



# Domestic Violence Community Protocols COVID-19

Domestic violence rates are increasing the world over as a result of the isolation and quarantine measures imposed during the COVID-19 outbreaks with reports of three-fold increases in China and European jurisdictions just a few weeks and months ahead of Alberta's current experience.

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 bed 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*).

This protocol is designed to support community organizations to address the COVID-19 pandemic, its impact on domestic violence services and supports and the intersections with diverse and unique population groups that are served by community organizations and within communities across Alberta. All sections of this document are applicable for the many diverse populations that experience domestic violence across Alberta and additional consideration sections have been added for working with:

- Cultural Sensitivity Services & First Language Supports
- Elders experiencing abuse
- 2SLGBTQ+ individuals



## PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This document was created as a guide for communities and community organizations as we address the COVID-19 pandemic. It was created to be used as a tool for organizations to support their own processes of creating COVID-19 protocols, determining how their organizations were going to process through these times and what their communities need to set themselves up for success.

This is a working document and should be treated as such. If there are additional sections that it is recommended should be included, population groups that are not represented or information that is outdated please contact Carrie McManus, Director of Innovation and Programs [carrie@sagesse.org](mailto:carrie@sagesse.org) with update recommendations.

We would like to thank the many members of the IMPACT community for the contribution to this document.



## 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
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## 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.
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## 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

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## 2SLGBTQ+ CONSIDERATIONS

Rates of 2SLGBTQ+ domestic violence are comparable to those among heterosexual couples, reported at a rate of 25-33% (*Duke & Davidson, 2009, p. 798*). 2SLGBTQ+ experiences of domestic violence have unique characteristics which lead to barriers often experienced when deciding to or accessing formal or informal support. Organizations should be aware of the barriers experienced by 2SLGBTQ+ communities when accessing domestic violence supports; (i.e. biased perceptions of experiences of violence, binary based responses and services which create barriers for gender variant, non-binary and trans gendered individuals) and consider reviewing their informational materials (i.e., website, social media platforms/strategies, intake and referral processes) and include signifiers such as a rainbow flag, visual representation of 2SLGBTQ+ identities and relationships, verbal signifiers when speaking with clients etc. **if you are able to provide culturally safe services to 2SLGBTQ+ members.** Organizations should also consider connecting with 2SLGBTQ+ resources and agencies to identify referral and connection opportunities for clients within their communities.

In addition to the safety planning protocols above, the following considerations should be made when supporting members of 2SLGBTQ+ communities.

- Clients may experience increased social isolation from supportive 2SLGBTQ+ communities and chosen families
  - Support clients to identify and access available safe informal supports, and support clients engagement with formal supports as necessary
- Clients may or may not be “out” to current available social supports
  - Support and encourage clients resistance and ways of staying connected to their identity that maximize the potential for personal safety
- Clients may be housed/socially isolated/quarantined with an individual/s that do not support the clients gender, gender identity, sexual orientation. Or who may refuse to use the clients correct pronouns or correct name
  - Recommend to clients that they don’t step into difficult conversations right now if possible
  - Support and encourage clients resistance and ways of staying connected to their identity that maximize the potential for personal safety
- Clients may be housed/socially isolated/quarantined with an individual/s that uses “outing” as a form of control. IE., “I will tell your parents if you don’t...”, “Do you want your boss to know...” etc.
  - Recommend to clients that they don’t step into difficult conversations right now if possible
  - Support and encourage clients resistance and ways of staying connected to their identity that maximize the potential for personal safety
- Support clients in understanding that their abuser may use necessary healthcare, including medications and hormones, as a mechanism for power and control by:
  - Restricting or eliminating access to medications and hormones
  - Using the virus as a reason to delay or avoid medical care



## ELDER ABUSE CONSIDERATIONS

There is heightened concern that the isolation protocols put in place to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 increase the potential for elder abuse. Elder abuse is defined as any action or inaction by self or others that jeopardizes the health or well-being of any older adult. Forms of elder abuse include financial, emotional, physical, sexual, medication and neglect.

As older adults are more at risk for developing serious illness from the COVID-19 virus, there is an increased need for them to practice physical distancing and isolation. This isolation and distancing however, may be with someone using violence making them more vulnerable to abuse. Older adults are likely to continue to experience abuse during the pandemic. In addition, seniors are at a heightened risk for financial abuse/scams while navigating COVID-19 due to numerous vulnerabilities including; cognition issues, social isolation, technology issues and lack of awareness.

