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# **An Evaluation of the Calgary Partner Check Process for Domestic Violence**

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by

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## Executive Summary

The serious nature of intimate partner violence and the harm to women and their children has been acknowledged in numerous publications (Statistics Canada, 2011; Tutty & Goard, 2002). The costs to society for charging abusive partners and providing treatment in the hope of stopping domestic violence are substantial (Bowlus, McKenna, Day & Wright, 2003; Greaves, Hankivsky, & Kingston-Reichers, 1995; Healey, Smith, & O'Sullivan, 1998).

As an institution, the criminal justice system deals with a high number of cases of domestic assaults yearly (Tutty, Koshan, Jesso, Ogden & Warrell, 2011; Ursel Tutty & LeMaistre, 2008a). One of the common outcomes of domestic assault charges, especially when the assaults are less serious and the offender has not repeated the violence, are batterer intervention programs, in which the abusive behaviours of offenders are challenged. However, because such behaviours are characterized by denial, it is difficult to assess whether the offenders are no longer abusive and their intimate partners are safe.

Standards of practice in Canada and the United States often recommend additional contact with the partners of batterers as a way of checking on victim safety and for program accountability (Austin & Dankwort, 1999; Dankwort & Austin, 1999). These are important for several reasons. First, partner checks are useful for program staff to keep abreast of whether men are making any progress with respect to their behaviour towards their partner (Rosenbaum & Leisring, 2001). Second, because batterers often minimize or deny their abusive behaviour, partner checks can increase program and batterer accountability by obtaining additional information from women (Gondolf, 1987; Gondolf & Wernik, 2009; Gregory & Erez, 2002; Healey, Smith, & O'Sullivan, 1998).

Third, partner checks create opportunities to provide women with referral information and increase her awareness of relevant services (Gregory & Erez, 2002; Rosenbaum & Leisring; Travis, 1998). Fourth, contact can also be beneficial for women by providing them with support, giving them information about the batterer programs, warning them of any behaviour by her partner in the group that is cause for concern, and validating them as the experts in their own experiences of abuse (Gregory & Erez; Scott, 2004).

Although the importance of partner checks is apparent, Rosenbaum and Leisring (2001) state that, in practice, they are difficult to carry out, expensive, time consuming and potentially dangerous. Furthermore, Gregory and Erez (2002) indicated that even in research, locating and interviewing battered women is difficult, often because they are fearful to talk about their experiences, unwilling to "reopen mental wounds", or are unable to be contacted (e.g., no forwarding address, disconnected telephones, or living in hiding). Therefore, not surprisingly, a dearth of empirical research exists that explores the efficacy and usefulness of partner checks.

One study by Austin and Dankwort (1999) qualitatively explored 25 women's perceptions of the counsellors who carried out the partner check component of a batterer intervention program. They evaluated a narrative-based men's treatment program in Calgary in which the counsellors were available to women in a partner support component. The counsellors provided consultation regarding the program itself, and answered any questions regarding how the perpetrator was doing in the program. If women were considering returning to their partners, the counsellors met personally with them.

These women commented positively about the counsellor's support. More than half felt validated by program counsellors, appreciating that their "non-culpability for the partner's abuse was affirmed by another person" (Austin & Dankwort, 1999, p. 35). They also appreciated hearing, "that being intimately involved with a violent partner did not signify deficiency on their part" (p. 36). The women felt affirmed when counsellors expressed to them that they knew best whether their partners were making progress in the program.

Even though the above study provides support for the importance and usefulness of the partner checks, no studies specifically evaluated the efficacy of partner check programs. As a component in a community-coordinated response to domestic violence, partner check programs are but one, albeit important, aspect of the strategy. As such, it is important to understand the larger context of the Calgary's specialized criminal justice and treatment approach to dealing with domestic assaults.

### **The Current Evaluation**

The current study was conceived to examine how well the partner check process that has been used in Calgary for several years is working. Potential participants were either administrators or frontline staff associated with two Calgary partner check programs. The participants took part in a 30 to 90 minute telephone interview regarding their impressions of how well the partner check process is working and how it might be improved.

In total, we conducted fifteen interviews with administrators (6) and front-line staff (9) from three agencies conducting partner check in the city of Calgary: Calgary Counselling (6 interviews), YWCA Calgary Sheriff King Home (2 interviews) and HomeFront's Partner Support Program (7 interviews). Twelve participants were female and three were male.

### **Comparing the Two Partner Check Programs**

Both the Calgary Counselling Centre and the YWCA Sheriff King Home provide treatment programs for mandated and voluntary offenders of intimate partner violence. However, in the past year or so, the HomeFront Partner Support Program has been given the responsibility of conducting the partner checks for offenders mandated to attend the YWCA Sheriff King Paths of Change or Sobering Effect programs.

HomeFront is a Calgary non-profit organization that provides support to victims of domestic violence after police charges have been laid against their partners. This victim support extends throughout any court processes. The Partner Support Program (PSP) provides victims of domestic violence whose partners or ex-partners are under community supervision (commonly known as probation) with community resources and support. The program goal is to support the victims by increasing their safety and encouraging them to consider their own best interests and that of their children. The workers will have already had contact with many of the victims whose partners and ex-partners are in the treatment groups, through the other HomeFront programs as well as the Partner Support Program.

Overall, then, this research provides information on two diverse methods of conducting partner checks, one where the primary contact is from the agency providing offender treatment, the other where the primary contact is from a victim support centre. It is important to note that the intent of focusing on these two different programs was not to assess whether one works more effectively than the other. Both programs emerged from the needs of their particular

organizations and, ultimately, provide two distinct models of partner check programs that may be a better fit for some depending on the resources in each community.

The in-depth interviews with the program informants identified a number of similarities and several differences. The similarities across the programs included the process for accessing the names of and consent from the accused; contacting and getting consent from the partners; responses from the partners regarding the partner check processes; and protocols when new abuse is disclosed.

Interviewees with both Calgary Counselling and Sherriff King personnel reported initial difficulties with the process of cataloguing when to contact partners and how the partner responded. Currently, both Calgary Counselling and Partner Support have developed administrative processes to better schedule the calls and capture the responses and wishes of the partners. Other common difficulties included connecting or reconnecting with the partners; dealing with new partners rather than the partner associated to the incident in which the police charges were laid.

The program respondents mentioned several differences as well. At Calgary Counselling, the partner checks are conducted by the primary therapist assigned to work with the accused, who are both mandated and non-mandated clients. These staff members have counselling credentials such as graduate or post-graduate degrees in social work, psychology or educational psychology. The role of the Partner Support program staff is support not counselling, so their education credentials are not typically at a graduate level. Rather, the staff are hired for their ability to connect and to engage with clients.

The Calgary Counselling staff can directly refer partners to several internal counselling programs such as the “You’re Not Alone” program for women victims and the “Turn for the Better” program for male victims of intimate partner violence. Partner Support workers can also make referrals to these or similar counselling programs. As it is unclear whether internal or external referrals might be more effective; this difference is simply noted.

The respondents from Calgary Counselling mentioned several technological difficulties unique to their agency’s telephone system, which requires individuals to accept the phonecall from a blocked number. In contrast, the Partner Support program personnel did not mention difficulties in connecting with partners because of technology or any other reason. Rather, they spoke of the advantages of having already connected with a number of the partners through other HomeFront initiatives such as the court case workers.

In summary, while several differences are noted and can be attributed to the different nature of the two agencies conducting the partner checks, importantly, the informants perceived the process as generally working well, especially after having made some adjustments to the procedures in each agency.

## **Summary of the Research Findings**

This section reviews the major themes of the qualitative data analysis including the challenges/issues and the strengths/successes of the partner check processes conducted by the Calgary Counselling Centre and HomeFront’s Partner Support program. The final section suggests several next steps for further assessing the efficacy of partner check programs.

One considerable and continuing problem noted by both program administrators and front-line workers is accessing contact information for the partners. In most cases, the partner contact information is gathered from those mandated to treatment via the criminal justice process. This presents a number of complications, including the fact that, if the victims and accused no longer live together, he may simply not have access to her contact information. Another possibility is that he declines to provide the information, claiming that he does not have it when, in fact, he does.

In some circumstances, such as when the partner had previous contact with HomeFront's domestic court case counsellors during the initial criminal justice process, the Partner Support program may have access to a partner's contact information and have already established rapport with her. However, few communities have a program similar to HomeFront that would allow such access to contact information.

Once the partner's contact information is accessed, actually connecting with partners is often problematic. This occurs for a number of reasons including; not having current phone-numbers for the partner due to their mobility; partners not answering phone-calls without call-display information (Calgary Counselling Centre-specific); not leaving phone-messages as a safety measure; partners seldom returning phone-calls and partners being repeatedly contacted by a number of agencies and declining yet one more worker offering assistance.

A third challenge is that partner check programs are complicated to administer. Deciding who should make the phonecalls, how to schedule the phone-calls for otherwise busy workers and dealing with a large number of unanswered calls are just some of the issues that emerged from the program informants. Offenders may be in treatment one month but not the next and sometimes this information is not simple to obtain. In response to these issues, both agencies have developed strategies to document the calls and the partner's responses and representatives from both agencies see their current procedures as working well.

A final problem raised by the program interviewees was the extent of the resources needed, including time and funding, for a relatively small return in the number of partners willing to be repeatedly contacted for partner checks. The fact that a number of partners choose not to be involved in the partner check process should not be seen as a failure on the part of the programs. Adult victims of domestic violence must be considered as competent individuals who have the right to choose to decline services or information. Moreover, a respectful phone-call to a partner may encourage that individual to engage later if the abuse were to re-occur or she has changed her mind about needing the support offered.

Notably, the current study was not intended to provide a cost-benefit analysis of partner check programs. One possible reason for the relatively high refusal rate by partners is that a large proportion no longer resides with the accused that attend treatment. These partners, therefore, have no vested interests or even the capacity to provide feedback about the accused's behaviour during the treatment process.

Nonetheless, when the safety of victims of domestic violence is considered, the numbers of partners connecting with partner check personnel should never be used as the primary measure of effectiveness. It would be an important discussion for individuals connected with the coordinated community response to addressing domestic violence in Alberta to struggle with how the "success" of partner check and other initiatives should be conceptualized.



With respect to the successes associated with partner check process, according to the program informants from both the Calgary Counselling Centre and HomeFront's Partner Support Program, the partners who are willing to connect with the partner check process are quite frank and use the opportunity to access support and information from the workers. Furthermore, once they have agreed to additional phonecalls, most are agreeable to the continuing contact.

An added advantage for the Partner Support Program is that they or another HomeFront staff member (domestic violence court case-workers, for example) have often already engaged with the partner after the police laid charges and the court process ensued. This likely enhances the willingness of the partners to speak with the workers.

The majority of the interviewees saw the partner check process as valuable to not only the victims and as a mechanism to hold the offenders accountable, but also for the agencies, the group leaders, the criminal justice system and the community. This question elicited strong theoretical support for offering partner check programs.

In the analysis of the most important reason for conducting partner checks, the most commonly mentioned aspects were offender accountability and victim safety. This is important as these are key goals of the program. Further, one would never want one without the other. The program informants noted numerous ways that they address victim's safety during partner check calls, and especially in the uncommon event that she is reporting new abuse. The procedures of both partner check programs very carefully consider the confidentiality of the victim's disclosures and have developed strategies to ensure that the accused could not deduce that his partner or ex-partner had informed the program staff.

The partner check process results in relatively few reports of new incidents of abuse. This could be viewed in several ways. On the one hand, partners may not trust the partner check process sufficiently to be willing to disclose new abusive events. Alternatively, as one administrator suggested, the recidivism rate in Calgary is relatively low, compared to many jurisdictions. The low recidivism rates, especially for accused mandated to treatment, were previously mentioned based on local research (Cairns, 2005; Hoffart & Clark, 2004, Tutty et al., 2011). From this perspective, the few reports of re-abuse may be a realistic representation, although one that must always be viewed cautiously.

Partner checks can provide very useful information to the treatment agencies, whether with respect to new or continued abusive behaviours or the partner's perception that the offender has changed as a result of the treatment. Both are invaluable from the perspectives of the program interviewees.

## **Next Steps**

Given the paucity of information about the efficacy of partner check programs as one mechanism to inform batterer treatment and ensure victim safety, the current study is an important first step, but more research is clearly needed. In addition to the two Calgary partner check programs highlighted in the current research, a number of other agencies that offer perpetrator treatment across the province of Alberta also conduct partner checks. It would be interesting to assess the extent to which their experiences are similar or diverse. Such triangulation of information about partner check processes would inform a more advanced discussion of what could be considered as best practices in this area.

This information could be more simply gathered through an on-line survey for the personnel from the other Alberta programs that rewrites the open-ended questions of the interview guide into close-ended, rating scale survey-type questions. This would both validate what procedures and processes have already been identified as helpful, but also potentially identify novel strategies to address some of the challenges that emerged in the current study.

A further research component that was recognized as important but was not feasible given the resources available for the current study, is interviewing partners who have been invited to participate in partner check processes. The only research that has accessed women's voices was the 1999 publication by Austin and Dankwort who interviewed 25 Calgary women in 1994-95 about their perceptions of the counsellors who carried out a partner check for a local batterer intervention program. Interestingly, those partner checks included providing the women with information concerning how their male partners were doing in the group, which is clearly different from the current partner check programs. This difference, in addition to considerable changes in Calgary's criminal justice system response to domestic violence, as well as important changes in telephone technology, such a call number display, suggest the need to update the research with partners.

Ideally, the research would entail qualitative interviews with both partners who have connected with and those that have been contacted but declined the opportunity to engage with the partner check process. Notably, those that have chosen not to give partner check information may also be more likely to decline being in a research study, but this issue could be addressed by providing honoraria for research participation.

In conclusion, the current study documents both challenges and successes of two local, well-established partner check programs. The program informants provided detailed information and frank opinions with respect to how well they see the programs working and what strategies were developed to address problems that arose in developing the program structure and protocols. All were relatively positive about the current iterations of the programs, seeing clear benefits that resulted in both keeping victims safe and holding perpetrators accountable

## **Chapter One: Calgary's Specialized Domestic Violence First Appearance Court**

### **Introduction and Overview of the Report**

The serious nature of intimate partner violence and the harm to women and their children has been acknowledged in numerous publications (Statistics Canada, 2011; Tutty & Goard, 2002). The costs to society for charging abusive partners and providing treatment in the hope of stopping domestic violence are substantial (Bowlus, McKenna, Day & Wright, 2003; Greaves, Hankivsky, & Kingston-Reichers, 1995; Healey, Smith, & O'Sullivan, 1998).

As an institution, the criminal justice system deals with a high number of cases of domestic assaults yearly (Tutty, Koshan, Jesso, Ogden & Warrell, 2011; Ursel Tutty & LeMaistre, 2008a). While there is no separate domestic violence offence, abusers are subject to a variety of charges, from common assault to uttering threats to murder, that would apply to anyone regardless of the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. Nevertheless, the dynamics and the intimate relationship between the accused and the victims in domestic violence cases, has severely challenged the criminal justice response that typically deals with crimes committed by strangers.

One of the common outcomes of domestic assault charges, especially when the assaults are less serious and the offender has not repeated the violence, are batterer intervention programs, in which the abusive behaviours of offenders are challenged. However, because such behaviours are characterized by denial, it is difficult to assess whether the offenders are no longer abusive and their intimate partners are safe.

Partner check programs can be simply described as contacting the partners or ex-partners of individuals mandated to treatment as a result of charges related to domestic violence assaults. The reasons for the contact are to access information about the possibility of new or ongoing abuse, to assure the safety of the partner should abuse be ongoing and offering the partner additional resources if so wished. Although partner checks are often recommended in the literature to assure the safety of partner, little research has been conducted on the process.

As a component in a community-coordinated response to domestic violence, partner check programs are but one, albeit important, aspect of the strategy. As such, it is important to understand the larger context of Calgary's specialized criminal justice and treatment approach to dealing with domestic assaults. To this end, the current chapter describes Calgary's specialized court processes; and Chapter Two presents research with respect to specialized courts in Canada and on Calgary's specialized courts in particular.

Chapter Three presents research suggesting the need for partner check programs and what little is known about how this might be structured. The final chapters of the report describe qualitative research with 15 administrators and front-line workers from two of Calgary's partner check programs at the Calgary Counselling Centre and the Partner Support Program (originally located at the YWCA Sheriff King Home and moved to this program under the umbrella of HomeFront). These in-depth interviews queried the strengths and challenges of offering the programs and the perceptions of these key informants about the utility of conducting partner checks. The results have implications for those agencies already offering partner checks and organizations considering developing such programs.

## Calgary's Specialized Domestic Violence Courts

Beginning with the development of the Winnipeg court in 1991, specialized domestic violence courts have become increasingly available across Canada with the goal of more effectively addressing the criminal justice response to domestic violence. The extensive effort involved in creating such specialized justice responses should be acknowledged. To date, however, few evaluations have been published that assess whether these initiatives make a difference, exceptions being the work of Ursel in Winnipeg (Ursel & Hagyard, 2008), the Yukon Domestic Violence Treatment Option (Hornick, Boyes, Tutty & White, 2005) and some courts in Ontario (Moyer, Rettinger & Hotton (2000), cited in Clarke, 2003; Dawson & Dinovitzer, 2001), and Tutty and Ursel in the Canadian prairie provinces (Ursel, Tutty, & LeMaistre, 2008b).

