

Supplying the beef

By Tony Pearson

In the early 1980s, Wendy's hamburger chain ran a famous commercial with the tag line "Where's the beef?" This is also a question which has been asked of Bancroft's much self-promoted Community Safety and Well-Being Plan.

Now it appears that some real meat is being added to the bones of that plan. On Friday, two major initiatives were unveiled. One is called BAST, which stands for Bancroft Area Support Team. As outlined by Andra Kauffeldt, a councillor in Limerick Township representing the County of Hastings, this team is a group designed to deal with imminent emergencies, where there's a real threat of personal harm occurring quickly. The team brings together representatives of eight agencies - the county, the OPP, Mental Health, Children's Aid, Maggie's, Victim Assistance, and the school boards - to bring the appropriate services to bear to offset the risk, and to deal with the underlying problems which gave rise to it.

BAST is an acknowledgement of two essential truths about protecting the safety of the community - that dealing with a crisis before it fully erupts is better than cleaning up the mess once it happens; and that dealing with a potentially threatening situation isn't just a job for the police, because a number of health and social agencies can bring resources to bear to prevent violence.

Along that line, the second initiative is equally important. One area of violence all too common in our area, as across the province, is violence against women and families. The Wilno murders of last year drive home the point: most violent crime against women in Ontario isn't committed by strangers, but by intimates - partners and former partners. It extends to teenage relationships as well; one in six police reported violent crimes in Canada was committed by a dating partner.

Overall, a shocking one in three people experiences violence or abuse before they turn 16. This statistic applies in North Hastings as well as Canada as a whole. The local OPP detachment logged 193 calls to handle domestic and family disputes in 2014. For 2016, the number is already up to 191, with the year not yet over. This is not a situation which can be ignored or diminished.

North Hastings Children's Services - soon to be re-titled North Hastings Child and Family Centre - recently received a grant from the Ontario government to take on violence directed against women. They will focus on training, co-ordination, and education to reduce the incidence of such violence through the North Hastings Family Support Team. An important element is training for front line workers in health and social agencies on how to recognize potential crisis conditions. Another is collective planning with community partners on ways that they can quickly provide appropriate services. NHCS hopes to launch both before the end of the month, as well as new public awareness efforts.

All this represents a move forward from theory. Hopefully, it will bring quicker referral of people in need - potential abusers or their likely victims - to needed services before crises come to an unfortunate climax. System navigators have to cut through the bureaucracy to make sure clients are seen by whoever can help. Clients who are socially fragile, clients on the margins of society, clients who don't have positive experiences with government agencies - such people are not likely to deal effectively with a confusing and unco-ordinated system. They need help to work their way through the mazes.

Talk is easy; action is harder; speedy action is more difficult still. Friday's presentations were encouraging. The fact that the OPP are involved and committed to the process is also a good sign.

Family violence arises from many sources, from social factors like poverty, or the childhood experiences of perpetrators. (Abusers are often men who grew up in families where abuse existed.) Family violence is also more wide-spread than we realize: less than 40 per cent of women who suffer from abuse seek any type of help. And a new family problem is emerging, with over 750,000 Canadian senior citizens reporting abuse or neglect in the previous year.

The dangers are very real locally. The Three Oaks shelter in Belleville, where Hastings County women and their children can seek refuge, provided 6,500 days of shelter last year. Over 200 women and children received protection, and the shelter provided outreach services to more than two hundred additional women.

Dr. Hugh Russell, the consultant who had a large hand in framing Bancroft's Community Safety plan, stated that small towns have an advantage in fighting family violence. Such communities are more close-knit; need can be more easily identified, and support more quickly accessed than in a large urban centre - in theory, at least.

But first, walls must be broken down - walls of silence about victims, and walls of procedure and paperwork between those who can help them. In doing this, as the community safety document points out, must be "Our Shared Commitment." So congratulations to North Hastings Children's Services for their initiative.