

WARC: Woman Abuse Review Committee

Background

Most of the women in the original focus groups felt that there were few, if any, avenues in place to hold all parties accountable for their commitments. Women expressed frustration that ex-partners were allowed to continue controlling behaviour and to use legal and custody battles as a method of ongoing harassment.

There are at least fifty formal services and organizations that make up the "Safety Net" in our community and each plays a part in the coordinated response to woman abuse in Durham. (Refer to the Appendix at the end of this section). Many have established protocols, policies and procedures that provide guidance to their response to women who have been abused, their children and the men who have abused them. Given the complexity of woman abuse and domestic violence generally, it is unrealistic to assume that solutions to problems encountered by women proceeding through the myriad of services and organizations can be found with a single sector or organization, or that they themselves, can add that component to their already overburdened and stressed experience.

Right from the beginning of this process there has been strong support for the establishment of an "Accountability Committee" made up of woman abuse survivors and key service providers. This committee was seen as being able to serve numerous functions, including monitoring and critiquing Durham Region's response to custody and access cases involving woman abuse issues.

In addition, throughout the development of "**A Community Response to Abused Women & their Families: A Protocol for Durham Region**" in the early to mid 1990's, the then "Accountability Committee" consisted of survivors of woman abuse who reviewed each section and provided comments. Although the primary focus of this Protocol had been the criminal justice system response versus family law, it included guidelines for Police, Crown Attorneys, Probation & Parole Services, Shelters, Hospitals and Health Services, Distress Centres, Children's Aid Society, Income Support, Counselling Services and Churches. The Protocol was developed under the auspices of the Violence Prevention Council who has maintained responsibility for its ongoing update and review. It is seen as a living document.

There appears to have been a desire by the Violence Prevention Council and the Protocol Committee to establish an "Accountability Committee" that would monitor Durham's Response to Woman Abuse. However, one was never established.

This early vision is consistent with the WARC concept proposed in 1999 - to have a multi-disciplinary accountability network for the purpose of reviewing woman abuse cases and related issues. This network would provide a process where an abused woman and/or her advocate could present her case for discussion, input, consultation, and action.

This team would include woman abuse survivors and all key agencies and service providers who deal with woman abuse issues rising in family court, criminal court, child protection, assessments, counselling, law enforcement, etc.

Original Terms of Reference

The initial responsibilities of the WARC Working Group were to:

- Develop a community model for a review committee with representatives from high enough within agencies that action can be taken when needed. Woman abuse survivors must also be represented.
- Define roles of the review committee including case reviews where an abused woman and/or her advocate can present a case for discussion, input, consultation and action. This could also include roles in situations where a woman or child has been murdered - supportive emotional critical debriefing for those involved as well as instrumental debriefing and community review about what went wrong and what changes are needed with systems.

- Consider staffing needs for effective functioning of such a committee (i.e. A person to interview the survivor and advocate(s), to write up the case for presentation, to obtain necessary signed releases, and to follow up afterward.)
- To explore and submit funding proposals for the establishment and operation of this committee.

Early Struggles

The initial meeting of the WARC Working Group was in July of 1999. The committee members were thrown immediately into debating and discussing the central and fundamental issue of its process and the concept of community ownership. A central concern was - how far does the model get developed by this committee before those who would likely be permanent members are invited to contribute? The struggle between balancing what some felt needed to be a community process with others who felt that it was important to be on task and focus on developing a model from which discussion could begin. Fundamental also was the debate about how much of a model needed to be developed before approaching those in decision-making positions to buy in and delegate a representative to the ongoing process.

To complicate matters, the attendance of committee members was not consistent, contributing to the struggle as members reached differing levels of clarity at different times. The lack of agreement and direction led the Steering Committee (who was overseeing the work of all working groups) to suggest that WARC move in the overall structure and join the Task Force on Court, Police and Legal Issues. It was agreed that the WARC August meeting be cancelled and that representatives join the Task Force at their meeting on September 9th to discuss the Steering Committee's suggestion.

