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**Supporting the Supporters to Prevent  
Domestic Violence Initiative: Exploring the  
Role of Informal Supports in Preventing  
Domestic Violence in Calgary and Area**

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## **Acknowledgements**

In 2012, through the Calgary Domestic Violence Committee (CDVC), HomeFront contracted Elena Esina to conduct research on best and promising practices of an effective societal response to domestic violence. After reviewing the findings with members of CDVC, *informal supports* and their role in preventing domestic violence emerged as a key area of interest to the group. As a result, in 2013, Shift summarized the research in the issue brief "[Supporting the Supporters: How friends and families can help to prevent domestic violence](#)" and in 2014, applied for funding to Innoweave to start a Calgary project in partnership with CDVC. A working group was created and we would like to acknowledge the following members of CDVC (Andrea Silverstone, Brigitte Baradoy, Kim Ruse, Maggie MacKillop, and Kevin McNichol) for providing guidance and support throughout this initiative. We would also like to thank Innoweave for providing funds to support this research project.

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*“...whilst agencies may know little, informal [supports] know far more. If we are ever to have a truly co-ordinated community response, citizens must be provided with the knowledge, confidence and information to recognize and name coercive control and act on it.” (Regan et al., 2007, p. 43)*

## 1.0 Introduction

Research shows that domestic violence (DV) is pervasive and costly to both families and society at large (Wells, Boodt, & Emery, 2012). However, we also know that DV is preventable, and that just about anyone can play a role in that prevention – including informal supports such as family, friends and neighbours. Current research shows that informal supports are much more willing to intervene during a domestic assault when they have been provided with the kind of education and capacity that builds their confidence and skills to intervene appropriately (Pajot, 2009; Point Research, 2010).

*Informal supports can include immediate family members, relatives, close friends, casual acquaintances, neighbours, co-workers, and/or members of a faith community (Sylaska & Edwards, 2014) that provide instrumental and emotional assistance to victims and/or perpetrators of domestic violence, as opposed to formal support, that is provided through agencies or larger systems (Goodman & Smyth 2011).*

We also know that the majority of DV victims turn to family and friends for support (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Barrett & Pierre, 2011; Statistics Canada, 2011). However, in many cases, family and friends do not feel adequately equipped and can sometimes marginalize a victim further through their actions. For example, negative reactions can damage the victim’s mental health, multiplying their stress and shame, while positive support is beneficial in diminishing the traumatic effects of abuse (Trotter & Allen, 2009; Goodkind et al., 2003; Levendosky et al., 2004). Given the centrality of informal connections as a source of instrumental and emotional support to victims of DV, it is critical that we understand how to better help informal supporters, giving them the confidence and skills required to play a positive role in preventing DV.

In order to explore the specific role that informal supports could play in preventing DV, in 2014, Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence (Shift) collaborated with the Calgary Domestic Violence Collective (CDVC) to develop the *Supporting the Supporters to Prevent Domestic Violence Initiative*. A working group comprised of four member organizations (Calgary Women’s Emergency Shelter, HomeFront, Peer Support Services, Discovery House) was struck to oversee this project. The aim of the initiative is to:

1. Explore the value of informal supports in the lives of those dealing with DV,
2. Understand how best to support informal supports to effectively respond to the needs of the victim,
3. Explore both in research and from the service provider perspective the perceived reluctance of friends and families to intervene in what is commonly understood as a private matter,
4. Understand what services (if any) are already being offered to informal supports in Calgary, Alberta, and
5. Explore how organizations that specialize in DV in Calgary, Alberta can start to build customized programs that are geared towards informal supports, including the general public, to prevent DV.

This study is part of a broader research agenda developed by Shift. Located in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary, Canada, Shift is a primary prevention initiative designed to stop DV before it begins. We do this by developing, implementing and scaling up best and promising primary prevention strategies and actions in partnership with researchers, government, systems and civil society. Spanning the intersection between the academy, community and government, Shift is uniquely positioned to promote evidence based policy and practice, and support broad-based social change. The Shift team has expertise in: convening, connecting and motivating others; influencing policy makers and community leaders; summarizing research in accessible ways; and, identifying strategic relationships and potential synergies between people, projects, policy, and research. Shift focuses its efforts on policy, legislative, systems and community change, exploring from multiple entry points the issue of preventing DV before it starts.

For Shift, the interest in the role of informal supports began in 2013 with the release of an Issue Brief entitled “[\*Supporting the Supporters: How friends and families can help to prevent domestic violence\*](#)”. Shift quickly realized there was a dearth of knowledge in this area, particularly in the Canadian context, and wanted to explore informal supports as a potential primary prevention strategy. Because the focus of this work would require the exploration and development of what could be considered innovative approaches to the intervention and prevention of DV, Shift applied for, and was granted, a

Developmental Evaluation Grant from Innoweave to support the development of an informal supports strategy for Calgary and area.

