

Domestic Violence Response

A Community Framework for Maximizing Women's Safety



This document consists of eight principles and key questions to help communities develop or enhance their coordinated response to domestic violence.

Developed by
Victim Services and Crime Prevention Division
Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General

in consultation with
Victim Service Programs

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Introduction

As the centre of responsibility in government for violence against women issues, the Victim Services and Crime Prevention Division (the Division) of the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General is committed to a coordinated, cross-sectoral response to the serious problem of domestic violence.¹

Many communities in British Columbia have developed effective strategies and maintained decade-long relationships between sectors. As our understanding of the complex nature of domestic violence has evolved, so too has our understanding of the ways to solve these problems. It has been through community leadership, research, and the hard work of constructive and critical dialogue that we have been able to examine practical ways to identify problematic practices and demonstrate concrete methods to resolve the problems, change policy, increase services and improve responses to maximize the safety of women and children. Experience has shown that coordination is key to enhancing the safety of women and their children and can be enhanced by appropriate policies and protocols that are effectively implemented (Pence and McDonnell, 2000).

To assist communities in enhancing their coordinated response to domestic violence, the Division has developed this Framework, consisting of eight principles and a questionnaire for identifying strengths, assessing progress and identifying gaps at the community level. The focus of this Framework is violence within intimate relationships, including both physical and sexual violence and the impact of such violence on children; it does not address other forms of family violence such as child abuse or abuse of older people.

Domestic violence is different from other crimes because the victim usually has had, or is currently in, an intimate relationship with the abuser. Domestic violence is a power-based crime², most often based on gender. The power and control dynamics make this crime particularly dangerous for the victim and uniquely challenging for the justice system. The likelihood of repeat violence is high; the abuser is known ahead of time; the victim's ties with the abuser are complex, typically not ending with intervention; and often the victim's fears of proceeding result in retractions of her initial report. Furthermore, whenever the woman has dependent children, any risk to the mother is a risk to the children. Given victims' particular vulnerability at this time, it is crucial to take into account issues of cultural or other forms of diversity that may make it especially challenging for victims to access services to keep them and their children safe.

Building on the Work of Communities

The Division supports the collective wisdom of communities to promote safety, and offender accountability through operational partnerships and coordinated community responses. Since the mid-1980s, an ongoing dialogue among justice system partners, women's advocates, and victims of domestic violence has resulted in important changes at the legislative, policy, and program level. Community coordination committees, which embrace partnerships between the justice, health and social service systems, are an example of a model that promotes dialogue on how to improve women's safety, how to accumulate knowledge about the management of cases, and how to identify gaps in the flow of services to victims.

Purpose of the Framework

The purpose of this Framework is to aid communities in the ongoing development of an optimal, client-centred response to domestic violence. This Framework can be used in a number of ways:

- ▶ to support the development of best practices to keep women and their children safe
- ▶ to assist in the development of community safety or needs assessments and identification of strengths, progress and gaps at the local level
- ▶ to guide the development of a more coordinated response at the local level
- ▶ to guide the development of a more effective justice response at the local level

This document is intended to be used at the local level to aid the development of comprehensive, coordinated responses to domestic violence that fit the unique needs of each community. The ways in which these principles will be applied and implemented will vary depending on the nature of the community, including its composition, geographic location, and history.



Gender, Culture and Immigration

In order to reflect the gendered nature of domestic violence, this document, like British Columbia's Violence Against Women in Relationships (VAWR) Policy, uses gender-specific language. However, this gender-specific approach is not intended to obscure the fact that violence within intimate relationships can also be perpetrated against males in same-sex relationships, males in heterosexual relationships and women in lesbian relationships.