At the joint meeting in September there was consensus that WARC should not join the Task Force but rather consider alternatives. It was felt that the goals and planned initiatives of the Task Force and WARC were distinct enough to warrant separate groups. Also, the membership of the Task Force was already very large. One alternative that consensus was reached on, was that consideration be given to WARC combining efforts with the Violence Prevention Council (VPC). It was felt that WARC's Terms of Reference may fit well with the work that the VPC was contemplating concerning the review of the existing protocol.

Several suggestions were put forward in a joint meeting as to what Task Force committee members saw as WARC's purpose and/or how it might function.

These included:

- a central place where survivors, advocates and the community at large can come following a tragedy for the purpose of debriefing;
- the hope that the purpose of WARC would be to identify gaps for the purpose of making changes and that WARC operates in a way that is supportive and bridge-building rather than divisive;
- WARC should be a "safe" place where those who report do not fear repercussions;
- WARC should include a review of how different services interact - the gaps in service/protection where there is more than one service involved, e.g. family, criminal, child protection, mental health, etc.;
- WARC should consider developing a Code of Ethics;
- WARC may be the next piece that fits with the Protocol;
- perhaps the VPC can be WARC as many of the players are already there;
- a model of accountability cannot be developed without sanctions from all the different systems involved;
- a fundamental component is to ensure is that it (WARC) cannot be a place where participants merely give way to finger-pointing or shaming of individuals working within the system;
- instead, WARC needs to be a place where individuals and advocates can take information about what's wrong with the service(s) and have it reviewed for the purpose of finding remedies and making changes;
- WARC could set up an Ombudsman type model where a person (or persons) investigate citizen's complaints about government bodies, agencies or officials. However, that may be infringing on the rights of the individuals.

Revised Vision, Goals & Responsibilities

The Terms of Reference were then reviewed and reworked as follows:

Vision

To have a safe and healthy transition for women and children in Durham Region who are leaving an abusive situation. Women and children would be supported in making that transition by a spectrum of organizations and services. Physical and emotional injury would not occur.

Goal

To have multi-disciplinary accountability panels, composed of major players in areas related to woman abuse, for the purpose of reviewing woman abuse cases and related issues. These panels would provide a process where an abused woman and/or advocate could present her case for discussion, input, consultation, investigation of potential solutions and actions. These panels would include woman abuse survivors and all key agencies and service providers who deal with woman abuse issues arising in: family court, criminal court, child protection, assessments, counselling, law enforcement, etc. The panels would report to a committee composed of the decision-makers in participating organizations and abuse survivors.

Revised Responsibilities of Working Group

- Develop a community model for accountability panels composed of representatives from a range of organizations involved in woman abuse issues, woman abuse survivors, and a committee of decision-makers formed to respond to the panel's findings and recommendations.
- Define roles of the accountability panel including case reviews where an abused woman and/or her advocate can present a case for discussion, input, consultation and action. This could also include roles in situations where a woman or child has been murdered - supportive emotional critical debriefing for those involved as well as instrumental debriefing and community review about what went wrong and what changes are needed within the system.
- Consider staffing needs for effective functioning of such a committee (i.e. A person to interview the survivor and advocate(s) to write up the case for presentation, to obtain necessary signed releases, and to follow up afterward.)
- To explore and submit funding proposals for the establishment and operation of this committee.

The Next Steps

The WARC working group determined that it would continue to meet to develop a community model for an accountability panel and would begin dialogue with the Violence Prevention Council. To that end, the committee solidified its membership which now totaled approximately 15 members made up of woman abuse survivors, community and hospital health providers, child and family services staff, child welfare personnel, shelter representatives, police, supervised access centres and court assessment representatives. The committee focused on developing a draft model for Durham that would encompass the following opportunities:

- individual case reviews;
- enhanced communication, problem solving and planning;
- improved community coordination;
- promote collective responsibility and community ownership;
- promote earlier identification of gaps and issues;
- support ongoing development and application of the Durham Woman Abuse Protocol;
- maximize resources; and track and evaluate progress in delivering a seamless response to woman abuse in our community (i.e. a community report card).

The hope was to accomplish all of the above in a way that was safe and validating for women, supportive and constructive for professionals, and which advanced knowledge and understanding of the impact of woman abuse as well as increasing understanding of the changes our community must make in order to minimize the pain and suffering of those affected. Given that the scope of WARC was broader than custody and access and family law, the recommendation that the WARC committee explore shifting its accountability to the Violence Prevention Council continued to make sense and preliminary discussions ensued.