## **2.0 Methodology**

There were two methods employed for this study. The first was an online survey directed at agencies that specialize in DV and community development in Calgary, AB and area. The survey was designed using research that explored effective approaches to intervening in and preventing DV, as well as the role of informal supports as an effective way to address DV. Existing networks were drawn on to distribute the survey, with contacts provided by: Shift, CDVC, United Way of Calgary and Area, and the City of Calgary Family and Community Support Services (FCSS). A link to the survey was sent to the coordinators for each organization, who then distributed the survey through their networks with the request that the recipient share the link with anyone in their network who may be working on the prevention of DV or building community capacity to respond to or prevent DV.

The second research method included in-depth interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to get a clearer picture of how agencies were including informal supporters in their service delivery model especially with victims and perpetrators of DV; and, to gain a better understanding of other work currently underway in community that involves working with informal supports.

The interview sample was derived using two methods: the first was to solicit candidates from the working group, and the second was to include a request for follow-up within the online survey with those agencies that indicated that they included informal supporters in their service delivery model and were agreeable to taking part in the interview.

The data from the online survey was aggregated by question, and is presented for those respondents that indicated they include informal supporters in their work, and for those who indicated that they did not include informal supporters in their current work. The in-depth interview data were organized by question and then analyzed for themes. The findings were then summarized and presented to the working group for further feedback and validation, and the group's feedback was incorporated into the final report.

This research was approved by the University of Calgary's Research Ethics Board in January 2015.

### 3.0 Limitations

There are several limitations to the research study. The first has to do with the design of the survey which did not utilize a forced choice methodology. This design allowed respondents to skip questions they could not answer, or felt were not relevant, and as such resulted in variations in the number of respondents answering a single question. The second limitation has to do with how the online survey was distributed to stakeholders. The survey was disseminated using a snowball sampling technique through specific DV networks and as such there is a strong likelihood that those responding were actively involved in dealing with all forms of interpersonal violence and were therefore motivated to provide feedback. A third limitation has to do with the sample size and selection of interview participants. The sample of interview participants should be considered a convenience sample as they were selected based on the referral from the members of the working group and those individuals who agreed to a follow-up interview when they completed the online survey. Lastly, while six organizations indicated through the online survey that they work with perpetrators, no data were collected on the role that informal supports play or could play with perpetrators of DV.

Given these limitations, the results of this study cannot be deemed representative of all of the organizations in Calgary that currently provide services and supports to those dealing with the various manifestations of DV, and should be understood as providing a snapshot of how informal supporters are currently being utilized as part of the work to address DV with a select group of agencies.

The authors would like to note that respondents to the survey and those interviewed covered a wide range of services related to interpersonal, family violence and domestic violence. However, for the purposes of this report, the term domestic violence will be used throughout to cover the various contexts of service provision included in the survey and interview results.

## 4.0 Online survey results

### 4.1 Description of respondents and who they serve

Between February 1, 2015 to April 15, 2015, a total of 47 on-line survey responses were collected. Thirty-two of the 47 respondents indicated that they provide services in Calgary and area, and 15 indicated they provide services solely within Calgary. The sample was comprised of representatives from the following types of organizations:

- Organizations that specialize in DV (39)
- Organizations that specialize in sexual assault (2)
- Organizations that specialize in elder abuse (1)
- Organizations that specialize in addictions and mental health (1)
- Provincial government departments (1)
- Health services (2)
- Primary Care Networks<sup>1</sup> (1)

The majority of respondents (41 out of 47 or 87%) indicated that they currently provide services and supports in the area of DV. Of the 41 organizations providing services and supports for DV, 21 (51%) reported that the victim was the primary focus of their intervention; 14 (34%) said that they focus on the family; and 6 (15%) indicated that the primary focus was the perpetrator. In addition, 11 out of the 41 organizations indicated that the primary focus of their intervention included the victim, perpetrator, and the family.

The majority of respondents (33/38 or 87%)<sup>2</sup> indicated that they included informal supporters in the work they did with victims or perpetrators. However, only 17 (45%) said that they did this routinely, while 16 (42%) indicated that they did it only upon the request of the client. Five of the 38 (13%) indicated that they did not include informal supporters in any of the work they did with victims or perpetrators.

