

**Status of Women Project
A Coordinated Community Response to Violence Against Women and Girls
in Lunenburg County
2012-2015**

“Be the Peace.....Make a Change”

**Partners Gathering #1
May 15, 2012
REPORT**

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With thanks to all who came and contributed, and to Faye Gosnell for taking notes and Donna Clark for facilitating.

Nancy Ross and Sue Bookchin
Project Coordinators

Executive Summary

On May 15, 2012, twenty-five people from 11 organizations/agencies came together to explore the first steps in building a “Coordinated Community Response to Violence Against Women and Girls in Lunenburg County.” We focused on our aspirations for the project and our fears. We unearthed an array of assumptions at play in this issue and charted some beginning principles for collaboration among partners- both organizations and individuals.

The 12 pages of notes you will find here is an impressive testament to the quality of discourse we created together, the openness to speak some of the hard realities, and the willingness to engage together in a possibility many of us are yearning for—the opportunity to really collaborate, to join together in addressing the issue of gender-based or relationship violence in new, uncharted and innovative ways. The depth and scope of the issues is huge, yet the sense of hope and possibility in the room was palpable.

The successive pages capture the raw data from all the flip charts, sticky notes and sharing from group discussions. If you take the time to read it all, you will be amazed at how much came forward in that short time. We could almost develop a plan from just that information, if we were not committed to first welcoming the broader public into the discourse. It is important as we move forward into the practical planning for 3 years and implementation, that we return to these pages for insight, reflection and remembering why we do this challenging work. It is the common core that unites us in this effort to bring peace to relationships, families, schools, and our communities in Lunenburg County.

The need is great. Our capacities, talents and gifts as a community, are greater.

Emerging Themes

1. Assumptions

There are a multitude of assumptions operating around this issue that need to be continually unearthed with curiosity and inquiry, to validate or challenge, eg., that we know what is best for someone else.

2. Early intervention

Engaging children and youth from an early age and throughout their school years;
gathering the voices of teens and their experiences and perspectives. More emphasis on prevention, education and conversations with youth and keeping youth engaged, eg., in community activities, local fire halls, etc.

3. Men and boys

Involvement and consideration of men and boys is integral with that of women and girls.

Violence (bullying) often comes from a place of fear and feeling powerless. The need to nurture esteem in boys and mentor them in developing 'healthy' identities and relationships.

4. Collaboration and partnership

We are not necessarily adept at collaborating and it doesn't just happen because we have talked about it. It takes work and agreement, listening with curiosity and non-judgment, openness and welcoming diverse viewpoints, partnerships that draw on our strengths as individuals and organizations with common purpose.

5. Community ownership and sustainability

Having a robust community-based approach means everyone is welcomed, that the collective wisdom of the community is harnessed in breaking the cycles of violence. The project is not owned by one organization, but is a community effort that develops a life of its own and keeps moving beyond the 3 years.

6. Appreciative inquiry

Focusing on stories of what is working and how to expand and amplify that. Making change by doing good things. Teaching each other. Being open-minded in looking at the larger context of situations. Articulating a vision of something hopeful, helpful and healing. Being "for" something rather than "against" anything.

7. Enhancing our Range of Services

Increasing support for kids and families, particularly for children who are growing up in violent situations- one of the gaps. Also more services for men and more programs in more rural areas. New programs like Neighbours, Friends and Families.

8. Culture is Constructed- it can be changed

In order to make change in our culture we need to increase our awareness about how violence manifests and make violence taboo. We need to change our social scripts about how we define children at very young ages in order to address root causes of violence like misogyny and patriarchy. We can facilitate positive role-modeling by removing some of the gender-biased attitudes and dichotomies we construct, eg., men are bad and must be stopped, women are victims and must be protected, moving away from a culture of blame and shame, and having compassion for all.

May 15 Partners' Gathering The Notes

Background

On May 15, 2012 twenty-five potential partners came together to spend the morning exploring the foundations of this 3 year project, funded by Status of Women Canada to Second Story Women's Centre. The project is predicated on community collaboration and partnership. The participants represented eleven different organizations, as well as individuals with a passion for addressing/preventing relationship violence in our communities. Donna Clark joined us as facilitator.

