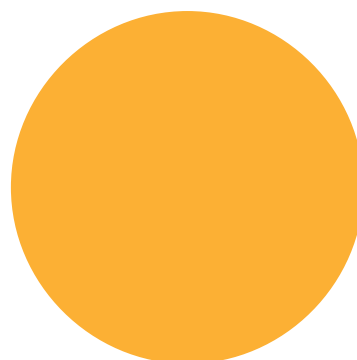# Supporting the
SUPPORTERS

How friends and families can
help to prevent domestic violence

Elena Esina, Lana Wells, Lynne Koziey

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**THE PROJECT TO END
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

Buying into the belief that domestic violence is a private matter between two people rather than something for which we all need to take responsibility means that we ignore one of the most important ways to prevent violence and offer meaningful support.

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Definitions

Victim: for the purposes of this paper, a victim is defined as a woman who is experiencing domestic violence.

Societal Response: all individuals, families, systems and institutions of society have a role and responsibility to prevent and end domestic violence.

Informal Networks: encompass friends, family (including siblings and extended family), neighbours and community members who have either a formal or casual relationship with the victim. For the purposes of this paper, friends and families is the focus.

Primary Prevention: an approach that aims to stop domestic violence before it starts by indentifying risks and intervening before violence occurs.[5]

While formal services and supports are critical, research shows that informal networks – including friends and family – can play a pivotal role in preventing domestic violence. The benefits victims receive as a result of positive, appropriate responses from members of their informal networks are many, ranging from improved mental and physical health, fewer suicide attempts and a heightened willingness to contact formal support.[1]

The long history of domestic violence appearing to be a private issue, albeit one with significant and costly public consequences, is especially relevant in Alberta, which has the second-highest rate of self-reported spousal violence in Canada – well above the national average.[2]

Despite this, most domestic violence service organizations in Alberta are designed to offer services that support victims and perpetrators. Little attention is focused on supporting the informal networks' role and responsibility to help prevent and end domestic violence. This underscores the need to better understand the benefits of a societal response to domestic violence, one that educates, supports and builds the capacity of informal networks through partnerships with government, professionals and community-based organizations.[3]

The aim of this issue brief – the first in a series examining effective societal responses to prevent domestic violence – is to explore the value of informal networks in victims' lives, how best to support those networks to effectively respond to the needs of the victim, the perceived reluctance of many friends and family to intervene in what is often viewed as a private matter, and how Alberta organizations that specialize in domestic violence can start to build customized education programs and support geared towards friends and families, as well as the general public. Further, this paper provides an overview of how friends and families can play a key role in primary prevention – stopping the violence before it ever starts.

Finally, it is important to note that while we understand informal networks can include neighbours, co-workers, faith and community leaders, as well as friends and families, for the purposes of this paper we will focus exclusively on those often closest to the victims – friends and families. While we recognize that men and children are also victims of domestic violence, this paper is specifically about violence against women and women as victims of abuse.

> "The most compelling reason to engage friends and families is because they already are the people who are primarily supporting survivors."[4]

EXPLORING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INFORMAL NETWORKS

In the last three decades, a substantial body of work has been produced that explores various responses to domestic violence. Innovative approaches implemented around the world include specialized domestic violence legislation, domestic violence courts, justice and community-based coordinated approaches, child and family justice centres, and collaborative partnerships between systems, service providers and governments.

While the sheer volume of this work serves to bring the issue of domestic violence into the public realm and demonstrates a shift in social responses to domestic violence, the focus remains on victims and perpetrators – most often in the form of a heterosexual couple – and often fails to acknowledge the critical role informal networks, specifically friends and families, play in the prevention of abuse and recovery of victims.