Concerns for caregiver stress may arise during the pandemic, as natural and community supports may not be able to access the home to provide care for the older adult, and the caregiver does not have access to respite support. Older adults may need to access alternative shelter models (hospital, facilities, emergency shelters) due to safety considerations associated with elder abuse, being unable to care for themselves, and increased support to meet basic needs and mental health.

For information on resources in your geographic area and or to learn more about elder abuse please see the following link: [www.alberta.ca/get-help-elder-abuse](http://www.alberta.ca/get-help-elder-abuse)



## ETHNO-CULTURAL DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

In most cases, family violence that occurs among immigrant families is caused by stress related to overcoming barriers to settlement and integration. Inability to meet these needs, unique circumstances, vulnerabilities and barriers related to pre-migration, migration and resettlement intensify abuse experiences<sup>1</sup>. Immigrant women are at a higher risk due to language and cultural barriers, poverty and lack of information on available resources and understanding of gender equality in Canada<sup>2</sup>. This is further intensified during the times when families are staying home due to Covid-19 pandemic social distancing.

### **Culturally Sensitivity Services & First Language Support:**

The disparity between collective cultural values and prevalent individualistic belief systems complicate help-seeking behavior among immigrant and refugee women<sup>3</sup>. Additionally language proficiency barriers complicate access to social and community services<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/05/19/calgary-domestic-violence\\_n\\_10050738.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/05/19/calgary-domestic-violence_n_10050738.html)

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Women's Foundation

<sup>3</sup> (Guruge, 2006; Lorenzetti et al. 2014)

<sup>4</sup> (Lorenzetti & Este, 2010; Sharma, 2001; Smith, 2004)

Culturally sensitive services and first language support are crucial factors to ensure that services offered (at this testing times) are inclusive, received positively, the client fully understands the information shared and are able to fully communicate their needs.

Key points to keep in mind when providing culturally sensitive supports:

- The way ethno-cultural women experience DV is very unique depending on their ethnicity and nationality, which impacts also their fears and the risks they are ready to take; it also determines how she responds to violence and the approach she uses to keep herself safe<sup>5</sup>
- Women from ethno-cultural population may not leave the relationship but only access service providers for help and explore strategies<sup>6</sup>
- It is critical to understand the legal rights of the immigrant and refugee population we are working with, to access the available supports and formal services for them
- Immigrant and refugee women are over-represented in the lowest-paying and least stable jobs; lack of access to sufficient income can create economic dependence on an abuser and make it more difficult for women to leave
- Consultation with religious clergy and community leaders can be an invaluable resource
- Individual support that is customized to the unique needs of these women and incorporates spirituality in order to reduce the negative consequences
- Engagement and support for men to ensure that they have the capacity to cope with the stresses associated to circumstances and respect gender equality in their relationships
- Gender and/or culturally specific support groups enabling participants with similar challenges to share and learn from each other's experience
- Provide translated resources about domestic violence and other available services and resources for immigrant and refugee women<sup>7</sup>

Culturally sensitive supports can be accessed through immigrant serving settlement organizations within each city. Settlement organizations provide information and guidance to newcomers. Staff often speak several languages and they provide services at no or low cost. These organizations have counsellors who are able to offer counselling sessions in first language over the phone and other virtual platforms.

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<sup>5</sup> Davies, Lyon & Monti-Catania, 1998; Lindhorst et al., 2005

<sup>6</sup> Davies, Lyon & Monti-Catania, 1998; Davies, 2009

<sup>7</sup> Moynihan et al 2008



### Safety Planning Considerations:

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

- Immigrant and refugee women may be scared of accessing police and other government agencies because of their own negative experiences with law in their home country.
- Non-status immigrant and refugee women may also hesitate to contact the law and government agencies for fear of deportation<sup>8</sup>
- Immigrant and refugee women may be sponsored by the perpetrator; develop rapport and trust with them so they discuss their status<sup>9</sup>.
- Many immigrant women may be living in a joint family setting with one or more abusive individuals around her; this may include the in-laws and extended family members and relatives; it would be important to keep in mind for service providers to ensure that:
  - Client is not surrounded by other family members; this will allow her to understand the information better
  - Client phone, email and text communication is not controlled by other family members
  - Client has control of her important legal documents including her passport and other immigration documents
  - Client is requiring the first language support and is assured that the service provided will be culturally sensitive
- If connecting with clients during a video call think about a hand signal or safe word to signal for help; i.e. the image below from The Canadian Women's Foundation or a safe word such as "teddy bear" that is used at the beginning of every call to establish identity and ensure safety.



<sup>8</sup> (Moynihan et al., 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Bhuyan, Shim & Valgapudi, 2010



## 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](mailto:Carrie@Sagesse.org).

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

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