Calgary's model developed in early 2000 with the input of key players from not only the criminal justice institutions such as police services, the Crown Prosecutor offices, probation, Legal Aid and the defence bar, but also community agencies that offer batterer intervention programs and support, shelter and advocacy for victims. The model was innovative, with the initial emphasis on a specialized domestic violence docket court with the aim of speeding up the process for those charged with domestic abuse offences to both allow low risk offenders to take responsibility for their actions and speed their entry into treatment. Such actions were thought to better safeguard victims, both because their partners were mandated to treatment much earlier, and to prevent repercussions to victims who, if the case proceeded to court, might be required to testify.

Because of its unique nature, this section describes Calgary's specialized domestic violence first appearance court process. This material is taken from a chapter written by Tutty, McNichol and Christensen (2008) in a book, *What's Law Got to Do with It: The Law, Specialized Courts and Domestic Violence in Canada,* edited by Ursel, Tutty and LeMaistre (2008) published in Canada by Cormorant Press.

In 1999, the dedicated domestic violence first appearance court process in Calgary came into operation. This unique specialization was originally only in the "docket" or "first appearance" court<sup>1</sup> in which the accused make their first court appearance following charges related to domestic violence. The court can perform all functions up to but excluding trial. Those functions include bail hearings, acceptance of pleas and sentencing. The specialized court hears all domestic violence-related cases charged in the City of Calgary, including violence by persons in heterosexual or same-sex couples who are in either cohabitating or non-cohabitating relationships, interfamilial violence, child abuse or elder abuse. The most common offences seen in the court include assault, uttering threats and breach of court orders, and can include attempted murder and homicide.

As noted previously, what makes the Calgary model unique is its focus on the first appearance court in which low-risk accused can have their charges withdrawn with a peace bond if they acknowledge responsibility for their behaviour and are willing to participate in court-mandated domestic violence counselling and other mandated treatments. Its goals are to hold offenders accountable within the justice system and increase the likelihood that a meaningful intervention will be imposed on the offender through treatment. It is based on the premise that a more efficient court process can take advantage of the low risk accused's guilt and shame that is usually present close in time to the offence. It is hoped that the speedy access to treatment and

tight monitoring of offenders will increase compliance with court orders and maximize the effects of treatment programs.

Additionally, victim safety is prioritized in the specialized court. Risk assessments and the victim's wishes are presented to the court team prior to docket court and are used to support and refine submissions made to the court by the Crown and defence attorneys. The addition of "real time" information improves the quality of submissions made in court and, ultimately, the decisions improve the response of the justice system to victims' safety and needs. Further, the more efficient process minimizes factors related to the dynamic of abuse and violence that impede or impair court processes, such as victims recanting their testimony or being reluctant witnesses.

Calgary is a city of more than one million citizens and is home to many specialized domestic violence organizations and agencies including a specialized police unit (Domestic Conflict Unit or DCU), and specialized probation officers. An extensive protocol network promotes collaboration and the sharing of information across agencies, including the police, Crown prosecutors, Legal Aid, victim advocates, shelters, probation, and treatment programs.

Additionally, victims are supported by a non-profit law office (Calgary Legal Guidance), which provides the joint services of a lawyer and social worker and specializes in restraining and emergency protection orders along with various other matters related to family law. Victims and their children have access to a range of counselling and treatment options and a safe visitation and access centre. Further, while their partners are under community supervision through probation, victims are contacted and offered support through the Partner Support Program, a partnership between a volunteer victim support staff and probation services.

The accused have the benefit of a fast-tracked Legal Aid appointment process and a dedicated Legal Aid lawyer attached to the specialized court. Calgary Police Services follow a mandatory charge policy and undergo extensive training on dominant aggressors and domestic violence investigations. Dominant or primary aggressor policies are guidelines for the police in deciding who to charge in circumstances in which it is difficult to determine who is the victim because of ambiguity, such as when both parties are injured or each accuse the other of assault. The dominant aggressor is the individual who has been the most significant aggressor throughout the relationship (Strack, n.d.).

### **The Calgary Court Team**

This section describes the critical elements of the specialized domestic violence first appearance court, including the court team that consists of domestic court caseworkers, specialized Crown attorneys, police, probation officers and duty counsel officers.

One of the key elements of the process is the court "team," perceived by many as the "backbone" of the process. The team includes specialists from the Crown prosecutor's office and probation office, a member of the Domestic Conflict Unit of Calgary Police Services and domestic court caseworkers from HomeFront, the non-profit agency that supports the court processes with domestic court case workers and other initiatives.

Currently, eleven or more Crown prosecutors are specialized in domestic violence and appear in the court on a rotating basis. Representatives from the specialized probation office rotate daily in the docket court, while other colleagues manage the majority of domestic violence offenders at a central location. Likewise, one member of the Domestic Conflict Unit sits in the

court. The Domestic Conflict Unit consists of 10 investigators, two sergeants and staff sergeants and the Elder Abuse Response Team. The Unit reviews all domestic violence calls responded to by the Calgary Police Service and directly handles approximately 400 high-risk and/or chronic files per year, while offering support to frontline police officers. Eight court caseworkers, a supervisor and a casework assistant from HomeFront cover the docket court on a rotating basis.

A major undertaking of the court team is to assess risk in order to attain or maintain the safety of victims and their children. The specialized domestic violence team exists to bring to the justice system a greater understanding of the nature of domestic violence and to bring about the best and most expedient response. The Crown prosecutors assess risk and recommend to the judge and defence counsel the directions that they consider most appropriate in each case. Their recommendations are based upon information and assessments provided to them during “pre-court conferences” that occur prior to case resolutions or bail hearings each day and for every file. The pre-court conferences involve all the court team members to ensure that relevant information is provided or confirmed regarding victim concerns/wishes and the conditions requested. For example, the accused may be given no contact orders, orders not to drink, orders to attend counselling within a specified time period, and may have their weapons confiscated.

#### *The HomeFront Domestic Court Caseworkers*

The HomeFront court caseworkers provide two essential services. The first is victim support. Each morning, they review the police 24-hour incident reports to collect new offence information and begin contacting the victims in those cases within a day of the police laying charges. Further, they review each case before every court appearance and ensure that victims’ wishes are up to date and that victims are aware of the status of the case against their partners. The workers typically inquire about a past history of abuse, current relationship status with the accused, perceived level of danger, as well as the victims’ wishes with respect to what they would like to happen at court. In addition, the clinical interview is supplemented with standardized risk assessment tools such as the Danger Assessment (Campbell, Sharps & Glass, 2001).

Safety planning for victims is an essential component of the court caseworker’s role. Safety is ensured by connecting the victim to other community or legal resources: counselling programs for victims or children exposed to domestic violence, immigrant serving agencies, shelters and the Court Preparation and Restraining Order programs at Calgary Legal Guidance. The court caseworkers also keep victims updated about the progress of their partner/ex-partner’s case within the justice system, including such information as the date of the next court appearance and the plea entered. Court caseworkers, by necessity, may also liaise with other agency representatives in the City of Calgary, including the Child and Family Services Authority (child welfare).

The second essential service is conducting risk assessments and providing the victim’s wishes to the court team. This information is often vital in supporting and guiding the decisions of the court and supplementing/balancing information provided by other sources, including the police and defence representatives.

#### *Probation Services*

Probation officers are key stakeholders in the specialized court process as they can provide considerable information about an accused’s past history of criminal offences. Further,

the court probation officer acts as an information conduit between the court and the accused's supervising probation officer.

In addition to case conferencing, probation officers are officers of the court and may answer questions posed by counsel, the accused or the court. The information requested often includes past involvement with probation, current orders against the accused (including pre-trial), compliance history, as well as possible treatment options and suggested conditions. To prepare for court, the probation officers preview the docket list to assess what information might be needed during the daily docket, including checking databases and talking to any assigned probation officers about whether the accused is complying with community supervision.

An advantage of having a probation officer in court is that the accused makes immediate contact with the probation officer and is directly referred to treatment services from court. This significantly decreases the delay of an offender entering into treatment. The probation offices are located on the ground floor of the provincial court building and are easily accessible. Once an accused has been sentenced, he/she meets with the probation officer to review the court order with the officer, signs it to signify compliance and receives reporting instructions about when he/she must reconnect with the supervising probation officer.

Common probation conditions include immediate monitoring of the accused and ensuring that the accused follow court orders. At this time, probation officers also complete a preliminary intake with the accused to screen for any mental health, medical or treatment related issues such as language fluency to better direct accused into appropriate programming.

Within the specialized domestic violence first appearance court, the accused are given a shorter timeframe to contact their probation officer and treatment agencies than if they were to appear in a non-specialized court. The accused are generally given seven to ten days to contact their supervising probation officer in a non-specialized court, whereas in the specialized setting, they are given, on average, four days.

### **The Specialized Domestic Violence First Appearance Court Process**

The specialized docket court sits four days per week, with Wednesday dedicated for trials. Trials happen throughout the week not just in the specialized court; but with the support of caseworkers and specialized crown). The judiciary was initially specialized in domestic violence, though now all Calgary provincial criminal court judges rotate into the specialized court.

The court team meets continuously throughout the day, with Crown prosecutors trading off to present up-to-date cases. The team reviews the particulars of each case with the defence or duty counsel and determines what course they will pursue. At this time, new information from any team member can be introduced. As well, members have the opportunity to request additional information they may need from other members before meeting again. Examples of information shared include: letters from victims asking that no contact orders be lifted or that the victim is fearful and pursuing a restraining order; address and employment updates from probation and police officers; verification of treatment attendance and compliance; or any changes in the perceived level of risk for the accused or the victim. The goal is to provide the court with as much information as possible in order to allow it to make appropriate and efficient decisions.

Docket court is the first opportunity for an accused to enter a plea; however, many other steps and procedures often need to take place before a plea is accepted. These procedures can include adjournments to allow an accused to make application for legal aid coverage and retain a lawyer; to allow information or paperwork to catch up to the court; or until an interpreter can be made available. Some adjournments are made for tactical reasons such as if other charges or court decisions are pending for an accused. Duty counsel, the defence or the Crown may request that the case be heard at a later time because they do not yet have all the necessary information.

In about one-third of all cases, when the accused accepts responsibility for his actions, the charges are withdrawn and the accused is given a peace bond whereby he enters into an agreement with the court to abide by conditions to keep the peace, report to a probation officer, attend and complete mandated treatment for either domestic violence or substance abuse, or attend a parenting course. Often peace bonds include conditions of no contact, geographic restrictions and abstinence from drugs and/or alcohol. In all cases, the accused are required to acknowledge before the court the substance of their actions that led to the criminal charges being laid and express a willingness to participate in domestic violence or other appropriate treatment programs.

The bulk of cases seen by the court and mandated to treatment are referred to the Calgary Counselling Centre, YWCA Sheriff King Home, and Alberta Health Services Mental Health and Addictions. Depending on case circumstances, additional referrals would also be given to immigrant serving agencies or first-language counsellors that can address cultural and settlement issues, First Nations counselling or culturally based services, mental health resources, brain injury resources, and others.

### **Key Points in the Court Process**

Fast and efficient resolution of domestic violence cases is considered a central goal in the co-ordinated justice response. This is because the longer the delay until the court intervenes, the greater the likelihood that the evidence, usually hinging on victims' willingness to testify, will be lost. Further, offenders' remorse and willingness to acknowledge a problem in their lives wanes the more time passes between intervention and the original offence. Delays also play significantly into the cycle of violence and can exacerbate victims' feelings of helplessness.

Treatment is an integral and effective response to domestic violence and every effort is made to direct the accused into treatment as soon as possible following police charges and fast-tracked court dispositions. Being fast-tracked into counselling, which is monitored by probation, is believed to be an effective means of maintaining the safety of victims and families and breaking the cycle of violence. Holding offenders accountable is essential to an effective domestic violence intervention because offenders need to know that there are consequences unless they better regulate their behaviour. Monitoring helps ensure the victim's safety and reassures victims that they are not solely responsible for supervising the offenders' behaviour.

Immediate screening and regular contact with victims throughout the justice process is a further means of checking on safety and offering needed support to victims of violence, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will seek support in the future.



## Discussion and Conclusions

With its emphasis on the docket court, Calgary's specialized response is a unique model, different from other specialized domestic violence courts across Canada (Tutty, Ursel & Douglas, 2008). Much of the emphasis has been on creating a speedier response to assaults in domestic violence cases: seeing the accused in a specialized docket court more quickly than previously, and having treatment available much more quickly than before. Further, crisis intervention theory has long posited that the sooner one receives intervention, the more likely the counselling will be effective (Roberts & Everly, 2006). Also, the safety and wishes of the victims are taken into consideration by the court team early on in the process, while the assault is still fresh in their minds and they are not influenced by the accused to the same extent as they might be later on.

The data from the specialized domestic violence first appearance court validate that accused receiving the option of having their charges withdrawn and given a peace bond (typically mandating them to treatment such as intervention for batterers or substance abuse) are less likely to have previous criminal records. This is not surprising since those who plead not guilty and proceed to trial are often more knowledgeable about the justice system and understand that long delays often result in dismissals.

Even so, some advocates for victims and others have expressed concern about utilizing the outcome of stays with a peace bond (Hoffart & Clarke, 2004); since it gives the appearance of letting the accused off without a criminal record. While this remains a philosophical concern, results from the HomeFront evaluation indicate that accused who receive a peace bond reoffend at a much lower rate than those who receive other dispositions. Further, an evaluation of the batterer treatment programs in Calgary (Cairns, 2005) concluded that those with peace bonds who attended and completed counselling had significantly lower new charge rates (6.1%) than those who did not show or complete treatment (23.7%). The lower recidivism rates for all cases concluded at the first appearance court, whether stayed with a peace bond or entering a guilty plea, provide additional support for dealing with these cases in this manner.

While noting difficulties in comparing recidivism studies because of differing definitions of recidivism and time periods, recidivism rates of 7.9% for police charges for new offences and 10.9% of charges for breaches of court orders over an average of one to two years following the first offence (a total of 18.8 %) appear relatively low when compared with other research (in fact, this percentage is likely inflated because a number of accused both breach and are charged with new offences). In terms of official reports in which the police laid subsequent charges, three studies from the United States (Maxwell, Garner & Fagan, 2001; Thistlewaite, Wooldredge & Gibbs, 1998; Tolman & Weisz, 1995) reported recidivism rates of 30% (six months to three years), 17% (one year) and 23.6% (18 months) respectively. Further, the lower recidivism rates since the inception of the HomeFront court as compared with the baseline data conducted by Hoffart and Clarke (2004) provide additional support to the premise that specialization has contributed significant improvements in the justice system response to domestic violence in Calgary.

Following the early successes of the specialized domestic violence first appearance court, the Calgary justice community instituted a specialized domestic violence trial court in 2004. One rationale for this was the recognition that the HomeFront domestic court caseworkers were not available to support victims in cases going to trial. The high number of cases withdrawn or

dismissed for want of prosecution at trial is often because victims recant their testimony (Ursel, 2002), and providing ongoing support could decrease the number of withdrawals and possibly increase the number of cases found guilty or concluded with intervention conditions at trial.

Recent research on the Calgary specialized DV courts (Tutty et al., 2011) comparing the data from the pre-specialization period through the new docket court into the introduction of the trial court, supports the domestic violence court specializations working as anticipated. One obvious advantage is dealing with the accused much more quickly in the specialized docket court. Utilizing peace bonds with accused who are willing to admit responsibility for their behaviours and follow-through with being mandated to treatment has the potential to have them receive counselling while more motivated to make changes. Importantly, the rates of new criminal charges, at least within a two year period, have been reduced.

A unique feature of the Calgary specialized domestic violence court response is that probation officers remain involved with accused who received a peace bond at docket. In most jurisdictions, a peace bond or stay would not be monitored by probation officers unless the condition was breached. The probation involvement in Calgary's specialized courts means that the conditions of the peace bond are more closely attended to and, for example, were an individual sent to domestic violence treatment as a condition of the peace bond to stop attending, Probation would be immediately informed and the individual given consequences. Across court developmental phases, the most common probation/peace bond conditions for cases concluded at docket were counselling in either batterer treatment programs, substance abuse treatment or other counselling (50.4%). With the current research focus on partner's safety when the accused are in batterer treatment, this unique connection with probation is notable.

In conclusion, a significant advantage of the Calgary specialized first appearance court model is the extent to which the police and court systems are perceived by the general public, by accused persons and by victims as mobilizing significant resources to address family violence. The hope is that this specialized response will signal that these offences are taken seriously and will not be tolerated, thereby serving as a deterrent and preventing offences from occurring in the future.

## **Chapter Two: The Efficacy of Court-Mandated Batterer Intervention Programs**

As the primary condition to which the accused are mandated by the courts, establishing the efficacy of batterer treatment programs is critical, especially as many women stay or return to potentially dangerous partners in the hope that they will change as a result of group treatment (Gondolf & Russell, 1986).

