

*“It’s not easy to change the direction of an Elephant”*

The cross-sectoral complexities of helping families affected by IPV:  
Insights from collateral agencies (CAs) in Alberta

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# Context of IPV in Alberta

- 2021 was the seventh consecutive year of gradual increase in police-reported intimate partner violence in Canada (*Statistics Canada, 2022*).
- The rate of police-reported intimate partner violence against women in urban areas of Alberta is 535 incidents per 100,000 population. **This is higher than the national average** of 461 incidents per 100,000 population (*Statistics Canada, 2022*).
- 74% of Albertans report that they personally know at least one woman who has been sexually or physically assaulted. (*This figure does not factor in the countless women who do not tell anyone about the assault(s) nor does it factor in any other type of abuse besides physical and sexualized violence.*) (*Canadian Women's Foundation "Angus Reid Omnibus Survey", 2012*).
- Calgary Police Service responds to approximately 20,000 domestic violence calls each year. (*Calgary Police Service, November 2022*).
- The Family Violence Death Review reports that between 2011 and 2021 there have been 165 (counts both victims and perpetrators). In the fiscal year 2020-2021 there were 18 family violence related deaths in Alberta (15 victims & 3 perpetrators).

# Context of IPV as Child Maltreatment Issue

## Child, Youth & Family Enhancement Act (CYFEA) 2000

Section 1(2)(a) through 1(2)(h) of the CYFEA (2000) defines the need for intervention as follows:

- Protection of children against the impacts of family violence falls under a subsection 1(2)(f) and or 1(2)(g) which sets out the criteria to assess if a child has been emotionally injured as a result of exposure to family violence or severe domestic disharmony (CYFEA, 2000). The following is an excerpt from the section of the Act that further defines emotionally injuring and its' connection to family violence:
- For the purposes of this Act, a child is emotionally injured
  - (i) if there is impairment of the child's mental or emotional functioning or development, and
  - (ii) if there are reasonable and probable grounds to believe that the emotional injury is the result of rejection,

(A.1) emotional, social, cognitive or physiological neglect,

(A.2) deprivation of affection or cognitive stimulation,

(B) **exposure to family violence or severe domestic disharmony,**

(C) inappropriate criticism, threats, humiliation, accusations or expectations of or toward the child

(D) the mental or emotional condition of the guardian of the child or of anyone living in the same residence as the child;

(E) chronic alcohol or drug abuse by the guardian or by anyone living in the same residence as the child

# Family Violence Legislation in Alberta

- ***The Protection Against Family Violence Act*** (PAFVA) was originally proclaimed in 1999 at which time it was directed primarily at protection orders for victims of family violence.
- ***Disclosure to Protect Against Domestic Violence Act (Clare's Law)***, (2021) was proclaimed. Clare's Law allows an individual who is concerned about their safety to obtain information about prior violence or abuse committed by their partner.
- ***Residential Tenancies Act (2004)*** was amended in 2016 to include a section titled Safer Spaces for Victims of Domestic Violence allowing victims to terminate their tenancy without financial penalty when specific conditions related to domestic violence are met.
- ***Prevention of Family Violence and Bullying Strategy*** Branch of the Alberta Government was located within the Ministry of Children's Services. During this time the Ministry provided strategic leadership working with other involved ministries, community
- ***Family Violence Death Review Committee*** by bringing together community partners and experts based on the nature of each tragedy related to family violence to explore learnings that can be employed to prevent future tragedies.

# Efforts towards primary prevention

Beginning in 2012 the Government of Alberta began administering a biennial survey to explore the knowledge of Albertans in relation to family violence. The results were reported in the 2018 Albertans' Perceptions of Bullying, Family Violence and Elder Abuse report delivered by Community and Social Services in April 2018. The survey results indicate that Albertans recall seeing increased information about bullying, family violence and elder abuse. They do not have increased confidence that they could help - meaning that the responses were stable when compared to the previous survey data. Information about if or when another survey would be completed was not readily available.

The Government of Alberta with the help of funders and researchers has turned their attention toward a prevention framework. The work known as **Impact**, will develop a primary prevention strategy that recognizes and attends to the root causes of family and sexual violence (Wells et al, 2023). Recommendations and a guide for program design will inform the Government of Alberta of next steps in relation to violence prevention was released this month!

