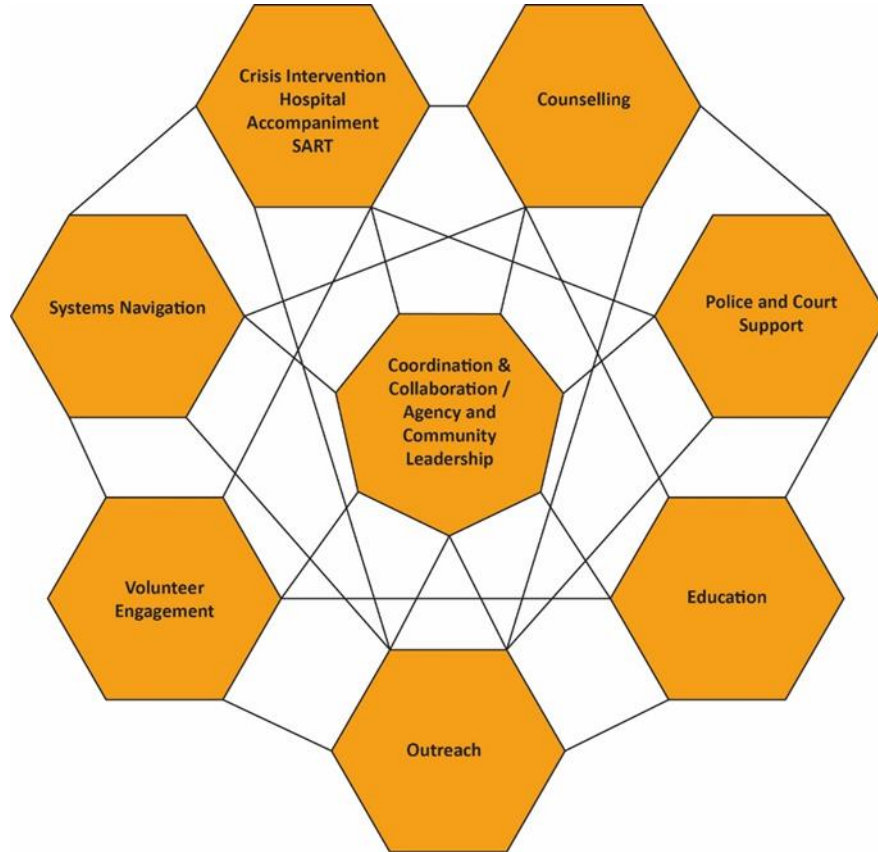
Survivors of sexual violence can also be referred to one of the 14 Sexual Assault Services in Alberta providing direct services to individuals, families and communities impacted by sexual violence. For a full list of the Sexual Assault Services in Alberta and their contact information visit [www.aasas.ca/get-help](http://www.aasas.ca/get-help).



~With gratitude and a spirit of reconciliation, the Sexual Assault Services of Alberta recognize that we work and live within the traditional, unceded lands and travelling routes of the Indigenous Peoples represented in Treaties 4, 6, 7, 8 and 10, and the home of the Métis Regions I, II, III, IV, V and VI who also share a deep connection with these lands~

## SEXUAL ASSAULT SERVICE REPONSES TO COVID-19

Sexual Assault Services provide a continuum of services to individuals, families and communities impacted by sexual violence including:



Sexual Assault Services have adapted in many ways to meet the needs of those impacted by sexual violence during this time. While our methods of providing Sexual Assault Services have changed in response to the pandemic, the things we know about community engagement and sexual assault service delivery have not. No two communities in Alberta are the same. Sexual Assault Services are developing their response protocols during these unprecedented times based on the needs of the communities they serve and the resources available.

The following will provide an update on the recent changes to core service delivery, emerging trends, and future considerations in response to COVID-19.