Introduction to the Project

Many people in the room have been doing great work in this area for years and have valuable information to guide the project. We need all perspectives and all are welcomed. The grant requires that a detailed work plan and budget, performance measurement framework and risk management plan be submitted by July 31, 2012. From conversations we have already had, it is clear that boys and men need to be involved; that people who use violence have often been victims of it themselves; and we need to unearth the multitude of assumptions about this issue. Two big questions are:

- What does a collaborative, co-ordinated response look like and mean for us?
- What else could we accomplish working together, that none of us could achieve alone?

At the very least, the coordinated community response should be inclusive, transparent and engaging, by ensuring that anyone working in or concerned about violence against women has opportunity for participation and input, and that all ideas are welcomed as the plan is developed.

Purpose

The purpose of the gathering was for those who have stepped forward so far (mostly service providers of some sort), to come together to:

- Get to know one another and what passion each brings to the effort
- Outline the project parameters, purpose, deliverables and givens (non-negotiables)
- Define and unearth our assumptions about this issue of violence against women
- Begin to develop a set of principles or guidelines for our collaboration and what that would mean
- Identify obstacles/barriers that impede an effective community response

Principles for the gathering

Donna introduced principles for our time together:

The 4-Fold way: (Angeles Arrien)

1. Show up and choose to be present.
2. Pay attention to what has heart and meaning.
3. Tell the truth without blame or judgment.
4. Be open to outcome, not attached to outcome.

Four Principles of Open Space: (Harrison Owen) +

1. Whoever comes are the right people.
2. Whenever it starts is the right time.
3. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.
4. When it's over, it's over.

The Law of Mobility:

If you are neither learning nor contributing you may choose to move to a different space or conversation.

Who we are at our best

Each person chose a card with a word and a symbol on it and was asked, "What does the card tell you about when you have been at your best in dealing with this issue?"

- Seeing the big picture will help get us there
- Refreshing- believing in the wonder of the human spirit
- Youth- recognizing the potential in youth; mentorship and excitement of youth
- New beginnings
- Grounded in dealing with others' hot buttons
- Helping to discover healthy passions
- Establishing safe relationships- open potential
- Creating space for others and taking on challenges- mentoring
- Nourishing others-- nurturing men and boys
- Looking below the surface- at roots
- Sowing seeds for change in community
- Clear about purpose
- Listening without judgment, understanding perspectives of others
- Passion about possibilities

- Working with heart, non-judgment and honouring the unique contributions of each person
- Willingness to challenge status quo and norms of culture
- Following paths that open- simple paths
- Attending to systemic issues
- Catalyst for change- working with power and powerlessness
- Personal balance – to maintain focus on issues
- Responsibility = walking with people
- Creating space for people to find voice
- Using our voices- inspiring our children and others- hold hands
- Focusing on the goal

Our Hopes and Fears

We were asked about our aspirations and fears for the project:

HOPES:

Purpose, vision

- That we develop a mission statement relative to the grant and Second Story
- Articulate a vision for something different
- That we can show viable options

Healthy collaboration

- That a community response will happen on the South Shore; not just with Domestic Violence, but with bullying also
- That we will form partnerships that model healthy collaboration and facilitation, with lots of opportunity for ongoing communication, drawing on our strengths as individuals and organizations, harnessing our collective wisdom and in a helpful, healing way
- Open-mindedness will be a cornerstone of how we work together, without blame or judgment
- Hopefully we can teach each other
- Everyone will feel their voice is heard
- A real coordinated community response where we identify gaps and let go of duplication

Emotional

- That we can manage the emotions that arise regarding family violence
- Be self-reflective
- Compassion- away from blame and shame
- Healing to restore
- Be present and live (not virtual)

Children and youth

- Proactive programming for students, early nurturing of self esteem and healthy relationships
- Prevention, education, conversation with youth... start early, even preschoolers, affect them at a young age and teach them well
- Support for kids and families, especially kids growing up in violent situations. This is thought to be a gap.
- Collect the voice and perspective of teens and their experiences
- We will break the cycle. That this generation will break it