Crisis intervention theory has long posited that the sooner one receives intervention, the more likely the counselling will be effective (Roberts & Everly, 2006). Also, the safety and wishes of the victims are taken into consideration by the court team early on in the process, while the assault is still fresh in their minds and they are not influenced by the accused to the same extent as they might be later on.

Since batterer intervention is commonly mandated by both Calgary's specialized docket court and the specialized domestic violence trial court, assessing the perspectives of those mandated to this intervention is vital. As a key intervention in addressing both the accountability of the accused and the safety of victims and their children, the current research was comprised of interviews with 17 men who were mandated by the specialized justice process to batterer intervention programs. These men attended the Calgary Counselling Centre's Responsible Choices for Men program.

This chapter provides an overview of research on batterer intervention programs, highlighting the various outcomes assessed in addition to the challenges and successes of such approaches in the North American context. While the bulk of programs are specific to men who have abused their partners, programs for women mandated to treatment have also been developed (Tutty, Babins-Wagner & Rothery, 2009). This report, however, is exclusively focused on groups for men.

### **Batterer Intervention Programs**

Batterer intervention programs, almost exclusively offered in a group format, were first developed in the late 1970s based on concerns expressed by advocates for abused woman (Cranwell Schmidt et al., 2007; Feder & Wilson, 2005; Gondolf, 2002). Initially slow to evolve due to voluntary attendance and poor retention rates (Gondolf, 2002), today, batterer intervention programs are a key component of the criminal justice system's response to domestic violence (Ursel, Tutty, & LeMaistre, 2008). In the 1980s, these programs received increased attention as a result of new mandatory arrest policies for domestic violence offenders. The resulting increase in perpetrators being mandated to treatment as a part of their sentencing caused a surge in the development of new batterer intervention programs (Gondolf, 2002).

The programs vary in their approach to helping batterers acknowledge and change their abusive behaviour. A pro-feminist psychoeducational approach, known as the Duluth model (named after the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Duluth, Minnesota), is the most frequently used model (Feder & Wilson, 2005). The Duluth model views domestic abuse as being rooted in patriarchal societal beliefs that portray men as having the right to exert power and control over women (Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004). Feminist principles are used to confront the men's beliefs, assist them to recognize their wrongful actions, and replace them with more appropriate behaviours that appreciate woman as equal partners in the relationships (Pence & Paymar, as cited in Babcock et al., 2004, p. 1026).

Cognitive-behavioural approaches to batterer treatment consider intimate partner violence to be a learned behaviour and require offenders to recognize their abusive behaviour as under their control (Feder & Wilson, 2005). Cognitive-behavioural treatment (CBT) focuses on changing the batterer's behaviour by providing him with tools and skills to deal with conflict and communicate more effectively (Babcock et al., 2004; Feder & Wilson, 2005). CBT includes a component on anger management, although most programs address this in at least one session. Although the Duluth model and CBT are typically seen as two different approaches to batterer treatment, many programs now incorporate both methods (Babcock et al., 2004).

Approaches using narrative therapy have increasingly been offered (Augusta-Scott, & Dankwort, 2002; McGregor, Tutty, Babins-Wagner & Gill, 2002; Babins-Wagner, Tutty & Rothery, 2009). For example, Calgary Counselling's Responsible Choices for Men program, the focus of this report, is a narrative therapy approach with a feminist perspective developed by Australian family therapist Alan Jenkins. The program invites the participants to review their beliefs about themselves in relation to the world, to challenge beliefs that are based on distorted perception, and to assist the men access their preferred or honorable selves (Jenkins, 1990).

Couples therapy is less frequently used and has been criticized for putting victims at increased risk for further victimization and for wrongfully insinuating that the woman are also partly responsible for the abuse (Babcock et al., 2004; Bograd & Mederos, 1999; Feder & Wilson, 2005, Johansson & Tutty, 1998). Additionally, couples therapy is considered inappropriate in most court-mandated treatment cases due to the severity of the violence that is likely present (Bograd & Mederos, 1999). Nonetheless, several authors have recently studied the utility for couple's treatment in cases of intimate partner violence (McCollum, 2008; Stith, 2003), concluding that, with careful screening to exclude serious abuse, couples intervention is a viable alternative.

Currently, batterer programs are the most prominent interventions for dealing with men who abuse their partners. The idea of mandating batterers to treatment as a part of sentencing is supported by research that finds court-mandated batterers are more likely to complete treatment over self-referred batterers (Rosenbaum, Gearan & Ondovic, 2001). The evaluation of their efficacy is essential and has received increased attention by domestic violence researchers. Ineffective interventions may not only be doing little to change batterers' abusive behaviour but may put victims at increased risk. Gondolf found that a batterer's attendance in a program is the "most influential factor in a woman's return to her abusive partner" (2002, p. 29). This research emphasizes the critical need to evaluate batterer treatment programs.

Despite the different approaches in batterer intervention programs, three common goals are to reduce re-abuse, to change the batterer's attitudes and beliefs that justify abuse, and to provide him with the skills to change his abusive behaviour (Davis, Taylor, & Maxwell, 2000). Researchers have largely relied on quantitative studies that either used recidivism rates or clinical measures of attitudes to evaluate the efficacy of batterer intervention programs.

Additionally, several researchers have employed a qualitative approach to gain greater insight into the victims and batterers experience of treatment and its outcomes. The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of the quantitative and qualitative research that examines the efficacy of mandated treatment for batterers. In addition, research on the efficacy of different program models is reviewed. The report concludes with suggestions for future research.

## **Quantitative Evaluations of Batterer Intervention Programs**

The research evaluating batterer intervention programs that use clinical and attitudinal measures is based on the assumption that domestic violence is linked to the batterer's belief systems. Batterers tend to hold sexist beliefs that entitle them, as a male, to use abusive behaviour to exert power and control over women (Cranwell Schmidt et al., 2007). Therefore, clinical measure studies are aimed at uncovering any changes in the batterer's attitudes and belief systems that justify his abuse towards a woman. These studies are thought to provide insight into the mechanisms of change that will later translate in a reduction of future intimate partner violence (Bowen, Gilchrist, & Beech, 2008). Most use a pretest and posttest design, with the posttests being administered either immediately following the completion of treatment or shortly thereafter.

Numerous evaluations of treatment for men that abuse intimate partners have been conducted. Canadian studies include Augusta-Scott and Dankwort (2002) in Nova Scotia; Montminy, Roy, Lindsay and Turcotte (2003) in Quebec; Palmer, Brown and Barrera (1992); Barrera, Palmer, Brown, and Kalaher, (1994), Scott and Wolfe (2000) and Tutty, Bidgood, Rothery and Bidgood (2001) in Ontario and McGregor, Tutty, Babins-Wagner and Gill (2002) in Alberta.

In 1997(a), Gondolf counted a total of 30 published single-site program evaluations, many with methodological shortcomings such as quasi-experimental and exploratory research designs. Gondolf (1997b) concluded that these methodological limitations resulted in no clear evidence of the efficacy of treatment. He did, however, note that the "success rates" of batterer programs are comparable to others such as drunk-driving, drug and alcohol, and sex offender programs.

The quantitative studies that used clinical measures generally conclude that the programs effectively increase a batterer's personal control and responsibility for his actions (Bowen et al., 2008; Feder & Forde, 2000; Tutty, et al., 2001), reduce perceived stress by increasing coping skills (Buttall & Pike, 2003; Tutty et al., 2001), and decrease depression and anger (Hamberger & Hastings, 1988). Additionally, batterers attending treatment programs have increased their social support network (Tutty et al., 2001). Stewart et al. (2005) also found that treatment completers decreased jealousy and negative attitudes about relationships, had more positive attitudes towards achieving program goals, and increased their use of skills to prevent re-abuse.

Motivation and treatment readiness have also been addressed by studies using clinical outcome measures. The importance of being intrinsically motivated to change has been raised as an important concern regarding batterers who are court-mandated to treatment versus self-referred (Stuart, Temple & Moore, 2007). However, Cranwell Schmidt et al. (2007) found that court-mandated batterers are initially motivated to cease their abusive behaviour by short-term consequences, such as job loss or fear of arrest, but that upon completion of treatment they are more likely to be motivated by the effects of abuse on the family or a desire to improve their family relationship. Stewart et al. (2005) also found batterers' readiness to change increased from the beginning to the end of the treatment program. This research suggests that, in general, batterer intervention programs are meeting the goals of changing batterer's beliefs about women and domestic violence, and encouraging the development of vital skills for more effective conflict resolution.

It is assumed that these changes in batterers' attitudes will translate into a reduction in violence. However, research does not necessarily support this assumption. Tutty et al. (2001) did find a significant reduction in frequency and severity of abusive behaviour in their study that

also found significant attitudinal changes pre- to post-treatment. However, other researchers have cautioned that attitudinal changes are not necessarily associated with significant reductions in re-abuse and more research is needed to establish the connection between them (Cranwell Schmidt et al., 2007; Gondolf, 2000).

For this reason and issues with reliability and social desirability of batterer self reports, in their meta-analysis of court mandated treatment, Feder, Wilson, and Austin (2008) chose to exclude studies that only used attitudinal changes as an outcome measure. In response to such concerns, researchers such as Babins-Wagner, Tutty and Rothery (2005) have incorporated measures of social desirability that are used to adjust scores on the outcome measures. Such adjustments typically shift the scores into the clinical range.

Despite confounds such as those highlighted previously, pretest and posttest measures of outcomes do provide valuable information about the treatment process and batterers' progression through it. In conjunction with those on recidivism, these studies provide a more complete picture of abusers, the efficacy of batterer intervention programs and the treatment process.

### **Qualitative Studies on Batterer Intervention Programs**

Very few studies have investigated the impact of batterer treatment programs qualitatively (Hanson, 2002). However, the value of qualitative studies should not be discounted. In addition to providing more in-depth and detailed information about, "what batterers actually take [away] from programs" (Gondolf, 2000, p. 205), qualitative research gives a voice to both the batterers and their partners, and the opportunity to share their experiences. Two studies have examined the efficacy of batterer intervention programs through qualitative means.

Gondolf (2000) conducted interviews with both the perpetrators of domestic violence and their partners to examine the avoidance methods used by the batterers. His study provided evidence that batterers attending treatment programs developed and became more skilled at using avoidance methods to cease their abusive behaviour. Additionally, Gondolf found a greater association between particular avoidance methods, such as discussion, and a decrease in re-abuse, as reported by both the men and women. A perhaps surprising finding pointing to the overall success of the programs is that the men reported needing to use some method of avoidance less frequently in later post-treatment interviews in comparison to those conducted earlier on.

Scott and Wolfe (2000) conducted interviews with nine batterers who had successfully ceased their abusive behaviour after attending a domestic violence treatment program. The semi-structured interviews gave the men the opportunity to explain how the groups had assisted them in changing their abusive behaviours. At least three-quarters of the men identified the following as being important aspects of treatment: (1) taking responsibility for past behaviour, (2) gaining greater empathy for their partners and the effects of their behaviour on the family members, (3) recognizing that they are responsible for their choices and actions, (4) acknowledging their partner as autonomous individuals with a right to her own feelings and thoughts, (5) developing better communication skills that allowed them to resolve conflicts more effectively and without violence.

As one aspect of the evaluation of Calgary's specialized DV courts, Tutty et al. (2011) conducted interviews with 37 men mandated to either Calgary Counselling's Responsible

Choices for Men treatment or the YWCA Sheriff King program. Most of the men maintained a position that their partners also behaved violently but were not charged by the police and they remained concerned about a gender bias in the criminal justice system as a whole. Nevertheless, the bulk of the comments about how they were dealt with by the police, the courts and probation services are neutral or positive. Interestingly as well, while initially concerned about being forced to attend these treatment programs, the majority of the 37 respondents reported having learned useful information/skills and having made significant changes in their understanding of anger, stress and their behaviours.

### **Batterer Intervention Programs and Recidivism**

Whether offenders re-abuse their partners has been the focus of a large body of research on batterer intervention programs, finding that the programs generally have a small but significant effect on reducing recidivism (Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004). In their meta-analysis of 22 mostly quasi-experimental evaluations of domestic violence treatment, Babcock and colleagues found no differences between treatment models (Duluth compared to cognitive behavioural, etc.) but that treatment had a significant but small effect on recidivism in addition to the effect of being arrested.

The findings from these studies are overwhelming positive. Stewart, Gabora, Kropp and Lee (2005) concluded that domestic violence offenders who failed to complete mandated treatment recidivated at a rate 3.76 times more than those who attended treatment programs. Babcock and Steiner (1999) reported that only 8% of treatment completers reoffended in comparison to 23% of non-completers, a statistically significant difference. These recidivism rates are similar to those in Cairn's 2005 study of three Calgary, Alberta treatment programs (6% versus 23.7%) and of Coulter and VandeWeerd's 2006 study of multi-level batterer treatment programs (8% versus 21%).

Another key question about batterer treatment programs is whether court-mandated offenders benefit in comparison to those who self-refer. Edleson and Syer (1991) compared six treatment conditions finding, that, at 18 month follow-up, men involved with the courts had lower levels of violence than "voluntary" group members. Similarly, Rosenbaum, Gearan and Ondovic (2001) found that court-referred men who completed treatment had significantly lower recidivism rates than self-referred men.

Other researchers have reported overall higher rates of re-abuse but showed the same significant reduction in recidivism based on treatment completion. Bennett, Stoops, Call, and Fleet's (2007) study had a recidivism rate of 14.3% for batterers who completed the program, which compares favourably with the 34.6% recidivism rated for non-completers.

Other studies suggest that batterer intervention programs are associated with a greater reduction of re-abuse than incarceration for domestic violence offences. Using a quasi-experimental design, Babcock and Steiner (1999) and Ursel and Gorkoff (1996) found that batterers who attended treatment were significantly less likely to recidivate than those who were sentenced to jail. Babcock and Steiner (1999) found a remarkable 55% difference in recidivism between treatment completers (8%) and incarcerated batterers (63%).

Ursel and Gorkoff examined the recidivism rates of incarcerated individuals who received treatment in a minimum security jail with those in high security facility and no established treatment program. They confirmed that batterers who attended the established

treatment program were less likely to recidivate. Caution may be needed in interpreting these findings as batterers who were sentenced to jail time versus those who were mandated to treatment may differ on other characteristics, such as criminal history or the severity of the offence, which may make them more likely to recidivate. Similarly, batterers completing jail time in a high security facility may represent more high-risk offenders that are more likely to reoffend regardless of treatment. In another quasi-experimental study, Labriola, Rempel and Davis (2008) compared attendance in a batterer intervention program to rigorous monitoring by probation and found no significant difference in reoffending between the two groups.

While these studies appear to provide strong evidence for the effectiveness of batterer intervention programs in reducing recidivism, their findings must be interpreted with caution. All utilized quasi-experimental designs. Therefore, the possibility exists that other variables may explain the difference in recidivism rates between treatment completers and non-completers. While it is promising that researchers who did control for differences in individual variables still found a significant reduction in recidivism (Babcock & Steiner, 1999 & Bennett et al., 2007), the effect of differences between completers and non-completers cannot be ruled out (Bennett et al., 2007; Coulter & VandeWeerd, 2006; Feder & Dugan, 2004; Feder & Wilson, 2005).

In fact, researchers have suggested that there are significant differences between batterers who follow through with completing their mandated treatment and those who fail to attend or drop-out. In comparison to non-completers, batterers who complete treatment are less likely to have criminal histories (Babcock & Steiner, 1999; Ursel & Gorkoff, 1996), have greater incomes (Babcock & Steiner, 1999), higher education levels (Babcock & Steiner, 1999), are more likely to be employed (Bennett et al., 2007; Cairns, 2005), married (Bennett et al., 2007; Cairns, 2005), and be younger (Bennett et al., 2007). Additionally, Cairns (2005) found that completers show fewer signs of anti-social behaviour, mental health problems, or substance abuse.

Several researchers established support for the stake in conformity theory (Bennett et al., 2007; Feder & Dugan, 2004). Stake in conformity has been found to predict both likelihood of following through with treatment and re-offending. Feder and Dugan (2004) concluded that, "Men who are unlikely to be deterred by the consequences of missing their court-mandated SAAP sessions are also less likely to be deterred by the consequences of reoffending" (p. 8).

To avoid the affect of confounding variables, theoretically, the ideal method for evaluating the efficacy of batterer intervention programs is using a true experimental design that randomly assigns convicted batterers to treatment and control conditions. However, given the nature of domestic violence and the societal belief that some treatment is better than no treatment, for ethical reasons, the criminal justice systems may be reluctant to agree to an experimental design that assigns some batterers to a no-treatment condition. Consequently, only four studies were identified that randomly assigned batterers to receive treatment or to receive an alternative criminal justice intervention, most commonly probation. The results of these studies are mixed.

Two studies found that attending batterer intervention programs significantly reduced recidivism in comparison to only receiving probation (Davis et al., 2000; Palmer, Brown, & Barrera, 1992). It should be noted that in the Davis et al. study significant findings were based on official records of re-arrest. Victim reports of re-abuse showed the same general trend but the differences in recidivism rates were not significant.