### CRISIS SERVICES & HOSPITAL ACCOMPANIMENT

Ensuring continued access to specialized sexual violence crisis, support and information services

- Support, Information, and Crisis Lines remain open
- Sexual Assault Services are re-organizing and redeploying some programmatic staff to accommodate demands on telephone, text and web-chat crisis and support services

- In communities where Hospital Accompaniment is offered, in-person service can be limited due to current COVID-19 pressures on Hospitals
  - Hospital and Sexual Assault Services are coordinating to ensure in-person service is provided safely to minimize risk of COVID-19 exposure
  - Hospital and Sexual Assault Services are coordinating to ensure survivors receive resources and warm referral to the Sexual Assault Service for follow up

### **Emerging Trends & Future Considerations**

- With physical distancing and quarantine measures in place, telephone, text and web chat service mediums are extremely important to ensuring access to specialized supports for survivors of sexual violence
- We have heard that access to medical care and forensic evidence collection following recent sexual assault may be delayed/compromised in some parts of the province as doctors and nurses are being redeployed to deal with the COVID-19 crisis.
- Sexual Assault Services are concerned that amidst the pandemic that survivors may feel even more reluctant to access medical care, and options for forensic evidence collection, following sexual assault

## **COUNSELLING**

Ensuring continued access to specialized sexual violence counselling and support services

- In response to public health physical distancing measures, many of the Sexual Assault Services across the province have suspended in-person therapeutic individual and group counselling
- All Sexual Assault Services have moved to or are in the process of moving their existing counselling clients from in-person sessions to over the phone and/or online sessions through telephone or web conferencing platforms
- Processes for new client intakes are being carefully developed and conducted
- Sexual Assault Services are reaching out to clients on the wait lists to offer online support and resources
- Sexual Assault Services are developing and launching online psychoeducational support groups

### **Emerging Trends & Future Considerations**

- Service focus has shifted for some clients to focus on skill development (i.e. coping, containment, etc.) and crisis management to help them cope with their increased anxiety associated with the global pandemic
- The complexity and overall needs of some clients has increased during this stressful time, which has led to an exacerbation of complex trauma symptoms
- Research into evidence based best practices for virtual intake and assessment of new therapeutic counselling clients is needed
- Research into evidence based best practiced for virtual trauma processing therapies and interventions is needed.
- New counselling client intakes are trending down amidst the pandemic and are expected to trend up in the wake of the crisis

## **POLICE & COURT SUPPORT**

Ensuring continued access to specialized sexual violence crisis, support and information services for survivors of sexual violence accessing the legal system



- Specialized police and court support (SP&CS) work has been impacted by the holds placed on many provincial court matters
- In-person services are suspended as program staff are reaching out to clients via phone, email, text, and videoconferencing to continue providing SP&CS services

#### **Emerging Trends & Future Considerations**

- Program staff are responding to general crisis management regarding the pandemic, but are still having new inquiries come in regarding the spectrum of services including reporting, forensic evidence collection, 3rd option, and court preparation
- Service focus has shifted for some clients to focus on skill development (ie. coping, containment, etc.) and crisis management to help them cope with their increased anxiety
- Many clients are experiencing increased crisis, anxiety and additional triggers relating to the pandemic, which is combining with increased uncertainty about the status of their cases. Clients are unsure if/when the case will resume and if they will be able to proceed at that time
- The complexity and overall needs of some clients has increased during this stressful time, which has led to an exacerbation of complex trauma symptoms

## **EDUCATION & OUTREACH**

Ensuring sexual violence prevention and intervention education is available to Albertans

- In-person public education events, including AASAS First Responder to Sexual Assault and Abuse Trainings, have been suspended
- Sexual Assault Services are developing and offering online sexual violence education and broadcasting live educational/support videos through online and social media platforms
- Sexual Assault Services are developing online volunteer training to ensure the pool of skilled sexual violence responders is maintained in preparation for the ripple effect of the global pandemic
- Many Sexual Assault Services are reaching out to community partners in their regions to aid in the general crisis response to the pandemic, including supporting other front line workers as they manage compassion fatigue, anxiety, vicarious trauma and burn out

#### **Emerging Trends & Future Considerations**

- While Sexual Assault Services, and community agencies around the world have quickly moved to webinar based education and presentations in a matter of weeks, research and development in the area of online sexual violence education is needed

## STAYING CONNECTED

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The Sexual Assault Centers of Alberta have been meeting weekly to share information and resources to ensure that those who have been impacted by sexual violence continue to have access to specialized services and supports.

