

Roundtable tries to get a handle on violence

Angela Blackburn

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Although Halton is generally recognized as a safe community, no one is immune from the violence that seems to be growing in our society.

Last week, a roundtable discussion hosted at Central Library by The Sexual Assault and Violence Interventions Services (SAVIS) of Halton was attended by MPP Kevin Flynn and drew experts not only on domestic and sexual violence, but also on other types of violence.

The roundtable was also attended by service providers from across the community including those from women's shelters, health care, police and education.

The two-hour forum saw a panel of five experts outline the work they do -- and the challenges that hinder their success.

"Our goal is to draw public and political awareness to the devastation and danger of violence in our community," said Zehra Haffajee, public education co-ordinator for SAVIS.

It was heard that violence cuts across all boundaries and is all pervasive in the community, affecting women, children, men, seniors, the disabled, and seniors in all religions, income levels and ethnic groups.

It's in homes, in schools, on the Internet and is present much more than one may think.

Unfortunately, funding cuts or loopholes can prevent victims from getting the assistance they need.

While Flynn apologized for not bringing his chequebook -- as a major need identified was better and more resources in Halton, and the funding for them -- the MPP said dollars will be flowing and they should be directed in a co-ordinated fashion, so they can be most effectively used in Halton.

Flynn also suggested similar roundtable discussions should be held regularly.

Community stakeholders present at the event shared their experiences in dealing with victims of violence, the challenges for front-line service delivery, discussed new initiatives under way and threw out suggestions about ways to end violence.

"I'm extremely impressed with the thoughtful comments and suggestions I have heard today," said Flynn. "It shows me that community groups and roundtables like today's can make a real difference and are an important part of a community based approach."

Flynn thanked groups like SAVIS for the important work they perform in the community,

"Our government has made investments to facilitate prevention and provide support for the victims of violence," said Flynn. "We must ensure that our communities are safe for everyone regardless of age, sexual orientation, or cultural background."

"Violence is a reality and there's a growing need in Halton for support services," said Haffajee.

"The type of violence seems to be changing. Some say politicians have big mouths, but politicians need to have big ears," said Flynn.

Flynn believed that behavioural change that does happen occurs through educating children.

One attendee said it can be as simple as teaching children what is acceptable and what is not -- obviously easier said than done.

Nicole Pietsch a SAVIS counsellor, said violence against women began to become public in the mid-1970s. It took front and centre however after Dec. 6, 1989 when Marc Lepine, who had a document anti-women agenda, gunned down 14 women at L'ecole polytechnique in Montreal.

Pietsch delivered statistics including the fact that one-half of all women will experience at least one incident of sexual or physical violence in their lifetime.

Those who are disabled are nearly twice as likely to be victimized, she said, noting ethnic background and age are also factors in the risk of potential victimization.

Halton Regional Police Service Constable Jackie Brennan, who is the Elder Services Co-ordinator told the forum that domestic violence increases with age and that seniors are often abused at the hands of their family members, who are their caregivers.

Brennan outlined scenarios where adult children are living off their elderly parents. She said the parent often has one room in the house, isn't allowed to use the telephone or go shopping, has lost financial control via a joint bank account or power of attorney, is either over or under medicated and pays \$2,000 to \$4,000 month rent.

"They do not come to our attention through the family. Generally we hear some other way," said Brennan.

Often, it's often a neighbour who reports something not quite right at the home, she said.

Helen Cavanagh of Transitions for Youth noted her agency provides a range of services to youths including shelter to homeless youths.

Most of the youths come from dysfunctional home environments and at one point 100 per cent of the females had been sexually abused.

Cavanagh said though some may see the face of a youth, who has gotten into trouble, Transitions for Youth sees the face of a traumatized youth.

Elizabeth Carmichael, of the North Halton Cultural Awareness Council said that council was established in 1993 when the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) came to Georgetown with the impression it would be welcomed.

Carmichael said there are linkages between race, religion, age, sexual orientation or similar factors and abuse. She said that link must be recognized.

When it comes to hate crime, Carmichael said many think they can get away with anything under freedom of expression.

Carmichael did note a 1995 assault on a man in Georgetown after which the Halton police were extremely vigilant, even escorting the victim home personally when the trial was pending. The perpetrator, who expressed his racism to police openly, served two years less a day and had the book thrown at him in terms of conditions. He later moved away, said Carmichael.

Susan Jewett, who is executive director of Burlington Counselling and Family Services, also sits with others from many of the groups at the roundtable on the Halton Violence Prevention Council.

That council was founded in 1992 in the wake of the murders of Leslie Mahaffy and Kristin French.

"Let's never forget these women's names. They are not statistics. They were people, human beings, they could be your sister, your daughter, your mom," said Jewett.

All the groups, governments, courts and police that work with victims of violence and perpetrators -- in whatever form that violence takes -- must be on the same page or progress won't be made, according to Jewett.

Raising awareness and implementing standards by which to measure risk of violence are key, said Jewett.

Such a measurement would help service providers, who all have their own perspective see the bigger picture through the same lens, she noted.

"Violence is a public problem, but it's not public quite frankly," said Jewett.

Jewett was disturbed when a woman and her children were murdered at the same time a police horse was also lost, there was a public memorial for the horse.

Carmichael noted many young blacks have been murdered in Toronto, but it was the death of a girl killed while Boxing Day shopping that stole headlines and public outrage.

Halton Women's Place workers, who said the two women's shelters are full most nights of the year, told the roundtable about the need for understanding cultural backgrounds, within and outside of Canada.

One worker noted a case of a 17-year-old girl married by proxy to a 60-year-old man and families being wiped out by murder back in the homeland.

The roundtable heard that legal aid certificates available to those at the shelter are for two hours -- and that judges won't grant custody if someone is at a shelter since it's not seen to be a suitable place for a child.

Flynn was told that funding cuts that eliminated a court support worker attached to Halton Women's Place was sorely felt and reinstatement would be of great assistance.

On yet another sad note, a Halton Regional Police officer told the roundtable that people are hiding in their homes and offices and plotting to meet children with the intent of committing sexual acts with them while local police are in a respond mode only because of a lack of resources to combat Internet luring - leaving proactive surveillance and undercover work to the larger OPP and Peel Regional Police Service.

While work must be done to eliminate the many, varied forms of violence -- education being key to changing attitudes and behaviours -- resources must be available to support victims and assist them in moving on with their lives.

Jewett told Flynn that Halton receives below average provincial funding for most, if not all social services, yet is a growing population.

"As a government, we're trying to close the gaps on some issues, knowing we're starting behind the eight-ball," said Flynn, acknowledging that provincial books were in bad shape and the government is weighing issues like the social service needs highlighted at the roundtable, against the fact that children at the not-affluent Eastview Public School were sharing textbooks in recent years.

Flynn also acknowledged how there exist "some silly things" sometimes with government.

He noted years ago, when he worked with Children's Aid that while the philosophy believed in keeping children at home, there was no funding support for that though there was exceptional circumstances funding available if a child was removed from a home.