Significant Moments

Developing a visual depiction of what the potential model might look like helped move the committee forward significantly. As with any complex process any opportunity to bring the abstract into concrete terms always helps. The visual is attached and entitled "Steps in WARC Resolution".

Review of a Specific Case

At one point the WARC Working Group learned a great deal by hearing from a woman abuse survivor about what she had to face and continued to face. The committee then heard from members about how they thought a Woman Abuse Review Committee might respond in such a situation. In essence we were provided with a trial run.

Overall this survivor felt that her experience had been very difficult and that there had not been any one place to help direct and guide her through the process. A threat assessment had been completed by the Ontario Provincial Police, concluding that her ex-husband presented a high risk for potential violence.

In her particular situation, there were some people she found to be very helpful. These included a worker from the Victim Assistance Program, two specific police officers who finally laid charges and obtained a panic alarm for her, a shelter, and individual group counsellors. To counsellors, this woman suggested that she needed direction rather than just talking. She felt in general that she had to figure everything out on her own and fight every battle herself.

Problems were described in many areas. Regarding the Crown's office, she reported that she had a different Crown each court appearance and kept having to retell her story. She felt she needed to be there in person so there was a real person's situation they had to deal with. She commented that the Crown's workload is too heavy for them to adequately prepare and it was difficult having to see her ex-husband in person each time.

Her experience of the police was that most police did not see the extent of violence she experienced. Restraining orders did not help her get safer. They only helped with the next charges when the abuser broke the previous restraining order. She reported frequent harassment and stalking and felt that police did not respond. It took a year to get a panic alarm.

Regarding Probation officers, this woman indicated that there were numerous breaches but Probation Officers involved in the case did not breach him and sent her back to the police. Probation Officers did not know about the risk assessment done by the OPP.

This survivor reported that it took a long time to get Legal Aid approval, making her situation more difficult and dangerous.

There were two current situations that were creating significant stress and danger for this survivor. Supervised visits were ordered by the Court at the Supervised Access Centre. Serious concerns were expressed by this woman as she felt her ex-husband could be dangerous and that he could abduct the children from the Centre given that there was no security and no police presence at the Supervised Access Centre.

Secondly, this survivor expressed significant problems in dealing with Income Support. She indicated that she felt humiliated

and treated like "a piece of dirt" by her worker. An office visit was scheduled for her on a certain date and she was told she would be suspended if she didn't appear. When she attended, her worker was away on vacation. She was asked to sign a lien against her house, but when she was asked for a copy of the legislation to take to her lawyer, that was denied. Several other difficulties were recounted.

A discussion ensued by the committee members, which ultimately informed and led to the development of the model "Steps in WARC Resolution". In addition, three committee members agreed to follow up on specific current difficulties being faced by this survivor. One committee member had significant experience in working with Income Support on the establishment of WARM (Woman Abuse Response Members) Teams. Within their process, a Review Process Person had been designated to hear any complaints and a process had been designed to address them within the system.

This committee member arranged a meeting immediately with the Review Process Person, herself, and the survivor. The Review Process Person listened very empathically to the woman's concerns, recorded information, and provided a copy of the legislation that had been requested. She followed through with a memo to the supervisor of the worker and in consultation with her, the concerns were addressed.

The committee member also approached two other committee members from the meeting who had vocally expressed concerns regarding treatment of their clients by Income Support. They provided detailed information about the difficulties being experienced by survivors. This information was forwarded and discussed with the Administrator of Income Support. He then discussed them with Area Managers. An Area Manager, the committee member, and the Divisional WARM Committee are meeting to problem solve and explore potential solutions. The committee member contacted the survivor, who indicated that she felt very positive about the outcome for herself personally.