Men and boys

- Hopeful about the involvement of men and boys... so it engages and supports them rather than alienating them; that more will be involved, and we'll have discussions about healthy boundaries and self-esteem
- Able to find young adult mentors to speak to youth. Research shows boys prefer to speak with men
- Facilitate positive role-modeling for young men, remove some of the gender-based shame
- We will think about how we define our young boys and address this at an ever-earlier age
- Interventions for men and boys

Follow-through

- Whatever programs we develop, there is continuing follow-up so they can continue, grow and trickle out
- This will take on a life of its own, not ending as another report on a shelf, but go beyond the life cycle of the grant
- Discover what it takes to sustain the work after 3rd year

Awareness

- People in the community feeling involved- a safe environment for people to step forward
- To prevent the erosion of community groups- keep them alive
- That we will deepen the awareness that violence exists in this community and is a relevant issue
- Rather than saying, “we want to change you,” we will understand where this behaviour comes from, first

Focus on the positive

- This project will build something, not be founded on defenses, but on building positive stories for individuals rather than focusing on the negative
- We will make change by doing good things
- Able to change stories by focusing on what’s working
- Take a positive approach to come up with solutions for people who choose violence, not just punishment
- The community becomes focused on peaceful living and the work becomes part of daily life

Culture and social conditioning

- The culture of the County we live in- learn to work within the environment
- That VAW (violence against women) will be as taboo as drunk driving. Affect social change like MADD
- Change our social scripts and choose to re-frame our experiences in terms of hopes
- Address the root causes of violence, eg., misogyny, fundamental insecurities among men
- To counteract the messages, we need to be opportunistic, and perhaps to circumvent culture

Diversity

- Be open to the notion of violence in LGBT community... not just the men-as-perpetrators narrative.

Programs and services

- More programs implemented in more rural areas
- Access to Neighbours, Friends and Families
- Court Pilot Project- voice added to it
- A services navigator

FEARS:

Worried that:

- Too much time will be spent in the seed stage
- Enough leadership, commitment and community support won't be there, eg., the 'community' wanting to take ownership
- The money won't produce sustainable results
- We will only focus on women and girls
- We will be 'against' something, rather than 'for' something

- We won't be able to make substantial changes to societal assumptions
- Because Second Story is responsible to the funder, that this will be seen as one organization's project
- People will leave because they become frustrated with the process
- We'll end up back at our 'reactive stuff that we do'... everyone going their own way – “my idea is best”
- Collaboration won't happen and will be lost in the bigger process
- Compartmentalization will continue with police, justice, health, schools
- We create a brand that isolates and is itself, 'violent'
- About the magnitude of the task involved in countering the messages in our culture
- About continued isolation
- About keeping everybody connected and involved for the 3 years

Some Other Diverse Thoughts and Ideas:

- It may be enough to show people that there's another option.
- No such thing as a bad person, it's all about choices. Help people make better choices.
- This is not just an educational issue- people aren't necessarily making poor choices just because they aren't educated about them. It may be that those “better choices” aren't working for them. Don't just focus on info and education. We need to do something about the circumstances in those people's lives.
- We know that bullies feel weak and powerless. Comes from a place of fear and unworthiness.
- We used to have a lot of community groups, but they seem to have eroded. Youth used to get involved in local fire halls, etc, but now they are ensconced in the virtual world.
- When we talk about not being judgmental, how do we actually do that? What does non-judgment look like?

- Top-down (government) strategies are there for political appearances. When the political agenda hits the pavement, there's not much consultation from higher-ups about what will work or what's useful for the people who need it.
- Medical model for dealing with trauma in mental health is not helpful because it only looks at damage. It ignores that people have developed survival skills as a result of their own experiences with violence.
- Use the virtual community to access everyone and promote our message
- Where does the self-critical reflection play a part?
- There is bullying among groups
- Working with a family, everyone appears to be very focused on what everyone else could be doing. Worried that as workers we can replicate that.
- There is a reluctance to discuss assumptions. Is that because it's not safe?
- Do we want to model "normal, healthy living" – or model "curiosity?"
- We're all the observers watching from the outside, but really, we're a part of it.
- How much do my actions parallel the actions that happen in a family? Getting focused on what someone else needs to do, losing the ability to realize that I'm part of creating what I see happening around me. We as workers can mirror this.
- We ask why men don't engage, but we've already defined them in a way that is hurtful to them.
- How do we deal with the practical concerns of keeping people safe?
- If you're being invited to be a good man, how do you know when you're not being good? Caught up in the idea of what constitutes "good" without questioning.
- Every story has so many versions but we tend to jump to conclusions without knowing most of the story.