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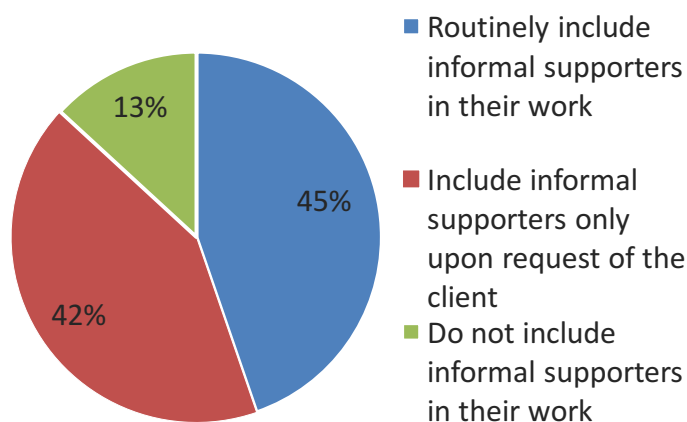
<sup>1</sup> Primary Care Networks (PCN) are groups of family doctors that work with Alberta Health Services and other health professionals to coordinate the delivery of primary care services for their patients.

<sup>2</sup> The number of respondents to individual questions vary as the survey did not utilize a forced choice methodology and so respondents were free to answer only the questions they felt like answering.

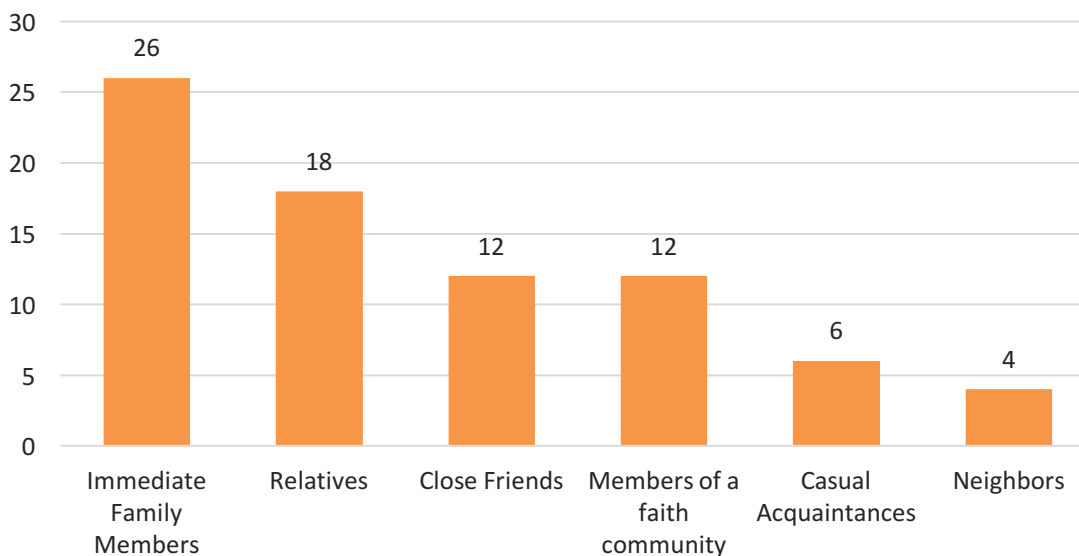


Respondents who included informal supporters in service delivery were also asked to identify the type of supporter(s) they served. As shown in Figure 2, the majority (26/28 or 93%) indicated that they served immediate family members, followed by relatives (18/28 or 65%). A smaller number of agencies served close friends and members of a faith community (12/28 or 43%), casual acquaintances (6/28 or 22%), and neighbors (4/28 or 14%).

**Figure 1: Percentage of respondents indicating they include informal supporters in their work with victims or perpetrators (N=38)**



**Figure 2. Type of informal supporters being served by organizations (N=28)**



When asked what kind of direct services were being provided to the informal supporters, the majority of respondents (19/29 or 65%) said that they provided information and education.

Respondents indicated that information and education was provided on:

- How to understand the needs of the victim
- How to safely respond
- The cycle of violence
- Healthy relationships
- The impact of DV on children
- Safety planning
- Self-awareness and self-care
- Navigating the criminal justice system
- Supporting the disclosure of abuse
- Understanding gender based violence in the community
- How to access community resources

In addition, 58% of respondents indicated that, when necessary, they referred informal supporters to other agencies within the community, while 34% indicated that they provided therapeutic supports including emotional support and counselling for the informal supporters.

Respondents were also asked whether they worked with other agencies in providing services to informal supporters. Of the 22 respondents who provide direct service to informal supporters, 17 (77%) indicated that they did indeed work with other organizations when addressing the needs of informal supporters. When asked to describe how, the majority responded that the primary way of working with other agencies was to utilize them as a referral source for other services required for their clients (victims).

