

# **Serving Victims of Violence in Rural Communities**

Challenges and Best Practices

**Prepared by:  
Deborah Kasdorff  
Barbara Erb**

**Victim/Witness Assistance Program, East Region**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Victim Witness Assistance Program (VWAP), Ontario Victim Services Secretariat, provides services to victims and witnesses of crime where charges are laid and on matters which are before the criminal court. The East Region Victim Witness Assistance Program covers a large expanse of rural area. Services to clients in rural areas require a cultural sensitivity and awareness of barriers and needs in order to provide a responsive and effective service. The VWAP Regional Management Team undertook to develop a two year strategic plan (in 2007). Rural issues were identified as one topic for further exploration and identification of strategies to address service to rural areas.

The East Region of Ontario has ten counties and eight court jurisdictions. With the exception of Kingston/ Frontenac County (at 19%) and Ottawa at (4%), the remaining counties combined show that 73 % of the population is in a rural setting.<sup>1</sup>

### URBAN / RURAL POPULATION SPLIT

County	Rural	Urban
Hastings	63%	37%
Prince Edward	83%	17%
Leeds & Grenville	68%	32%
Stormont, Dundas, Glengarry & Akwesasne	59%	41%
Frontenac	19%	81%
Lennox & Addington	100%	0%
Prescott & Russell	82%	18%
Ottawa	4%	96%
Renfrew	70%	30%
Lanark	62%	38%

Rural issues are often identified primarily as the deficit of public transportation. This document is designed to address a much broader and holistic perspective of the issues victims of crime who reside in rural areas might face. Through the preparation of this document it became apparent that there is minimal information and research available concerning the provision of services to victims in rural areas. There is a growing body of research and information available on domestic violence in rural settings and rural issues and violence generally, however, the majority of the research is urban based.

<sup>1</sup> OVSS Regional Profile. 2008. pg. 28

The information contained in this document is drawn largely from the years of experience of VWAP staff working with victims of crime in the East Region and is also supported where possible with references and research. The contents of the report were validated and strengthened following focus group discussions that were held with East Region VWAP managers and regional office staff, providers of the Victim Crisis Assistance and Referral Services (VCARS), the Sexual Assault Centres (SAC), the Partner Assault Response (PAR) programs in East Region.

There are a number of factors and descriptors of rural life which were taken into consideration in the narrowing of the challenges:

- There is a tendency to idealize rural life by those in urban and rural settings and violence and abuse are therefore often easily hidden and even ignored;
- Geographical remoteness makes it easier to hide abuse;
- Rural women are seen as violating community norms by their peers if they seek help.
- Traditional norms are more prevalent in rural areas and so are patriarchal attitudes that devalue and objectify women.<sup>2</sup> While patriarchal attitudes are not absent in urban centers, they co exist with a wide array of other competing values.
- Although poverty affects everyone, in rural or urban settings, the rural poor experience poverty very differently than their urban counterparts, mostly around access to transportation and less opportunities for employment.<sup>3</sup>

In rural areas there are an abundance of weapons (of all sorts) as well as numerous situations where the judiciary allows the return of the weapons to the offender for hunting season. There is a fear of an uncertain future of the family farm as well as difficulties managing the farm in circumstances where accused are not allowed to be near the victim. Rural areas are also experiencing increasing poverty and fewer opportunities for employment. There is also a lack of community resources such as daycare, housing, health care and education, most of which are urban based.

This document identifies a number of challenges / barriers to providing service to the rural victim of crime. Strategies and best practices are addressed in an effort to provide VWAP staff and other community stakeholders with information and tools to provide service. The stories provided are real life accounts of experiences of rural victims with some situational and name changes to ensure anonymity.

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<sup>2</sup> Doherty, D. Making Family Violence Law Info. Available to People in Rural Areas.Pg.10

<sup>3</sup> Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry quoted in Karen Cohl and George Thomson, Connecting Across Language and Distance: Linguistic and Rural Access to Legal Information and Services, p. 31.

## 1. CHALLENGES

### a) Communication

#### **Issues**

There are a number of communication challenges which are unique to rural areas.

#### Telephone

Many rural residents do not have a telephone. If the home is in an isolated area, the cost of installing a phone is prohibitive because the customer must pay for installation of telephone poles in addition to the other usual expenses.

Cell phones are often the only telephone option for rural residents and this raises a number of additional challenges. Cell phone service is patchy and unreliable. Cellular phones do not work in areas where there are no transmission towers and there are many “dead” zones between towers. For people with limited financial resources, pay as you go cell service, or “incoming calls only” plans may be the only option available resulting in sporadic cell phone service, or limiting the ability to make or receive calls from the support services. A person may have cell phone service for only a few days a month depending on their financial circumstances. Lack of privacy on cell phones is also a concern – cell phones are sometimes shared by several people and leaving a message on cell phone voicemail can be risky.