Assumptions

What assumptions have already emerged and what others are there about working with this issue, both ours, and those we might encounter 'in the field.' Assumptions are often normalized without verification and without considering the larger context. This promotes judgment, blame, cynicism and black and white dichotomies that determine our interventions rather than inclusion, compassion, critical thinking and prevention. Which do we verify and adopt, and which do we challenge and debate?

- **The nature of violence**

- It doesn't affect me
- That it's okay
- That there's an on/off switch, eg., it's acceptable in hockey, or compelling as entertainment, but not in relationships; makes it confusing for people
- It's just men to women, (not women to men or in LGBT relationships as well)
- Violence is only physical/bruises; otherwise it's not worthy of consideration
- There's only one victim (the woman)
- Only certain people are capable of violence versus we are ALL capable of violence and ALL capable of being victims
- Assumptions around who offends and who is a victim
- Viewed as an anger issue
- The "abuser" won't go on to abuse other/new partners in front of the children
- Degree- sliding scale

- **The causes of violence**

- It's driven by substance abuse- drugs and alcohol are to blame; otherwise "he's really a good person"
- Sexual assault only occurs when alcohol is involved

- **Determinants of violence- not a one-dimensional issue**
 - That it's just about violence
 - Domestic violence against women does not impact the children
 - Socio-economic moulds how we group victims and perpetrators as poor, uneducated, no self-esteem, etc.
 - This is a rural issue
 - The role poverty plays as a determinant, (though not necessarily the blame... a man robs a store to feed his children.) Or the role money plays (A rich man might not need to hit his wife, he can hire lawyers to do this work for him.)
 - It can be hidden more in higher socioeconomic groups
 - What determines well-being? Do we know or assume?
 - Communication in a technological world-- fights start over txt messages, interpretations without the context of body language
 - Men who abuse have often been abused themselves; need awareness of this before reacting
 - There are some really bad/evil people out there who are serial offenders and will never change
 - Are gender assumptions enough? Will that cover it and allow us to 'fix' this?
- **Gender (and other) dichotomies**
 - Gender definitions and assumptions- understanding and working with them
 - It's only men who use violence
 - A woman can change a man's behaviour
 - Men are bullies
 - Men who cry are weak
 - Men can't do caring work; cannot be models for and nurture young women; only women can do that for youth
 - Patriarchy does not allow for compassion in men, seen as 'soft'

- We react to men, we have prevention for women
- “Men have it worse” – being accused of verbal/physical abuse allegations
- Women need help, men need to be stopped
- Abusers are inherently bad, victims are inherently weak
- In an effort to be inclusive and get away from blame/shame dichotomy, we may overlook the need for abusers to be accountable for their actions
- Women are using violence more and more
- Men and boys can’t help themselves, they can’t stop, females make them do it
- Women/girls use more subtle forms of violence and control that provokes men
- Boys often feel controlled by girls at young ages, (“they always get their way”). How does that influence how they feel about girls/women or lash out as they develop?
- **Social programming and moral issues**
 - It’s “just a women’s issue”- no, it is a human issue
 - It’s a family problem (private), not a community problem
 - Expectations around relationships and what they are about
 - Do the fairy tales we tell young children set them up for unrealistic expectations?
 - Are kids taught to seek Mr. or Mrs. Right, only to find themselves disappointed? Do they feel that they are failures if they can’t “keep hold” someone’s undying love and loyalty?
 - We jump to conclusions with only one side of the story and are quick to judge without knowing the whole picture
 - People are not always what they show themselves to be to the public
 - We believe there’s less violence than actual
 - Society knows what is best for the individual
 - Are we becoming moral police, saying we know what constitutes a ‘healthy’ relationship? What is “normal / healthy?” These concepts evolve over time
 - How we define “the good man,” and is that a ‘good’ thing?

