

# Would a Collaborative Site Make a Significant Difference for Victims and Survivors of Intimate Violence in Kingston?



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Collaborative Service Delivery Site  
**PRESENTATION BY SURVIVORS' ADVISORY COUNCIL**

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Opening Remarks: Judith Moses, Collective Wisdom Consulting

Good morning. On behalf of the Survivors' Advisory Council, I'd like to thank you for scheduling time in your meeting today for our presentation.

As you know, the Council has been meeting regularly since the Fall. We meet approximately once a month to discuss various issues relating to the collaborative site. For example, we've chatted about what the collaborative site should look and feel like, security and safety issues relating to the site, services that should be available on site, and problems with the current service delivery system that might be resolved by having staff from different agencies working together at one site.

Today, Council members will be focusing primarily on this latter issue ~ problems or challenges commonly experienced by victims and survivors of violence in Kingston today; and ways these might be addressed and resolved through co-location and collaboration.

Our first speaker this morning is Jeannie Quinn. After Jeannie, we'll hear from Laura LaLonde and Deirdre Reddick. I'll make a few concluding remarks at the end of the presentation and then we'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.

## “The Crisis”

Good morning. As Judith said, my name is Jeannie Quinn. I was emotionally abused and physically and sexually assaulted by my partner for 19 years before I was able to escape with my children. I have experience working with the OPP, Victim Crisis Services, VWAP, the Justice of the Peace, Provincial Division Court, General Division Court, Court of Appeal, Family Court, probation officers, and various social services. I’m here today as a survivor; and I’m going to speak about the realities of abuse, the impact of violence and the implications this has for “first contact” between me and you.

We have many different supports and services for victims of partner abuse, child sexual abuse and sexual assault in Kingston ~ all of us on the Council have been involved with one or more of the services represented here today. We’re grateful for the help we and our children have received over the years, and may continue to receive, from your various organizations. Could we have escaped from the violence or recovered from our childhood abuse without your help? Absolutely not. Do we think the system could be improved? Definitely! As we’ve talked about and shared our personal experiences at various Council meetings, we’ve come to see that each of us fell through some kind of crack in the system at one time or another; each of us has paid the price of some kind of loophole; and each of us can see ways that co-location and effective collaboration might have decreased our confusion, distress, uncertainty and isolation.

When you meet us for the first time, across a desk or in our living room, you’re most likely meeting us after some kind of critical incident ~ maybe you’re meeting us in emerg after our daughter’s most recent suicide attempt; or you’ve arrived at our apartment after the neighbours called 911; less likely but true for some us, we meet when we reach out to one of your organizations for help or flee to Interval House. It’s “crisis intervention” for you; for us, it’s our daily reality. Yes, the critical incident is what brought us to your attention but in all likelihood, we’ve been living with the long term impact of childhood abuse or we’ve been coping with ongoing abuse at the hands of our “loved ones” for many years by the time you meet us.

Abusers, both child sexual offenders and abusive partners, gain control by manipulating and terrorizing us. They use verbal, emotional, sexual and physical violence to instill fear, make us

obedient, and twist our thinking to fit theirs ~ over time, we come to believe that this is somehow our fault; we deserve it. Gradually, we begin to believe that, just as our abuser is always telling us, we'll never be able to make it on our own. Nineteen years of abuse and violence left me demoralized and demeaned, lacking self confidence and unable to make decisions. Many of us live in a state of panic, constant fear and relentless anxiety; no one can cope with that year after year without seeing their mental, emotional and physical health deteriorate.

Many people, including some police officers, doctors and frontline workers like ODSP and Housing staff, continue to believe that it's easy for victims to leave an abusive situation. It's not easy at all; it's actually very complicated. When we think about leaving or try to leave, we're struggling with lots of conflicting feelings and thoughts. We often feel vaguely uneasy and guilty; many of us don't really know what freedom is anymore or how it feels. Even when we're physically out of our abuser's sight or home, we're not really outside his control and we know it. He can still reach us by cell phone, at work or through our friends and family; he may track us down in our new home and show up, uninvited, at our door. We don't feel free and it's hard to believe we ever will be free.

Despite our fear, anxiety and lack of confidence, we do leave. We leave; and we're dragged back. We leave; and we're wooed back with gifts and apologies. We leave; we go back to protect the friends and family who helped us escape. We leave; we go back because we think we can manage the situation and keep others safe by returning ~ we know how to deal with him and wondering what he's going to do next when we're not there "to calm him down" is more terrifying than the idea of returning.