In contrast to these studies, Feder and Forde (2000) found no significant difference in recidivism between groups of batterers randomly assigned to mandated treatment or probation only. Recidivism in this study was based both on self-reports from the batterer and the victim, and on official records of probation violations.

The fourth study using an experimental design, compared batterers who received treatment with those who were rigorously monitored by a case manager. Dunford (2000) again found no significant difference in recidivism. However, Dunford's experiment was conducted in a military setting and may lack generalizability to other populations in addition to also focusing on participants with a greater stake in conformity.

The randomized clinical trials in Broward County, Florida and Brooklyn, NY (Jackson, Feder, Forde, Davis, Maxwell & Taylor, 2003), raised serious questions about batterer intervention programs when neither found statistically significant differences between violations of probation or re-arrests in men randomly assigned to either treatment or a control condition. These conclusions, using the "gold-standard" of experimental research designs, created significant concerns about such treatment.

Gondolf (2002) responded with critiques of the implementation of the last two studies. In at least some instances, random assignment did not occur, the groups were characterized by high drop-out rates and it was difficult to access victims for follow-up reports, casting doubt on the interpretation of the findings. In his multi-site evaluation of four batterer treatment systems, with variation on whether referrals were pretrial or after trial, length (from 3 months to 9 months) and whether additional services were offered, Gondolf (1999) found no significant differences across programs in re-assaults, portion of men making threats and the quality of the victims' lives. A subgroup of about 20% of the referrals was identified as dangerous men who continued to assault their partners despite intervention. Such offenders need a different treatment approach, however are difficult to identify. Further, Gondolf recommends screening for severe substance abuse and psychological problems that are associated with dropping out (2002).

Rather than the cessation of violence, Gondolf (2002) refers to "de-escalation of assault", finding that, while nearly half of the men in the four treatment sites re-assaulted their partners at some time in the nine months following program intake, two and a half years later, more than 80 percent had not assaulted their partner in the past year (based on partner reports) and the severity of the assaults were reduced. This fits with the points raised by Jennings (1990) who has questioned whether the absolute cessation of violence during treatment was a fair standard, when in treatments for other problems such as alcoholism, clients are expected to relapse, but learn from these experiences to help them resist in future.

Gondolf's final recommendation is to provide programs as early as possible and to shift the focus from program length to program intensity (2002, p. 214). For example, as soon as possible after charges and during the crisis when motivation tends to be the highest, offenders could attend counselling three or four times per week for the first four to six weeks.

## **Program Factors**

Most comparisons of different models of batterer intervention programs conclude that no one model is better than others (Babcock et al., 2004; Bennett & Williams, 2001). Hanson and Wallace-Capretta (2000) compared four different treatment models and concluded that what is more important than program approach is that they are implemented soundly. In a study that

seems to support this contention, Ursel and Gorkoff (1996) found that batterers who received treatment from an established program had the highest reduction in recidivism as compared to individuals who received treatment from new and less experienced program facilitators.

Research on the effects of program length is inconclusive. Bennett and Williams (2001) found no difference based on length of program. Similarly, Gondolf (1999) found little evidence of the importance of program length, however there was a general trend in his study that the longer, more comprehensive program resulted in a greater reduction of severity and frequency of repeat abuse. Davis et al. (2000) found that only the longer 26-week batterer intervention programs significantly reduced recidivism, with no difference in reoffending between the batterers who attended an 8-week program or received only probation. A plausible explanation is that a certain number of weeks or sessions may be required for treatment to be beneficial but beyond that, no further gains are made.

Some researchers have suggested that batterers' individual characteristics have a considerable impact on what type of batterer intervention program will be most successful for them (Bennett & Williams, 2001; Lohr et al., 2006; Medros, 1999). Much research has identified characteristics of batterers that make them more likely to recidivate, including a prior criminal history (Cairns, 2005; Hanson & Wallace-Capretta, 2000; Shepard, 1992; Ursel & Gorkoff, 1996), the duration of abuse (Shepard, 1992), substance abuse (Fals-Stewart, 2003; Shepard, 1992), and witnessing or experiencing abuse as a child (Shepard, 1992).

High-risk offenders are typically thought to be some of the hardest to treat. Hendricks, Werner, Shipway, and Turinetti (2006) evaluated a program for high-risk domestic violence offenders. They found that batterer treatment is beneficial for even high-risk offenders, who recidivated significantly less after attending a combined psychoeducational and cognitive skills training program, 23.5% recidivism as opposed to 41.2% for program dropouts.

Therefore, the efficacy of batterer intervention programs may depend on the ability of the program to address the varied needs of batterers. Domestic violence researchers have speculated that additional interventions, in particular substance abuse treatment, may notably increase the effectiveness of batterer treatment programs (Cairns, 2005; Easton, Mandel, Babuscio, Rounsaville, & Carroll, 2007; Gondolf, 2002; Stuart, 2005; Stuart et al., 2007).

### **Areas for Future Research**

As the results of the research on the efficacy of batterer intervention programs are still somewhat mixed and no single model of domestic violence treatment is superior, the continued evaluation and 'safe' experimentation of different treatment approaches is necessary (Bennett & Williams, 2001).

The large number of offenders who start treatment but fail to complete it is reason for growing concern (McMurran & Theodosi, 2007). Research on batterer intervention programs suggests that those who fail to complete their treatment have significantly higher rates of recidivism. Therefore, additional research examining the predictors of program drop-out and what interventions may decrease the likelihood of batterers failing to comply with mandated treatment is warranted.

As suggested in the literature, individual batterer characteristics may not only play a significant role in program completion but also in the effectiveness of treatment. More research is needed to examine the effects of treatment duration on program efficacy and the effects of

individual characteristics on the batterer's response to different treatment approaches (Stuart et al., 2007).

Lastly, the majority of research on batterer intervention programs has quantitatively measured short-term program outcomes with follow-up periods of one to two years. However, Klein and Tobin (2008) found the average time to first re-arrest for batterers was over two years, and that just over 13% of offenders are re-arrested for the first time after three years of their initial assault and almost 7% are not re-arrested until at least five years later. Research has also shown that even the batterers who do not physically assault their partner again tend to continue their use of psychological abuse (Johansson & Tutty, 1998; Rosenfeld, 1992). Therefore, studies using more self-report data, qualitative measures and longer follow-up periods is needed to effectively measure the efficacy of batterer intervention programs and long-term patterns of re-abuse.

### **General Conclusions on the Efficacy of Batterer Intervention Programs**

Despite the mixed results on the efficacy of batterer intervention programs, generally domestic violence researchers agree that batterer intervention programs have at least a small effect at reducing re-abuse (Babcock et al., 2004; Feder & Wilson, 2006; Feder et al., Wilson, 2008; Lohr et al., 2008; Stuart et al., 2007). Bennett and Williams (2001) concluded that the effect of these programs should not necessarily solely be measured in terms of statistical significance but in regards to practical significance. Research using clinical measures and qualitative studies to examine changes in batterer's attitudes, beliefs and behaviours suggest that the efficacy of programs with batterers is practically significant.

Batterer interventions are perhaps best thought of "not themselves as a cure but a reinforcing component of a coordinated community response to domestic violence, wherein a program's success reflects on the effectiveness of the overall system in addressing domestic violence" (Gondolf, as cited in Hanson, 2002, p. 437). Batterer intervention programs need to be a part of a *coordinated* community response in which the criminal justice system, batterer intervention programs, victim services and advocates work together and inform each other, and where the evaluation of these domestic violence interventions is ongoing.

In summary, while there has been considerable scepticism expressed by victim's advocates about the effects of batterer intervention programs for court-mandated clients, the research supports their utility for a relatively large proportion of those charged with assaulting intimate partners. The proviso that some repeat offenders and others with co-occurring problems such as substance misuse and psychological problems are not amenable to the models currently in use suggests the need to conduct further research on identifying these subgroups and developing appropriate interventions.

### **Chapter Three: Partner Checks Connected to BIP Programs and Research Methods**

Establishing batterer intervention programs (BIPs) has been one attempt to further prevent violence against women (Smith & Randall, 2007), and BIPs have become the standard court response to the abuse of women (Day, Chung, O’Leary, & Carson, 2009; Gregory & Erez, 2002). Although BIPs in Canada and the United States are diverse in terms of their content and emphasis, there are also many commonalities.

In particular, many intervention programs for batterer’s require contact with their partners (Rosenbaum & Leisring, 2001), also known as “partner checks” or “partner contacts”. In fact, best practices and standards of practice in Canada and the United States often recommend additional contact with the partners of batterer’s as a way of checking up on victim safety and for program accountability (Austin & Dankwort, 1999; Dankwort & Austin, 1999).

Partner checks with abused women whose partners attend batterer programs are important for several reasons. First, partner checks are useful for program staff to keep abreast of whether men are making any progress with respect to their behaviour towards their partner (Rosenbaum & Leisring, 2001). Second, because batterers often minimize or deny their abusive behaviour, partner checks can increase program and batterer accountability by obtaining additional information from women (Gondolf, 1987; Gondolf & Wernik, 2009; Gregory & Erez, 2002; Healey, Smith, & O’Sullivan, 1998). Third, partner checks create opportunities to provide women with referral information and increase her awareness of relevant services (Gregory & Erez; Rosenbaum & Leisring; Travis, 1998). Fourth, contact can also be beneficial for women by providing them with support, giving them information about the batterer programs, warning them of any behaviour by her partner in the group that is cause for concern, and validating them as the experts in their own experiences of abuse (Gregory & Erez; Scott, 2004).

Although the importance of partner checks is apparent, Rosenbaum and Leisring (2001) state that in practice they are difficult to carry out, expensive, time consuming and potentially dangerous. Furthermore, Gregory and Erez (2002) indicated that even in research, locating and interviewing battered women is difficult, often because they are fearful to talk about their experiences, unwilling to “reopen mental wounds”, or are unable to be contacted (e.g., no forwarding address, disconnected telephones, or living in hiding). Therefore, not surprisingly, a dearth of empirical research exists that explores the efficacy and usefulness of partner checks.

One study by Austin and Dankwort (1999) qualitatively explored 25 women’s perceptions of the counsellors who carried out the partner check component of a batterer intervention program. They evaluated a narrative-based men’s treatment program in Calgary in which the counsellors were available to women in a partner support component. The counsellors provided consultation regarding the program itself, and answered any questions regarding how the perpetrator was doing in the program. If women were considering returning to their partners, the counsellors met personally with them.

These women commented positively about the counsellor’s support. More than half felt validated by program counsellors, appreciating that their “non-culpability for the partner’s abuse was affirmed by another person” (Austin & Dankwort, 1999, p. 35). They also appreciated hearing, “that being intimately involved with a violent partner did not signify deficiency on their part” (p. 36). The women felt affirmed when counsellors expressed to them that they knew best whether their partners were making progress in the program. Austin and Dankwort considered that it was critical for the women to hear that many men do not stop their violence, even after

completing the program. This enabled them to make informed decisions about their relationships. The findings of this study affirm the important role batterer intervention programs can play in women's lives, providing them with information, validating their experiences of abuse, and helping them to trust their own abilities in making decisions about their lives.

Even though the above study provides support for the importance and usefulness of the partner checks, no studies specifically evaluated partner check program efficacy. Rather, most of the research explored women's perceptions, assessment, or predictions of their risk for experiencing future violence when their partners are enrolled in a treatment program for intimate partner violence (Bell, Cattaneo, Goodman, Dutton, 2008; Cattaneo, Bell, Goodman, & Dutton, 2007; Cattaneo & Goodman, 2003; Harding & Helweg-Larsen, 2009; Heckert & Gondolf, 2004; Kropp, 2008; Weisz, Tolman, & Saunders, 2000).

Although these studies do not include samples of women who had taken part in the partner check component required by many batterer treatment programs, their findings point to the importance of including women's voices in the intervention process. For example, Harding and Helweg-Larsen found that when women experienced an abusive event in the past year that was conceptualized as indicating severe abuse; they perceived continuing their relationship as being risky in comparison to women who had not experienced severe abuse. The authors concluded that women's risk perceptions should be a crucial consideration when helping them to maximize their safety (Harding & Helweg-Larsen).

In terms of women's risk predictions, Cattaneo and Goodman (2003) found that regardless of whether they were in crisis, women were able to predict the likelihood of re-abuse. These findings suggest the value of women's ability to predict their risk for repeat violence for both victims and practitioners. Similarly, Weisz et al. (2000) investigated whether severe domestic violence could be best predicted by women's general ratings of risk, a statistical approach, or a combination of the two.

Overall, the results supported the usefulness of women's predictions of danger, thus emphasizing the importance of women's assessment of dangerousness. Women may be able to make more accurate predictions because they could consciously be including relevant risk factors that are not found in the empirical literature; they may have a better understanding of the meaning's of their partner's threats and violence; and they may be aware of the whole context in which the re-abuse may occur (Weisz et al.). These findings highlight, "The importance of incorporating ongoing contact with survivors into settings that need to respond to the risk of batterer's re-offenses" (p. 87).

In addition, Bell et al. (2008) investigated women's accuracy in predicting re-abuse and found that the majority of participants accurately assessed their risk. They concluded that women's risk assessments may be a useful source of information for both clinicians and other service providers for ensuring their well-being and safety (Bell et al.).

Furthermore, Kropp's (2008) review of the literature indicates that the importance of information obtained from victims has been empirically demonstrated. Women who have been abused can provide valuable information regarding their partner's past violence, personality, mental health and attitudes. The results of the above studies can therefore be extrapolated to the evaluation of partner checks because their findings reinforce the importance of obtaining information from women to ensure their safety and to provide additional information to practitioners including those working in BIPs.

Despite the research suggesting that most victims of batterer treatment program partners neither use nor perceive the need for other services, Arias, Dankwort, Douglas, Dutton and Stein (2002) suggest it is critical that victims are offered services. For example, they emphasize the need for staff of batterer treatment programs to provide feedback and information to victims:

“The nature of a program and information about its effectiveness, along with program evaluation and termination summaries, are important feedback and information elements. In addition, documenting violent behaviour is vital for use in court proceedings related to divorce, custody, and/ or visitation” (p. 163).

From their research, Arias et al. (2002) concluded that it is essential that staff of batterer intervention programs offer follow-up support, safety planning, and referrals to victims. They also suggest that, “the violence intervention field must grapple with the issue of how to address what appears to be a somewhat overly optimistic view about the effectiveness of batterer treatment” (p. 162).

With such well-considered advice, how then are partner check programs organized and administered and how well do they work according to those who conduct the checks and supervise the front-line workers? These questions form the foundation of the research conducted for this report and described in the next several chapters.

## **Chapter Four: Research on the Two Partner Check Programs**

The current study was conceived to examine how well the partner check process, which has been used in Calgary for several years, is working. Given the paucity of literature and research on this recommended process, the research will add important information as to the partner check process and any challenges or problems encountered.

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. Potential participants were contacted by email or telephone and invited to take part in the partner check evaluation. If they agreed to participate, a date and time was agreed upon for the telephone interview to take place. At the time of the interview, verbal informed consent was obtained and the participants took part in a 30 to 90 minute telephone interview regarding their impressions of how well the partner check process is working and how it might be improved. Examples of the interview questions (for the complete interview guide see Appendix A) include: “What is the current process of conducting partner checks in your agency?”; “Is this partner check procedure a change from a previous process?”; “In general, how do victims respond to your invitation to do partner checks?”; and “How well do you think your current partner check process is working?”

In total, we conducted fifteen interviews with administrators (6) and front-line staff (9) from three agencies conducting partner check in the city of Calgary: Calgary Counselling (6 interviews), YWCA Calgary Sheriff King Home (2 interviews) and HomeFront’s Partner Support Program (7 interviews). Twelve participants were female and three were male.

Both the Calgary Counselling Centre and the YWCA Sheriff King Home provide treatment programs for mandated and voluntary offenders of intimate partner violence. However, in the past year or so, the HomeFront Partner Support Program has been given the responsibility of conducting the partner checks for offenders mandated to attend the YWCA Sheriff King Paths of Change or Sobering Effect programs.

HomeFront is a Calgary non-profit organization that provides support to victims of domestic abuse violence after police charges have been laid against their partners. This victim support extends throughout any court processes. The Partner Support Program (PSP) provides victims of domestic violence whose partners or ex-partners are under community supervision (commonly known as probation) with community resources and support. The program goal is to support the victims by increasing their safety and encouraging them to consider their own best interests and that of their children. The workers will have already had contact with many of the victims whose partners and ex-partners are in the treatment groups, through the other HomeFront programs as well as the PSP program.

Overall, then, this research provides information on two diverse methods of conducting partner checks, one where the primary contact is from the agency providing offender treatment, the other where the primary contact is from a victim support centre.

This chapter presents both programs sequentially, noting the major themes that emerged from the agency interviews, identifying the process of conducting the partner check, the staff and administrator’s understanding of the rationale for conducting the checks, how victims<sup>1</sup> respond,

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<sup>1</sup> For expediency’s sake, the accused/offender will be described as male and the victims as female, although both treatment agencies offer groups for women accused who are mandated to treatment groups.

the processes when a victim reports new or continuing abuse, challenges and successes and safety for victims.