#### **4.2 Respondents' perceptions of best-practice approaches to supporting informal supporters**

The survey questions were designed to explore respondents' perceptions of best-practice strategies associated with ensuring informal supporters could be effective in supporting victims and perpetrators of DV.

As shown in Table 1, only three of the known seven best practices were perceived by the majority of respondents (11/18 or 61%) as being ‘very’ effective. On average, approximately 40% of the respondents (8/18) rated the remaining four best practices as being ‘very’ to ‘somewhat’ effective, and almost a third of the respondents indicated that in their opinion, these practices would “not be effective at all,” or that they had not tried the practice in question when dealing with informal supporters.

**Table 1. Perceptions of best-practice approaches to supporting informal supporters (N=18)**

Types of supports based on best practices	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not effective at all	Have not tried this
Providing information on which resources are available in the community	12	6	0	0
Building their confidence and skills so they can play a positive role	11	5	0	2
Providing information on the signs of DV	10	8	0	0
Providing information on the cycle of abuse	8	7	3	0
Teaching them specific intervention skills to be a positive bystander	8	7	1	2
Providing ongoing dedicated advice and supports	8	5	1	3
Helping them overcome fears associated with intervening	7	7	1	3

#### **4.3 Perceived barriers of informal supporters stepping into a support role for victims of domestic violence**

Research from Latta and Goodman (2011) suggests that there are many barriers that prevent friends, families and neighbours from stepping into a supportive role with victims experiencing DV. Based on this research, respondents were asked to rate on a three-point scale the key barriers they think stand in the way of people stepping into a supportive role to stop or prevent DV.

As can be seen in Table 2 the majority of respondents indicated that the key reasons they think that people do not step into a support role have to do with: Not feeling competent (13/18 or 72%); not having enough knowledge about community resources (11/18 or 61%); feeling they will be harmed if they intervene (9/18 or 50%); and feeling it is none of their business (7/18 or 39%). As for the rest of the known barriers identified in the literature, respondents indicated that they either didn't know or were not sure whether the barrier in question was an issue for informal supporters.

**Table 2. Perceived barriers of supporters stepping into a supportive role for victims of domestic violence (N=18)**

Known barriers to people stepping into a support role	Definitely plays a role	This may play a role	Don't know if this is a factor
They do not feel competent to respond appropriately to the situation	13	5	0
They have a lack of knowledge of community resources available	11	7	0
They are scared to intervene because they may get hurt	9	7	1
They feel it is none of their business	7	10	1
They do not understand, or are unable to identify the signs associated with DV	6	11	1
They believe that only professionals can help	4	10	4

#### 4.4 Feedback on advertising services for informal supports

Those respondents who indicated that they currently provide services and supports in the area of DV and include informal supporters in their service delivery model were also asked whether they advertise these services. A third of the respondents (9/28 or 32%) did not respond to this question. Of those who did respond, only 5 out of 19 (26%) responded in the affirmative; and the majority (14/19 or 74%) indicated that they did *not* advertise these types of services.

#### 4.5 Respondents' perception of how their service aligns with promising approaches to primary prevention of domestic violence

In order to get a sense of the extent to which service providers see their work as being aligned with a primary prevention approach to DV, we drew on *The Spectrum of Prevention Model* (Davis, Fujie Parks, & Cohen, 2006)<sup>3</sup>, a comprehensive primary prevention approach sometimes used to solve complex social problems listed in Figure 3. We asked respondents to choose the interventions in the Spectrum that they felt their work with informal supporters addressed. As shown in Figure 3, below, the majority of respondents (over 84%) felt that their services were most closely aligned with strengthening individual knowledge and skills (17/19) and promoting community education (16/19), followed by educating professionals (11/19 or 53%). Less than half saw themselves aligned with fostering coalitions and networks (9/19 or 47%), and mobilizing communities and neighborhoods (8/19 or 42%). Less than 30% perceived their work as having to do with influencing policy and legislation (6/19) or changing organizational practices (4/19).

**Figure 3. Respondents' perception of alignment with the Spectrum of Prevention Model**



<sup>3</sup> The authors also drew on the revised Spectrum of Prevention Model from Peeren, K., Hoffman, L., Lee, J., & Tucker, N. (2010). *Spectrum of faith community change*. St.San Rafael, CA: Transforming Communities: Technical Assistance, Training and Resource Center. Retrieved from [http://www.transformcommunities.org/sites/default/files/spectrum\\_of\\_faith\\_community\\_change\\_final.pdf](http://www.transformcommunities.org/sites/default/files/spectrum_of_faith_community_change_final.pdf)

#### 4.6 Results from respondents who *did not* include informal supporters in their service delivery approach

The 11 respondents who reported that they did not currently provide services for informal supporters were asked to indicate whether or not they were familiar with interventions that utilize informal supports as part of the service delivery approach for supporting victims and/or perpetrators of DV. Of these, eight (73%) replied that they were *not* familiar with the informal supports approach, but indicated that they would be interested in accessing resources designed to build their organization’s capacity to integrate this approach into their service delivery model.