We leave and we go back for countless reasons:

- Fear he will come after us; kill us or commit suicide.
- Fear he will take our children and run.
- Fear of the unknown.
- Loss of financial security; loss of our homes, our belongings, our pets.
- Loss of all that is familiar to us ~ our daily routines; our kids' schools; the friends we had as a couple; our in-laws.
- Loss of our life partner ~ our companion and sexual partner.

We tell you this, or remind you of this, to help create a context for “first contact”. When you meet us for the first time, you’re not just meeting someone in immediate crisis. You’re dealing with someone who, in all likelihood, has thought about disclosing or leaving countless times and has probably tried to leave several times ~ despite the fear, anxiety, panic and uncertainty we feel when we make a decision that is in conflict with what our abuser wants. Our “failure” to either stop the abuse or to break free from our partner has left us feeling even more hopeless and out of control.

Many of us are unaware of the services and supports that are available in the Kingston area; we don’t know where they are, what they do or how to access them. Sometimes a friend, or a friend of a friend, may be able to help us but not all of us are fortunate enough to “know someone who knows someone”. The bits and pieces we do know about police or court procedures are often wrong ~ all of which leaves us even more dependent on our abuser and makes it more likely that we’ll believe whatever he tells us about our rights, the law, and what will happen if we leave.

When we first disclose or leave home, we face several weeks and months of almost constant “story telling” and decision-making, especially if we’re involved with the Criminal and Family Court systems. Most of us have no idea of the number or kind of decisions that will be required of us in a relatively short period of time; and we don’t know who or what agency is supposed to be helping us with which decision.

And if that’s not enough ~ add to that, the systems and services we need during the early weeks and months following our first contact are some of the most confusing, most overwhelming and least “user-friendly” ~ the police; CAS; and the various court systems. Most confusion; most pressure; and least support ~ it just doesn’t make sense. We understand that the many staff who work in these systems, particularly the police, are responsible for dealing with a wide variety of situations and people, not just victims of partner abuse or sexual assault; and now we know that their involvement in situations like ours is very tightly defined by their agency’s mandate or by law.

However, from our side of the relationship, what we experience are:

- Service providers who may be very competent in fulfilling their specific role and responsibilities but who don't have the training required to understand or appreciate the many different and very complex issues we face as victims of abuse and violence; who don't have the time, information or expertise they need to help us make the many different decisions we have to make in a very short period of time ~ and who certainly don't have the time to help us learn or re-learn how to make decisions.
- Service providers who are unaware of the impact years of abuse can have on our ability to concentrate and remember new information; and who, as a result, tend to get frustrated by our repeated questions or our need to write everything down.
- Service providers who are often unavailable or inaccessible, either because of shift work, high rates of staff turn-over, or reassignment to some other service in their organization; who are "assigned our case" but don't have the "background" information they need to pick up and carry on from where we left off with our last contact. ~ and ~
- Service providers who may ~ or may not ~ give us a phone number for yet another agency when we ask for something they cannot do ~ usually because it's outside their mandate.

We see systems that either seem to be connected or seem like they should be connected but which don't seem to communicate effectively with one another or at all. So it's up to us to repeat our entire story countless times because we're not sure which part will be relevant or is needed; and it's up to us to figure out who we're supposed to talk to about what and how all these different, very confusing, systems fit together. During these early days, we seem to spend our time going from appointment to appointment, visiting many different agencies, and often lugging mountains of paperwork with us because we never know what will be needed and who has access to what. Sometimes we have to go to several different places even when dealing with one issue or process, such as making an application for a Peace Bond. And, of course, each meeting or appointment means arranging and paying for transportation and child care; and for those of us with disabilities, we have to make sure each of the sites we visit is accessible for us.

We often experience the decisions made by the multiple agencies that get involved once we've

come to your attention ~ the police, the Crown Attorney's Office, V/WAP, CAS, Interval House ~ as random and inconsistent. Decisions are made too quickly or we're pressured to make decisions too quickly. Decisions made on our behalf are rarely explained in detail; and when given, explanations are not repeated as often as we need to help us really understand what's going on. Without that understanding, there's no way we can be partners in the decision-making process. We remain disempowered and at your mercy ~ you seem to have all the information and power. Despite your best intentions and kindness, our relationship with you and some of your agencies begins to feel frighteningly familiar.

Having highlighted some of the challenges we commonly face during the early days of our involvement with your organizations, we would now like to focus on how the collaborative site might help us all work together more effectively....so, I'll turn things over to Laura at this point.