In some domestic violence situations, the abusive partner controls the phone to keep the victim out of touch and to isolate the victim from her network. This makes it more difficult to reach the victim.

#### Email and Internet

Access to e-mail and the Internet is also not available in many parts of the East region. Broadband access is not available in many rural areas. In homes with computers, internet access is typically a dial up service which is slow, inefficient, often does not work and often not affordable

#### Postal Service

Mail delivery is available to most residences however there are drawbacks for the rural customer as well. There is little privacy as the mail delivery person is also the sorter, the postmaster and sometimes runs the general store where customers come to pick up their mail. It is difficult to have a sense of privacy when the person who delivers your mail is aware of what many people do on a day-to-day basis.

Mail does not necessarily reach people in a timely manner particularly in the winter when road conditions impede mail delivery.

## Story

Police responded to a 911 call from a remote rural area. It took approximately 45 minutes to arrive at the location of the call. The telephone was located outside on a telephone pole at the end of a very long laneway in a wooded acreage. A man was standing at the location of the phone and when questioned by police he indicated that he had been threatened by his girlfriend who had been drinking heavily but that he now believed she would not cause him any harm and he apologized for the call. When police persisted in their request to speak with the woman, the man indicated he did not know where she was at the moment. Police followed the laneway to a remote cabin and discovered the woman badly beaten. It took her some time to escape to use the phone as she waited until he was intoxicated and sleeping. However he awoke and discovered her at the telephone. At the point of discovery she was unwilling to provide any statement to police. Police however were able to take her to the hospital and then to a shelter.

## Strategies to Address Communication Issues

- Be familiar with the geography and the demographics in your service area so that you can address issues knowledgeably with Justice partners
- Address the challenge /barrier at the Community Coordinating Committee for input to solutions and actions
- Be aware of agencies or services in the community who have funding to purchase long distance or cell phone cards.
- Work with the police to ensure that the victim will receive the communication. Enlist the help of the police to ensure that the victim receives critical information they need. For example, the investigating officer may be able to hand deliver a message or letter if there is no other way to contact the victim.

## Best Practices (VWAP)

- Ask clients during your first contact with them about their telephone / communication systems.
- When sending written correspondence to victims do not include the program name on the return address label – use street address only. This will ensure that postal workers/mail delivery personnel are not aware who the victim is receiving mail from
- Record any restrictions on communication and the preferred methods the client uses to contact people / services from the home and in transit in a visible place on the file or data base for reference by all staff that might have contact with the file.

- If there are safety concerns, ensure that Justice Partners and especially police are also aware of the client's communication restrictions.
- If finances are the reason a victim does not have a phone, enlist / identify community resources to assist financially to install a phone line.
- Assist the client to identify neighbors with telephones and other communication capabilities and develop ways that the client might be comfortable asking to use the phone.
- Clients without a phone in their residence tell us that trying to reach VWAP staff to ask a question or get a court update can be very frustrating. Clients express concern when they get program voicemail and are not able to give a number where VWAP staff can call them back. When VWAP staff are able to connect directly with clients who do not have a phone, the option of scheduling a phone appointment should be explored as the client may be able to give you a phone number they can be reached at on a particular date and time. (example the home of a neighbour or family member or counselor)
- Free access to Internet service is available at some schools, libraries and community centres and rural residents without home computers do set up email accounts at these locations if they are able to travel in from their homes.

## **b) Lack of Transportation**

### **Issues**

It is rare for a rural community to have public transportation of any kind. Access to transportation is more of an issue than it ever has been and it has not improved over the years. For example, public bus runs have decreased or have been eliminated and are now non-existent in many communities.

Rural families often live many kilometres from their closest town. If families own a vehicle at all they are most often single vehicle homes. When the family unit breaks down the vehicle often goes with the person who leaves the home frequently leaving the victim behind without transportation of any kind.

If a victim has to travel from an outlying community to meet with Victim Witness Staff in the VWAP office it can involve a lengthy drive (an hour or more is not unusual). A lunch hour or after work meeting is often not possible. Time off from work is often required meaning lost income in addition to the cost of travel. Taxi costs are prohibitive and not even considered a possibility by most families. For many people spending money on gas to drive to a meeting with VWAP is not an option as they simply don't have the money to spend.