More details about how to connect with local support services and how sexual assault services are working very hard to maintain support services while keeping their staff, clients and communities as safe as possible can be found through links on the AASAS website <https://aasas.ca/get-help/>, in the [AASAS monthly newsletter](#), and through AASAS social media:



## CONTACT INFORMATION

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If you would like more information about this document, please contact:

Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services

[mailbox@aasas.ca](mailto:mailbox@aasas.ca)

[www.aasas.ca](http://www.aasas.ca)

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<sup>i</sup> Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services (2019). *Prevalence of child sexual abuse and sexual assault in Alberta*. [https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/aasas-media-library/AASAS/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Prevalence-of-Sexual-Assault-Childhood-Sexual-Abuse-Summary-of-Key-Findings\\_FINAL.pdf](https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/aasas-media-library/AASAS/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Prevalence-of-Sexual-Assault-Childhood-Sexual-Abuse-Summary-of-Key-Findings_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton (n.d.). *Child & youth: Understanding the issue*. <https://www.sace.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CY-SV-1-Pager.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Statistics Canada (2012). Police-reported sexual offences against children and youth in Canada [Data set]. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2014001/article/14008-eng.htm>

<sup>iv</sup> Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services (2019). *Prevalence of child sexual abuse and sexual assault in Alberta*. [https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/aasas-media-library/AASAS/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Prevalence-of-Sexual-Assault-Childhood-Sexual-Abuse-Summary-of-Key-Findings\\_FINAL.pdf](https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/aasas-media-library/AASAS/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Prevalence-of-Sexual-Assault-Childhood-Sexual-Abuse-Summary-of-Key-Findings_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> Cybertip!ca (n.d.). *Keeping kids safe online while out of school*. <https://www.cybertip.ca/app/en/signup>

<sup>vi</sup> Department of Justice Canada (2010). Criminal Code, Part V: Sexual Offences, Public Morals and Disorderly Conduct. <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-46/page-33.html>

<sup>vii</sup> Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services (2019). *Prevalence of child sexual abuse and sexual assault in Alberta*. [https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/aasas-media-library/AASAS/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Prevalence-of-Sexual-Assault-Childhood-Sexual-Abuse-Summary-of-Key-Findings\\_FINAL.pdf](https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/aasas-media-library/AASAS/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Prevalence-of-Sexual-Assault-Childhood-Sexual-Abuse-Summary-of-Key-Findings_FINAL.pdf)

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<sup>viii</sup> Rotenburg, C. (2017). *Police-reported sexual assaults in Canada, 2009-2014: A statistical profile [Data set]*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2017001/article/54866-eng.htm>

<sup>ix</sup> Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services (2019). *Prevalence of child sexual abuse and sexual assault in Alberta*. [https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/aasas-media-library/AASAS/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Prevalence-of-Sexual-Assault-Childhood-Sexual-Abuse-Summary-of-Key-Findings\\_FINAL.pdf](https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/aasas-media-library/AASAS/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Prevalence-of-Sexual-Assault-Childhood-Sexual-Abuse-Summary-of-Key-Findings_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>x</sup> Johnson, H. (2012). Limits of a criminal justice response: Trends in police and court proceedings in sexual assault. In E. Sheehy (Ed.), *Sexual assault in Canada: Law, legal practice and women's activism* (pp. 613-634). Ottawa, ON: Ottawa University Press.