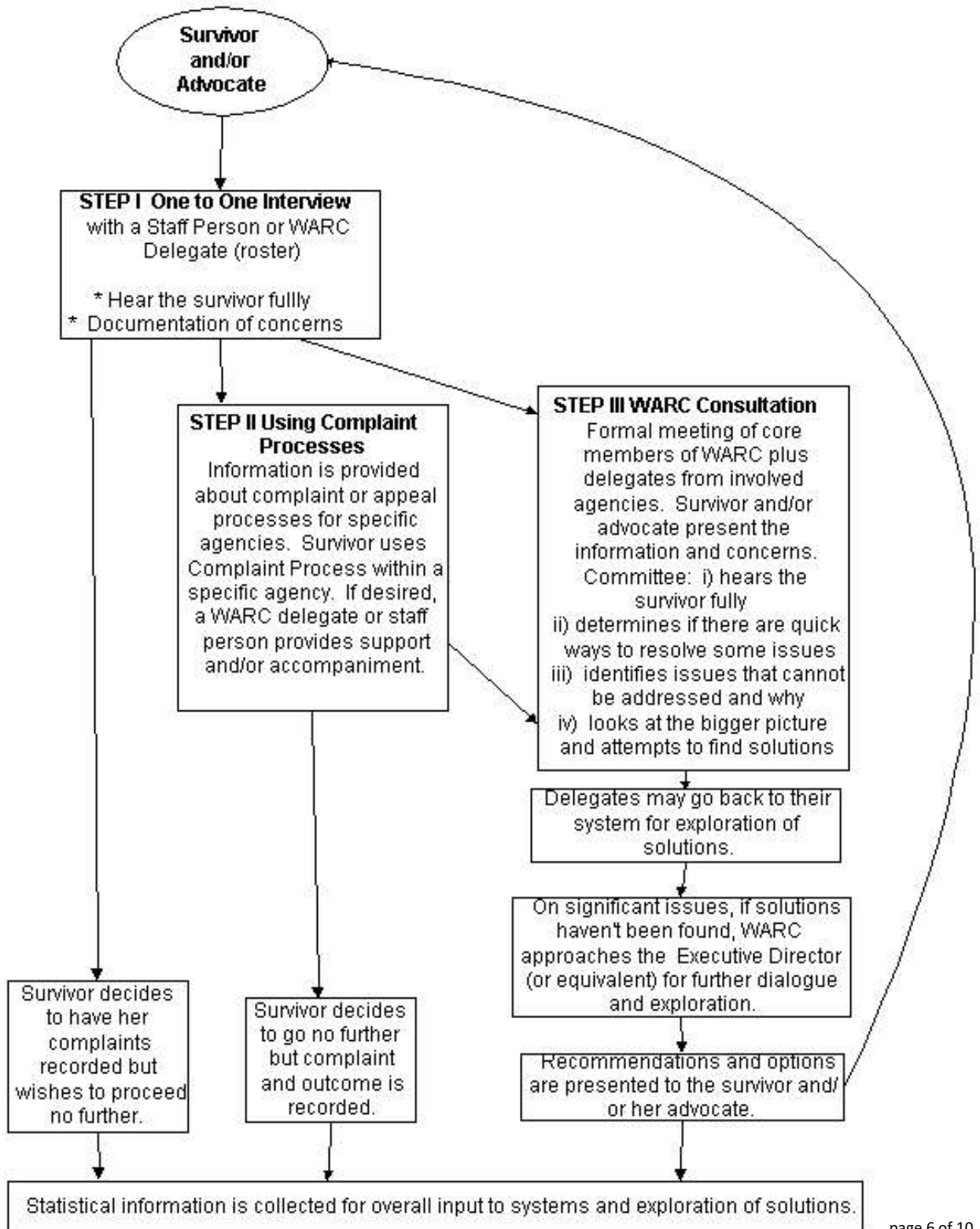
In addition, the Director of the Supervised Access Centre and a Police Officer on the committee met to look at safety issues at each of four Supervised Access locations, discussing a variety of options, including having a panic alarm available at each site and an agreement with the Police that if they received such a call, it would be treated as an immediate high priority. Further discussion took place about the whole issue of the appropriateness of supervised access in situations with high-risk offenders. Plans were made to begin a more detail discussion and examination of issues related to supervised access.

Upon reflection, it was felt that the current committee responded akin to how we might hope the established WARC would. An established Woman Abuse Review Committee could also have explored other issues raised by this case, with the same positive intent of understanding the issues being raised and creatively finding potential solutions.