Even people who live in the same town where the VWAP office is located may have to walk an hour or more (or hitch hike) to keep an appointment or attend court as public transportation in a rural town or small city is non-existent.

## Story

Greta lives in a small hamlet with her new partner and his elderly mother. Greta's partner has been charged and Greta voluntarily left the home so that he could return to care for his mother. Greta does not have a driver's license. She walks with a cane. She is staying temporarily with friends who are also seniors without transportation. She is estranged from her grown children who disapprove of Greta getting involved with her partner. Greta is a very private person who expresses shame and embarrassment about what happened to her. Greta has a volunteer driver from senior's home support who takes her for her groceries and medical appointments. She would like to meet with the crown attorney but does not want to tell the driver the purpose of the meeting and doesn't want to lie about where she is going. Greta says she will work something out and the appointment is booked. The crown and VWAP meet Greta at the police station which is about half way between her home and the courthouse. She later explains that she had to pay \$15 that she couldn't afford to the driver who asked a lot of questions about why she was going to the police station and how long she was going to be there. Greta says she will be the talk of the town by noon. She is worried about how she is going to maintain her privacy and still get to court for the trial.

## Strategies to Address Lack of Transportation

- Coordinate services and improve communications between service providers – Rural victims should not have to make several long trips to apply for services such as Legal Aid, Housing, Social Assistance or to access counselling. Different appointments could be combined in the same day.
- Use local Community Coordinating Committees to identify ways to work together and make services more accessible.
- Give information about a range of services to service providers who actually go into rural homes (for example public health nurses, home care workers).
- Identify who in your network of community services provides transportation and for what purposes.
- Sharing office space with other service providers in the outlying communities can be a good option. This works particularly well if service providers rotate use of the facility. (For example VWAP uses the space every second Tuesday, shelter outreach staff every Thursday).
- Create partnerships among funding ministries to establish access points for video conferencing in different communities, instead of having victims travel for meetings.
- Strategize with service clubs and community organizations to find travel options. For example, some communities have innovative drivers programs; Ontario Works may pay mileage for OW clients; some communities have special bus service from remote communities to town.

## Best Practices (VWAP)

- On first direct contact explore existing support systems with the client to identify transportation supports. Are their other community resources involved that can help with transportation? Shelter outreach programs often assist with transportation. Are friends or family members an option?

- Ensure that priority issues such as safety planning and community referrals are explored by phone on first contact.
- Be flexible on scheduling. Does the client have to come to the town/city where you are located for any other reason such as lawyers, doctors or counselling appointments? If so can an appointment with you be scheduled for the same day.
- In cases where coming to your office is not an option for this person, can VWAP staff meet the client in the community closest to where they live? Seeing a number of people in the same community on a given day makes staff travel cost and time efficient.
- Police detachments are often able to provide meeting space. Meetings at satellite courts are also an option.
- Seek partnerships/protocols with Criminal law Division and Court Services Division to provide immediate reimbursement of travel expenses for clients to attend meeting with the crown attorney.

### **c) Care of Farms / Farm Animals**

#### **Issues**

On a family run farm, partners typically work side by side in the barns and/or the fields. Personal life and business life are closely linked. When violence or abuse becomes part of a relationship, upkeep of the farm deteriorates. For a person who farms, leaving a marital relationship can mean leaving their home, their community, their animals, their business assets and their job. Many farmers have invested years of unpaid labor into the business. Most farm partners are not paid a wage; there are no Employment Insurance (EI) benefits and no pension plan. Farming is often a meager and difficult way to support a family especially given the economic and political climate of the day. Suicide rates for farmers are 40.6 per 100,000 compared to 18.1 for the general population.<sup>4</sup> More than one in three farm fatalities is a suicide.<sup>5</sup> Fear of losing the family farm is a very strong motivation to stay in an abusive relationship. If there is police intervention and the male partner is prohibited from returning to the farm the woman is left with the burden of running the farm on her own, something she may not be physically or financially capable of doing.

Farmers are often bonded to the land. To farm people the land represents the ability to provide for oneself. The familiarity, the love of rural life, the privacy, the close-to-nature belief system and close ties to rural friends and neighbours are often valued much more than life in any other setting. Farmers are also tied by the love of the farm animals, especially if they are responsible for their daily care, feeding and shelter. The animals are often thought of as "part of the family".

Woman abuse is often linked to animal abuse and many women report cruelty and mistreatment of farm animals by their partners. Farm families sometimes witness abuse of animals or destruction of property. Leaving animals that are "part of the family" in the care and custody of someone who abuses them is

<sup>4</sup> Dosman, J.A. Did You Know? PEI. Women in Support of Agriculture. Newsletter. 1993

<sup>5</sup> Glossop, R. Perspectives on Equality & Today's Families. 1991  
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simply not an option for many abused partners who choose to stay rather than leave the animals to their fate.

