Inviting Voice, Creating Space

The Inviting Voice, Creating Space (IVCS) project grew out of a conversation among community service providers about barriers to women’s health and safety. We realized that many women were experiencing obstacles and challenges.

CWAV Society’s Safer Futures and the UBC School of Nursing formed a partnership. We asked women from all walks of life to tell us about their experiences in the Cowichan Valley and what would help remove barriers to health and safety.

We took a broad view of health and safety, premised on the notion that health is determined by where and how women live their lives. We hypothesized that women’s health and women’s safety are interwoven and deeply interdependent.

Being safe means being free to use and move about spaces in the community without being victimized or fearful. It means access to resources and services. It means participating freely and fully in community life.

Health is influenced by a range of determinants that lie beyond community services and hospital doors. Things like income, housing and social status; culture and social support; education, employment and working conditions; and the physical environment are as or more important than actual health services. These issues then intersect with gender, race, class, age, ability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, as well as where we live.

Health and safety covers everything we are, everything we do and all of the places we live, work and play each day. If any one factor changes, it affects everything else.

Our research bears this out. We learned that feelings of belonging, connection and inclusion are the most important factors in women’s participation in programs and services.

One of the most important results was understanding that the accumulated experiences over a woman’s lifetime combine into complex patterns that change over time and are unpredictable. This finding suggests it’s critical to encourage policy-making and planning that rejects a one size fits all model of service provision.

Decision-makers need to go beyond looking at one topic at a time - housing as one thing; transportation as another. Employment and support systems that currently operate as separate entities need to be planned together – and in an integrated way.

We need to shift from silo thinking. No single organization can address major social problems. Collaboration is needed to address barriers to women’s participation and access to services. Cross-sector coalitions are needed to address the complexity that is women’s health and safety.

Can we see road safety as a health concern? Can we tackle lack of meaningful work as a safety issue? Can violence-prevention be as important to community safety as street lights? The connections are endless. Each one is an opportunity for collective solutions.

This is our new frontier.
Youth Projects

This was a blockbuster year for our amazing youth team—Safe Youth Cowichan (SYC)!

After talking to over 500 youth from around the region, these young women and men developed a Youth Safety Lens. The Youth Safety Lens is up for consideration by the Cowichan Valley Regional District (CVRD) and we expect it to go to the Union of BC Municipalities for adoption. SYC’s recommendations from the local safety assessments that they did have also been incorporated into the planning of the Trans-Canada Highway Corridor and Local Area Plan.

SYC’s Photo-voice and video Assumptions continues to create awareness of the needs of youth in community decision making.

SYC developed, facilitated and implemented a community needs assessment and Neighbourhood Action Plan. The City of Duncan created Duncan Junior Youth Council to work directly with the city on community safety decisions, as a result of this work.

Most recently, SYC is speaking out about sexual harassment through a major community campaign on Street Harassment.

Terri Dame
Supervisor
Safer Futures Programs
Our Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) program is home to direct one-to-one services. Stopping the Violence (STV) counselling helps women who have experienced abuse recognize the strengths that have allowed them to cope with their trauma. Through this work, they regain a sense of safety and control and learn to create healthy, supportive relationships.

Children Who Witness Abuse (CWWA) Counselling helps children between 4 and 18 understand the violence they have seen their mothers endure and how that abuse hurts them. CWWA also provides support and guidance for their moms.

Community Based Victim Services (CBVS) assists victims of intimate partner violence. Most CBVS clients are involved with the police and the Domestic Violence (DV) Court. We help victims develop safety plans and navigate the often-challenging court process. Throughout the year, CBVS hosts a drop-in group called Holding Your Own in Relationship (HYO).

In addition to these core services, WAVAW offered the following groups.

1. Teen Healthy Relations, a 10-week educational program in local high schools funded by the Canadian Women’s Foundation (CWF) as part of a national study on healthy relationships and social justice.

2. Strengthening Families is a 10-week program offered three times a year under a grant from the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). While moms learn about the impact of violence on their children, their kids learn about healthy families.

