

Family Violence Follow-Up Teams in Edmonton: A Model of Collaboration

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In northeast Edmonton, two teams, each comprised of a social worker and police officer, are providing an effective service following up on police cases of family violence.

This is how they work. Every morning the teams review police reports and contact the clients they feel are in greatest need of their support. If the people involved agree, they will visit the home. The team focuses on problem solving; first to ensure the victim's safety and then to connect individuals to community resources — all within 72 hours of the initial crisis. Important to the success of interviews with clients is the Teams' ability to fully appreciate each person's situation and to work out a plan that is best suited to their needs.

The idea of combining social work and police practices in family violence situations is not new. Many cities in North America have been doing it for quite some time. Both police officers and social workers share a common goal — stopping family violence. By working closely, they help reinforce the message that family violence is both a crime and a societal problem.

What is unique about the Edmonton model is how it evolved, how it is evaluated, and how it continues to develop as a result of the evaluation. City officials looked at models in practice and decided to set up a six-week pilot project, based on a collaborative approach, where a social worker and a detective went out into the community as a team and intervened in the most serious family violence situations.

The results of the six-week trial were positive and the team was again selected to fully develop and test the collaborative model for a six-month period. This time, however, the team's interventions were compared with those handled by standard police practices and were found to be significantly more effective from the points of view of clients, staff, police, and social work administrators and community agencies alike.

When City Council voted to establish permanent follow-up teams, they were confident that what they had mandated was a model of practice that is effective and truly collaborative.

Overseeing the follow-up teams is the joint responsibility of both the city's Community and Family Services Department and Edmonton Police Service. This aspect is unique and key to the continued growth and success of the program. Why? Because no one perspective prevails. The entire process is integrated, from top management of both departments, to the front line or follow-up teams. Even the program evaluators come from both departments, people who meet regularly and work closely with the teams and clients to identify the most effective way to achieve the best outcomes for the client.

It is collaboration that works because the front-line teams are committed and neither discipline is compromised in the partnership. They are encouraged to develop a unique combination of intervention practices that are tailored to each situation, meeting the needs of the clients. What they have to work with is a new approach carried out in the spirit of cooperation and teamwork.

Right now, the follow-up teams work only in northeast Edmonton, where the city's highest rates of family violence and police intervention are reported. A third team is being considered for 1994 and a city-wide program could be developed in the future.

For information on the Edmonton Model, call Maria David-Evans, Manager of Safer Cities, at 403-496-5807.