## Stories

After 10 years of abuse Mary decided to take her children and leave the relationship and the family farm. In order to leave safely she had to go while her partner was away for a weekend. Mary realized there was no place to hide in a village of 800 people and in order to protect herself and her family she would have to go to and stay in the shelter more than 80 kilometers away. She had saved a few dollars here and there from the grocery money to pay a “relief worker” to come in and milk the dairy cattle for three days until her husband came back to the farm. In Mary’s view – leaving the farm not only meant leaving her abusive partner it also meant changing her life as she knew it. Mary feels like she doesn’t belong in the shelter. Her children are used to walking in the woods, riding their snowmobiles and playing with the pets. They ask their mother when they are going to be able to go back home. Mary is starting to consider it.

Betty and her three children live on an isolated concession road on a farm which has been in her husband’s family for generations. Her closest neighbors are her in-laws who live about 5 kilometers away. Betty’s husband earns most of his income using his team of horses to haul logs from the bush. They also have a few head of beef cattle and some laying hens. The farmhouse is heated solely by means of an outdoor furnace. Betty’s husband is a heavy drinker and cannot be relied on to feed the horses, cattle or chickens when required. Betty’s husband has been charged with assault and is prohibited from being at the matrimonial home (also the family farm) or communicating with her. Betty tells VWAP she can’t look after the children; keep the animals fed and the outdoor furnace going. Her husband can’t earn a living without the horses and he is not allowed to come to the farm to get them. Her husband’s family is pressuring her to get the charges dropped – she wants to know how she can go about doing this.

## Strategies to address Farm/ Animal Related Issues

- Work with local farm organizations. Tell them about services and ask for their help in identifying concerns and ways to address them.
- Demonstrate sensitivity to the bond with farms and farm animals when making contact with victims from farm families.
- Farm workers lack the time to travel long distances if there are animals to care for at home. They need quick and easy access to information – this may need to be provided over the phone rather than in a face-to-face meeting.
- Education and awareness campaigns within the farming/agricultural sector will assist rural farm communities in recognizing and dealing with abuse.
- Rural/seasonal employers will benefit from education and awareness and can be encouraged to develop policies that support victims of abuse in maintaining their employment while dealing with the abuse.
- Distribution of public education materials should not coincide with harvest times when it is less likely to be read or become useful.

## Best Practices (VWAP)

- When seeking bail input from victims who farm, ask them about farm workload issues and how these can be addressed safely. Is the victim able to manage? What does he/she need to make it possible to stay on the farm and keep the farm operational? In some situations permitting the accused to be at the farm for a certain period of time each day in the absence of the victim has been successfully implemented.
- Have your 1-800 number and the 1-800 number of referral agencies available. Phone calls are often long-distance, show up on phone bills and it costs money to phone or drive.
- Be aware of any existing rural service centers. Be cognizant of the inability of victims to easily access information about services and agencies.
- A good resource to keep in mind is the The Farm Line Support Service, a telephone support help line for farmers and farm families in Ontario. Toll free access to the confidential and bilingual service permits farm and rural families in Ontario access to peer support on issues and situations ranging from financial and legal to personal, family and mental health. The telephone number is 1-888-451-2903. Further information can be found on the web site at [www.thefarmline.ca](http://www.thefarmline.ca).
- Court attendance can be particularly difficult for farm women if they do not have the family help or financial resources to hire a fill-in on the farm while they are away. This should be explored as part of court preparation.
- Check with local Humane Society if they can house small animals if the victim needs to go to a shelter or if they would be willing to have a bank of volunteers to take care of the farm animals in the event of an emergency.

### d) Isolation

#### Issues

Isolation is a theme that arises frequently when considering the challenges of serving a rural population. Being physically isolated is a reality for many families where the nearest neighbor can be many kilometers away. Isolated families may not have a phone and if they do, a call to friends or family is often a long distance call. Going to a neighbor's home for coffee or to use the phone is not an option for many. It becomes easy to see how victims of crime may not be aware of services and supports available to them.

Social isolation is a common tactic used by abusers in domestic violence cases as an effective way to exercise control over the victim. Victims who are isolated from friends and family quickly become dependent on their abuser as their source of information and support. They tend to internalize messages that they are to blame for the abuse they suffer when they hear nothing to the contrary. When both social and physical isolation are present, service providers must work more intensely to counteract these internalized messages of self-blame.