Asked what prevented them from including informal supports, three of the respondents identified the following barriers: 1) lack of a clear funding stream identified for this work; 2) no program model to follow; and 3) unsure how to proceed.

These eleven respondents were also asked to rate the barriers that they felt impacted the ability of informal supporters to reach out and support someone who may be dealing with DV (Table 3). The key barriers identified were: lack of knowledge of community resources; inability to understand or identify the signs associated with DV; and perceptions related to ‘competence’ in responding to the situation. Interestingly, these results were similar to those from respondents who indicated that they currently provided services to informal supporters.

**Table 3. Perceptions of barriers of informal supporters offering support to victims of domestic violence (N=10)**

<b>Known barriers to people stepping into a support role</b>	<b>Definitely plays a role</b>	<b>This may play a role</b>	<b>Don’t know if this is a factor</b>
They have a lack of knowledge of community resources available	6	3	1
They do not feel competent to respond appropriately to the situation	5	5	0
They do not understand, or are unable to identify the signs associated with DV	5	5	0
They are scared to intervene because they may get hurt	2	8	0
They feel it is none of their business	1	8	1
They believe that only professionals can help	0	9	1

## **5.0 In-depth interviews: Highlights and observations from service providers**

In addition to the online survey, a total of 10 in-depth interviews were conducted with 13 individuals from 10 organizations that provided direct services and supports in the area of domestic violence, or were involved in community development work with a specific focus on preventing DV (see Appendix 1 for the list of agencies). The intent of conducting the in-depth interviews was twofold:

1. To get a clearer picture of how agencies were including informal supporters in their work with victims and perpetrators of DV; and
2. To better understand work related to informal supports currently underway in Calgary and area.

Of those interviewed, 9 individuals (representing 7 organizations) indicated that they worked primarily with victims and provided direct intervention services, while 4 interviewees (representing 3 organizations) provided primary prevention programs for adults, children, and youth, utilizing a community development approach to prevent DV.

### **5.1 Inclusion of informal supporters when working with victims of domestic violence**

All of the ten organizations interviewed stated they worked with or included informal supporters in some part of their service delivery approach. However, when probed further on how they were working with informal supporters, it became evident that only three of the seven organizations providing direct services to victims, actively included informal supporters in their service provision. The other four organizations providing direct service to victims stated they would assess for the presence of a social support network, which was understood as informal support, but would not actively include the informal supporters in the intervention. Finally, the three community development organizations were primarily concerned with building the capacity of the general public, as well as professionals and paraprofessionals, to recognize and appropriately respond to DV (for a complete breakdown, please see Appendix 1).

In exploring how informal supporters were included in the interventions with the three organizations providing direct services to victims of DV, the responses varied from; including informal supporters in the assessment phase of the intervention; including them periodically throughout the intervention (if it was felt that the person in question could play a positive role in the intervention), or including them in the latter stages of the intervention to support the victim in the transition to a new lifestyle.

When probed on who specifically was included from the client's informal network, interviewees overwhelmingly stated that "it depends." Most felt informal supports should comprise whomever the client felt most safe with; this ranged from a close family member to a co-worker, a friend, or even a leader in their community.

In exploring how informal supporters come to be included (or, in most cases, "are taken into consideration") when providing services and supports for victims of DV, all of the interviewees that were providing direct services to victims said that assessing a client's social support network was a natural component of assessing the client's needs and developing a plan of action.

## **5.2 Types of supports provided to informal supporters**

When queried on the types of supports that were provided to informal supporters, the responses included; providing one on one support (counseling) if they are perceived to be contributing to the dynamic of non-disclosure; maintaining cultural norms or stances that are non-productive to the client; providing non-helpful feedback to the client; or approaching the situation from a perspective that fails to recognize the dynamic complexities of DV (e.g., "why doesn't she just leave?") or sexual assault (e.g., "she was asking for it by the way she dresses.").

In the other scenarios where informal supporters are identified, but not directly included in the agency's service delivery model, the majority of those interviewed indicated that support would be provided over the phone, or the person in question would be referred to other agencies (such as women's shelters) and/or programs known to specialize in DV. Other forms of support offered included group sessions for supporters to come together to debrief and talk about their experiences dealing with those who have disclosed, or may be dealing with, ongoing DV. These opportunities were seen as therapeutic in that they allowed supporters to normalize their own experience, validate feelings of doubt and guilt, and/or challenge the idea that this problem was unique to them.