Cultural diversity should be considered as an integral factor within each of the principles included in this Framework. Domestic violence occurs in every culture and many of the dynamics of domestic violence and the needs of victims cut across cultural and immigrant status. Nonetheless, there are important cultural and immigration issues that should be considered in responding to domestic violence (Light, 2007). It has been suggested that because of the particular dynamics that may make Aboriginal, immigrant or refugee women especially vulnerable to ongoing

violence or discourage them from seeking help and services, Aboriginal, immigrant, and refugee women may be at particularly high risk of the impacts of prolonged and serious violence. In order to facilitate victims' safety, community responses should be sensitive to these dynamics.

Why a Gendered Approach?

- *The majority of victims of police-reported spousal violence continue to be females, accounting for 83% of victims in 2007³*
- *Women are much more likely than men to be victims of spousal homicide. In 2007, almost 4 times as many women were killed by a current or former spouse as men⁴.*
- *In domestic violence situations, women are twice as likely as men to be injured, three times more likely to fear for their lives, twice as likely to suffer serious injury and six times as likely to seek medical attention⁵.*
- *From 1999 to 2004, it is estimated that more than 100,000 women in British Columbia were victims of spousal violence⁶.*
- *During that same period, 4 out of 10 women in Canada reported that their children witnessed their abuse⁷.*

Children

A child's safety and well-being are integrally linked with the safety of the mother. Children can be exposed to abuse of their mothers in many ways, including when they see their mother assaulted and demeaned, hear loud conflict and violence or see the aftermath (e.g., injuries). Children might also be used by an abusive partner to perpetuate the abuse, for example, threatening violence against the children, talking inappropriately to children about their mother's behaviour and holding the children hostage or abducting them. Child homicide is not uncommon in domestic violence cases (Cunningham and Baker, 2007).

Interventions and coordinated responses to domestic violence require an understanding of the complex dynamics of power and control where children are involved. As in all domestic violence cases, an effective response requires that all systems work together in a coordinated manner (Representative for Children and Youth, 2009). Dynamics of power and control need to be considered as an integral factor within each principle in order to maximize women's safety. For further information see the Aid to Safety Assessment and Planning (ASAP) manual.

Evidence-Based Principles for Maximizing Women's Safety

The following evidence-based principles⁸ are central to the safety of women and children who are victims of violence and can be used as the basis for a community framework for maximizing safety:

1. Focus on risk assessment and safety planning as strategies;
2. Apply a gender lens when developing and implementing responses;
3. Promote coordination as a 'best practice' in responding to domestic violence;
4. Promote responsiveness of services including timeliness, proactivity, advocacy, empowerment and respectful treatment;
5. Facilitate effective and appropriate information-sharing while maintaining principles of confidentiality;
6. Develop strategies to address barriers to domestic violence victims' participation in the justice system;
7. Include a focus on prevention; and
8. Build monitoring, evaluation, and accountability into all responses.

