



## Sexual Violence & COVID-19 from the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services

April 27, 2020

10:30am

AASAS is presenting on sexual violence services across the province and their responses to COVID-19, as well as touching on informal responses.

Presenters:

- Cheryl Wallach: Communications Specialist
- Lisa Oracheski: Criminal Justice Response Coordinator

AASAS is a network of 14 agencies across Alberta. These member agencies are responsible for the frontline services within their communities and regions. However, there are many areas in Alberta that don't yet have specialized sexual assault services.

### **Fullsome response to sexual violence includes:**

- Crisis response
  - With adequate support, victims can proceed effectively through the justice system
  - Services lead to a better experience for victims and help them trust in the system
- Counseling: needed both short and long-term
- Education and prevention
- Police and court support
- Outreach to underserved populations
- Volunteer Engagement
- Systems Navigation
- Coordination and collaboration

AASAS has seen a huge increase in counseling intakes and sessions since 2013.

### **Member agencies:**

- Typically 25% of clients are children and 75% are adults. Children are sometimes seen since the age of 3



- Sexual violence especially at risk for adolescents
- Many adults they see were sexually abused as children and did not disclose until adulthood
- 13-15% of clients are male
- 12-24 free counseling sessions but offer flexibility – provided by psychologists and Masters of Social Work
  - In-person counseling is different than supporting counseling provided over text/chat or from system navigation for police and court support
  - Includes information and referrals, crisis prevention and risk assessment, and help dealing with triggers
  - Longer-term counseling involves setting goals from a feminist framework and in-depth processing of trauma
    - More personalized
    - May include EMDR, narrative therapy, CBT, IBP or SMT

#### **What does AASAS do?**

- They are the main voice: two focuses are awareness and access
- Impacts on Albertans of sexual assault, and ensuring victims have access to supports
- 45% of adult Albertans have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime – many people need these services

#### **AASAS Initiatives:**

- Coordination and Collaboration
  - Inter-agency advisory committees and/or working groups, which includes agencies – grounded in needs of survivors
  - 7 employees facilitate approx. 400 external collaboration meetings each year
- First Responder to Sexual Assault and Abuse Training
  - Throughout Alberta and licensed in Saskatchewan
  - Two day training directed at professionals – survivors are more likely to come forward if they receive adequate support
- Criminal Justice Response to Sexual Assault
  - 6 areas of collaborative action
  - Input on Sexual Violence Investigative Best Practice Guide (May 2018)
    - Addresses misconceptions
    - Emphasizes importance of investigating with collaboration with victim support services
- Community Collaborative Response



- There are large regions that don't have a coordinated response to sexual violence
- Individuals who require support either have to travel distances, rely on non-specialized support or go without
- Have received government funding to support community response in areas previously lacking
- #IBelieveYou Campaign
  - Launched in 2016, intent to increase positive response to survivors
  - Recognition that anyone can be a victim
  - Targeted general public as most survivors turn to informal supports first
  - Significant advance in awareness – language and behaviour change leads to survivors being more likely to seek help
  - Impacted service delivery – increase in new counseling intakes
  - Listen, believe and support
- Alberta's One Line for Sexual Violence
  - May 2019
  - Province-wide central platform for specialized sexual violence services
  - Includes language interpretation, including Cree
  - Staff and volunteers from AASAS member services – can direct caller to most relevant referrals
  - Out of hours, directed to a 24-hour service in Red Deer
  - Helps to overcome regional disparities – same access and quality of support
  - Specialized support is necessary – sexual violence is associated with shame
  - 57% increase in calls since the start of the pandemic

### **Why talk about sexual violence & COVID-19?**

- Research indicates that rates of domestic and sexual violence/abuse increases during times of crisis
  - Including months after the end of the crisis
- Victims may feel cut off from support services
- Emerging evidence supports this trend in countries like China and France

### **Counseling Services**

- Member locations are still serving clients
  - Needs have shifted; counselors can conduct sessions over phone/online
  - Most have shifted from in-person sessions
- 80-90% of clients have transferred to an online format. Some are waiting – not all clients have access/safety to participate in online sessions