## **5.3 Recognition of the role and value of informal supports**

Overall, the interviews revealed that service providers have a common understanding of the types of individuals that comprise informal supports, and recognition of the value that informal supports play in addressing and preventing DV with both victims and perpetrators.

Informal supports and the importance of having a positive social network were acknowledged as playing a beneficial role in helping women cope with their situations



by all interviewed. In fact, for those three organizations working in community on building people's capacity to step into the role of an informal supporter, the role of the informal supports was understood as a key aspect, not only in preventing DV, but also building the community's capacity to respond to other issues that may arise.

#### **5.4 Challenges in working with informal supporters**

The challenges involved in working with informal supporters varied depending on whether interviewees worked directly with informal supports as part of the intervention or whether they were working in community to build the capacity of potential informal supporters. Overall, interviewees identified the following challenges in working with informal supporters:

- Ensuring the informal supporter was providing supports that were deemed beneficial to the victim.
- Working from a therapeutic paradigm that acknowledged the role of informal supports but did not include specific interventions for the informal supporter.
- Dealing with the misconceptions supporters had about the contextual aspects of DV (i.e., most people believe that the abused could just simply leave the abusive situation).
- Realizing that the current funding paradigm did not adequately recognize the role and value of informal supports.

For those three agencies who worked in community to build the capacity of people to become effective informal supporters to prevent DV, the challenges included:

- The role that cultural contexts and norms play in influencing potential supporters to step into the role of being an effective support (i.e., some cultures value connectedness, and some cultures are very hierarchical and patriarchal). The former makes it easy for the concept of informal supports to take hold, the latter reinforces non-disclosure and the perpetuation of the belief that power is control.
- The importance of framing the issue of DV in a way that is sensitive to the local context (i.e., immigrants, laypersons, para-professionals etc.) and the importance of meeting the community members where they are at in terms of their needs and understanding of DV.
- Dealing with the misconceptions and myths about the cycle of abuse and the root causes of DV held by informal supporters and the public.
- Working within a funding paradigm that does not recognize the role and value that informal supports can bring to the intervention and prevention of DV.

These challenges notwithstanding, the interviewees all agreed that there is value of including and supporting informal supports as they do play a key role in not only prevention, but also in intervention.

### **5.5 What do informal supporters need to be effective in preventing domestic violence?**

The majority of those interviewed agreed that the more education and skills the potential supporter received about DV and how best to respond, the more effective they could be in supporting the victim. Interviewees also noted that although there had been ongoing education and awareness around the issue of DV, common misconceptions regarding the context of DV (e.g., the violence ends when you leave; the victim plays a role in the violence; the victim is asking for it through her behavior, etc.) were still prevalent, and significant work needs to be done in this area before the average person will step into the role of being an effective informal supporter.

When probed regarding what types of information would be required for informal supporters to provide effective supports, the majority of those interviewed said that an effective first step would be education and information regarding: 1) the 'reality' of DV (root causes of DV, cycle of violence, etc.), and 2) specific skills on how to respond, intervene and prevent DV.

### **5.6 Interviewees' feedback on next steps**

Finally, interviewees were asked whether they would be likely to use a community resource or engage in a strategy designed to build the capacity of informal supporters if it were developed. All of those interviewed were not only supportive of this idea, but acknowledged that they would like to be involved, in whatever capacity they could, in informing, designing, and potentially delivering the resource. They offered the following insights:

- The strategy should have a strong educational component regarding the root causes of DV and the cycle of violence and support services available in the community.
- Professionals and paraprofessionals will likely require different levels of education and skill sets to integrate informal supports in their service provision.
- The strategy should include a coordinated approach and be integrated into existing practices in order to leverage existing momentum and resources.

- The strategy should include a campaign to help the general public better understand both the root causes and the cycle of violence and that they have a role to play with their friends, families, neighbours and co-workers.
- The approach should take multiple perspectives and experiences into consideration as framing the issue in diverse communities will impact the uptake.
- The approach will need to be multipronged (multiple methods and approaches) in order to have impact.

## 6.0 Discussion and implications of the findings

Overall, the results from the survey and the interviews reveal that:

- There is wide array of programming, services and initiatives that are directed at educating people on how to recognize and respond to DV so that they can potentially step into an informal support role. However, this work is not coordinated or very collaborative, and is being implemented from multiple and diverse perspectives.
- Of the seven organizations that were surveyed and provide direct services to victims, only three actively include informal supporters in their service delivery approach and when necessary, provide supporters with the support and training they need to be effective; however, the dominant form of 'service' for informal supporters was the provision of information on community resources and referrals to other agencies.
- Almost all of the organizations did not advertise services for informal supporters.
- The majority of the agencies interviewed were not familiar enough with the best practices that are associated with supporting informal supporters or barriers that stand in the way of people stepping into a support role (Tables 1 and 2, respectively).