Domestic Violence Response Community Framework

Effective Strategies

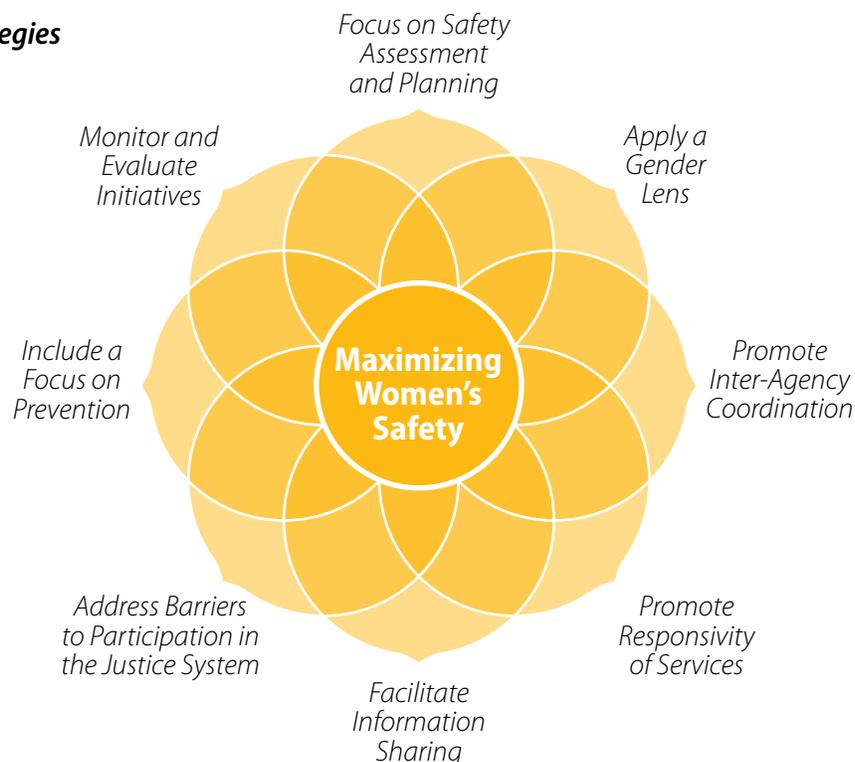


Figure 1
Evidence-based Principles for Maximizing Women's Safety



Focus on Risk Assessment and Safety Planning as Strategies

The goal of victim-centred risk assessment and safety planning is to identify and take coordinated steps to prevent harm and lethality where compelling circumstances exist which may affect a victim's health and safety. Not all responders need to conduct a formal risk assessment with a woman who is a victim of domestic violence but all responders should focus on the safety of women and their children by putting their mind to the issues of risk assessment and safety planning and assuring themselves that an ongoing, coordinated approach to risk assessment and safety planning is in place.

Information about risk should be communicated in a timely manner among responders on an ongoing basis. Responders need to be aware of evidence-informed risk and safety factors and use validated approaches as a structure to inform their professional judgement and act as prompts for further questioning, analysis and risk management. For those responders who undertake formal risk assessment, there is a need for validated tools that are easy to use, flexible, and appropriate to their specific circumstances. In British Columbia, recognized comprehensive risk and safety tools include the Aid to Safety Assessment and Planning (ASAP) and the Spouse Assault Risk Assessment (SARA).

Important as these tools may be in assessing risk, research on their efficacy is ongoing and caution must be applied in utilizing these tools to predict offender behaviour. Professional judgment of those working with the case, including police, will determine whether the case will be designated as high-risk.



Apply a Gender Lens when Developing and Implementing Responses

A gender lens should be applied to all responses to domestic violence in order to ensure the safety of women and their children. Responses to domestic violence should acknowledge that domestic violence is a power-based crime in which, generally, the male in an intimate relationship exercises power and control over the female. The abusive power and control dynamic results in high-risk situations for victims and their children because it is used to frighten, silence, and isolate victims and prevent them from leaving or seeking help. As the dynamics of domestic violence often result in the erosion of women's self-esteem and in their diminished ability to act, empowerment should be a central consideration in any response to domestic violence.





Promote Coordination as a 'Best Practice' in Responding to Domestic Violence

A coordinated local approach to domestic violence includes working together across disciplines to encourage an integrated and consistent approach to the victim, the children and the offender. Such an approach includes the justice, health care, child protection, social services, immigrant settlement, and education systems, as well as those victim services specifically addressing the needs of victims of domestic violence and of diverse groups. Major reports on violence against women and children over the past 25 years have confirmed the crucial importance of coordination of all sectors, at all levels, across the entire continuum of the response to domestic violence.

A coordinated response is particularly important in supporting women who are fearful of proceeding through the justice system and victims who are marginalized or particularly vulnerable. There are coordination strategies and models of collaborative approaches to domestic violence that appear to be successful, including violence against women coordinating committees, inter-agency meetings, inter-agency coordination protocols, inter-disciplinary teams, court response steering committees and Domestic Violence Units. A coordinated approach to services for offenders also appears to have a large impact in reducing re-offending.