- Counselling has shifted to crisis management, coping and containment, dealing with practical life concerns like job loss
  - Less working through trauma as in previous sessions
- Many programs have a waitlist, and services are reaching out to offer online resources
- Overall complexity of client needs has increased – exacerbation of complex trauma symptoms
- Need for research into new best practices

### **Public Education**

- Has shifted to online context – videos and online resources
- Increased engagement on social media
- Some training has been suspended
- Some places are developing online volunteer training
- Support for front-line workers who may be burning out

### **Police and Court Support**

- Programs still available: staff coordinating with agency to share resources across the province
- Maintaining access to clients is a key concern
  - Staff are monitoring changes so they can best serve clients
- Increasing response to general crisis management, as well as enquiries for full spectrum of services
  - Increased anxiety and additional triggers, e.g. if their case will resume

### **What should you do if someone discloses?**

- Recognize: child sexual abuse and adult sexual assault
  - Children most likely to be abused by a family member/someone trusted
    - 14-37% Albertans sexually abused by someone living in their home
  - May be at increased risk for online abuse
  - Children and youth likely to be disconnected from supports – additional barriers to accessing support
  - Youth and adults also likely to be assaulted by someone they know (87%)
    - May be disconnected from natural supports like friends and family
  - Some may not be currently at risk, but mental impacts of historical sexual violence are long lasting and significant
    - May be suppressing needs, but others may be overwhelmed by anxiety which exacerbates trauma symptoms
- Respond: sexual abuse one of the most underreported crimes in Canada (5% reported)



- Many fear they won't be believed/that they will be blamed
- Normalization makes it difficult for survivors to recognize the impact of their experience
- Many don't initially access formal support services – many choose to disclose to friends and family members
- Reference: all Albertans can access One Line
  - 1-866-403-8000
  - Chat via [aasas.ca](https://aasas.ca)
  - Also support for those supporting victims of sexual violence

## Q&A

Are you seeing an increase in intimate partner sexual violence specifically? What additional supports are offered?

- Anecdotally – one centre has had an increase in people reporting domestic violence
  - Not necessarily related to sexual assault they were reporting, but then talked about in-home domestic violence as well
- Services include risk assessment and referral to domestic violence services if appropriate for the need
  - Outreach and support
  - Safety planning
- Intimate partner sexual assault involves partnering with domestic violence-specific sector and sharing resources

Community protocols will be posted on [www.aasas.ca](https://www.aasas.ca)

- Website includes local resources and One Line information
- Information about all member agencies

On One Line, what sort of safety measures are in place to ensure confidentiality and safety are maintained? For example, are there safe words?

- About 17% of requests for service involve intimate partner sexual violence
- Sexual abuse in-home means safety will be an issue
- Sexual violence often involves less imminent danger than domestic violence
  - Safety issues from sexual violence often involve self-harm
  - A standard safe word wouldn't make sense for many clients – often out of the situation; threat of danger is no longer there
  - Lethality is not the same as intimate partner violence



- Different appropriate safety questions would be involved for sexual risk in their own home

Are delays in sexual assault testing kits affecting reports of sexual violence?

- No one has said they haven't been able to access forensic collection in hospital – just the same health survey as everyone else in hospital as per COVID regulations
- Delays have not been significant – services are external to the COVID response
- People may refer themselves to other centres if there are delays
- No reports of refusals or non-access
  - But there are reduced rates of reporting and hospital access – fear of hospital in the current climate
- Many people don't seek out medical care (similar to police reporting) at the best of times. Survivors reluctant to reach out for help even not in a pandemic
  - Minimize their own experiences, and a pandemic will exacerbate that
  - Sexual assault trauma often involves a delayed reaction regardless – trauma symptoms will hide until it's safe for them to resurface

Have there been any disclosures of triggers from clients when being asked to wear a mask... mouth covering?

- Haven't heard but there's a possibility – triggers are very unique to individuals
- Usually want to give survivors whatever makes them most comfortable, which may not be an option currently
- 10 days of isolation after going to the hospital – another reason to potentially not report