Overall, there was recognition of the therapeutic 'potential' of involving informal supporters in providing service and supports to victims of DV and there was a common understanding of who comprises informal supports and the preventative 'potential' in building the capacity of people to take on the role of an informal supporter.

Both survey respondents and interviewees indicated that the primary reasons that informal supports were not stepping into a supportive role *may* have to do with:

- Not feeling competent to respond appropriately,
- Not having enough knowledge of appropriate community resources, and

- Feeling that they might get hurt if they intervene.

Feedback gathered through the survey reveals that service providers feel the best way to support informal supporters is to:

- Provide them with information on applicable services in community,
- Provide them with information on the signs of DV, and
- Build their confidence and skills so they can play an effective role.

These results are consistent with the literature that suggests that having information on the context of DV, feeling that it is within one's power to act on this information, and knowing how to respond effectively greatly influences an individual's willingness to intervene to help a victim (Frye, 2007; Goodman & Smyth, 2011).

It should be noted that while respondents did rate the best practices drawn from the literature as being very to somewhat effective, it remained the case that the primary form of support currently being offered in Calgary and area to informal supporters was information on the cycle of violence and referral to community resources. Research conducted by Latta and Goodman (2001), however, suggests that the provision of information/education and referral is only the first step in engaging with and supporting those who want to support someone who has disclosed.

Thus, a strategy that seeks to fully include and support informal supporters moves beyond the provision of information and the use of referrals, and strives to: (1) assist survivors to engage with their own networks, (2) helps network members support the survivors in their lives, and (3) enables survivors to develop new ties to supplement their existing connections (Goodman & Smyth, 2011, pp. 86-87). This 'social network-oriented' approach requires a realignment of the relevant community services, and moves the intervention away from focusing on the individual towards understanding the practitioner's role as partnering with other community resources and informal supporters to better support survivors (Goodman & Smyth, 2011; Sylaska & Edwards, 2014).

Interestingly, the seeds of such an approach were corroborated in the feedback gathered in the interviews. Overall, those interviewed indicated that, in addition to being given information and education regarding DV and applicable community resources, informal supporters would also benefit from: being included beyond the assessment phase of intervention and being involved in community-based support groups to build their skills and capacity. It was also suggested that Calgary needs a more

coordinated approach (with DV agencies) to ensure informal supports are accessing services and supports.

Finally, the results of the survey and interviews reveal that the way informal supports are currently being cultivated and utilized in the Calgary context exists on a continuum that goes from; engaging community members in a dialogue about their role in the prevention of DV, to a peer supports model that utilizes volunteer peers to become effective supports to victims, to a clinical model where informal supporters (i.e., family members, relatives and friends) are included in the intervention and receive supports.

## **7.0 Implications for the service delivery context in Calgary and area**

Based on the findings from our study and feedback provided by the *Supporting the Supporters Working Group*, the following opportunities have been identified:

1. Consider adopting a social network-oriented approach to supporting the supporters.
  - Based on feedback from those interviewed there is an opportunity to work with existing agencies who see the value of informal supports but currently do not have an explicit strategy in terms of including them in their intervention paradigm. This approach would include the development of an intervention model where practitioners are supported to take a more coordinated and collaborative approach to dealing with victims and where the focus of the intervention is on:
    - Helping victims better engage their networks,
    - Helping victims develop new and healthy forms of informal networks, and
    - Helping informal network members to have the knowledge and skills to better support victims.
  
2. Build a comprehensive strategy that would include:
  - A common theoretical approach to informal supports, disclosure, and resources (e.g., creating a theory of change, identifying and building capacity on best practices, hosting supporting the supporters workshops on research to advance the area).
  - A coordinated approach with professional and paraprofessional organizations be developed and supported in the Calgary and provincial context.

- The development of a network for sharing of information, identification of promising practices and the uptake and implementation of best practices for those supporting supporters.
- A strategy that includes exploring the role that informal supports could play with perpetrators.

It is recommended by the researchers that CDVC, along with all relevant key stakeholders, raise the profile of informal supports as a valuable and integral part of preventing and addressing DV. This process should include educating funders and policymakers regarding the integral role that informal supports can play in the prevention of all violence in order to ensure key stakeholders are integrating informal support strategies into their funding and systems paradigms.