- **Family values**

- What are they?
- What is the role of marriage (the concept of it) in creating violence?
- The breadwinner calls the shots (a gender assumption, too?)
- Men are powerful and controlling OR the opposite- powerless and disenfranchised, low self esteem in society/family
- A woman's place is in the home

- **Choice**

- "If we could just teach these people to make better choices..."
- "If it was that bad, she would have left," "if she doesn't leave, she deserves it"
- The choice is simple- leave or stay
- You reap what you sow
- Everyone's clear on what others should do

- **Interventions**

- Intervention is the same as prevention
- It's only the offender who needs help OR only the woman victim who needs help
- Interventions are needed for women AND for men, (AND children), as most of these families will stay together.
- How is my story about what he needs any different than his story about what she needs? (Workers often have ideas about what the various players need, as do the players themselves)

- **Political systems**

- Political correctness (statistics men against women)- what is behind it?
- Politicizing whose pain is worse- women's or men's- that one can trump another
- We replicate the same responses to violence that we see/observe in violent situations

- **Department of Justice and justice system**
 - It's hard to navigate
 - The court system thinks it's an anger-management issue and prescribes a program
 - There is always a victim-offender dichotomy
 - What kind of language comes from government and justice? What kinds of language are we expected to use in our work?
 - "... what matters is not what works for the man (or the woman) but what works for Justice." There is a liability ('cover your ass') issue
- **Collaboration and possibilities**
 - It's a buzzword. Not enough to just talk about, how do we DO it together?
 - How to be critical thinkers together
 - We can find peoples' end goal of peace

Principles for Collaboration

So what will keep us engaged in this? How do we work together?

Beginning ideas for principles that will keep us moving forward on this together.

- Prevention, not reaction
- Idea generation and action
- Realistic, manageable goals
- Create a safe environment where feelings can be expressed freely
- RESPECT- for the whole group working together. Respectful listening. Open and direct communication, both within the group and externally
- Appreciation model – strengths-based- valuing the gifts, talents, and strengths of individuals, community based groups, departments and organizations
- Recognizing that people who aren't attached to organizations may have more freedom to do things
- Players and intentions may change over the course of the project. Openness to this.
- Modeling- from sincerity and integrity – wearing all hats

- The “WE” principle- inclusion and working together- avoiding alienation and us-them. Can’t assume it- needs building
- Check our biases and privileges- regularly
- Listen, reflect, act. These principles should guide how we carry out the work.
- Embrace positive thinking. Reframe the negatives.
- Honour people’s intentions.
- Sense of community- have a stake in our communities
- Holistic practice
- ‘Trauma-informed’- being cognisant of coping mechanisms that people develop that seem maladaptive in other contexts. Can we look through their lens and see that their reactions have come from trauma, and be supportive of them?
- Congruent practice regarding culture and diversity
- Child-centred and family-focused
- Be emergent. Allow for the taking up of things that emerge throughout the process. Be curious, exploratory, non-judgmental, think outside the box.
- Use humour

It’s easy to name principles but harder to live by them. How can we hold each other accountable to these principles? Requires much trust to be able to speak freely.

Key Roles for Partners- Moving Forward:

Communications Plan

Research-- web, literature, great ideas/initiatives

Community Asset Mapping

Outcomes/ results measures/indicators

Gathering/collating statistics

Making Other Community Connections:

Youth

Core Partners

Men and boys

Women and girls

Key Informants

First voice

Native women

Disabled

Seniors

Others

Planning for 2-day Public Event in July

Volunteering for July event

Next Steps

Planning for a 2-day open community gathering, July 5-7th to engage all partners, community members, service providers- anyone who has a stake or perspective to share and would like to contribute to how this project unfolds.

Using and combination of Open Space Technology and Appreciative Inquiry:

July 5th Thursday evening 6:30-9pm- storytelling, the story of this issue, personal stories

July 6th Friday, 9am – 5pm- issues and opportunities for addressing violence against women and girls as a community. Self-selected conversations

July 7th, Saturday, 9am- 12:30 pm- action planning. What might we do in the next 3 years that could make a difference? What priorities will we focus on?

Gather a team to collate the data and create a detailed work plan and budget, evaluation framework, risk management plan for the funder by July 31st.