### **The Calgary Counselling Centre Partner Check Process**

The Calgary Counselling Centre receives offender files from probation officers shortly after the disposition from Calgary's specialized domestic violence courts, with the names of clients mandated to attend batterer intervention groups. The primary therapist for the case typically starts with individual therapy sessions with the offender to assess the clients' readiness to attend group, based on Prochaska and DiClementi's model of readiness for change. As such, the offender might remain in individual treatment for several to a number of weeks.

It is the responsibility of the primary therapist (some of whom may also lead the treatment groups) to conduct the partner checks. From the agency manual: "Partner checks will be completed three times during the treatment period. Once during the initial assessment period (before referring to a group program), second while the client is in the family violence group and third at the end of treatment."

*The protocol has an expectation that you would complete three partner checks during the offender's treatment. The protocol includes questions that you would ask and information about safety planning.*

*We have groups called Responsible Choices for Men or for Women. The partner checks, we should do three of them, one before they start the program, one in the middle and one at the end of the program. Three when they are in group. If a client has been coming initially for individual sessions we do one or two and then just before they get into group we do three more and then one more. But if they are doing well some of us just do one or two. Previously we were obliged to make about five calls. Now it has come down to three because of the difficulty trying to connect with the partners.*

*We would do it any time there was a change in the client's presentation that would indicate increased risk to the partner and we're concerned about their safety. Then we do it approximately half way through and at the end of treatment. [I: So 3 times?] At minimum. It may be more than that depending on where the client is at in terms of taking responsibility and the assessment of risk to the partner.*

#### *Consent from Clients (Accused)*

An important question for agencies considering implementing partner checks is how staff members obtain consent from the accused to contact their partners.

*There is a consent on the referral form from probation that the client is to have reviewed with the probation officer. When they sign the forms at probation they actually are giving consent. However, we have an additional form to gather the information so that the person is aware that accountability includes their partner.*

*We let the client know that this is part of their treatment program and they need to provide us with the name and contact information of the partner and sign a consent saying that they are aware we will be contacting the partner.*

The respondents were also asked how they would deal with a client (offender) who refused to sign the consent form:



*It is how you seek consent. If you can engage the offender in seeing that it is to their benefit to have other people witness their change process, they will buy in. If they are convinced that the partner will malign them during the partner check you have to deal with that. So does it always work? It is a part of the responsibility-taking for the client. It depends on how skilled you are in working with the client in terms of them seeing it as being an important part of the process of change.*

*As far as I know, they are shipped back to their probation officer. I have never had anyone do that. If they are mandated to counselling they have basically consented to do this. I've had clients say, "I'm not with that person anymore and I don't have the contact information." In that case, I get the current partner. They are usually with somebody and we do the partner check with them.*

*As it is a condition of his probation there are consequences. The probation order says that he would agree to certain requests so knowing that information we talk about this is part of our program, we cannot proceed. You will need to discuss further options with your probation officer.*

*He won't receive treatment. But I don't think it has happened since we put this policy in place years ago.*

### *Contacting the Partners*

When counsellors contact the partners, a possible complication is if the person is not at home, raising the question of whether or not to leave a phone message.

*We do not leave messages in situations when we do not have permission from the person themselves. With partner checks, we record attempts to reach that person. About 10 to 15 percent of people we cannot reach for whatever reason. We note that on the file. We would not leave a message.*

*I call at different times of the day to try to connect with the partner so as to not to leave messages. I'm a little uncomfortable with that unless I know that the man goes out of town for work, and then I may take a chance. We are told to be very careful about leaving messages.*

The interviewees were asked how often they were able to connect with the partners. The agency has provided recent information about their partner check process for mandated clients: In 2010, 148 partner checks for mandated clients were attempted, with 91 completed (a 61.5% completion rate). For the non-mandated partner checks, 28 were attempted, with 16 completed (a 57.1% completion rate).

*On a scale of 0 to 10, I would be able to contact at least about six or so. No, even less than that, about 5. Many times they don't phone us back and only 1 instance out of 10 we'd be told that the person is out of town, something along those lines. (CCFL1)*

[I: With what proportion of victims do you usually connect?] *That is complicated because sometimes they are no longer with the partner and are with somebody new. I would say probably 70%. [I: So you do partner checks with whatever partner they have at the time?] Yes, because there is no contact information for the previous partner.*

*I'd say 50 to 60% give me permission to contact them. However, out of that another 50% I cannot contact a second or third time. I'm guessing that they are unavailable or*

*they've moved or the phone numbers have changed or they just don't want to take the call. Our phone number is unidentified so the second and third calls are more difficult.*

*If I am able to reach a partner I have never had them refuse to talk with me. I know it happens in some cases but I've never had that.*

*Personally it is probably about 50%, but the agency it's about 30%. It depends if you've got an offender whose partner speaks English or if there is a no contact order in place.*

Specifics around how the question is asked include:

*We tell them this is part of the process of ensuring safety for the partners and for themselves. It is compulsory for both mandated and non-mandated clients. We do a lot of safety planning with the victim. (I: Does the process adequately address the women's safety?) Yes. That is number one.*

*We usually contact their partner in about a week's time. We assess their safety and their risk. There are two forms that we fill out. One we do multiple times with them and then the other is a risk assessment, for instance, do you have children with him?.*

*The protocol doesn't say, "Tell me what new abusive behaviours he has engaged in." We generally say, "How safe are you feeling zero to five, five being unsafe?" Then regardless of the behaviour we would take steps around safety and what does she need to do. So it's not it's a new behaviour it is how is she feeling in terms of safety.*

*How do the Partners (Victims) Respond to the Partner Checks?*

A central question with respect to the partner check process is how the partners (victims) respond to the requests to engage with and provide information to the staff caller.

*The ones who speak to me are pretty frank about sharing how it happened and what is happening now. They are pretty frank. Some of the ethnic cultures are supportive and they tend to stand behind their spouses trying to paint a better picture now.*

*My experience with partner checks has been very good. I am checking on the client's resources, giving them information and they seem very open to that. If I contact them the first time and they want to participate then they are open to me calling again. I had only one experience where somebody says yes but subsequently won't answer the phone.*

*Some are quite happy to do them, to be involved in the process that their partner is involved in. Some of them don't want to talk about it at all. I think that they are afraid. Especially if they are new to the country there is some suspiciousness. If they are on their way to being separated they really want nothing to do with it. The police [involvement] does change a little bit. We have some discretion if they are with a different partner. We get permission to talk to the new partner, but a new one often will say everything is fine. So a very big range. Often they are not with their partners anymore or do not want to talk at all. Once they know what it is they don't want to be bothered with it unless they feel comfortable telling on their partner. Or they are trying to put the relationship back together; then they tell me that everything is okay.*

*It depends. Some wonder, "What do you mean, partner check?" They may be concerned about this information going back to the person being counselled. We do our best to put*

*them at ease in terms of what happens to the information and what we are going to ask. If you get past that, they will answer your questions but most are initially cautious.*

*Some will talk to us but the hard part is getting somebody to call us back.*

*It depends. If they are really busy you are rushed off the phone. If they are feeling unsafe they usually want to talk. If they are intoxicated, they may not be happy to talk and you get blaming words. So it depends on the circumstance and the partner and also how done with the relationship she is. You might get, "I want nothing to do with him, I'm not in contact with him, do not call me." That doesn't happen very often. If she does talk with you, you either get a perfect report, this is a good idea and everything is going well or she wants to tell you the real deal. You get a diverse response.*

The interviewees were also asked how the partners responded to subsequent phonecalls. The responses suggest that, for the most part, once the partner has consented to the check, they are comfortable with further phonecalls.

*They seem okay. I tell them I just want to check how safe you are and how you are getting along. People respond to care so I make it sound as though I'm caring for them, which I do.*

*With the exception of one person who hasn't returned my phone calls at all, overall good. Very happy to talk about their partner because they have seen some positive changes. That's been my experience.*

*If they are okay with the questions, they are happy to take five minutes to go through the questionnaire and talk. Sometimes you don't reach them the second or third time.*

*It's amazing. Second call they know who I am; what is expected because I'm pretty consistent in the way I conduct it. So the second call, we go through the process and there hasn't been a problem. Sometimes in the second call they comment that they are looking at the situation differently since our first conversation. I've had that happen a number of times. That call has actually helped them make up their minds about the relationship or they will see the relationship in a slightly different light.*

#### *Protocol when New Abuse is Disclosed*

A key consideration is what protocol the primary therapist should follow if a partner discloses that their partner or ex-partner has re-abused them.

*We contact the probation officer and let them know. We don't want to betray the trust of the victim by saying [to the accused], "Sally said this" and then Sally gets in big trouble when Joe gets home. I've never had that happen.*

*If we think the victim is in danger or has been a victim of more abusive behaviour we would have to call the PO and let them know. If we got this from the victim we would walk through a safety plan with her as far as her next plan of action. If we think we need to warn them then we do. Safety has to come first.*

*When the primary therapists do partner checks I don't think it is communicated to the group facilitators. There was a time when it was being done but not anymore. But we*

*still do it because we want to make sure that things that were processed in the group are not being taken home and taken up against their partners. Some counsellors do that but not all.*

An important question regarding partner checks is what happens regarding the offender when new abuse is disclosed? At the Calgary Counselling Centre, the key informants described the following procedures.

*We bring it up with the client (accused). We are very tactful because we don't want him to go back and abuse the partner. We try in a discreet way to ask more about what is happening so we don't let the perpetrator know that the victim has revealed this information. We certainly do a lot of safety planning with the victim.*

*I do some digging. Honestly, I am a little suspicious of both stories so, with the client [accused], I might ask questions more specific to behaviours. We have some surveys that I can use but I am very careful to make sure that the client is not concluding that I have gotten information from the victim. You are making a bit of a judgement call as far as the legitimacy of anything that is happening. For the most part, by the time we get them they have restraining orders so they aren't in contact anymore with their victim.*

*We don't disclose that we've had a report in most cases. We check generally every session around safety, if there have been times when it got tricky for them during the week, how did they manage that? Generally speaking, people self-report and then you can talk about the safety, what they would do, what their triggers were and you work that into the ongoing change process. In group, we also check-in with safety. We'd watch for a self-report first and then we would deal with safety on that. If it isn't, we touch on safety because sooner or later if you've got a good relationship with your client and they want to change and they've gone back to old behaviours... Something we set up at the beginning that old behaviours are hard to break and you may fall back into old ways. We want to help you develop new patterns of interaction; signs that you can stop yourself sooner, change your thinking, your behaviours. But we protect the victim's report.*

### **Challenges with CCC Partner Checks**

When asked about problems with the partner check process at the Calgary Counselling Centre, the interviewees mentioned several issues: difficulty connecting or reconnecting with the partners; new technology such as caller display; and the fact that the partners may be receiving calls from several different agencies.

#### *Contacting the women: phone-backs*

*There were people who were not calling back. We've been leaving messages and messages. We have a coding system where 4 means we were not able to be in touch with them: a lot of 4's so we were told to make a few calls but we record it on the contact sheet and after 3 or 4 4's we send one form. We were trying to streamline the process a bit. The current system is good. On a few occasions it's difficult to contact the spouse if the person leaves. The other one is when they go into hiding and we don't know the number. The probation officer is not able to help me with the new telephone number which is, of course, confidential.*

*The problem is the engagement of the victims. The victim's interest or willingness to participate and, when she does, are we really getting the story. I don't have any advice on this issue. The other piece is that the recidivism rate in Calgary is so low that compared to other jurisdictions we are not having a whole lot of re-offenses.*

*Phone numbers is the biggest thing. Sometimes they give phone numbers that you can't access. Making contact is the hard part. Maybe the partner doesn't want to be contacted. The partner has a right to not be contacted if they don't want to be.*

*I have experienced no problem other than that the offender may say, "I don't have her information, and I'm not seeing her anymore." The actual victim may not be able to be contacted. I would be happy to have that information. Even if they don't want to participate in the full process, just check-in one-time going, "Are you okay, here are some resources. Are you in contact with this person because they say that they are not in contact with you?"*

New technology was identified as an issue affecting contact, according to several staff members.

*People not taking calls for blocked numbers. You have to expose it, you don't know who is in the house, whether safety is going to be compromised, whether somebody is going to monitor the call because you have to show who it is. So what is the impact of that on the information you're getting. Those are some contemporary challenges we face.*

*The whole telephone; you can't leave a message on their machine, the machine is full. To get a telephone number; they might give you one but it is not correct. It's mostly with how we go about it which is via telephone. People have 2 or 3 numbers these days so it takes effort to phone all of those numbers. Blocked calls; if you are not comfortable leaving your name, many people won't take your call unless they know who you are. They might have some technological barriers at that point.*

Another potential problem is that the partner is confused about who is calling, as documented in other research with respect to women receiving phone-calls from multiple agencies in the city of Calgary (Babins-Wagner, Tutty, Dirks-Farley, Weaver-Dunlop, & Rothery, in preparation)

*Where the partner is confused about who is calling; can't sort out who was calling from where.*

*Multiple people making multiple calls to the same women. Research has shown that the victims see it as his problem not their problem and they are really not interested in engaging in any support. That is an issue for the field to grapple with.*

Several interviewees mentioned times when the checks do not work.

*If they (accused) are absolutely convinced that the partner will malign them during the partner check you have to deal with that concern. So does it always work? It is like anything. It is a part of the responsibility-taking for the client. So it depends a lot on how skilled you are in working with the client so that they see it as a valuable part of the process of change.*

*It varies. They can be very effective. At other times, not at all because there is some constraint firstly for them being conducted, secondly the person may not be in a position of where they are going to engage in that process. There are a few that aren't.*

## What is Working Well with the CCC Partner Checks?

The front-line counsellors and administrators that were contacted from the Calgary Counselling Centre were asked a general question about whether they consider that the agency Partner check process is working well. Most commented that, aside from the previously-mentioned complications, they see the process as generally effective in their agency.

*I've had a few where the stories were so different. I had bought into the client's story. They were really good at it, so doing the partner check helped me get a more balanced picture and head in a better direction in session. Those are moments when things have worked well. I have been able to offer counselling to victims and some have taken that offer. We are accessing the victim and the victim has choices and rights and we are doing our best to make sure they are safe. We refer them to different resources so the contact is a good thing.*

*It seems to be working fine. I haven't had an experience of it going wrong. "This is part of the requirement of the program; you need to do this" and that seems to fit.*

*I'm not too clear on how well it is working. I know some people are doing it, some are not. But it has gone up in the number of partner checks that we do. The process? I think the one we have here is quite good.*

*Just the interpersonal connection between me and the person I'm talking to and the partners that decide they want to come for counselling. I think the value is in the feedback when it is working, and also the feedback when therapy is not working or the partner is feeling this is not helpful.*

An advantage of having the Calgary Counselling Centre staff conduct the partner checks is that if the victim is in need of support or counselling, the agency can offer either individual or group treatment to them and do so in a timely manner.

*When we start calling the partners a few sessions into the individual counselling and we feel that the partner has needs, we often call them in for counselling sessions separately. I open up files separately and work with victims of domestic abuse and some have continued for a few sessions. Some haven't turned up for various reasons; lack of finance or they are fearful of coming, they may not have the time, they are juggling many things. When they do come, we have groups for victims of domestic abuse both male and female so we try to encourage them to take part in these groups which, in turn, will hopefully address their needs.*

*I work a lot with ethnic clients and am now asking them to bring in their partners at the same time. When meeting with clients, I can assign my students to take care of their spouses to work in tandem. I am becoming more and more involved with the partners.*

Several staff members provided examples of its utility, mostly with respect to women partners who were contacted and subsequently came into the agency for counselling.