#### Collaborative Site ~ Part One

Hi, my name is Laura LaLonde. I escaped an abusive relationship, along with my children, several years ago. During my 20 year marriage, I was emotionally, physically and sexually abused and sadly, so were my children. I have had extensive involvement with the police, with both Criminal and Family Courts, and with the mental health system.

So, how do we think a collaborative service delivery site, as we envision it, will improve the experience of victims prior to and immediately following disclosure in the future?

One: The idea of visiting one place as an entry point to the network of services available in Kingston is very appealing and reassuring. Many of us have been very isolated; our interactions with others have been closely monitored or completely controlled by our abusers. Leaving our home by ourselves, and meeting and speaking with new people, is unfamiliar and frightening. We hope the collaborative site would significantly decrease the number of different, unfamiliar locations we would have to find and visit during these early days when we are particularly vulnerable.

Two: Co-located staff, working collaboratively, represent an excellent opportunity to centralize information about services, supports and agencies. Instead of learning about various services on a piecemeal basis or not at all, victims only need to learn about one service: the collaborative service delivery site. Information about the site could be available throughout the community and at all partner agencies; information about partner and community agencies could be available at the collaborative site. The collaborative site could serve as an “information store” where victims and survivors could access information about various services, including little-known services such as pet fostering, as well as information about various processes, such as court processes, and about the issue of abuse in general. All this information could be available in print, on videos and on various websites ~ but the equipment needed to view videos, listen to audio tapes and/or access the internet would only be needed at the collaborative site, not at each and every partner agency.

Three: Access to centralized information from different agencies and co-located colleagues would also be beneficial for you as service providers. When we ask a question you can't answer or need some kind of support or service that's outside your mandate, the problem can be solved with a trip across the hall rather than a referral to yet another agency ~ another phone call; another visit to an unfamiliar environment; another person we don't know. You could ask your colleague to join us or facilitate an introduction ~ much less intimidating for us; much more efficient for you.

Four: We hope that the staff working at the collaborative site would be there because of a particular interest in this issue. For example, a CAS worker interested in learning more about and working with children exposed to partner abuse might ask for this assignment. This would ensure that we're working with service providers who want to work with us and who have the expertise needed to work with victims during this particularly challenging time. This would eventually result in a more uniform and consistent response to victims.

Five: Co-location and effective collaboration should also provide some opportunities to reduce the number of times we have to repeat our stories or wait for information to be shared after a release has been signed. Confidentiality between us and each of your organizations would still have to be protected but it seems that it would be much easier to facilitate effective



communication and information sharing with all of you working in the same building ~ easier to transfer and share critical information ~ something that's particularly important during these early days.

Lastly and possibly most importantly: Bringing everyone together at one site by itself will not be enough ~ even if you're all in one place, we still need hands-on assistance and practical support to help us find our way through the complex, confusing and overwhelming systems and processes we have to deal with after we come in contact with you, especially if we're involved with the Criminal and Family Court systems. The collaborative site would allow you to create a "systems buddy" or "client advocate" position that's not restricted by any one agency's mandate or limited to any one court system ~ someone who could work with each client in whatever way we need, for however long we need, to help us figure out what we need and how to get it ~ both at the collaborative site and in the community; someone who could answer the same question a dozen times if necessary and do so without judging us because they understand we simply can't take in and retain new information very well during this uncertain time; someone who can serve as our "memory" during these early days, helping us organize all the information you give us, remember and prepare for appointments...that kind of thing. Many of you would be unable to function in the systems you've created without an "assistant" to keep you organized and get you the information you need ~ why would you think we could manage any better?

We'll revisit this idea of a client advocate in the second half of our presentation ~ which will focus on the challenges we face after the initial "crisis intervention" and early police involvement has concluded. At this point, I'll turn things over to Deirdre who will speak about some of these long term issues.

## Long Term Recovery

Good morning. My name is Deirdre Reddick. I escaped an abusive relationship after 8 years. I went through both the Criminal and Family Court systems, eventually seeing my partner plead to a reduced charge of harassment with a one year Peace Bond; and I currently have full custody of my 5 year old daughter. My ex-partner continues to use his access privileges to control, harass and abuse me. I am, however, a survivor; and am here today to talk about the challenges we face in the months and years following our escape or initial disclosure, as Court actions drag on and we struggle to establish new lives for ourselves and our families.

The challenges we face as we try to move forward with our lives are overwhelming. By this time, we're probably involved with many if not most of your organizations:

- Our time at Interval House has come to an end and we're either living with friends or family members or trying to set up a new home for ourselves and our children.
- Our abuser's criminal trial is underway or pre-sentencing reports are being prepared or appeals are pending.
- We're trying to sort out separation, custody and access through the Family Court.
- We may even be involved with CAS ourselves, trying to prove that we can and will protect and care for our children.
- Some of us are attending regular counselling sessions or we're making sure our kids get the counselling and support they need.