## 8.0 References

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## Appendix 1: Overview of the range of programs and supports including informal supporters from agencies that had been interviewed<sup>4</sup>

Organization	Type of Program	Target	Services Provided	Nature of the interaction with informal supporters
Calgary Immigrant Women's Association	Family Conflict Program	Immigrant families  Men and women	Family counseling  One on one counseling for victims  Group sessions for supporters	Identified in assessment phase – will be included if client requests it.  Counseling for the supporter to be an effective support if included in the treatment.  Client is supported to utilize an informal network in community or utilize other community resources.
	New Friends & Neighborhood Groups	Newcomers	Group sessions for newcomers, language classees	Client is supported to utilize an informal network in community or utilize other community resources.
	Nurturing Yourself	Immigrant women	Workshops on how to recognize and respond to DV	
Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter	Community Awareness Campaign	General public  Professionals & Para-professionals	Workshops on how to respond to disclosure of DV	Workshops are designed to help people recognize and respond to DV and empower people to step into an informal support role.
	1000 Voices	Immigrants	Informal discussions and dissemination of information at Genesis Centre	This work is designed to inform people about DV and what community resources are available.
	Healthy Relationships	Youth	Healthy relationships training	This work is designed to empower youth to have healthy relationships and how to be a positive informal supporter.
Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse	Support & Information Line  Counseling for Victims and Support	Victims  Support People,	Phone support for victims and supporters  One on one counseling for victims and supporters	Informal supporters are included in the intervention with victims.

<sup>4</sup> All participants provided consent that permits to use the name of their organization/program(s) in this report.

Organization	Type of Program	Target	Services Provided	Nature of the interaction with informal supporters
	People	Professionals	Groups for victims	All of the education programs are designed to help people recognize and respond to sexual abuse and empower people to step into a support role or intervene when they can.
	First Responder	Frontline workers, general public	Training on how to effectively deal with disclosure	
	Man Enough	General Public	Educating and empowering men to be an effective informal support	
	Who do you tell?	School kids Teachers Parents	Workshops on disclosure Education about child sexual abuse	
YWCA of Calgary	YWCA Sheriff King Home Emergency Shelter	Victims	One on one counseling  Outreach	Informal supports are identified in the assessment phase.  Not formally included in the intervention and referred to other community services.
	Public awareness campaigns	General Public	Workshops on DV prevention Media	Public being informed on how to recognize and respond to DV.
Peer Support Services	Community Outreach	General Public	Workshops on recognizing and responding to DV	Outreach is designed to help people recognize and respond to DV and empower people to step into an informal support role.
	Peer Support Program	Victims	Training peers to be an effective support to victims of DV	Peers are trained to be an effective informal supporter.
	Moving on with Mentors	Victims	Training mentors to be an effective support to victims of DV	Mentors work with victims in an informal support role for any need the victim may have.
Alberta Health Services	Prenatal Outreach Support	Marginalized & at-risk women	Case work to support at risk moms	Social supports Identified in the assessment phase.  May be included in a plan of care.
	Workplace		Modules, EAP, link informal supports to	Primarily referred to shelters for

Organization	Type of Program	Target	Services Provided	Nature of the interaction with informal supporters
	Health and Safety	Co-workers	resources	ongoing support. Refer to CONNECT Family and Sexual Abuse Network
Youville	Long-Term Residential Treatment Centre	Women struggling with addictions and mental health	Counseling and case work  Informal supporters are given advice over the phone to support the client	Social supports Identified in assessment phase.  Clients are encouraged to utilize any social supports they may have and are primarily utilize to support the client in the transition from the home.  Not actively included in the intervention and referred to other services.
Immigrant Services Calgary	Family Support Program	Immigrant families:  Mandated clients (men)  self-referred (women)	12 week program  Group sessions and individual counseling  Educational groups on parenting, violence, cultural norms, services etc.	Clients are encouraged to utilize the informal supports they have, or to seek out a supportive network in community.  Informal supports are not actively included in the intervention and are referred to other services in community.
United Way of Calgary Neighborhood strategy	1000 Voices (Place based approach to DV)	Community at large	Community events exploring how to provide support to others regarding any community issue (i.e., DV, violence, safety etc.)	Building the capacity of community members to step into an informal support role
Ethnocultural Council of Calgary	Sustaining Healthy and Awesome Relationships	Men and boys from ethno-cultural communities  Community leaders/Brokers	Supporting leaders to be effective brokers and supports to their communities in addressing community issues including DV	Building the capacity of community leaders/brokers and community members (men and boys) to be effective informal supporters.



**SHIFT TO STOP  
VIOLENCE  
BEFORE IT STARTS**



Initiated by The Brenda Strafford Chair in the Prevention of Domestic Violence