

Community co-ordinates to stop domestic violence

By Sarah Sobanski

North Hastings Children's Services (NHCS) is helping local families get ahead of domestic violence.

As a part of the Safer and Vital Communities Grant, North Hastings Children's Services is spearheading the creation of the North Hastings Family Supports Team (NHFST). The team will work with local emergency services and secondary support services to create a co-ordinated effort against domestic violence in the area.

Between now and March 2018, \$1.7 million will go to 25 support projects like the NHFST across Ontario. NHFST will see a portion of \$70,000. This money will act as a salary complement for a new consolidation co-ordinator for local services out of NHCS, and go towards transitioning local services into a more cohesive and responsive team.

NHCS's Sarah Phoenix has been selected to be the co-ordinator for the project.

"We will be talking to the front line workers, so we can have a mutual agendas," said Phoenix. "[We'll be] co-ordinating with local services as well but we understand a lot of our services are very [isolated]. Some only provide to victims, some to offenders, [and] some to children. We provide to families. We operate from a no wrong door policy, so therefore we can offer services based on them being a family, and we don't define family as anything complicated."

If a person is identified as at risk for domestic violence, or if they are a victim of domestic violence, Phoenix will be able to step in and help co-ordinate next steps for the family with a network of local services. This might involve seeking the help or advice of reputed, trusted family lawyers like Nathens, Siegel LLP who can step in and take matters into their hands if the situation calls for it. They might be able to provide ample support for families in matters of legality and court procedures if the need arises for such measures.

"[It's about] identifying barriers. It might be a dog situation. [The victim will say] I don't have a place to stay or I can stay at my aunt's but my aunt has an allergy so I can't bring my pet. That could make the difference between violence happening, and not happening is finding a safe place for both of them," said Phoenix. "Those are our second responders. No one thinks domestic violence [and] think[s] about the dog pound. We have to look at the whole picture."

This year to date the Bancroft detachment of the OPP has had 118 domestic violence calls and 73 family dispute calls. This is up from 95 and 99 calls respectively in 2013.

Phoenix said as many as 67 per cent of Canadians say they have personally know at least one woman who has experienced physical or sexual abuse. More than 1.5 million women live on a low income in Canada, who are more likely to face domestic violence. One in five single mothers in Canada also live on a low income.

She added that children who witness 10 or more incidents of parental domestic violence before the age of 16 are at least twice as likely to attempt suicide. Exposure to violence can affect children's brain development and ability to learn, and lead to a wide range of behavioural and emotional issues such as anxiety, aggression, and bullying.

"The goal is to get ahead of these issues," explained Phoenix. "We know they exist. We know they're happening every day in rural [and in] urban [communities]. Rural families face unique issues because of access and that will be a huge focus. It makes it more complicated in a North Hastings community because most of our services are located south of seven, and that was a big thing was finding someone who could co-ordinate."

The NHFST will focus on service co-ordination, social navigation, advocacy, public information and education, database co-ordination or technical assistance and fundraising. Public information and education initiatives could include high school seminars, flyers and training community members on what to do if they know someone who is a victim of domestic violence. The 2004 grant was created to fight crime rates and work towards community safety and wellbeing. Community-based, not-for-profit organizations can apply with the support of local police and other organizations.