Kinship ties in rural communities prevent women from feeling free to make disclosures at the local resources that could assist them (i.e. hospital, doctor)

because they fear that the information will leak in the community. If they disclose, this may affect the rest of their life in the community.

Living in isolation often means there is little if any informal (peer) support present and formal support provided through counselors or other professionals is frequently non-existent. Creative strategies must be developed to get information about resources out to those who are socially and physically isolated.

### Story

Carol's partner has been charged with mischief after he caused major damage to their family home while in a drunken rampage. Carol lives in a hamlet with a population of about 60 people. There are two houses on her road – hers and her in-laws. She jokes that if you blink when you drive through her town you could miss it. Carol has not worked for many years and has no money of her own. Carol's partner takes their vehicle to work everyday and on Saturday mornings they drive to town together for groceries and supplies. When asked about family support Carol said they all live out of the area and she has a lot of explaining to do if she makes a long distance call. There are no services at all in Carol's immediate area – it is a 45-minute drive even to a grocery store. She said it is very difficult for her now because her husband is living with her in-laws just down the road. She feels embarrassed and ashamed. She also feels unsafe. The last time she called police it took them almost an hour to get there.

### Strategies to address isolation

- Determine routine places people often travel to and place clear language literature in those locations. Victims of domestic violence for example say it does them little good to get brochures about community resources once police have driven them to a safe shelter. These women tell us this information should be in the grocery store bulletin boards, in their church bulletins and newsletters, doctor's offices, laundromats, libraries, their children's schools.
- Service agencies need to continue to address the practical barriers that make accessing services such a challenge. Toll-free telephone numbers and transportation assistance are a critical component of any service to rural communities.
- Community Coordinating Committees can assist by sharing resources and information and developing multi-agency strategic plans for reaching isolated communities. For example a mobile toy lending library can also have brochures about community resources available for parents.
- Provide education and resource material in a variety of formats – websites, brochures, audio video materials.
- Identify informal circles (i.e. quilt circles) to connect with these women and to do some awareness training. Train the hairdressers in the rural areas to refer the clients to the community services. The Neighbours, Friends and Families Campaign has excellent material that could assist with the awareness and training.

## **Best Practices (VWAP)**

- Familiarize yourself with the area where the victim is located. The case synopsis from police or the Domestic Violence Supplementary Report (LE239) often makes reference to victim isolation as a factor impacting vulnerability.
- Have a detailed 911 map of your jurisdiction and find the victim's location on it prior to your first contact. This allows you to make your own assessment of how isolated the victim may be and to be sensitive to the level of isolation he/she may be experiencing.
- Be familiar with the community resources available in the area where the victim lives and how they can be accessed.
- Explore informal and formal supports already involved with the client. Explore the option of consents to share information with those agencies if it will be of assistance in supporting the client.
- Consider that your first contact with the victim may be your one and only contact with the victim – what are the key areas to cover in this contact?
- When discussing safety issues explore with the victim how their isolation impacts their ability to be safe. Ask the victim to consider how to stay safe while waiting for police to respond to a 911 call? (i.e. go to a particular room in the house? leave the house completely?)
- Explore development of protocols with police or VCARS who may be on scene to ensure that in appropriate cases, victims are told about VWAP and given information about how to contact VWAP.<sup>6</sup>

## **e) Absence of Community Resources**

### **Issues**

The allocation of community services is based on regional geographical areas, which often physically excludes large parts of rural regions. The services are generally located in or near urban centers and outreach is generated from the central point. The services are typically spread too thin for the large geographical area to be covered. This applies to community services as well as essential services such as phone, hydro and electrical repairs.

Emergency vehicles such as police, ambulance, and fire may take extended periods of time to reach people in rural and remote areas. For victims of violence, a slow response time creates a dangerous situation. Winter road conditions can make travel even lengthier which will create a more dangerous situation.

Further, due to cut backs in service, many rural areas have lost their local services and do not have the time or the money to find alternatives (so they do without). Health care, day care, housing services are also often not available in rural and remote areas. Employment opportunities are rare or non-existent and returning to school or retraining is not an option as it is not offered except in urban centers and rural people are not able to access the opportunities.

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<sup>6</sup> Woman Abuse & Ontario Works in a Rural Community.2003.Pg.44  
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Service providers to rural areas are generally located in urban centers. Often the providers are not sensitive to the cultural differences of rural people.<sup>7</sup> For example, many services expect the client to come to the urban centre for service with out taking into consideration the difficulties the client may have to accomplish this. On the other hand, it may be very difficult for a rural client to attend at a community service for fear of loss of anonymity.