# The Role of Collateral Agencies in CAS Work

- We defined collateral agencies as those agencies in the community most likely to refer, or be referred to when families are experiencing IPV
- This includes police and large numbers of agencies with the mandate to service families experiencing IPV such as women's shelters and counselling services
- Using our professional networks we advertised the study through sector newsletters, social media and directly sending recruitment materials to 18 agencies

# Recruitment & Participants

- Although we reached out 18 collateral agencies repeatedly, (during and shortly-post covid) we found community agencies were very open to sharing the information, but that participation was very low due to workload demands (and maybe people were just tired of being on Zoom)
- In the end we had 7 participants. We only collected data on position, organization and years of experience with IPV cases
- 5 VAW specific organizations and 2 General counselling agency
- 5 (>5) and 2 (<5) years of VAW experience

# Preliminary Themes

Family Violence is Everywhere in this work  
Programming for Children and Youth  
Seeing Abusive Behaviour as a Choice - Perpetrator Accountability  
Conceptualization of Family Violence  
Doing what they've got to do Lack of Knowledge of CS protocols  
Leave Ultimatums Working with Perpetrators  
File closure Signs of Safety Programs for Women Survivors  
Workload Issues in CPS Assessment of Risk and Safety  
Client fears of CPS  
Intersections with Children's Services  
System complexity Duty to Report  
File closure Collaborative Approaches  
Power Differentials Need for cultural awareness  
Need for Trauma-informed practice  
Relationships are KEY - It's who you get  
client-centred care practices  
Not doing enough - not responding - lack of follow up  
Examples of CPS being helpful  
Lack of Alignment with Mandates - separation of women and children's safety





# Findings

The overlaps in the work between VAW agencies and Children Services was evident in the data and complexities remain at the intersection of working with families involved with children services as a result of IPV experiences (such as an overwhelmed workforce, lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities, mandatory reporting & absence of attention to perpetrators).

For this presentation, we will focus on three of the most promising practice approaches from the data collected

- **Collaborative approaches,**
  - Including centering communication and relationships between Collaterals, Child Protection agencies and the families they are serving
  - Best achieved through co-location models, high risk tables, and role clarity
- **Trauma-informed approaches**
  - Which are client-centred, and culturally responsive
  - Best achieved through advanced and continual training (and supervision) in TIC
- **Considering needs of children within the context of their families**
  - To support family connection through
    - supporting survivors of IPV in being able to meet their needs
    - addressing perpetrator behaviours that keep children unsafe

# Collaborative Approaches

Coded any reference to ways in which organizations partner or work closely with VAW or children's services agencies. Mentions of the importance of partnerships.

- Calgary Domestic Violence Collective, Provincial Collective Impact Initiative, High Risk Management Table
- Identified co-location or worker/team specific models
  - 2 agencies talked about having workers on site (either at CAS or having CAS workers at their agency) which made relationships easier
- Highlight protocols for good communication and information sharing whenever possible

*“We have individuals all doing their piece and maybe doing a fantastic job within the silo but really communication - breaking down those silos so that we can create a better client experience, better client outcomes and more engagement. ...But at the end of the day again, if we all look at what is best for the clients that we’re serving, for the individual that needs the help, how can we instead just shift our policies and procedures to adapt to their needs rather than the other way around. So that’s where I think collaboration and communication is really important. Children’s Services are not necessarily going to have all the information that we do. But if we have that information and we can share key pieces of that, that would inform the safety of the family and positive outcomes. That’s a really good thing.” (Participant 103)*

# Collaboration can provide clarity and appreciation

*“...it’s like this big mystical building of power that nobody knows what’s going on in it and, they’re just a bunch of bad people that take children away. And as a social worker I didn’t think I could properly help my clients without really getting to know and understand better what goes on in that building. And, and I found that there was actually a lot of very caring people that work in that building who have very big caseloads and care very much for the safety of children.”*

(Participant 101)

# Collaboration supports clarifying differing mandates

*“I think one of the things that comes to my mind is the I think the need for like we're not evidence gatherers, Right? ...Like that's not our role we're not investigators ...so knowing our lane, knowing where we want to stay in terms of. Yes, they've reported this to us, and we are here to support them, but we're not there to you know verify whether this happened or not we take our clients as as they are. Their experience is what we work with and so, then you know when there's a call to CS ...there's sort of almost this expectation like well you know I have been flat out asked by CS “are they safe?” ...I can't make that determination, I have a concern, from my perspective, and in my role and that's why I'm calling [CS] because I actually have no authority...That can really be frustrating and even a little unsettling as a professional because when you get to the place....we absolutely call whenever we need to....so when we get to the place where we're calling....”*

(Participant 106)

# Collaboration can help address risk

*“...We have the High Risk Management Initiative. So that’s an intensive case management program that brings together I believe right now we’re sitting at around 14 partners and they collaborate on the top 1% of cases that are at risk of committing homicide against their partner. They meet every 6 weeks and admission into that program is based on a voting system amongst partners.*

(Participant 103)

# Trauma-Informed Approaches

- Trauma-informed approaches
  - Which are client-centred, and culturally responsive
  - Best achieved through advanced and continual training (and supervision) in TIC and collaboration

*“So definitely more trauma informed, and I think culturally sensitive training too and like I’m also thinking of like intergenerational trauma and I think that’s a huge area of need that caseworkers need to be more well equipped to understand how they can be perpetuating intergenerational trauma and how to, yeah, I guess like how to work with a client in a way that they can be supportive.” (Participant 105)*

