

## Steps for Change

### **A Brief Overview of Conference Highlights, Activities and Recommendations:**

On Tuesday, March 23rd and Thursday, March 25, 1999, a two-day working conference was held with key representatives from Durham Region, including service providers, politicians and focus group participants. The driving force behind the Steps for Change Conference was to formally release the findings from the focus group research as well as to increase community awareness related to the primary issues of concern to the focus group participants. The conference served as a starting point for a dialogue that helped organize and unify the Durham community regarding solution-focused approaches to addressing the identified concerns.

Each morning of the conference opened with a plenary session for the public at large, and was attended by a total of 224 people over the course of the two days. Of that 152 participants attended the first day of the conference and 72 participants attended the second day of the conference. Each day the afternoon sessions were by invitation only, and participants were assigned to a specific working group related to their own area of expertise. There were focus group participants present in all of the seven working groups. The themes for each working group were directly related to issues identified throughout the research phase of the project.

Before the specifics for each working group are outlined, it is important to highlight the similarities the conference participants dealt with regardless of the working group they attended. The conference participants were highly respectful of what the focus group participants had to say. The testimonies from the woman abuse survivors heard throughout the conference, both in the plenary sessions and during the working groups, were met with tremendous compassion and admiration. The conference participants were often moved to tears and on one occasion gave a spontaneous standing ovation after one of the survivors completed her testimony.

In general, it would be fair to say that there was unanimous support for the recommendations put forward by the focus group participants. A breakfast for Executive Directors took place on the first day of the Working Conference. Key leaders from the community met together with politicians (including two members of the provincial cabinet and the Chair of the Health & Social Services Committee for Durham Region). After listening to a very moving testimonial from a woman whose son was murdered on the first unsupervised access visit, the group engaged in a visioning process about what they would like to see for Durham Region.

Four visions suggested by this Executive Directors group were:

- Develop Luke's Place - a resource centre where women and children can go to get accurate information and expert assistance from workers and allies who understand the issues and dynamics faced by abused women and child witnesses.
- Ensure that Durham is a community where women and children are respected and believed and where the issue of safety drives and defines policymaking and service delivery.
- Provide coordinated, informed, comprehensive and safe intervention as soon as woman abuse is suspected.
- Educate the community, starting with elementary schools that abuse is not the norm and is not acceptable. Establish the principle of zero tolerance for abuse.

The four visions suggested by the Executive Directors were also unanimously embraced by the conference participants at large. Additionally, the following recommendations were endorsed. They are as follows:

### General Recommendations from Conference Participants

1. Routine screening for woman abuse in all custody and access cases coming before the courts.
2. Fast track all cases where allegations of abuse are present, as well as in those cases where abuse may not be disclosed but signs and symptoms are present that may indicate a high risk situation.
3. Develop a system that would red-flag high risk cases while enhancing the safety and security of all family members as well as professional staff.
4. The abuse assessment would be conducted immediately by an "abuse expert" in the community to establish the validity of her claim, and if found to be credible, her situation would then be assessed for risk factors. The appropriate steps would be taken to maximize safety for all family members.
5. Mandatory training on woman abuse issues for assessors, police officers, lawyers, judges and all other professionals and lay people involved in responding to woman abuse cases.
6. The establishment of an Accountability Committee made up of woman abuse survivors and key service providers. This committee has the potential to serve numerous functions, including monitoring and critiquing Durham Region's response to custody and access cases involving woman abuse issues.
7. A dialogue with the appropriate judges in Durham Region will be conducted during Phase II of the project. The one judge in attendance at the conference volunteered to assist the Steering Committee in facilitating this dialogue.
8. A Task Force to be established with the purpose of standardizing the wording of custody and access orders to maximize effective enforcement by police personnel in Durham Region.
9. A meeting with the local Legal Aid staff to discuss issues such as unlimited legal aid assistance and greater accessibility to legal aid in woman abuse cases
- 10 .A working group of family law lawyers to be organized regarding the establishment and definition of Best Practice Guidelines in woman abuse cases.
- 11 .It was recommended that each profession have a set of standards and guidelines such as Best Practice Guidelines to oversee their intervention in woman abuse cases, e.g. for police, social workers, child welfare personnel, judges, assessors, supervised access workers, legal aid staff as well as family law lawyers.
12. Mandatory counselling for abusive men that focuses on eliminating their abusive behaviour and increasing their fathering skills.
13. Develop a "graduated system" of access based on the abusive partner's attendance at a specialized counselling program and on the abuser's ability to demonstrate observable behavioural changes that make evident a decrease in his abusive behaviour. This type of a system could allow for a gradual change from supervised to unsupervised access if the changes were significant.
14. Any change in access would be first discussed in collaboration with the abusive man's partner to include her insight and experience as well as ensuring safety and security for both her and her children. This would be an integral part of the process.
15. A working group might also create a list of observable signs of effective change on the part of the abuser and observable features of effective intervention programs.
- 16 .Form a partnership between woman abuse survivors and key service providers in Durham Region to develop a woman's resource centre dealing specifically with custody and access issues. Such a centre could provide all of the information support/resources that a woman and her children might need to effectively deal with the issues raised. As mentioned earlier in this paper, there has been unanimous support for naming this centre "**Luke's Place**".
17. Work toward the adoption and implementation of the 24 recommendations for reform put forward in the Bala Report, Appendix E.
18. Adopt a comprehensive definition of abuse that would include emotional, psychological and verbal abuse, in addition to physical and sexual abuse, along the lines of the new legislation in New Zealand referred to earlier in this paper.

**Note:** Many valuable comments and recommendations were recorded and summarized in each of the seven working groups at the conference. Given space limitations, this material has not been included in this report. To access this information check out the other reports listed on the [www.vpcc.ca](http://www.vpcc.ca) website.