Employment in rural areas has been restructured. Court occurrences increase when the closing of the main industry/manufacture impacts employment in one area. Many people have no other prospects of employment in the rural areas. Therefore, many clients are transient and it is impossible to stay in touch.

## Story

Jon is a victim of historical sexual abuse. Police located him and received a disclosure from him as part of a larger investigation of sexual assault allegations against a rural priest. Jon lived 60 kms from the town on his own in a little cabin on a farm where he made a meager wage as a hired hand. He had never disclosed the sexual abuse to anyone before. The investigating officers laid charges with respect to Jon's historical assaults but were sensitive to the emotional trauma Jon experienced as a result of the disclosure. VWAP received a referral from the police and were able to contact Jon through the mail and by telephone at the farmer's house. It was necessary for VWAP to be culturally sensitive to the privacy of Jon and therefore necessary not to use identifying information on the envelope or on the phone. Jon was very anxious to receive some counseling. Once he made the disclosure to the police he realized that he no longer wanted to keep this a secret. The Hospital SA&DV program was able to contract a male therapist to work with Jon. The therapist was able to meet with Jon at times when Jon could arrange a ride to come to the town. Other times, the sessions took place at a community health clinic which was 30 kms from his home. He was able to borrow a car from his employer to meet the therapist while at the same time maintaining his confidentiality with his employer. VWAP was also able to make arrangements to meet with Jon on one of the occasions he had a ride to town. On that occasion it was also an opportunity to further hear about Jon's desire to return to school and we were able to arrange for a three way call with the adult learning centre in the town so Jon could receive further information.

## Strategies to address provision of community resources

- Community Coordinating Committees can become aware of the demographics in their jurisdictions and identify which areas might be under serviced. The utilization of a visual such as a large map of the service area can be used to identify where services/ information are offered and where gaps might exist.
- Community Coordination Committees should alert funding bodies and politicians of the needs once identified. Population based funding often does not address the issues faced by rural people.
- Service / support workers for rural people should be trained and sensitized to rural culture so that the rural client can be better understood and assisted.
- Strategize with community partners to streamline services especially for clients in remote areas. It isn't necessary or possible to build "one stop

<sup>7</sup> Doherty, D. Making Family Violence Law Information Available in Rural Areas.2002.pg 39  
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- shop” centers in every community. It is possible to create a floating service team which can have workers available to go to the client.
- When developing Community safety planning strategies, planners need to take into consideration the dangerous situations faced by victims who must wait for lengthy periods of time for police to arrive.
  - Community agencies should generally consider other methods of providing service to rural clients such as telephone interviews and through email contact.
  - The local public library in a rural community is a valuable resource to tap into. They maybe able to provide office space which victims would feel safe accessing.
  - Libraries are also a good access point to make information available, such as Neighbours, Friends and Families material.

### **Best Practices (VWAP)**

- VWAP staff must be sensitized to rural culture.
- When VWAP facilitates a referral for a rural client it may be necessary to bring the agency worker to the VWAP office to meet with the client. For example, if a victim of domestic violence is in attendance at a bail safety meeting and agrees to speak with an outreach worker, it may be possible for the outreach worker to attend at VWAP at that time.
- When developing safety planning strategies with victims or for victims with community partners ensure that the rural differences are addressed.
- Before the completion of a file it would be important to connect the client with another resource so that VWAP was not the only resource introduced to the rural client. This may be as simple as providing written information about resources in the community or actually facilitating contact.
- VWAP’s only way to provide service might be through email and / or telephone (as well as mail).
- When contacting a rural client be aware and sensitive to maintaining confidentiality. For example, using the agency name on the return address may spark rumors in the rural community through the post office personnel.

### **f) Availability of Weapons**

#### **Issues**

Rural homes are often homes with firearms and other weapons. *Reaching Out – The Experiences of Abused Women in Grey Bruce* found that women in that rural community reported the use of or threat with a weapon at more than twice the national rate as reported in the Stats Canada Family Violence Survey. In that same study, 51% of women surveyed reported they feared for their life compared with 34% in the Stats Canada survey.<sup>8</sup>

Another recent study found that rural and farm women who experience violence in the home describe a cycle of intimidation with guns often including family pets

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<sup>8</sup> Reaching Out. The Experiences of Abused Women in Grey Bruce. 2008.pg.2  
*Serving Victims of Violence in Rural Communities*

and farm animals.<sup>9</sup> It is not unusual to hear from victims of abuse that there are numerous firearms in the homes where they live. Many report that their partners are legally prohibited from possessing firearms but keep them at the homes of friends or relatives where they can be easily accessed.