The significance of these networks has recently been highlighted in at least three studies. The Canadian General Social Survey, conducted in 2009, found that seven out of 10 victims of domestic violence turned to family, friends, neighbours, co-workers and spiritual advisors for help.[6]

Meanwhile, a 2011 Canadian population-based study found that 80 per cent of 922 female respondents who experienced at least one incident of domestic violence in the five years preceding the survey used their informal networks for support.[7] Finally, another study, based on 696 women and 471 men who experienced domestic violence, found that 80.5 per cent of women and 57.1 per cent of men used their informal networks for help.[8]

Given the number of victims who turn to members of their informal networks for help before, during and after a crisis, evidence suggests a growing need to improve the capacity of these networks to ensure their responses are sensitive, appropriate and effective. Research shows that survivors of domestic violence clearly distinguish between positive and negative reactions of their friends and families.[9] Negative reactions can damage the victim's mental health,[10] multiplying her stress and shame, while positive support has proven to be beneficial (please see sidebar: The Benefits of Positive Informal Support for Victims). This highlights the importance of those people who are in contact with the victim and have the potential to help diminish the traumatic affects of abuse.

The Benefits of Positive Informal Support for Victims[11]

- Improved mental and physical health
- Increased safety
- Readiness and ability to contact formal support
- Increased sense of worth
- Active role in ending domestic violence
- Improved quality of life
- Reduced level of distress, depression, anxiety and PTSD symptoms
- Fewer suicide attempts
- Less likelihood to experience repeated abuse over the course of a year

Interestingly, the significant role informal networks can play is so compelling, some experts have suggested creating "new networks and relationships for families through the use of volunteers and peer group experiences,"[12] recognizing that by mobilizing "informal helpers as active participants in interventions,"[13] victims could be better served and supported.

ALBERTANS' AWARENESS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DOESN'T TRANSLATE INTO HELP

In 2012, 900 Albertans were asked if they believed that family violence occurs in their communities or local area.[14] Ten per cent stated that it occurs 'a lot' and 38 per cent said 'a fair bit'. In other words, almost half of Albertans believed that family violence happened in their local community quite often. In addition to three per cent who said that they 'do not know' whether family violence occurs locally, only five per cent thought it did not happen at all.[15] Further, a recent study commissioned by the Canadian Women's Foundation found that "over the course of their lives, 67 per cent of Canadians have known a woman who has been physically or sexually abused, with Alberta having the highest reported incidence at 74 per cent."[16]

However, many of the women who are being abused may not seek help from their informal network, experiencing shame, fearing judgement and not wanting to be a burden.[17] For those who do go to their friends and family, many do so reluctantly, believing they have depleted the good will that exists or have burdened their support network unnecessarily. Others found that when they did go to their informal network for support, it was unhelpful or harmful.[18]

Understandably, many friends and families are themselves wary about intervening because they don't have the skills, capacity and/or will to intervene and support the victim. This wariness to intervene can be attributed to several factors, including:

- fear of repercussions or being injured while intervening;
- social and cultural norms and beliefs (such as not interfering with the sanctity of marriage and that children should be raised in a two-parent household);
- helplessness; and
- lack of practical information about ways to effectively handle disclosures and support the victim.[19]

This reluctance is backed up by the numbers. A 2010 survey examining Albertan's beliefs about why members of informal networks failed to intervene found that 46 per cent stated fear of repercussions or getting hurt; 40 per cent did not want to get involved; 15 per cent saw it as a private matter; and 14 per cent did not know how to help or what resources exist.[20]

Of note is that when survey respondents were offered a set of five reasons that prevented them from getting involved, a full 80 per cent in 2010 and 77 per cent in 2012 reported that in a family violence situation they are always or often "unsure of what action to take."[21]

This highlights that the experiences and needs of informal networks are crucial to consider given the tremendous amount of "work" that is done by them once domestic violence is disclosed.[22] In the above study, the researchers acknowledged that "(s)taying engaged with the survivor and/or abusive partner was a long and exhausting process that often felt unrewarding and frustrating."[23]

Due to a lack of understanding among professionals, and the relatively few studies that specifically explore the needs and experiences of informal networks, we as a society are failing to address the complexity of their situation.

However, friends and family members who understand the need to reach out, and are taught how to do so safely and skillfully, can help reduce the shame involved with disclosure and ensure that they don't inadvertently hurt or further traumatize the victim in their attempt to improve the situation.

MAKING INFORMAL NETWORKS PART OF THE EQUATION

Friends and families need to be provided with appropriate knowledge and information – as well as with support and skills – to ensure that they can provide help to the victim safely and effectively. Given that helping victims can often be a long and exhausting process,[24] the more resources and "intervention tools"[25] informal networks have to draw upon, the greater the possibility of reducing the stress that is often involved in providing help. Concrete steps taken by Alberta organizations to reach out and provide targeted services to friends and families would tap into the invaluable resource that exists among a victim's informal network, going a long way to preventing and reducing the rates of domestic violence.