The critical incident that brought us to your attention has past; from your perspective the crisis is over. Now, it's all about following through with Court appearances, completing the right applications and paperwork, and trying to figure out how we're going to live, month after month, on our own. But we're not really free at this point. Our abuser may still be calling and following us, looking for us at our friends' and family's homes, showing up at our work place. He may be using the system, especially the Family Court system, to punish and harass us. It's more of the same to us but each occurrence is a new incident for you which means another report, another meeting, another time telling our story to someone new.

Police services seem best suited to deal with “one time incidents” but “one time crisis intervention” is often not appropriate when dealing with complex abuse issues. Child sexual abuse and partner abuse typically involve multiple offenses over extended periods of time, often continuing even after we have escaped or left the relationship; and it doesn’t make sense to us that we have to deal with a different officer each time we report a “new offense”.

During my involvement with your various organizations, I sometimes shared a portion of my experience with one agency or one legal component of the system and was told that this information was either not relevant to the process at hand or I was directed to make a new report or repeat my disclosure at a different agency. As time passed and I was called upon to repeat my story again and again, with little effect, I grew more distant from my own experience, became more numb and began to lose details ~ all of which caused “new” service providers to doubt my credibility and question the seriousness of the abuse I had experienced. My life became a collection of fragmented, disjointed pieces of information that I had to fit into your respective mandates so I could get the help I needed.

Bottomline, we don’t understand the different systems, we don’t understand what happens in the various court rooms; and we don’t understand the roles and responsibilities of a Crown Attorney vs a Defense Attorney, or a Probation Office or a Justice of the Peace. We don’t know the difference between the Provincial Division Court, General Division Court, Court of Appeal and Family Court ~ and why would we?. Before we met you, most of us hadn’t even heard of Peace Bonds or Restraining Orders; and if we had, we assumed they were the same thing. While some support is available, for example through the Victim Witness Assistance Program, restrictive mandates limit you to specific Courts or certain legal processes; or alternately, exclude you from meetings and processes at the very time we need a support person or advocate present. In some instances, we’re given written information about procedures and processes that are outside your specific mandate but honestly, as one member of our Council put it, “everything I got was Greek to me”. This kind of written information is typically given to us as we’re walking out the door, “to review later”; there doesn’t seem to be time to review the information together or to answer any questions we might have.

It's too much. We need someone who is able to work with us and support us, step by step, through all the different legal processes, regardless of which Court is involved ~ someone whose mandate does not restrict them to Family OR Criminal Court; someone who has the time to explain and review information as often as necessary to ensure that we can be an active part of our own recovery. It's unreasonable to expect any victim of violence or abuse to navigate their way unassisted through these complex and overwhelming systems ~ AND organize all the other supports and services we and our children need ~ all the while building a new life for our family.

Each time we complete one phase of our recovery process and our needs evolve and change ~ for example, we begin to think about returning to school or finding new work ~ we have to start again. We have to research and find the agencies and supports we need; make a decision about how much we tell each person about our past and present life situation; and coordinate information sharing between "old" and "new" services.

We stand alone in the middle of this whirlwind. We see and pay the price for the cracks and loopholes that appear within and between your agencies. You may be supportive and helping us as much as you can within the constraints of your mandate ~ but it's up to us to weave together this complex and often disjointed collection of services into some kind of package that meets our needs. We're expected to fit our experience to the system without understanding it; instead of the system fitting itself to our needs. At the same time that we're expected or required to stay on top of all these appointments and meetings and paperwork and reports, our voices are muted, our participation is limited, and our ability to control, direct or impact anything is minimal.

Sadly, the problems we experience continue long after that initial crisis is past, long after the formal court proceedings have ended. Five years, ten years ~ for some of us, even longer ~ we remain vulnerable to unpredictable acts of harassment and violence at the hands of our abuser; and even if we no longer see or have any contact with our abuser, many of us still struggle to believe we're entitled to healthy, joyful, violence-free lives.

Once again I'll turn it back to Laura who will share some of our thoughts and ideas about how the collaborative site might help us better manage lengthy involvements with the court systems and be part of our ongoing struggle to be free. ~ Laura ~

### Collaborative Site ~ Part Two

So how could the experience of victims and survivors involved in court processes and long term recovery be improved through co-location and collaboration?