The Model

The final draft of the WARC Model:

STEPS IN WARC RESOLUTION





This model proposes that survivors and their advocates have several options. Step I provides an option for a survivor to have her concerns heard fully and recorded. The concerns identified would be periodically reviewed by WARC, and if issues repetitively arose, the system(s) involved would explore potential solutions and report back to WARC.

In some circumstances a survivor may fear going further, afraid that it could affect her or current proceedings in a negative way. In other circumstances, this may meet a survivor's needs and be all that she requires.

In Step II, the survivor is educated about potential appeal or complaint processes within the agencies she is concerned about, and if desired, she is supported in utilizing these processes. If issues are resolved to her satisfaction, she may go no further and the complaint and outcome would be recorded for WARC.

Some women will desire to access Step III, a WARC Consultation. The overall model being considered for WARC is to have a core group of key agencies involved in many woman abuse situations. A WARC Consultation would involve representatives from the core group. In addition, there would be representatives from other agencies who could be called in for a particular consultation if the issues or solutions being addressed involve that particular agency or service. This allows for representation from the needed agencies, but creation of a consultation group that is not too large. It also provides a base of an ongoing group who know each other and have established cooperative relationships.

In the WARC Consultation, representatives would hear the survivor's issues fully, determine if there are quick ways to resolve some of the issues, identifying issues that cannot be addressed and why, and explore the bigger picture and attempt to find solutions. A representative may need to go back to their agency for further discussion of the issue and exploration of potential solutions within their system. If an impasse is reached and the issue is pressing, representatives of WARC may approach the senior person in the organization for discussion and exploration of the issue. This would be done with the knowledge, input and involvement of the representative.

Finally, recommendations and options agreed upon by WARC will be presented to the survivor and/or advocate.

Apart from WARC Consultations, there may be times when all WARC representatives would meet together for new input, to review information compiled about survivor's concerns and to plan coordinated solutions within the community.

Further Clarification

There were many important discussions about who we were and who we were not. How to differentiate between WARC and internal complaints procedures of community services and organizations was key in understanding and clarifying WARC's role. The difference between WARC and other accountability committees in our community continues to be a challenge. An ongoing question is how to link and coordinate efforts so that we minimize any potential or perceived duplication. The relationship of WARC to the Violence Prevention Council is one that is still very much in process.

The Tone

The committee was very careful and thoughtful in its meetings. Everyone was always respectful of the processes in place in each organization and struggled with how a WARC committee would interface, build upon and augment existing complaint processes. There has been modeling from the start about what we felt the attributes of the final WARC committee meeting might encompass. The goal has always been to create a model where there would be no shaming, blaming or pointing fingers. The hope is to create a model where both abused women and staff working with women who have been abused would welcome and view WARC's role as positive and helpful either during or after the fact. This is also a model that would support a zero tolerance to violence and encourage committee involvement by all services and organizations.

Where We Are Now

The draft model has been developed, and a work plan has been developed with a plan for seeking community feedback and preliminary buy in by senior administrators and managers. Plans are underway to meet with key system stakeholders in order to gather their feedback as well as to ascertain what barriers, if any, exist to their ongoing participation and commitment to support and join a community accountability model such as WARC.

Final Thoughts

Anyone wishing to duplicate this process should keep the following in mind:

- always include woman abuse survivors meaningfully and in all aspects;
- maintain the big picture and ascertain if other similar processes exist in the community;
- incorporate community development concepts and seek community feedback;
- communicate throughout the process - don't wait until the end or buy-in will be seriously compromised;
- always remember to use real situations to help develop the model;
- it may be useful to develop a visual depiction of any potential model and test it out against a real situation;
- and establish principles early on that will provide the underpinning to any model developed.