3. CWF allowed us to use remaining funds from a 2013–14 grant to offer an advanced Strengthening Parenting group.

CBVS is seeing an increase in high-risk cases. The lack of crisis counselling is an ongoing gap. Despite these challenges, we continue to provide victim services on Penelakut Island every other Tuesday to support this isolated and poorly resourced community.

Since the death of Judge Josiah Wood in early 2014, we have been working with other community partners to ensure his unique vision for the Duncan DV Court continues. Under his leadership, the court introduced safety planning for victims as a preventive strategy to reduce the likelihood of violence reoccurring or escalating. The court remains committed to this special procedural characteristic.

A concerning trend sees an increase in the number of women charged with domestic violence. CWAV would like police to conduct primary aggressor assessments before a woman is charged. Such assessments distinguish behaviour that is a retaliation to often long-standing violence by an abusive partner from those instances where the woman is the attacker. While the Crown has been good at recognizing when the woman who has been charged is the actual victim, once she is before the court, CWAV cannot provide her with the safety planning and assistance she needs unless the Crown makes an exception.

WAVAW’s many successes this year include:

- Providing leadership in forming a local Violence Against Women in Relationship (VAWIR) committee; bringing together all service providers in the region to plan ways to reduce
the incidence of gender-based violence.

- Helping in the formation of an Interagency Case Assessment Team (ICAT) to coordinate interventions when high-risk domestic violence situations are potentially life threatening.
- Training two practicum students in trauma-informed counselling and group co-facilitation skills.

Cathy Welch
Supervisor, WAVA W Programs

409 new CBVS clients

90 referrals
37 parents
53 children
CWWA services

89 referrals
to STV services

48 attended Parenting & Family groups
30 women 18 children

810 hours of 1:1
STV counselling provided

52 received 1:1 CWWA services
14 parents
38 children

2167 ongoing CBVS clients

48 children
remain on CWWA waitlist

56 remain on STV waitlist
Until my teenage daughter came home talking about the Teen Healthy Relationship Program, I had never heard of Cowichan Women Against Violence Society. CWAVS staff were teaching my daughter’s grade ten class about what a healthy relationship should be like. She kept putting the CWAVS’ business card in my purse.

I felt embarrassed and confused but when my husband left the house in a rage, I called CWAVS. He had grabbed me and thrown me down. I was afraid of what he might do when he came back.

The victim services worker at CWAVS helped me to understand that my husband’s rage was not my fault, that he was choosing to be abusive and he could make different choices. She gave me the phone number for Somenos Transition House in case the kids and I chose to go.

After a few appointments with the Victim Services worker, I was able to talk about how my husband’s behaviour was affecting me and the kids. I realized that his abuse went beyond yelling and hurting me. Keeping me from our bank account, accusing me of cheating, and threatening to ‘silence’ me if I talked to my parents were also forms of abuse.

The drop-in group helped me learn how to hold my own in relationship. I also came to understand that my husband’s behaviour was a crime and how I would go about reporting the assault to the police if I decided to go that route.

I never felt judged or pressured. I started to trust that my kids and I would be safe.

I met with the Children Who Witness
I started to trust that my kids and I would be safe."

Abuse Counsellor to see whether this program could help my kids. She asked me questions about what kind of violence the kids may have seen or experienced. I realized that even though my husband never hit our kids, they were affected by what happened to me. We talked about ways that I could support my kids while they waited for counselling. I was already doing some things that were helping and she suggested other things that I could try. We all attended the Strengthening Families Group. It helped having a group with other moms and my kids had fun and learned about healthy families in their group.

It’s been about a year since I made that first call. A lot has happened. I no longer live with my husband. I’ve been going to sessions with a Stopping the Violence counsellor. I’m figuring out why I tend to end up with controlling men.

There are times when the counselling is hard and I go through lots of tissue. I understand myself better and I’m starting to trust myself, something that’s still very new. I like who I see in the mirror these days.

My kids do too. I never realized how much they were trying to take care of me, the business card being just one example. They tell me they’re relieved that I’m safe and happier. They now feel that they can focus on school and their friends.

WAVAW Client