Services that may be available in your community and can potentially be coordinated include:

Justice System Supports

- *Victim Service programs (both police-based and community-based)*
- *Local police services*
- *Legal services*
- *Crown Counsel services*
- *Community corrections and probation services*
- *Family Justice Services*
- *Assaultive Men's Treatment Programs*
- *Community crime prevention initiatives*

Child Supports

- *Child care services*
- *Child protection services*
- *Family Preservation and Reunification programs*
- *Children Who Witness Abuse Counselling*
- *Sexual Abuse Intervention Programs*
- *Educational programs (through local schools or school boards)*

Health and Social Supports

- *Stopping the Violence Counselling*
- *Outreach and Multicultural Outreach Services for women fleeing violence*
- *Transition House programs (including Safe Homes and Second-Stage housing)*
- *Health services (including Sexual Assault Response Teams)*
- *Job training (including Bridging Employment Programs)*
- *Immigrant settlement services*
- *Language interpretation services*
- *Aboriginal Friendship Centres*
- *Community Response Networks for assisting abused older adults*



Promote responsivity of services including Timeliness, Proactivity, Advocacy, Empowerment and Respectful Treatment

A prompt response to victims and offenders and a speedy justice process appear to increase women's safety and willingness to proceed with charges and enhance the impact of consequences for the abuser. Proactively informing victims and their children about, and referring them to, available services, for example, local community services designed to meet their specific needs, is one way of creating a safety net. Proactive referrals are necessary because many victims, including women from various diversity groups, are unaware of the seriousness of their circumstances and of available services or how to access them or are too traumatized to know what they need to do.

Advocacy is an important factor in helping to empower victims of domestic violence to effectively use the systems that can assist them. The most effective responses to domestic violence are those that are most empowering to the victims; that is, those services that enable women to improve their lives and keep themselves safe (Russell, 2002). A respectful response to a victim's needs is one that takes into account the individual circumstances of each victim, including gender, socio-economic factors, culture, language, immigration, sexual orientation, age, physical and mental disabilities, mental health status, geographic location, family situation and lifestyle issues. A respectful response is also a response that builds on victims' survival skills and resilience and takes into consideration their children.



Facilitate Effective and Appropriate Information-Sharing while Maintaining Principles of Confidentiality

A key element of victim empowerment and safety is the timely sharing of information, both with the victim and among service providers, while adhering to principles of confidentiality. Consistent, proactive, timely information-sharing with the victim and among sectors is a crucial component of a coordinated response to risk assessment and women's safety at the local level. Accessibility of information, including provision of information in the language of the victim, is an important consideration.

Protection of people's rights to confidentiality is also key for victims' safety. All federal and provincial freedom of information and privacy legislation must be adhered to in responding to the needs of victims of domestic violence. Legislation, policy and practice must be interpreted and utilized in a consistent, coordinated fashion to ensure that proactive referral to victim services, including community-based victim services where they exist, is facilitated. Specific safeguards for confidentiality and disclosure can be developed in situations where system-based and community services are working in collaborative partnerships or are developing or participating in high risk domestic violence response teams. Information-sharing protocols can assist communities to effectively share information, adhere to principles of confidentiality and maintain a focus on victim safety.



Develop strategies to address barriers to Domestic Violence Victims' Participation in the Justice System

A victim's reluctance or lack of readiness to participate in the justice process is most often a result of fear – of further violence; of the consequences for herself, her children or her husband; or of the police or the courts. Domestic violence victims' fears of reporting or of proceeding through the justice process are based on the realities of their lives, including their experience of trauma. Barriers to victims' participation in the justice process may be increased by social isolation and a lack of information about available options, particularly for women who are marginalized.

Victims often find the system overwhelming and rational decision-making without consistent and comprehensive support can be very difficult. Misunderstanding women's fears of proceeding or lack of readiness to proceed as hostility to the justice process may result in serious negative consequences for women and their children. Therefore, victims who are fearful of proceeding require more rather than less service. It is particularly important that a coordinated approach be adopted to respond to victims' fears about the criminal justice system.