For organizations that specifically work with victims, it is important for them to explore whether their current services respond to and serve members of informal networks,

and if not, how they can work differently to ensure informal networks are incorporated into their practices. Research supports the importance of organizations offering both clinical and support services for informal networks. For example, a Washington State-based domestic violence fatality review, which examined 84 cases involving 135 fatalities between 1998 and 2010, illustrates just how crucial it is for members of informal networks to have the skills and abilities to help victims. The review found that although almost all of the victims murdered had confided in at least one person, those people did not have the capacity to offer the help required.[27]

Similarly, findings of the Ontario Domestic Violence Death Review Annual Reports[28] led to recommendations to heighten public education and awareness about domestic violence and appropriate responses.[29] In 2004, an educational protocol[30] went a step further, focussing on face-to-face engagement with family and friends rather than simply providing written information and launching a public awareness campaign. The protocol's author suggests that organizations interested in working with informal networks first make it known that those networks are welcome to use their services.[31] The protocol also includes instructions for community organizations, crisis lines (including support and information lines), community advocacy, community education, shelter programs and transitional housing to engage informal networks.

WORKING WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILIES TO HELP STOP ABUSE BEFORE IT STARTS

It's important to note that friends and families are not only valuable during and after a woman has been abused, but also before the violence starts. Informal networks can be key partners in primary prevention given that they play a crucial role in sharing information, shaping norms about relationships and violence and, in turn, influencing behaviours.[32] Research shows that women who receive more support from informal networks have a decreased risk of experiencing domestic violence in the first place,[33] especially if that support occurs "before relationships become violent when initial problems or issues begin to emerge."[34]

"...whilst agencies may know little, informal networks know far more. If we are ever to have a truly co-ordinated community response, citizens must be provided with the knowledge, confidence and information to recognize and name coercive control and act on it.[26]

Because members of informal networks – especially family members and close social and personal relationships – are hugely influential as the "primary locations where health-promoting information, skills and choices could be shared and modeled" positive, supportive relationships within these networks can mean the difference between experiencing abuse and not.[35]

Beyond Alberta service organizations, additional opportunities to build capacity of friends and family exist in schools,[36] workplaces[37] and places of worship.[38] These three key settings have emerged in the research as strategic entry points for enhancing the knowledge, confidence and skills of children, youth, friends, leaders and co-workers to stop the violence before it starts.

ENGAGING INFORMAL NETWORKS IN VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Most domestic violence organizations in Alberta do not offer services that explicitly support members of informal networks or invite friends and families of victims or perpetrators to use their services. While many organizations provide some information on their websites, such as how to recognize the signs of abuse, at the time of this research there were only a few domestic violence organizations that specifically identified services and supports for friends and families.

Public education campaigns around the world that have illustrated success in educating and changing behaviour among friends and families may prove to be good examples from which Alberta organizations can draw ideas and inspiration. One such campaign in the United States is Florida's Project Courage, a domestic violence prevention program whose goal is to engage all members of a community – youth, businesses, faith leaders, health professionals, first responders, and government and civic leaders. Friends and family are also an important part of the prevention.

In addition to raising awareness, Project Courage offers training programs that emphasize the Three R's – Recognize, Respond and Refer.[39] Participants are taught to recognize what abuse is, respond safely and skillfully to the victim and perpetrator, and refer the victim, as well as friends and families, to the appropriate service organization.

The project found that changes occurred in the thoughts and behaviours of participants, including the belief that they had a responsibility to help victims of abuse and felt comfortable doing so. Significantly, 100 per cent of the community participants believed that it was their business if abuse was happening inside a home. "These types of changes are the first steps to creating social change as people must first understand that abuse is a problem and then acquire knowledge as to why and how it is a problem and what they can do about it as members of a community."[40]

Closer to home, Neighbours, Friends and Families (2010), was launched in Ontario to increase awareness through community education, train-the-trainer workshops and training for members of Ontario's public service. Evaluation findings for the last five years (2007-2012) showed significant increases in participants' knowledge of the warning signs and risk factors of domestic violence, their ability to provide support and referrals to the victim and perpetrator, and empowerment to provide support.[41] Further, of the 602 participants, 95 per cent said that they "would be likely to intervene if a neighbour, friend or family member was being physically assaulted by their partner,"[42] once again highlighting the benefits of engaging a victim's informal network and preparing them to provide appropriate support when needed.