*“...the system is really set up to traumatize people who asked for services and that’s more than just CS, that is not just a CS thing. We have our standards, we have our protocols, we have our regulations and our framework, and we really haven’t taken a trauma informed approach because it’s hard! And it’s difficult and you can’t standardize it as much as you’d like to. And I think because of that people have been traumatized by the system and the system CS represents the system. And there are agencies, like us, that represent the system...to build that trust takes time and CS doesn’t always have that time ...they have legislation and things that they work under. We can be flexible on some things and that’s why CS does turn to us because sometimes we can be the flexible arm that they can’t be. But I think we need to recognize that many people are traumatized by the very system they reach out to help for.”*

(Participant 104)

# Considering the Needs of Children in the Context of Families

- Need to keep the child at the centre of our work with families and to recognize that how we work with their family is at the core of that as well.
- *“I think we try and do everything that we can to be hopeful, while maintaining our clients privacy as much as we can right it's sort of this fine balance, because we of course want to we don't want to have kids in in situations or positions that are dangerous or harmful for them....But also we want to you know maintain as much as we can that helping relationship with our clients, so of course and we're mandated obviously to to work with them, so we, but the idea of it, especially an emergency situation we try and work as collaboratively collaboratively as possible.”*  
(Participant 106)

# Considering the individual in context

*“...Um, again it, it’s case by case. Sometimes it is a really helpful um, experience or support for people and, and sometimes it’s not. I think when it’s people who are you know self-disclosing and know that that’s the ultimate next step based off the information that they’ve disclosed, they’re wanting that help and looking for that support. Um, for the people who had disclosed unintentionally or didn’t fully understand what the next steps would look like, it’s not always the most helpful outlet...it really is a person-to-person, sort of case-by-case kind of issue.”*

(Participant 102)



# Addressing Perpetrator Behaviours to promote safety

*“The other thing that we really do, is that we believe that family violence and abusers are a deliberate choice. And that we want to support the offenders or the perpetrators that are using family violence and abuse against their partners. But we also want to make sure that we are providing, I would say poking holes, in that person’s belief system to make sure that there are strategic changes happening.”*

(Participant 100)

*“I should clarify that we do not distinguish between those who have witnessed, experienced, or perpetrated family violence. We will serve the entire family if that's what they want to do. It really is about a client's agency and what they want to work on, but we believe that breaking the cycles of violence requires that we work with every member of society that wants to work on why. Why family violence, what are the causes of family violence, and how we stop family violence. So, we're one of the few agencies that actually works with perpetrators. That doesn't mean that we provide reunification services or anything like that that's very specific, we still work on an individual basis, even if we could be working with an entire family, it will just be on an individual basis that we will be doing that work.”*

(Participant 104)

# Models of Practice – Good when they function

- 5 of 7 participants mentioned Signs of Safety as the model that Children's Services was using
- Which is promising in that there is some awareness of the protection model that is in use
- Frustrating because most people talked about how it started off strong and then fell to the wayside, largely due to the costs to keep people trained and supervised in the model

*“It’s not easy to change the  
direction of an Elephant”*

*(Participant 1)*



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# In Summary

- *“It’s not easy to change the direction of an Elephant”*  
*BUT* there are some promising practices and they are:
    - Collaborative (child protection and CA work together on cases)
    - Trauma-informed and culturally sensitive
    - Consider the needs of children in the context of families
    - Keep perpetrator in the forefront of safety considerations
- We still need to address the elephant in the room - **system complexity** and barriers to the above that reside in
- Conflicting mandates of support
  - Over stressed systems and workers within those systems

# These findings map onto our survivor data

- Involvement and support is directly linked to level of violence leaving some families with open files but no resources – or families wanting support not receiving it because risk isn't evident (despite women asking for help and indicating fear) – from 3-8 years of involvement, on and off, to never opening the file despite multiple pleas for assistance (or coming out after days of family calling)
  - They closed file because *“they couldn't find anything that I don't do”* (compliance) but more than 10 years later, still does not feel safe or supported
  - *“they never gave up on me”*
- Police involvement in all of the scenarios – but despite our best efforts we weren't able to get a police officer to engage with the study
- Across all of the survivor data, there was a concerning lack of knowledge about why children's service were involved and how it was of any use to the families involved
  - Involvement caused fear, but it also caused a lot of shame around feelings of parenting inadequacy
  - Shame of thinking someone didn't think you can look after your children
- No one ever had the same worker throughout – ranged from During that time 3 different workers – 2 good and 1 bad and interestingly there was always the narrative of 'good and bad workers' Differences in worker approaches (supportive vs. abusive) *“they care a lot about my children and they care a lot about me”*
- Abuser never involved in the process
- Threatening child removal (all of them)
- **All had Good experiences with collaterals suggesting these intersection is imperative for families**

# Thoughts, Comments, Reflections, Questions?