[I: Have some partner checks worked especially well?] *Many. Lately I've been having a couple come in. This young lady was calling the cops whenever they had an argument. Getting flack from Child Welfare too; they had their kids taken away and now realize that they need to work on their relationship and not just when there was violence. They are coming in for a couple of sessions. I have him into a group for mandated clients. So*

*they've are involved in two or three programs. It is important for them because if they don't work on themselves they won't get the kids back, who are in foster care right now. So from that perspective, the partner checks have worked out.*

*An ethnic client tells me things are fine but his wife came on the weekend and expressed the anger of their son and friends who stated, "Why did you call the police. Women in our community endure this. We know this exists among the men in our community and nobody need have known about it." But this woman said, "I don't think the way you think and if he abuses me again, I'll not hesitate to call the cops." This is the position she took, whereas he told me things are fine with his wife. So partner checks are very important and getting the partner to come in for counselling affirms the positive things that she does to protect herself.*

*I had a client I was quite concerned about. He was quite abusive and she minimized everything. I did the partner check and it was pretty extensive stuff. I made sure to have the partner checks more frequently as a result. She was quite impressed with how the group was affecting his behaviour. There were nice behaviour changes and she has some awesome things to say about him now despite the fact that the abuse was quite extensive prior. She was very open and up front with me.*

*A client came in charged with assault one-time and, "This is one-time," he'd never done this before." Very minimizing. When I did contact the partner, she was very explicit and almost relieved to be able to say what was going on. This is somebody who was not born in Canada. They had been married elsewhere so it was good for her to be able to discuss that with somebody. The clarification on her confidentiality was really important; that this would not be going directly back to him. Then he got into the treatment program and I received a call two weeks ago and she was so impressed with the group. She had nothing but amazing things to say about how he had made these awesome changes and how their life was going really well. That has been consistent throughout because I was very concerned about her so I did more checks than typical. It was like, "This is what is going on, I'm really not happy with this and it's been long-term" and then the next one, "Things are kind of okay" and then, "Things are going much better," and then this last one where she is, "Wow, I'm so impressed."*

*A couple had been co-habiting for about three years. It was complex; there were addictions on both sides and violence had occurred over a period of time. The male was charged with assault and referred to our agency. An initial partner check was made. The partner came in for counselling and both parties completed counselling. Both made really good progress. The woman became pregnant, so the motivation to ensure that their unborn child's future would be violence-free became very high. They worked hard and made many changes. They addressed the addictions problem. Being pregnant was an incredible motivator for the female and she was successful as was the male. That was a few years ago. They have maintained contact with the agency. They now have two children. Their home is still violence-free and their lives have turned around and they are both sober. This is a very moving story because of the child. They sent out a birth announcement to us and said this child can face a violence-free future because of the work that we've done, thank you. So that couple's life and the future of their children changed because of partner checks. Had we not been able to do the partner check and engage her, who knows what the outcome would have been?*

*I was working with new Canadians. There was a charge laid and a peace bond put in place. I engaged the partner via telephone. They ended up coming in and meeting together as a family to talk about their transition and developing a plan for dealing with some of the other environmental stressors that had contributed the person responding as they had in the incident that brought them to the attention of the police. Some influences on the family dynamics were addressed so that there was a greater chance of decreasing the pressure on the family. With that and the responsibility and the awareness of the individuals within the family, the whole family engaged.*

*The offender had addiction issues and had been asked to leave. He did. I got hold of the partner. She was very worried about him. He was not disclosing the degree of drinking. I talked with probation who decided that this guy needs to go to rehab. Once that was in front of the offender he started taking things seriously. Further conversations with the partner — once he got motivated, he went through the program; he did very well. They got back together. The partner called me a couple of times when she was worried. The engagement worked. It was me, it was probation, it was the partner, and the offender working collaboratively. There was a good outcome. She was very open to the idea of this guy in treatment. She was thrilled to death that somebody was helping him. She had been at her wits end. It was a very good outcome.*

### **Sheriff King Process and the Rationale for Shifting Partner Checks to HomeFront**

For a number of years, part-time staff from the YWCA of Calgary Sherriff King group program conducted the partner checks using much the same procedure as the Calgary Counselling Centre. For the past several years, however, the agency shifted to having the Partner Support Program staff of HomeFront conduct the partner checks.

*Since 1998, 1999, we would contract on a part-time basis to do partner contacts. They had training in safety planning and high risk, community resources. We would review the partner checks with them. We usually asked them to try during the evenings when men were in the groups ... that was the original design. One period, we had one person working three nights a week doing that. We ended up with one doing it one night a week and another, two nights a week with some daytime. When both left around 2007, we talked with the Partner Support Program at HomeFront and they agreed to take on this responsibility. It was just too difficult to maintain. We were having a lot of trouble with it and wanted someone who would do it on a continuous basis.*

*We hired part-time staff to do partner checks, so it would not be connected to those of us working directly with the clients. The numbers were not wonderful. There were some advantages in having someone doing the partner check right on the spot but it was a less streamlined process. It was not really worth it. There were so few contacts. Partner Support can do so much more with clients they are already connected to. It just makes more sense. They are timely, we have a good relationship, and they respond very quickly if we are concerned about someone and vice versa.*

The two administrators from HomeFront concurred about the reasons for the shift:

*We took the Partner Check for Sheriff King. They weren't getting ahold of these people. Sometimes they wouldn't have the exact contact information or were not aware of the changes of the offender or the partner. Because we already have that contact they felt it*



would make sense to move under us. In our program we try to make the partner checks conducive to our current programs because the partners complained that too many different people were calling them for different purposes, a call from probation, then a partner check from Sheriff King. So we amalgamated everything. One call and we can cover everything and they seem to like that better.

Having an external agency do partner checks for the mandated clients differs from how Sheriff King typically did partner checks. Some smaller communities like Airdrie have started contracting them out, usually to the victim assistance units. But for the most part, the treatment agency does the partner checks in-house so that is very different from what would normally happen. The big reason was the recognition that the Partner Support Program has the co-ordinated justice process and the HomeFront staff were already contacting these clients within 24 to 72 hours of the arrest. We followed them to the conclusion of their sentence and then the Partner Support Program kicked in. It was an internal referral and our retention rate was quite high. We recognized that we were probably going to be more successful at maintaining contact with these clients from a partner check perspective than a community agency relying on the information the offender gave to them. We were duplicating service in that partner check program and then the Partner Support Program were contacting these victims for essentially the same purpose. It didn't make sense and we thought we could streamline things.

The interview respondents were also asked to comment on how well the shift from Sheriff King to the HomeFront Partner Check process has worked

*It is a great shift. It is an efficient use of resources; it is more respectful for victims. In terms of accessing these clients, HomeFront is essentially doing partner check work and has full-time staff doing that work so it is more efficient and provides more consistently overall.. I can employ a full-time person because I have enough work volume of work across all the program activities where a shelter or an individual agency may not be able to justify that kind of a position. I also think that the unique positioning of HomeFront and its access to police and Probation services allow a far greater safety response than an external agency may be able to provide.*

### **Partner Support Program Process**

*Partner Support conducts the partner checks on behalf of the treatment programs at Sheriff King. The treatment program sends over the list of client names with partners. We cross-reference that against our client database and we then contact those clients as part of our regular service process.*

*We do them for the Sheriff King. We get a spread sheet the second Tuesday of every month with a list of offenders in treatment currently. I'm the one to go through, select out the ones that are still in treatment and then divide them into clients we currently have. If I have a client that I talk with regularly, on my regular calls say, "Are you willing to do this partner check?" They don't have to participate, it's voluntary. It's a series of questions that we ask them in regards to their safety, and past relationships. We forward that back to Sheriff King and the counsellors can look at it.*

### *Consent from the Offenders*

The interviewees were asked about the process of obtaining consent from the offenders to contact the victims and what would occur if the accused refused. In contrast to Calgary Counselling, the Partner Support Program staff members do not obtain the consent from the accused; this process is conducted by the staff at the Sheriff King who organize and lead the offender groups. The contact information is forwarded to the Partner Support Program staff who then contacts the victim for her consent. Similar to the Calgary Counselling Centre process, Probation Services has also notified the accused of this process and obtained their consent.

*Sheriff King deals with the offenders who take the treatment program so the person had to consent to it. The partner can choose to participate or not participate. [I: If the offender doesn't give consent?] If they are mandated and don't give consent, they are often breached; so most participate.*

*[I: What if the offender refused consent?] We wouldn't accept him into the program. He is court mandated. He could refuse and we will discharge him from the program. Safety and the contact are that important. This is a very high risk situation, the risk of the partner being injured or hurt, and if we accept him into treatment without permission to talk to her it is risky. So it isn't a choice about whether he is going to be in our program or not. The choice is that we won't accept him. I don't see any other way around that in terms of best practices. I believe it is an agreement on the provincial standards for counselling, especially violence offenders.*

*One of the standards for participating in a domestic violence program is that they must provide that information. Otherwise they risk being expelled from the program.*

*[I: What if the offender refuses partner contact?] The YWCA probably wouldn't refer it to us in the first place. If people say, "You can't contact my partner," what are you hiding? Why can't your partner be contacted? So, is it only the men or women that allowing their partners to be contacted, and the ones that aren't following through are saying, "No?" So is that skewing the data? That would be my only concern.*

*They're not our clients. That would be Sheriff King. My understanding is that if they're mandated they have to consent and provide that information at the onset. [I: What if the offender refused consent?] I don't know how often they see that. There could be ways around that; they could provide inaccurate information, or just say they don't have information if they're not living together.*

### *Contacting the Partners*

The staff from the HomeFront Partner Support program were also asked about the processes and challenges of connecting and engaging with the partners. They first described the timing of their partner checks.

*The request is to make the initial call within the month that we get the new referral. They ask us to do a full intake the first time we call and follow-up for as long as the person is in group. So if the person is in group for 14 weeks we try to get multiple contacts with the victim. The partner we will do monthly. We contract with the victim about when the best time is and how often to call. Once you set the plan at the beginning it is much easier to contact someone. If someone wants bi-weekly contact then we give it; or monthly. So it is really case-by-case.*

*We do it during our regular Partner Support Program office hours; Monday through Thursday from 8:00 to about 8:00 at night. That will flex depending on what the staff is in. Since we are not a treatment agency we do not know when they are doing their group programs so we just make the call. [I: How many victim contacts are expected over the group?] About three to five. We are close to three to four contacts per victim.*

*We get the spread sheet the second Tuesday of every month, which has everyone listed in treatment and their start and discharge date. Everyone who has a start and not a discharge date, we divvy up accordingly to who has their clients. It's a fourteen week program, and we usually do them once a month. If there are still people in treatment, we do a follow up; we call them for two minutes and see if they're safe and any follow up they might want. [I: How many times?] It depends how often we get ahold of them. If we have monthly contact, we might only do it once or twice. We don't do it every week, but you probably get three during the time they're in treatment.*

*[I: How many victim contacts are expected over the group?] Three attempts but usually we do one completion of the survey and a follow-up the next month.*

*We're asked to check in with them monthly. Initially there's more extensive information for the partner check and then it's just a follow-up form, which usually is done monthly. I don't know what the expectation is with the treatment. We continue contact until that referral is no longer there, meaning that the offender has completed or is no longer involved in treatment at Sheriff King. [I: How many times are you able to contact victims?] Maybe three or four times over the course of fourteen weeks.*

The interviewees were asked what proportion of the time they are able to connect with the partners.

*Time of year plays a factor so like summer, because people are away. If it is Christmas, the tendency is, "Everything's fine, we are a happy family, we don't want to participate." So you see fluctuations if there are holidays. But, for the most part, if we already have an established relationship with them it is extremely high.*

*I would say it is in the neighbourhood of 50 to 60 percent; might be higher than that.*

*This month, I have eight, and I'm in contact with all eight. It might take one or two tries, leaving voice mails and getting them to call back, but, it's usually pretty good. We try them three times, and leave three voicemails, and if after the third attempt we don't hear from them, we don't try anymore.*

*I've only been with Home Front for two months. I've gotten ahold of most of mine. There's been one or two I haven't. [I: With what proportion do you usually connect?] Some of them had forgotten [about the partner check] and they're like, "I did what?" (Laughs). "Oh you said this, 'cause we explained it to them, and "Are you still okay"- "Oh, yeah sure okay, I don't remember that, but sure."*

*I haven't completed many partner checks because the number is disconnected, they are not interested or it is not applicable. Probably half the time.*

*It varies from month to month. I initially had maybe ten people. If I were to reach five of them that month, that would be a good rate. It can be hit and miss. Again, I think the advantage is that, with these clients if we've already had contact we know when and how to reach them. I'm assuming that it's probably improved compared to how the partner checks were previously done. I would think half. It just varies, so this month I had only two clients and was able to reach both.*

*Probably 35 to 40%.*

#### *How do the Victims respond to the HomeFront Partner Checks?*

Specifics around how the question is asked included questions about how the partners respond to the first and to subsequent phonecalls. Several staff members described the initial phone conversation.

*We introduce ourselves. We introduce the partner check in conjunction with our current program, Partner Support. We tell them the purpose: that we are calling on behalf of Sheriff King, what their information will be used for, that if they don't want to participate they are able to withdraw. If there are any comments they don't want forwarded to the partners through the partner checks for Sheriff King we will do that. But we do let them know that there is certain information that we'd have to bring forward if there is a safety concern or breaking of any court order.*

*We did the consent verbally through the Partner Support Program and then we contact and get a verbal consent from the client (victim) and provide them as part of the Partner Support Service a written copy of that consent that they agreed to. We review that periodically throughout their time with us.*

*We have our own confidentiality when a client enters our Partner Support Program. We ask them again if they'd like to do the partner check; that it is voluntary, and the confidentiality. I've had many clients that, when I initially call for Partner Support, they'll be very non-engaging, and kind of say yes, no. Then, when start the partner check and ask them these questions, they reveal a lot and become very engaged. It opens up conversation and builds more of a relationship. Most people oblige. The ones that don't have had a lot of trauma from the incident and don't want to keep reliving it.*

*We get the referral from YWCA. They have the accused, saying to contact the complainant. When we're calling our complainant, we explain the partner check program, what it is and we ask them if they want to consent to participate.*

*We have a confidentiality sheet that we read out. But they are already in contact with us through HomeFront. We introduce it at the beginning and let them know the confidentiality around that.*

*How do we obtain consent? We have a standardized consent form and a chart that we go through with each participant for HomeFront and we would review that if this is a new client for the partner checks. We leave it up to them if they want the form sent via email or mailed. So they can mail it or fax it to us. We try to obtain both verbal and written consent for participation in any of our initiatives.*

The interviewees were also asked about the partner's typical reactions to subsequent phonecalls.

*Once they agree, we contract for the next call. "Can I call you again in two weeks on a Friday" and they'd say, "Every three weeks would be fine." So they would be expecting our call. Once they agree, it is usually fairly smooth. Because we have full-time staff we can deliver on that agreement. Sheriff King couldn't commit to say I'm available at this time because it was a part-time position.*

*Good. Fairly well and very straight forward. Initially, there's a lot more work involved, a lot more questioning but the follow-up is very straight forward.*

*Fine, once they've already agreed and you're calling for them for monthlies. The lady that I replaced had done the initials, and I was calling them, and when I made contact, they're fine.*

*They are actually good. They'll say, "Nothing new this time..." The hardest call is the first call because you are doing for intake. Subsequent calls are much easier.*

*Those that you have a relationship with, if they've agreed, it goes well and then you can follow up and you can say well how is this person doing now, what's different.*

*There are four different groups: a group of victims who say things are still going great and so glad about the program. They are a pretty small group, about 10 or 15 percent. There is a group of folks who say, "Things are okay; why do you keep bothering me, leave me alone." There is a group that says, "He is so much worse, what have you done? I wish I'd never had him go." There is a group is in crisis, needing referral or support. That would probably be a fairly small group.*

The respondents were also asked about the protocol when a victim disclosed that new abuse had occurred.

*When we call the very first time, we say that if they tell us anything that is a safety issue or breaking of an order we must report. So if there is current abuse, physical aspects, we will stop the conversation and inform that we will have to inform probation. We also would have to inform the facilitator so that they are aware and we can address the issues in group. We have to let both the group facilitator and probation know.*

*We engage with the victim around what it is they want to do with the disclosure. Typically if they are disclosing they want some action taken and then the ideal situation for us, particularly if there is not an imminent risk is that they would engage either probation or police services and provide them a statement in order for those forces to lay a new charge or bring some law enforcement activities into place. If there is an immediate crisis, if the victim is saying, "I need some help," we would get them to phone 911 immediately or we would call on their behalf. If we believe that someone is at risk, particularly children; we may be forced to make that call. Typically our process is to say to the client, "You've told us this; we need you to phone and follow-up; you are choosing not to but we have to as part of our professional obligation. So it is variable but typically we engage with the client and follow through with whatever needs to happen. When it comes to breaches, it is better to go with them because on a breach of a no contact it is the victim's information that gets a conviction in court. So if they are not willing to go to court and testify that this happened there is not a lot you can do.*

*If someone did reveal that there is still abuse, I would contact the probation office and whoever I found necessary to know. I actually haven't had anyone disclose any current*

*abuse. I have had breaches being disclosed, which I've reported to probation. That's the same procedures we always have.*

*If they say if they have new incidents, I do a safety plan, "Is it getting worse; and what does this look like?" See if they want shelter numbers, if they want to leave that partner. Make sure they have the appropriate resources to make the decisions and explaining the cycle of abuse again, if they have forgotten it, which often they do. Many times things escalate, and then, all of a sudden, they'll de-escalate and honeymoon hits again. Make sure that they have the proper support. Just because they're saying, "This is getting worse," doesn't mean they're ready to make a step. It's not a written in stone policy. But, we need to keep the victim safe. That's why we're here. There isn't a piece of paper that says, step a, b, c, d. It's an expectation.*

*Usually we already know about that because of our safety check-ins with the client. So, if something new happens it would be disclosed. Then we do safety planning and organize another follow-up call. I haven't had anybody that has relayed to me any new abuse concerns during the partner check.*

*We encourage them to report new incidents or any incidents of abuse to the police and the probation officer. If we're not able to report directly to the police but there's been a breach of a probation order, we would certainly follow up with the probation officer, and the probation officer would follow up with the victim to see if they were willing to come forward and report. So it really is a matter of reaching out to our partners via HomeFront but strongly encouraging the victim to report any new incidents.*

*We are working on behalf of Sheriff King so there is nothing we would do at Home Front unless safety was a big concern. Then we would intervene to make sure that partner is safe so if that means calling police or speaking with my supervisor brainstorming about what we can do, what we should do, what is the current protocol. It works well.*

### **Challenges with HomeFront Partner Checks**

When the partner check staff members and administrators were asked whether they saw any problems with the current partner check process, their comments identified issues in the following areas: Women get angry/upset; contacting the new partner or the right partner; the process can be complex/tedious; and how much information should be provided to the Sheriff King treatment program staff.