One: I'll begin, as I did previously, with the idea of an "information store" ~ information about the different or specialized services victims and survivors might need at different stages of their recovery and healing should also be available at the collaborative site, including information about housing, education, retraining, financial management, addictions, long term therapy and counselling. Some of the services might be available on site but even if a visit to another location is required, at least we would be able to reach out to familiar staff working in a familiar location to help us navigate this next part of our journey.

Two: The collaborative site, as we envision it, would allow you to share important and helpful information with clients more effectively and efficiently. For example, if several clients were just beginning their involvement with both Criminal and Family Court, appropriate staff from partner agencies could prepare and present an overview of these different court systems, the roles played by various professionals, the limitations of the law and how they may effect our participation, how the two systems do and do not relate to each other ~ that kind of thing. This would not only be a more efficient use of your time, it would also be one way to make the system fit our experience and speak to our needs. Instead of each victim arranging multiple appointments with different professionals at different sites, we could come together as a group and learn basic information about both systems that will help us be an active player in our own recovery in the months and years to come. Many of us are involved with both court systems; we shouldn't be expected to pay the price for the lack of contact, coordination or relationship between the two Courts.

Three: As Jeannie mentioned, many of us have found our interactions with the police, CAS and court systems to be the most confusing, most overwhelming and least “user-friendly”. Co-locating staff from these organizations with staff from other organizations may help us feel more supported, less intimidated and less fearful when interacting with police officers, CAS workers or court personnel. It would be easier for us to ask for our counsellor to sit in on some meetings when appropriate, or we could book appointments with our counsellor immediately before or after a meeting to help us prepare or to debrief ~ and all without having to travel from agency to agency. We think it will also provide an opportunity for police officers and CAS workers to learn more about abuse and working with victims ~ just by observing and working with their colleagues at the collaborative location.

Four: We also think that co-location and effective collaboration would make it easier for you to see the cracks and loopholes in the system in real time; they wouldn’t just be evident to us as we go from agency to agency trying to coordinate your services and make them fit with our needs. They would be evident to all of us and we could work together to deal with them within the collaborative model ~ far better than having them exposed during a Coroner’s Review.

Five: It’s often very difficult for us to figure out who we can and should trust ~ after all, most of us have been abused by the very people who said they loved us more than any other ~ our fathers and our husbands. Working with a consistent and limited number of professionals over an extended period of time would be very reassuring and helpful, and would offer us the opportunity to re-learn, or for some of us learn for the first time, how to develop trusting relationships with others.

The idea of a “systems buddy” or “client advocate” is related to this last point and as I mentioned early, is critical to this model. We believe use of a client advocate will help create a system where victims are active participants in our own recovery and are no longer being passively passed from one agency to another, something all of us on the Council have experienced. The “client advocate” would work with the client from day one and would continue

to support and advocate for her for as long as she needs; her only mandate would be to help us get the information, support, services and responses we need from the system.

Client advocates should be hired or approved by all the partner agencies; the model won't work if they're seen as employees of a specific agency, such as Kingston Interval House or V/WAP. Staff from those agencies already work as advocates in many ways; however, the mandates of their specific organizations limit their ability to help us pull together and coordinate all the services we need. If the client advocates work for one agency, their mandate and authority will be limited. We need someone whose role is accepted by all partner agencies and most importantly, who's not restricted to one Court system or another. The client advocate should also be empowered to work as an ombudsman for complaints when the system isn't working for a particular victim ~ someone to hear our desperation; someone who knows where we're coming from and where we need to go.

~ Deirdre ~

### Conclusion

What are victims and survivors seeking; what are we searching for? Our freedom. We are led to believe freedom is achievable if we leave our abusers; but this **is** only the first step and the system we must maneuver through is both difficult and confusing and cannot fully deliver on its promise of freedom from abuse. Often, it seems the rules of the system are complicit in maintaining our abuse, or at least, disempowering us. We feel overwhelmed and bounced from agency to agency when we enter the system; these feelings continue throughout the process.

Limiting the number of agencies we have to deal with will help; limiting the number of locations we have to visit will help; and certainly, limiting the number of professionals we have to deal with and the number of times we have to tell our story will help. But these steps alone will not solve the problems we experience; they may decrease the number and size of cracks in the system but they will not eliminate them. Adding a client advocate into the mix, someone who is not restricted by the specific mandates or time constraints under which all of you work, will help us

get the best possible outcome from the proposed collaborative site ~ and the site will be collaborative not just because it brings together staff from all of your agencies in one location, but because victims and survivors will be recognized as true collaborative partners.

Thank you.