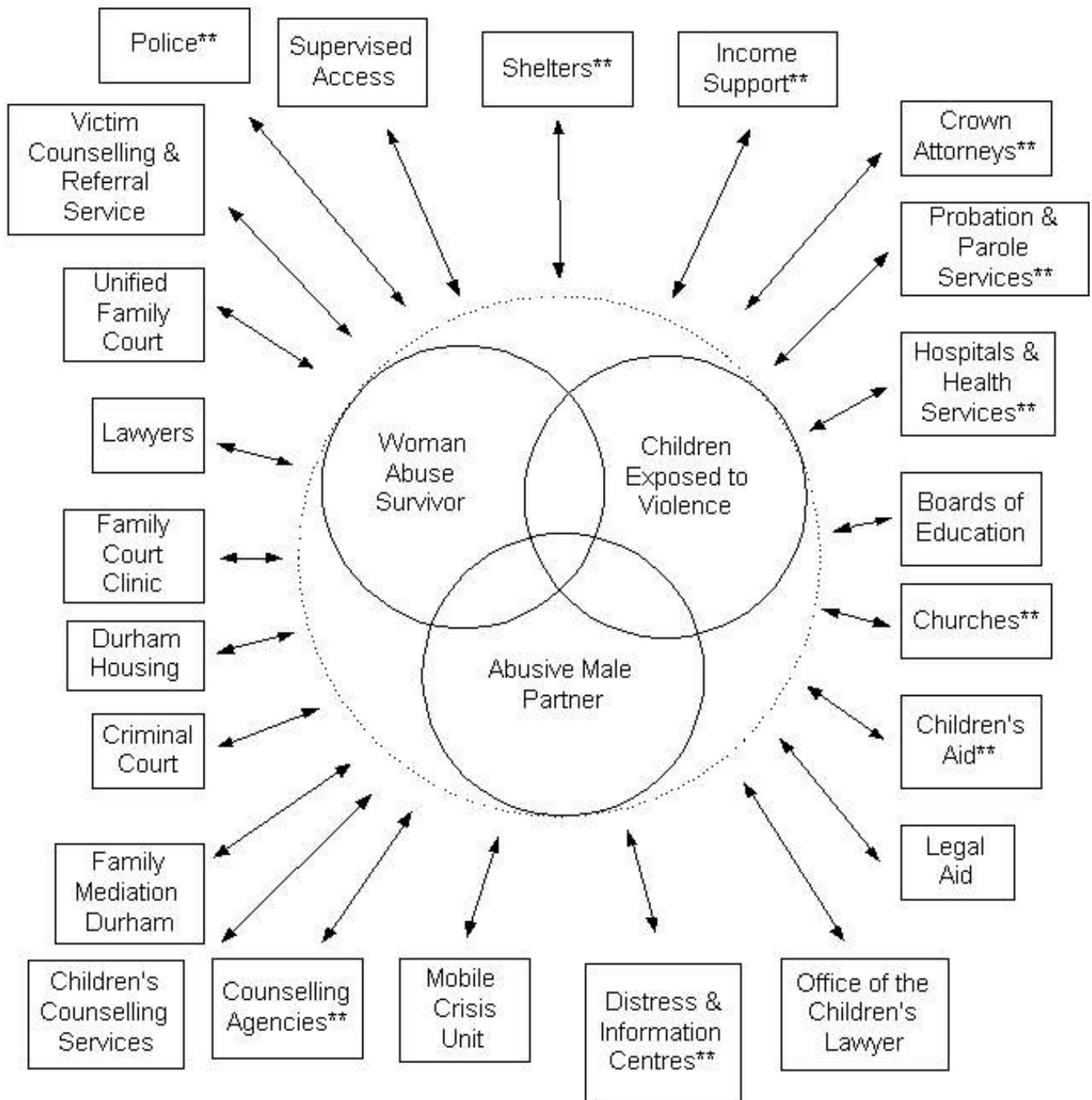
Next Steps

The Working Group has defined the following steps in the process of looking at the establishment of a WARC (Woman Abuse Review Committee):

- Obtain community feedback on the proposed model and revise.
- Determine which organizations will be invited to sit on WARC.
- Present the model to the Violence Prevention Council and the Steering Committee and explore options for the structuring of WARC.
- Develop a plan for seeking community "buy in".
- Develop a plan for seeking commitment from involved organizations.
- Clarify the difference between WARC and other coordinated community committees in Durham.
- Representatives begin to meet.
- Finalize plans for structuring WARC
- Establish "new" WARC including structure, process, accountability, membership, administrative support, chairperson(s), Terms of Reference, evaluation process, etc.
- Publicize and educate the community about WARC and its functions.

Safety Net - Working!

"Developing a Coordinated Response to Woman Abuse"



** Protocol Section has been developed for Durham Region



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