*They're aware that we have to tell. Some people get a bit angry; but they're aware that that's what we have to do to make sure they're safe. So the only issue would be having clients lash out because of that. I've had one or two clients become angry and irritated by having to go through the partner check, but nothing that's been too damaging or severe. Many people get angry because they feel like their partner is not going to benefit whatsoever; he's not going to listen to anything, and he's just looking to get out of it.*

*The only problems I've had are that people get heated-up and you have to de-escalate them. It's almost like reliving the abuse, 'because you're going back in your history and trying to answer these questions as fully as possible and then you're getting angry, and angry, and angry. One lady just got to the point of, "Why the hell did I put up with this?" "Okay, but we're moving forward and you're not with him now. It sucks that these things happened but you've made positive steps, so let's concentrate on that."*

*We'll move forward. Sometimes, having to rehash it can be difficult. For her, it wasn't a place of re-victimization, thank goodness; it was just a place of anger. If I had somebody say, "I don't want to revisit." I'd [say], "Can you just tell me, was it physical? Yes or no?" "Yes?" "Okay, perfect."*

*For a few victims, it brings up the past, which is something we don't really touch on in the Partner Check program. We go into some in-depth questions that can potentially put victims in crisis mode again. I had one woman that with the questions was in crisis mode and was quite upset by answering a partner check. [I: So one of the risks is putting them back into crisis?] Yes. Many times, the question is very difficult for them to answer because it rehashes everything.*

*There are some occasions where we put down we are not doing a partner check because they are not in a position to provide information. If the person is fleeing then we don't want to put extra trauma on this person. If someone has had a major medical issue we won't. If the partner check causes trauma by asking the questions, we'll stop. If there is a no-contact order then it depends if there is a child safety issue or a family court situation. We will note why it might not be a good time and revisit later. If the partner check causes trauma by asking the questions, we'll stop.*

Other interviewees noted difficulties when the partner was new; not the one involved in the incident to which the police responded:

*Sometimes, they'll put down a new partner, which gets a little sticky for us. We have to call the new partner and we can't really reveal much. We just have to say that he's in treatment and this is a partner check.*

*Sometimes there is a partner on the list and you call them and they are a new partner and don't know about the charges related to why he or she is in treatment. That can be a concern for confidentiality and the treatment process. If there was a better way for Sheriff King to ensure that the partner is actually the one affiliated with the charges and if they aren't, create some confidentiality policies to make sure that that person actually knows that their partner is in treatment. Sometimes they don't know because they weren't the person, they weren't the victim for the original charge.*

*Because the list from Sheriff King is provided by the offenders, sometimes the information isn't correct. Sometimes they put down the name of a partner that wasn't the actual victim in the crime. So you call and it was a brand new girlfriend who had no idea that this person was mandated to treatment for domestic violence. It is an awkward conversation. But the problem is it is the offender who provides the name so, particularly if the offender is part of criminal ... stalking and he provides the victim's name that he has been stalking. If he provides the name of the new girlfriend hoping to God that you will never find the real victim that is a problem. Sometimes it is not credible information. In a couple of cases they deliberately gave wrong information so you won't find the person he actually assaulted.*

*Often we are given the name of the new, not the old partner, and the new partner has no idea that there is even a problem or is identifying that the offender is great and there is*

*no big deal. So there are some questions around that. Often that can be sorted out case by case but that can make it time consuming and confusing.*

Other staff members and administrators described several process issues that complicated or made the process tedious.

*There are issues with formatting, like the list of offenders, many times names are misspelled. Then it's so hard to find them in our database. Sometimes it's a bit tedious going through the whole list to find the victim. I think there could be easier ways to divvy it up amongst my coworkers? It can be changed to make it a little better. Our initial intake form was really tiresome, and we altered it. Now, it's pretty easy; you just put the information in and send it off to Sheriff King. Right now, we're not over-burdened by the amount that we have. Some months are more than others, and it's a lot.*

*Sometimes people are in group one month and discharged from group the next, so on the administrative side it is difficult to keep track of who is in and who is out. You don't know because it was discharged, they are breached, or they moved to another city. That is an ongoing challenge. I think what I said; administrative. It is hard to figure out who is in and who is out. It is hard to figure out do I still ask this complainant, do I no longer ask this complainant. For some high risk complainants, it is not appropriate to do a partner check because there are other issues that wouldn't make them a good candidate. So that tracking element is always very challenging.*

*The problems in the partner check are more process-based; don't have the name of the partner, have the wrong number, can't find the partner, information exchange between agencies is slow or incorrect or not as effective as it could be. Ineffective responses from some agencies to some of the information that comes, misunderstandings about what response is required or was expected, but that is day-to-day operation. I wouldn't see those as fundamental problems to doing partner checks. It is fundamental to doing the work as a whole. So I don't see any huge problems. Cost, it is a time consuming and expensive endeavour. If you just looked at it from an economic perspective it is pretty easy to say the return on investment isn't very high, so why do it? But the counter argument is what are you valuing as your return on the investment? If I'm trying to engage clients to actively participate in my agency and I'm not getting any, well yeah, it's a waste of time. But even if it is just one of every 100 clients I am able to identify and notify authorities who then breach or arrest an individual in the act of committing a breach or further abuse, I would argue that it is worth your time.*

A problem mentioned by two individuals was with respect to providing information gathered from the partner check contacts.

*One challenge was differing points of view about how much information should be released to Sheriff King. Where do we stand in terms of asking victims to provide historical information on abuse and what happened at the court? We've worked through that and the process of obtaining consent all came together.*

*I wouldn't say there are ongoing problems. Systemic and structural barriers sometimes sidetrack things, like information-sharing, individual understandings among different agency's service providers about what is a breach or what is not or what is high risk and what is not; what things can and can't be shared. Sometimes you get idiosyncrasies*



*among individual players and often you can sort those out through conversations with those folks and their supervisors and agencies. But that is ongoing and often it is just training and awareness. You may have new staff that don't know or understand the process is. I would say some of that. Sometimes there is information exchange issues as well, just timeliness of getting information from different agencies back and forth. That can be a bit of a barrier.*

#### *HomeFront Partner Check Process Working Well*

In response to a question about what is working well in the HomeFront partner check process, five interviewees described general strengths.

*The feedback has been really good from the victims completing the partner checks. The numbers that we have heard have been high.*

*It's working fairly well. The questions are fairly standard and it's not very long. Depending on how much they want to talk, sometimes it takes ten minutes, which is not a big amount of time. It's pretty good.*

*I think it does really well. Every complainant is not the same. You have to tailor it to that particular complainant in a way that's going to get across to them. It's much more helpful than having something that you have to do because not everybody works well with that. If it's step-by-step, people aren't going to fall through the cracks.*

*It works very well. Since we've been doing the partner checks, we've been able to figure out a process administratively. That was a big challenge at first. But after things have been running for this amount of time, things are getting easier.*

*We started in March of 2009 and we're just over a year and a half. It has been a work in progress. It is a lot more effective now than when we started. What would be the best way to approach partners to not make it overwhelming or redundant for them? It took us a while to figure that out. But now that we have, quite effectively. Over the last year it's grown rapidly. It is more efficient, it is more effective, easier.*

Two individuals commented about the sharing of information working well.

*It is working quite well because we have extensive information about who the victims are. For the other agencies I'm not sure how effective the information is particularly if the only source of that information is directly from the offender. But our experience has been that we are able to cross-reference and we have very good relationships with probation. We already often have relationships with these clients because of their earlier participation in the court process so it works for us. I think that is part of the reason we have a fairly good uptake with people saying yes we will participate.*

*We get situations where a victim is pregnant. Knowing this is important so the facilitator can direct safety issues. It is important when the victim tells us they are planning to divorce. We can put that down in a partner check so that the facilitator can start safety planning and probation can start planning because it is a flag for further abuse. It is also good when someone says, "He is calmer now, gentler now." We can pass it on to probation who can pass it on to treatment. Then all three of you know that something is effective. So it is good for the systems piece where everyone communicates and it is faster. You are not waiting a month later to find out.*

A final individual suggested that the process lessens the burden on the victim.

*It certainly lessens the burden on the victim if we're reporting and they can be encouraged to do so. Otherwise, they may not have had that avenue or even known that existed. There would have been a lot of hesitancy. So knowing they have that connection and they're able to report and get the support, works well.*

Several of the partner check study respondents presented stories of individuals that demonstrate the utility of the process used by the HomeFront program staff.

*I know of a partner check where the offender, who is not supposed to have any contact, answered the phone and the partner check person was able to identify who that person was and immediately had the police respond to the home. He was arrested and charged with a breach of the no-contact order.*

*In another partner check, there was clearly some abusive incident happening in the background between the offender and one of the children. The partner check person had a police car crew go by the home and settle things out.*

*Some of our clients report that just having the opportunity to talk to someone and be listened to and heard was valuable and helped get them through their dark times. I know we've made referrals to moms and dads around getting support for their kids and that has been helpful. Those would be examples of successes that come out of it. Often probation officers find it valuable to get some of the information that comes to them through the treatment agency or through the partner check process about what is going on with the victim. Often Probation may contact the Partner Check program or they certainly contact our program and get victim information or get updated on a victim; maybe they have a letter that needs to go out and they don't have an active address. We are often able to provide them and it saves them work.*

## **Comparing the Two Partner Check Programs**

The two partner check programs that are the focus of the current evaluation started similarly, both being housed in agencies that provide the treatment groups for the accused. The move from the Sherriff King to the already-established HomeFront's Partner Support program was a good fit and addressed several challenges such as staffing, the timing of calls, and concerns from partners about calls from too many agencies. However, even before the move, the role of the Partner Support program was to provide support to partners whose spouses were being monitored by probation services because of spousal assault charges. As such, the workers would have already been connected with many of the partners, since being mandated to treatment is one of the most common dispositions of Calgary's specialized domestic violence courts (Tutty et al., 2011).

The Calgary Counselling Centre has chosen to continue with their current model for the direct impact that it provides to the primary therapists by sharing information about new abuse incidents and engaging the partners in agency programs if so desired.

The in-depth interviews with the program informants identified a number of similarities and several differences. The similarities across the programs included the process for accessing the names of and consent from the accused; contacting and getting consent from the partners;

responses from the partners regarding the partner check processes; and protocols when new abuse is disclosed.

Interviewees with both Calgary Counselling and Sherriff King personnel reported initial difficulties with the process of cataloguing when to contact partners and how the partner responded. Currently, both Calgary Counselling and Partner Support have developed administrative processes to better schedule the calls and capture the responses and wishes of the partners. Other common difficulties included connecting or reconnecting with the partners; dealing with new partners rather than the partner associated to the incident in which the police charges were laid.

The program respondents mentioned several differences as well (a comparison of the core program characteristics is presented in Table 1). At Calgary Counselling, the partner checks are conducted by the primary therapist assigned to work with the accused, who are both mandated and non-mandated clients. These staff members have counselling credentials such as graduate or post-graduate degrees in social work, psychology or educational psychology. The role of the Partner Support program staff is support not counselling, so their education credentials are not typically at a graduate level. Rather, the staff are hired for their ability to connect to and engage with clients.

Another difference that may be connected with the previous point is that the Partner Support program staff identified one problem as clients sometimes presenting in crisis and that de-escalating their emotions could be difficult. In contrast, none of the Calgary Counselling staff mentioned victims presenting in crisis as problematic. Perhaps, with their more advanced counselling education and experience, the Calgary Counselling staff perceived client's upset as an opportunity to connect clinically and to refer to agency resources, including groups or individual counselling with them.

While not meaning to imply that they are less skilled in connecting with partners, the Partner Support program's mandate is support, not counselling, and some staff may have less experienced in addressing women's upset from a therapeutic perspective. There may also be differences in the timing of when the partners are called or other variables that could account for these differences in the crisis-response of the partners; but further research would need to be conducted to more fully explain this.

The Calgary Counselling staff can directly refer partners to several internal counselling programs such as the "You're Not Alone" program for women victims and the "Turn for the Better" program for male victims of intimate partner violence. Partner Support workers can also make referrals to these or similar counselling programs. As it is unclear whether internal or external referrals might be more effective; this difference is simply noted.

The respondents from Calgary Counselling mentioned several technological difficulties unique to their agency's telephone system, which requires individuals to accept the phonecall from a blocked number. In contrast, the Partner Support program personnel did not mention difficulties in connecting with partners because of technology or any other reason. Rather, they spoke of the advantages of having already connected with a number of the partners through other the HomeFront initiatives such as the court case workers.

In summary, while several differences are noted and can be attributed to the different nature of the two agencies conducting the partner checks, importantly, the informants perceived

the process as generally working well, especially after having made some adjustments to the process in each agency.

Table 1: Comparison of Partner Check Processes across Agencies

	Calgary Counselling	Comment	HomeFront	Comment
Who does the partner check?	Primary therapist assigned to accused	The primary therapist responsible for the accused gets direct feedback about any re-offences. The group leaders are sometimes apprised of new incidents	Partner Support staff member assigned to victim	The workers often have established rapport with the victims via previous contact during the court processes.
Getting Victim Names	From probation		From Sheriff King group programs via probation	
When contact victim?	Once during initial (individual) counselling; once during group and once after group completed		Once SK informs PSP that the accused has begun attending group.	
Differences	Also does partner checks with partners of non-mandated clients		Only does partner checks with mandated clients (as directed)	
Availability of Counselling Resources	CCC has internal programs such as You're Not alone for women victims and A Turn for the Better for male DV victims to which partners can be directly referred.		PSP can refer clients to other outside counselling agencies.	
Staff Roles	CCC staff are professional counsellors or Masters-level trainees who provide counselling.	.	The role of the PSP staff is to provide support and information rather than counselling.	

## Chapter Five: Successes and Challenges across Partner Check Programs

While the previous chapter reported the differential responses of the two agencies, the Calgary Counselling Centre and HomeFront's Partner Support Program, this chapter highlights issues and perceptions regarding the generic process of conducting partner checks and the rationale for their use. The themes include the utility of partner checks for a variety of different venues including the victim, accused, agency, and the criminal justice system, concerns about partner checks, whether partner checks address victim's safety and the informant's perception of the most important reasons for conducting partner checks,.

### *The Utility of Partner Checks for the Victim*

Ten interviewees commented that information about resources and the dynamics of abuse was one of the main advantages for victims of the partner check process.

*I'm constantly giving them information about where they can go for safety, how to prepare, what dangers to watch out for and caring for themselves. Some of the victims have come to the point where they think that they should put their spouses first before themselves. Sometimes I've had to tell them it is important to care for yourself because if you neglect yourself you can't care for anybody else.*

*Even having the knowledge that there are resources is really important. It informs victims that there is a system out there that won't put up with this garbage; that they have rights and should not be abused and that there are people who genuinely believe this and would like to help. Whether they do anything about that is another thing altogether but just to let them know that there are people who care if someone is beating the heck out of you or even slapping you around a little bit. That's what we get, I only hit her once. Well yeah, you still hit her."*

*That somebody out there knows a bit about what is going on. Some partners feel quite hopeful that their partner is going to therapy. They may not have been telling family what is going on and, yet, I know what is going on so they have a source they can call.*

*It gives them a person to talk to about their concerns, whether they are feeling good or bad about the treatment program. It gives them access to resources, helps them to think through if they need counselling or if they are having any treatment needs, fears, worries about the children. We find it's a resource for them to talk about that and, of course, if their safety is at risk they have an emergency contact. They can call 911 but they can also talk to the partner check person, "This happened, what should I do?"*

*Make sure they have the appropriate resources to make the decisions and, if things are already escalating, explain the cycle of abuse again, if they have forgotten it, which often they do. Things escalate, and then all of a sudden they'll de-escalate and the honeymoon hits again. This is the cycle; you explain that. Many complainants don't necessarily identify abuse as abuse because it's always been that way, or it's not as abusive now. There's more of an understanding. Also, to get past the hurt, because many people are working from a place of pain and anger.*

*Being able to resource is a huge part of what we do in our work at HomeFront and in the Partner Support Program. Resourcing and helping people find out what's out there to*

*meet their needs. It goes back to safety and risk and emotional support, providing resources that may be needed.*

*In our agency, the partner checks are part of a larger piece so the victim gets some information about the justice process or where things are at or who to contact in the probation office. More broadly I'm not entirely sure how useful they are other than it is a reminder that the offender is in treatment. There is that education and information exchange that can happen with partner checks. So you may get a better educated victim.*

Eight respondents perceived the victim being empowered and having her voice heard as an advantage of partner checks for her.