As part of their struggle to exist within a violent relationship, women engage in many different survival strategies, such as recanting their reports of violence or asking for changes in bail conditions. Any recantation or request for bail variance must be dealt with in a systematic, coordinated manner by justice personnel who have training in the dynamics of abuse and in the application of the Violence Against Women in Relationships (VAWIR) Policy.



Include a Focus on Prevention

The need to prevent future violence is integral to all responses to domestic violence. Prevention can be viewed as a continuum: preventing violence from happening in the first instance; crisis intervention to prevent continuation of the abuse; and rehabilitation or treatment to prevent the recurrence of abuse.

Effective prevention strategies could include:

- ▶ educational programs targeting children and youth exposed to domestic violence or exhibiting aggressive behaviour that focus on healthy relationships and conflict resolution;
- ▶ public education initiatives in the community to raise awareness, change attitudes, enhance gender equality and mobilize communities to help prevent domestic violence, including initiatives directed at specific cultural communities;
- ▶ early intervention in situations of domestic abuse to prevent further violence to women and their children;
- ▶ strategies to reduce recidivism including systematic safety planning;
- ▶ information, education and empowerment initiatives for victims to help them understand the nature and dynamics of domestic violence, empower themselves and get help; and
- ▶ working with men to prevent violence against women.



Build Monitoring, Evaluation, and Accountability into all Responses

Monitoring, evaluation and accountability are key elements of a response to domestic violence to assess the impact of policies and programs and help ensure program and policy effectiveness, offender accountability and victim safety. Planning, budgeting and timelines for development and implementation of new initiatives, including community initiatives, should include consideration of the need for monitoring and evaluation.

Next Steps

This Framework of principles is intended to be used as a tool to assist communities in the development of a comprehensive, coordinated approach to address domestic violence at a local level.

Further steps for communities might include:

- ▶ Use of the Framework as a basis of discussion and analysis within local violence against women coordinating committees
- ▶ Use of the Framework as a tool to assist in visioning, gap identification, service and program planning, program evaluation or problem-solving at the local level

The list of questions that follows may assist you in these next steps or in other steps that your community may choose to take to enhance its response to domestic violence (see also attached worksheet).

Domestic Violence Response Framework Questionnaire

There is a tremendous sense of possibility and strength in the work that is being done in communities to keep women and their children safe. For each of the principles in this Framework, the following questions will assist you at your local level to assess strengths, implementation progress and to identify potential gaps in your community's response.

- 1. What is our community currently doing to address this principle? How is this principle incorporated into our responses to domestic violence?***
- 2. What are the gaps/needs in our community in terms of implementing this principle?***
- 3. What resources does our community have? What are the assets we can build on? Could our community be approaching this work differently? Can we change the way we work together to improve collaboration?***
- 4. What is our community's priority in terms of improving implementation of this principle?***
- 5. What will be our community's next steps to improve our implementation of this principle?***
- 6. Who will take these steps, what specifically will they do, and by when?***

A systematic application of this list of questions to each principle in this Framework by a collaborative group of domestic violence service providers may assist in the development and implementation of a comprehensive community planning process, with the goal of working toward a coordinated community response to domestic violence that keeps women and their children safe.

About the Division

The Victim Services and Crime Prevention Division, Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General is the centre of responsibility in government for victim services, crime prevention, and violence against women. With the August 1, 2009 realignment of counselling and outreach services for women and children fleeing violence, Division funded programs and services now provide a more comprehensive and integrated response to victims of violence in British Columbia. Division funded programs include:

- ▶ Police-based Victim Services
- ▶ Community-based Victim Services
- ▶ Crime Victim Assistance Program
- ▶ Victim Safety Unit
- ▶ Victim Court Support Program
- ▶ VictimLINK 1-800 Helpline
- ▶ Stopping the Violence Counselling
- ▶ Children Who Witness Abuse Counselling
- ▶ Outreach and Multicultural Outreach Services
- ▶ Community Coordination for Women's Safety Program

For additional information and resources visit www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/victim_services.