Victims themselves may be firearms owners and choose to keep their firearms in the home giving violent partners potential access to a weapon.

In addition rural homes provide easy access to everyday tools like axes, sledgehammers, chains, pitchforks and a multitude of other implements that are used to assault and threaten others.<sup>10</sup>

In a disturbing number of cases, the court makes exceptions for offenders to legally have access to guns during hunting season or for shooting of nuisance animals on farms.

### Story

A high-risk case review is completed on a domestic violence case where there have been many years of abuse that was never reported to anyone. Susan's ex-partner has between 25 and 30 firearms of various calibers including several restricted weapons. She describes him as "obsessed with guns". When asked, Susan says that while he has never threatened to shoot her or pointed a gun at her, the fear that she will be shot is ever present in her mind. She believes that the worst punishment her partner could ever have is to have his guns taken away from him. She does not want him to have the guns but does not want to be implicated in any decision by the authorities, as this will further jeopardize her safety. At sentencing the crown asks for a weapons prohibition and defense argues against it telling the court that a firearms prohibition is not required as the weapon was never used in the assaults and furthermore guns are needed around the farm to shoot groundhogs and coyotes.

### Strategies to address weapons issues

- Education for Judges on risks associated with weapons in domestic violence cases.
- Crown attorneys at bail court should explore the issue of weapons with potential sureties and ensure that weapons are removed from any residence where an accused will reside.
- Education for police officers on seizure of weapons.
- Encourage Community Coordinating Committees to address some of the issues through their endorsement and involvement with global efforts to control weapons.<sup>11</sup>
- Community Committees to advocate with constituents / politicians to raise awareness and implement changes.

<sup>9</sup> Doherty et al. Responding to Wife Abuse in Rural & Farm Communities. 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women. Hands [www.letswrap.com/dvinfo/rural](http://www.letswrap.com/dvinfo/rural)

<sup>11</sup> Disarming Domestic Violence. An International Campaign. 2009-2010.

## Best Practices (VWAP)

- Routinely ask victims about the existence of weapons, the abusers access to weapons and details on where they are stored and disclose this information to police/crown.
- Ask if the victim has firearms and ensure police are aware of this information as well. If the victim has firearms in the residence the accused is likely aware of this and this is helpful safety information for police to have.
- Provide information on the Canadian Firearms Program and the process for reporting a public safety concern. Members of the public can call 1-800-731-4000 if they believe a person who owns firearms could be dangerous to themselves or to others or if they know of an individual who has a firearms license or has applied for a firearms license and there is a valid reason why this person should not have such a license. These public safety concerns are routed to provincial Chief Firearms Officers who will take appropriate action. The identity of the caller is kept confidential. For further information on reporting public safety concerns regarding firearms please see [http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/cfp-pcaf/cont/report\\_signaler-eng.htm](http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/cfp-pcaf/cont/report_signaler-eng.htm).

## 2. SAFETY ISSUES

A review of the various “challenges” outlined in the earlier section of this report begins to reveal the unique safety issues faced by victims in rural communities.

These challenges become the barriers to safety that victims face and the barriers that service providers must consider when discussing safety or developing safety plans with their clients.

Imagine a home where

- You don't have a phone
- You have to ask for permission to use the car
- You live 5 kilometres from your nearest neighbour
- You can't leave home for more than half a day because the farm animals have to be fed
- Your partner is violent and abusive
- Your family have stopped coming to see you because they don't like the way your partner treats you
- There are guns in your home

Abusers may take advantage of these factors to silence victims and prevent them from seeking safety from abuse.

In a rural community where the victim and offender live in close proximity, the courts can be reluctant to impose distance/radius restrictions on offenders that will keep them a safe distance away from victims. If the community has one restaurant, one gas station or one bank the court may view imposing a distance

perimeter as an unfair burden on the offender effectively cutting him off from access to basic services. This means more potential for victims/offenders to encounter each other in close proximity.

Addressing these unique safety issues begins with developing strategies to address each of these challenges.