The campaign, which conducts ongoing evaluation, has since been adopted by Nova Scotia. "This campaign reduces risk for women because it puts information about warning signs and risk factors in the hands of those closest to women who are being abused. The campaign is not trying to make every friend, family member and neighbour an expert on woman abuse. It is helping to connect those caring people to experts who can provide life saving support and resources."[43]

Another campaign that has managed to change behaviour through the use of community action, communications and mass media, is the New Zealand-based It's Not OK campaign.[44] Friends and families are targeted as part of the solution to preventing and ending domestic violence. Results from the survey – in which 2,444 people were interviewed face to face – showed that the campaign has been successful in raising the awareness of domestic violence and explaining what people can do to safely intervene. Almost one in four respondents (24 per cent) said their views on family violence have changed as a result of the campaign,[45] while two-thirds felt the campaign has helped them to understand more about behaviours we should not tolerate.[46] Significantly, 55 per cent of males and 58 per cent of females surveyed reported taking some action, such as talking to family or friends about violence they were worried about, obtaining information about family violence and/or contacting an organization, professional or community leader to talk about violence they were worried about.[47]

> We must seek to understand the complex ways in which we are all implicated in perpetrating (intimate partner violence).[48]

DISCUSSION POINTS FOR ALBERTA DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS AND GOVERNMENT

Organizations that already work with victims of domestic violence should consider what they can do to better serve and support friends and families of victims. Gaining appropriate skills, expanding the organization's knowledge base and creating infrastructure that allows for program delivery and development are important components in addressing this largely unmet need.

Some actions for Alberta domestic violence service organizations to consider are:

- Provide supports and interventions that include referrals, counselling, therapy and education to friends and families;
- Develop and deliver train-the-trainer programs to family and friends that teach the three R's – Recognize, Respond and Refer. Recognize what abuse is, respond safely and skillfully to the victim and perpetrator, and refer the victims, as well as friends and families, to the appropriate service organization;
- Develop a peer-based model to provide support, skills and understanding to victims' friends and families; and
- Let it be known that your organization is here to help – promote specific programs and services for friends and families on your website.

Some actions for the Government of Alberta to consider are:

- Designate funding for programs and supports for informal networks; and
- Develop a public awareness campaign that is comprehensive, skill based yet connected to local service organizations so people know where to go for help.

CONCLUSION

More needs to be done to help members of informal networks help victims – and potential victims – of domestic violence. Organizations across Alberta are well positioned to add educational programs, support and clinical services, and community development to their offerings and, in doing so, can shift the way domestic violence has traditionally been combated to a "more network-oriented approach" between members of informal networks and professionals.[49]

This means building comprehensive strategies that outline how organizations are going to support those informal networks, at both intervention and primary prevention levels. Although necessary, experts admit that "such a shift would require a re-conceptualization of the role of the domestic violence practitioner and the scope and nature of services."[50]

While the focus of this paper has been on victims, it is important to recognize the need to also support perpetrators – in both reducing the risk factors for becoming an abuser and to support those who have a desire to change their behaviour. Strategies that focus on preventing perpetration are a vital part of the solution.

Given that the vast majority of Albertans polled believe that at some point, domestic violence happens in their local community,[51] there is no question that each of us plays a role in ending domestic violence, starting with those closest to the victim: friends and families. New thinking – and action by service providers, clinicians, workplaces and government – is required to ultimately put an end to the abuse.

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Shift's purpose is to enhance the capacity of policy makers, systems leaders, clinicians, service providers and the community at large to significantly reduce, and eventually end domestic violence in Alberta. We are committed to making our research accessible and working collaboratively with a diverse range of stakeholders to inform and influence current and future domestic violence prevention efforts through primary prevention. For more information please visit us at www.preventdomesticviolence.ca.

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