Endnotes

- 1 A number of terms are commonly used to refer to violence against women in intimate relationships. Use of the term “domestic violence” is not intended to obscure the generally gendered nature of this crime. This framework recognizes that women are far more likely than men to be the victims of serious domestic violence and that men are far more likely to be the abusers (Statistics Canada, 2005, 2006).
- 2 A power-based crime is one that stems from a dynamic of abuse of power. While that dynamic may be based on a range of factors, including gender, age, relationship or ability, it is a dynamic based on fear and a sense of powerlessness that ‘enables’ the more powerful person to victimize the less powerful.
- 3 Statistics Canada. Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2009. p. 5.
- 4 Ibid. p.6.
- 5 Statistics Canada. Measuring Violence Against Women: Statistical Trends 2006. p. 19.
- 6 Ibid. p. 34.
- 7 Ibid. p. 33.
- 8 These principles were derived from research in the field of domestic violence, as well as consultation during ViSDA (Victim Services Delivery Analysis) forums undertaken by the Victim Services and Crime Prevention Division in October and November 2008.

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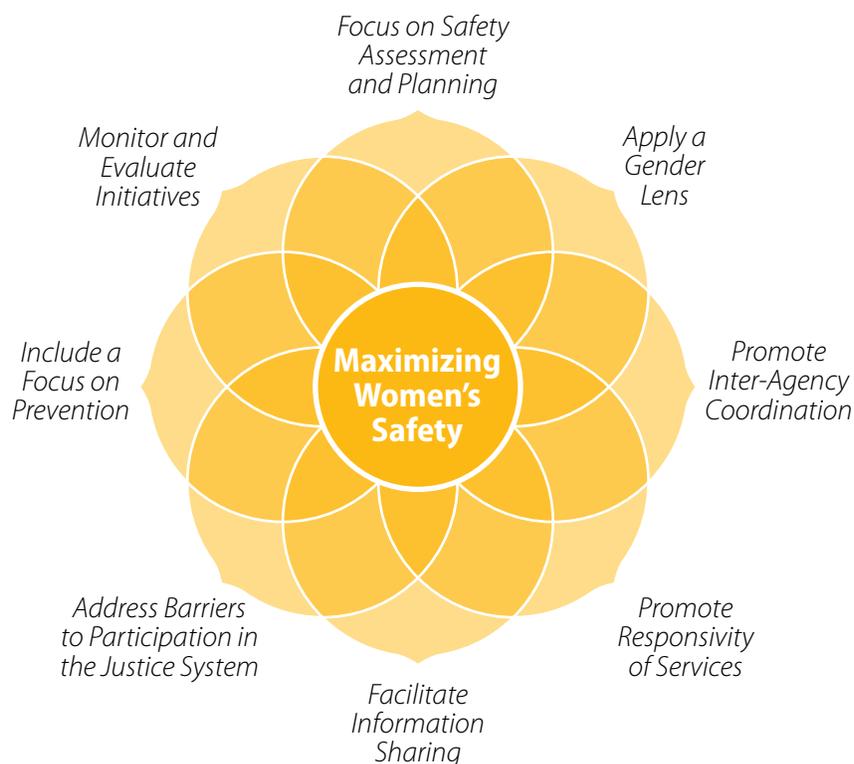
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Worksheet – Evidence-Based Principles for Maximizing Women’s Safety

Domestic Violence Response Community Framework

Effective Strategies



Key Questions

1. What is our community doing to address these principles? How are these principles incorporated into our responses to domestic violence?
2. What are the gaps/needs in our community in terms of implementing these principles?
3. What resources does our community have? What are the assets we can build on? Could our community be approaching this work differently? Can we change the way we work together to collaborate?
4. What is our community's priority in terms of improving implementation of these principles?
5. What will be our community's next steps to improve our implementation of this principle?
6. Who will take these steps, what specifically will they do, and by when?

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