### **Question to Ask Rural Victims:**

- Who are your allies? Identify at least one person— hopefully more that you know you can rely on to help you if you need to get to a place of safety. These might include your child’s teacher, your priest or minister, someone at your church, or a neighbour. Your ally should be someone with whom you are willing to share enough information about your situation that they will know how and when to respond to your needs. Work out in advance a plan for how to contact your allies.
- When you have felt unsafe in the past what have you done to increase your safety? How did that work for you?
- What resources do you need to help you feel safer? (cell phone, support system, a pre-arranged ride to town, a financial cushion).
- Do you have the toll free number for the 24-hour crisis line in your area? Have you called them to share your safety concerns and get their ideas on safety planning?
- Do you know where the guns are stored, where the ammunition and keys to the gun cabinet are kept –? Plan an escape route that takes into consideration the location of the guns in the home. Change locks on gun cabinets, when possible.
- If you have to call 911 and you know it may take police a long time to respond, what can you do to stay safe until the police arrive? Think this through ahead of time.
- If you have to call 911 on your cell phone it is vital that you tell the 911 dispatcher where you are and what emergency service you need. (i.e. I am at 123 Country Lane in the town of Sharbot Lake and I need Sharbot Lake OPP). A 911 call from a land line reveals to the 911 operator where you are calling from but your cell phone does not automatically reveal this.

### **Confidentiality, Anonymity and Safety**

Confidentiality is key to victim’s safety and their willingness to discuss safety concerns. Maintaining confidentiality can be particularly difficult when you live and work in a rural community. Even non-identifying information can be identifying if for example, reference is made to a particular road that the victim lives on combined with reference to the number of children the person has. While the victim’s name or address has not been revealed it can be quite easy to figure out who the person is.

Lack of anonymity is a reality in a rural area where people are identified by the vehicle they drive, their daily routines, the route they take to work and the people they associate with. This lack of anonymity can both enhance and jeopardize safety depending on the circumstances. Victim’s allies who notice a change in

routine will become concerned and reach out if they are aware of what is happening in victim's lives. This can enhance safety. On the other hand, a victim who is trying to flee or seek help quietly will be concerned that neighbours will speculate about what is going on and may jeopardize safety by discussing their suspicions

### **Best Practice**

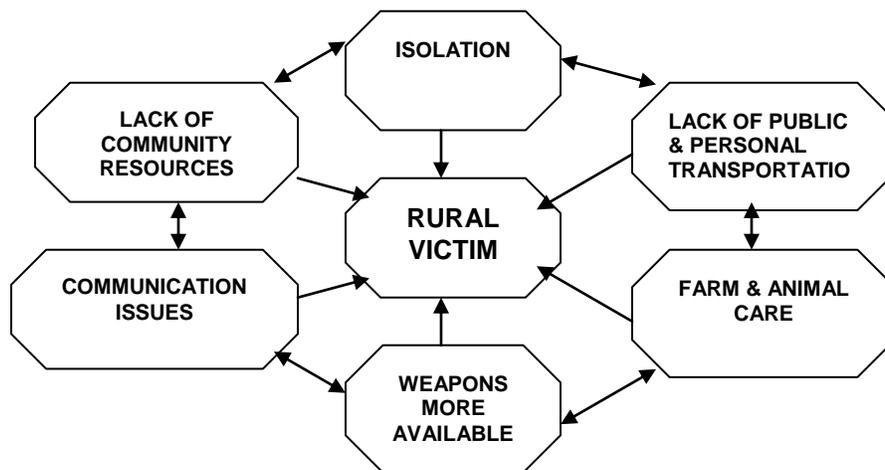
- Ensure staff are aware of confidentiality issues in the context of a rural community.
- Encourage victims of domestic violence to contact your local shelter or outreach program for help in developing a detailed safety plan.
- If the victim uses a Global Positioning Unit (GPS) in the car, make her aware that the abusive partner can trace her. Make sure that she leaves the GPS at home if she is trying to escape from an abusive situation.

## CONCLUSION

This document is an attempt to raise awareness about the intricacies and challenges of providing service to victims of crime in rural areas. The recommendations for Best Practices apply to Victim Witness Program Staff but could also be integrated into services by other providers. It is important to raise awareness of rural issues among government employees and boards who generally provide service from larger central organizations primarily located in urban areas. It can be very difficult for those who are unfamiliar with rural ways of life to recognize the complexities this involves.

The growing body of information and research available on the topic of rural victim's issues is encouraging. There is evidence to show that for practical support purposes, the needs of rural victims can be multifaceted and complex. In most situations, a rural victim may face one or several challenges when reporting a crime, receiving emergency or community services, and most importantly in safety planning. These challenges and barriers are interconnected and the presence of numerous barriers in one victim's situation is more likely than not. A victim who has communication barriers and no transportation is going to be dealing with isolation issues. Victims who are isolated will have their isolation compounded if they live in fear that their anonymity will be lost if they reach out for help. Assisting a victim who faces these multiple challenges will typically require more time and a greater effort to coordinate with others. This approach is critical to making services meaningful for rural victims.

### CHALLENGES AFFECTING SERVICES TO RURAL VICTIMS



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