*It can be empowering. They can have a say in the areas that their partner needs to work on. That can be quite helpful.*

*That person is paying attention to what I say and feel and what my experience has been and so that's extremely helpful. It's like being sick and knowing someone can help me. It is respectful and ethical. It's a welcome.*

*It's useful for the victim, letting them have a say, allowing them to contribute and letting them know that the (accused) is not just going to treatment and saying whatever they want. The partner is able to share their side of the relationship. I've had many clients thankful that they're being heard, because their input is going into treatment. A lot of them say, "He lies and he's just going to manipulate his counsellor." I've had a lot of people say, "It's really good that you're on my side."*

*They have input in the system, 'because a lot of them are feeling lost; like what they say doesn't matter, and it's giving them a bit of a voice. I really think it matters.*

*It gives them back a sense of power, just letting them know that the information that they've disclosed about him is not going to the counsellors. That information will not be released to the offender. Giving them a voice and being able to make a difference in their counselling sessions really gives them a sense of empowerment back.*

*It gives them an opportunity to be empowered and provide feedback. There are times when partners are feeling that their partner isn't getting what they should be out of it, so it provides an opportunity to explain that. The accused - it needs to be their responsibility. All the ones that I've contacted are already HomeFront clients so we can maintain that relationship, so I don't know if it is necessarily so much about safety as empowering them to give some feedback on how their partner is doing.*

*Useful for the victims to validate their presence, contributing to accountability if they want or contributing to the help that their partner gets.*

Five respondents identified the victim's safety as a core reason for conducting partner checks.

*The primary goal is safety and accountability.*

*It is a way to keep their own need to address safety in a timely manner; we do it at the beginning of session, halfway through, at the end, minimally and then if there are times when something has happened, i.e. a person doesn't attend a group and we have*

*concerns about safety we will do a partner check. So it keeps safety front and centre of their thinking.*

*It would be nice to know that someone else is concerned about their safety, that there is an option. Domestic violence traps people somewhat so it would be nice to know there is help there if I need it.*

*There is that extra opportunity for victims to disclose if the risk is escalating so it can provide a safety outlet. Letting them know that the offender is actually going to group and doing what they said they were going to is reassuring for some victims. The victim has to want to work on their safety and disclose to you, so the fact that you are actually asking them are they safe and do they need help, is increasing the opportunity for them to be safe. If you don't do it then you have reduced their safety.*

Three individuals commented about the value of the partner checks in clarifying information such as the nature of abuse or the system's responses to intimate partner violence.

*Some partner checks make little difference because the individual is not responsible for their own safety. However, from my experience as a therapist, sometimes just asking the question has caused the person to look at the situation differently. They have reported back that it was a direct result of the conversation around the partner check that caused them to think again about their situation. Those conversations have been particularly relevant in situations where there has been a no-contact order and the person has been thinking about whether or not to return to the relationship.*

*It's good for victims to answer those questions and look back on the relationship. Usually by the time they're in treatment it's either a while, or they're back together. It causes them to look back on the past abuse and reflect on their going through treatment, and how that's working. It's interesting for people to think, "How safe am I on a scale of one to ten?" We'll ask them every time, "Are you feeling safe?" and they'll say, "Yeah." It opens it up for them to do it quantitatively. Sit there and think, "Am I a four or a three?" That really makes them think about things.*

*We sometimes unwittingly confuse victims because they get incomplete information. Some people would argue though having multiple points of contact gives people more opportunity to engage. You may not like the person calling, which may be a barrier. Another reason for having multiple sources calling is one person cannot know all the nuances of every agency in order to make referrals or to engage them and encourage them to participate.*

One interviewee perceived the partner check as lessening the burden on the victims.

*It certainly lessens the burden on the victim if we're reporting and they can be encouraged to do so. Otherwise they may even know that they could do that and there would have been a lot of hesitancy. So knowing that have that connection and they're able to report and get the support works well.*

*Do the Partner Checks Ensure the Safety of Victims?*

Related to whether partner checks are useful for victims and a central concern about conducting partner checks in general is whether the victim's safety might become compromised



by the process. The interviewees were asked specifically to comment on whether the partner checks took the safety of the victim into consideration.

*You really can't protect women necessarily by connecting with them or if and you can't protect them if they won't tell you things that are happening. It was a good intention but I'm not sure it is achieving the intended benefit.*

*[I: Does the partner check make the victim safer?] No. [I: Aid in the process?] Yes, I think it aids in knowledge and knowledge is power. I don't think it actually prevents anything unless they seek help for that.*

*Even just having a good contact number can make them feel safer if they know that I can reach them if he or she says something in session that is concerning to me. I can warn them before calling the police or after calling the police. So it can add to their sense of safety. Honestly, when I get the consent I'm careful about how I broach the topic because I am a little bit concerned if they have a controlling issue, that they might tell the partner not say anything negative. So it may on one level decrease safety.*

*[I: Does the partner check address women's safety?] If it's done properly, it is more than five questions on a piece of paper. You have to turn the paper over; on the back is a safety plan. Doing a good partner check is critical because the circumstances of individuals vary so much that some people might just do it as a routine. Treatment providers generally do not do that; they use it to try to engage and address safety. But consistency is important and sometime people are not easy to get ahold of. It's always a big question. If somebody has moved away to move on with their life and they don't want to do it, it is hard to know what is really happening. We honestly don't know so does it address safety? We like to think it does and sometimes we have a better sense that it does but in terms of follow up with partners I think that is question that we'd have to ask people on the other end. Because I think this real sense is that it varies.*

### *The Utility of Partner Checks for the Accused*

Ten of the interviewees commented that a major way that the partner checks were useful for the accused was that it holds them accountable.

*The partner checks would be useful in keeping them honest, knowing that the person they perpetrated against has a say in this and that nothing happened or was going to happen.*

*It is one of the ways that they are held accountable and that can engage them in responsible behaviour. This is a serious business and we take treatment seriously. They know from the beginning that we are there for change and we have zero tolerance around violence. So it really holds them accountable and can increase their awareness that we expect them to address safety and their behaviours.*

*Maybe a sense of accountability. As far as the client, there is some accountability; they know that I can contact their partner. Maybe more truth telling in session because of it.*

*I really don't know, because we would require disclosure of him whether we are doing partner checks or not. It tells him he is accountable but these guys don't get that until probably two thirds of the way through the program. It may be useful as a preventative in the event that he is being abusive and the partner shares that and we can help him prevent something way worse from happening. But again, it is very, very rare.*

*If the partner's continuing to abuse obviously he's not taking in the, the treatment. He's just going through the motions and not actually internalizing anything.*

*If he is doing well, there is confirmation. If they are still together, it is a confirmation that things have changed and he is hearing it and she is saying, "I talked to this victim advocate and told her you are doing better." So there could be some possibility of good. Of course some victims might say I talked to this victim advocate and told them you were a jerk.*

Two individuals commented that the partner checks were important to the accused as they conveyed concern about the victim to him, on the part of the agency/system.

*One thing that comes across to that person is that we are concerned about the welfare of the client and there is an external monitoring of that relationship. I tell my clients I will be calling your wife just to make sure that her safety is in place. Our intention is your relationship works out well so we are not just talking about the abuse; we are also talking about how to repair that relationship, the tension, the distrust.*

*If he is doing what he says he is doing, we ought to get some sense of that from her. So if he is indicating, "I'm not drinking, I'm taking responsibility, all is fine," then I ought to pick that up from her conversation. Though, he says, "Why would you want to call her," and I say, "If you are doing what you say you are doing, she ought to tell me that, right?" It can provide evidence that he is actually trying hard, that he is making some changes, confirming evidence I suppose. That would be the advantage to him because his continued abuse leads to conversations about her safety.*

One interviewee commented that it was useful to tailor the treatment to the accused more adequately.

*Most will not tell you that it is useful. I've heard someone say, "Someone called my partner and they were really nice or she said good things." That is usually if they are getting along fairly well. If there is contact and they are doing okay sometimes he's fine with that. But it might be good for him if there is some way that we tailor treatment to more specifically fit. We know about him then.*

A final two research respondents did not perceive the partner checks as necessarily being useful to the accused.

*It is really about the victim's safety and victim's safety improves and she is doing better that helps out the abuser. Otherwise, I don't see it critical. It's more a commitment we have to the community and to safety of victims.*

*I really don't know. They could provide inaccurate information, or just say they don't have information if they're not living together.*

#### *The Utility of Partner Checks for Treatment Program/Group Leaders*

This question was asked in two parts, one with respect to the group leaders, and the other about the treatment programs. However, at Calgary Counselling, the primary therapist who conducted the partner check does not routinely provide specific partner check information to the group leader, unless they, themselves, lead a group. Similarly, at Sheriff King, information from partner checks would never be directly disclosed in group sessions.

*Information is not for the program. It is for the primary therapist if there is any risk. It could be that she's at risk and the offender is at risk as well. For example, if he's drinking or if he's quite depressed you'd be concerned about his safety as well.*

*I don't think they are relevant to the group leaders. The group leaders don't have access to that information.*

*I'm a group facilitator for the family violence groups so I have an idea where the victims have been. When I'm taking the groups through the process of understanding and empathizing it helps me. Partner checks are important that way.*

*It advises them. If the group is being consistent they do check-ins around safety each week, so if you get a discrepancy between a partner's report and your check-in in group, it alerts them to that discrepancy and allows them to re-visit whatever they need to do to engage the participants in a conversation regarding safety.*

*We never use the information in the group from the partner check people.*

Nevertheless, the respondents described ways in which reports of new abuse could be integrated into the treatment group. Ten interviewees commented about the importance of the information conveyed through the partner checks to the treatment programs.

*If the partner has reported a concern then regardless of whether the client is in individual or group treatment, that information can be integrated back into that group or individual session.*

*If you have a client saying, "I'm good, everything is wonderful, I only did this one time," having that second person say, "Actually no, there has been sexualized abuse and there was physical before this and he's always yelling at me" is pretty big. It's a nice check and balance, "This guy is telling me this and I have no resources other than the police report to say this." Just to get more information and to deal with that client in a way that may help buy-in for the program. So just having that person go, "This is also happening, not just this one time" is really important.*

*We very occasionally hear that abuse continues and then we can deal with the person in the program. But it is so rare, that I wonder about the value of it over all.*

*The two stories can be quite different. It adds information to the context or even the cultural perspective. It can help in the approach one would take. For instance, if gender is a big issue, sometimes that will come across clearer from the female. Then you could focus a little more on dealing with gender issues in counselling. But understanding the family system dynamics adds quite a bit to the process.*

*It's a heads up. If there are concerns around risk factors like drinking, mental health, he is not supposed to be in contact, but he is stalking, angry; he lost his job... that kind of information can be useful for your facilitators; just a closer look. Paying more attention to that guy, maybe having a brief conversation with him after group; the primary would get that information not the group leaders but you'd need to send it to the group leader in terms of, "I'm a little concerned about what's going on there."*

*It gives us an idea of what someone else in that person's life has to say about them. They are not always contradictory; sometimes they give quite nicely. But it is helpful to know. I struggle with the implication that she is always the source of truth. A large chunk of the*

*time, they have no contact when he is here or they are not supposed to, so she is not seeing him. If you checked up when the no-contact condition is over, very often they are not together when he is here. The group leaders are the ones doing the treatment so it helps inform them what might be going on. Gives them maybe a different perspective from what the client is sharing or affirms what appears to be a good process. It helps guide treatment. So in cases with bad news, you can really watch out for that person.*

*If a guy acts like things are great but his partner is saying he doesn't take it seriously and jokes about it, he's verbally abusive at home, it is a nice awareness. We certainly let the facilitators know that this guy probably isn't telling the truth. They are not going to use the information from a partner but it helps them work with that person. Because the men know that their partners are going to be contacted they realize that lying about stuff is a problem, that there is some monitoring, assuming they are living together. If it is court-ordered they know because probation has already contacted them. There has already been a chance for the victim to testify so it's not like we are starting it. Many of the men have quite a charming façade and so for the group facilitators to realize that though they might be charming in the group they really may be very different at home, helps them not be caught up in it. The majority of the court-ordered men say that they are actually victims of abuse and not guilty of whatever happened; at least that is how they start. If he volunteers something then the facilitator knowing that something has happened can really pay attention to that person. If something negative has happened and the person volunteers, "I was charged again or I breached or we split up because this happened," then it can be dealt with and the group's facilitator will know that the Partner Support report will underline the significance of that.*

Alternatively, as noted by one respondent, observing the behaviours of the group members can lead the leaders to checking on the safety of the partners. That the partner check process is in place legitimizes and facilitates that process.

*On occasion, certain states of mind have been noticed; certain tones of language; maybe they share things in group that they might not share in an individual session. The other guys might share some incident that tweaks a facilitator that they need to check on safety so in that way it is valuable.*

Three interviewees mentioned specific examples of individuals for whom the partner checks made a difference.

*There've been two cases where what I was hearing from the victim was major concerns around attitudes and beliefs that were more deeply rooted than what we typically see and that could have been very dangerous to the victim. So being able to give a heads up to our point person at Sheriff King that this is what we were hearing or giving them a heads up as to a potentially dangerous situation, a dangerous person.*

*It helps to know. In the few situations, the person in group said, "Everything is great, we are getting along well." You do a partner check and that person says the complete opposite. It gives the facilitator something to keep an eye on, particularly if there is something going on that the facilitator does not know and the partner gives you permission to share it with the facilitator, such as the partner's going to divorce this guy but he doesn't know yet. It is important that the facilitator know that so they can pay*

*attention to some of the flags, particularly if someone is violent. So they do see it as a safety measure.*

*They can provide a wealth of information for the group leaders. Finding out that a client has continued to drink may prompt the group leader to modify the session that night. From a risk monitoring perspective, it may confirm and lead to risk assessments and plans being put in place for a client based on the information from the partner checks. If you are getting a disclosure that a partner is at risk, having an active partner check process gives you some confidence that you can find the victim and follow-up very quickly. That's an advantage.*

### *The Utility of Partner Checks for the Agency*

While three individuals saw no advantages to their agencies of conducting partner checks, the majority did. Five respondents noted that the partner checks provide information that can be used by the treatment programs to adjust and evaluate their processes.

*Part of what happens in a partner check is the partner might say, "I really hate this program and it's terrible." I need to hear that feedback as well.*

*They are useful in the agency because they are getting information. When I talk to a client who tells me that her partner prior to treatment was doing some really nasty stuff to her and after treatment her life has changed, that's a big leap but it is honest. It's not the norm but to hear that means that something is going right in the program.*

*It is one of the ways that we can see if the treatment program is working in terms of helping to provide a safer environment for the partner and the children if there are children involved at the agency right? It allows us to adjust the treatment as necessary so it keeps it current and relevant to what is happening with the individual clients.*

*For Sheriff King, it's good in terms of securing funding and knowing that they're doing what they need to do so that they're accountable to victims and their programs are up to par. That they're offering a valuable service.*

*For Sheriff King, it really helps them determine what the level is required by the facilitators, how big the group should be. It helps them evaluate the type of people coming into their service, whether they have resources. It gives us (HomeFront) a better understanding of the other components. Some insight of what they are taught in treatment it is very helpful: what the groups teach people, what they should be getting out of the program. It gives us the information to explain to the complainant what the purpose of the group is and what topics they go over.*

Four interviewees commented that the partner check process was useful to their agencies in that it reflects the community accountability to addressing the serious nature of domestic violence.

*Simply as part of the broader community commitment to the prevention of family violence. That is part of the protocol that was set out and so we follow it as part of the domestic violence community.*

*It provides that accountability for what we are doing. I'm glad with HomeFront doing them we are doing more of them and we have some real pros doing them. So it gives us*

*some accountability. It also gives us these wonderful words, community collaboration; we are working with the community to provide safety to victims of violence.*

*It is part of our commitment providing support for victims. When we have people who have abused adults and/or children; we want to pay attention to the victims as well. It is part of our commitment to make sure that the victim has access to resources that they are safe, that their voice is heard in the process and not just the voice of the person in counselling. The referral access, safety, and their voice are the three largest points. Part of our mission is to make sure that people who have been victimized are being heard and have a right to express what they think or feel.*

*I would imagine that for Sheriff King, it's good for them in terms of securing funding and knowing that they're doing what they need to do so that they're accountable to victims.*

Three individuals saw victim safety as a key benefit to the agencies in terms of conducting partner checks.

*The aim is that partners are able to plan their safety and if they need to exit that relationship, we care for their safety. There is an expectation that we do the partner checks. That is the agency policy.*

*We are trying to be on the same page and keep victims safe and all the offenders receive the adequate amount of treatment.*

*It ties into our mandate of keeping victims safe. Again, the accountability, as well as the opportunity to collaborate with community partners.*

#### *The Utility of Partner Checks for the Criminal Justice Process*

One individual was sceptical about the partner check being useful for the criminal justice system.

*I think it gives an illusion. We don't give them this information in any great way. I don't know about probation knowing or caring a whole lot about them. I'm not sure.*

Five individuals mentioned that a core utility of the partner check for the criminal justice system is providing information between the various agencies and services.

*HomeFront does frequent checks and, from time to time, has informed me of new information that the client did not tell me. The criminal justice system or probation may get information faster than I can. Sometimes we pick up things when we talk to their partners, information that probation may not have because of the relationship we form with them. I don't get that necessarily from the guys. But the Partner Support Program also does partner checks so when they get information that we don't know about we pick that up and pass it on. Today I was calling up a family of an ethnic man who was mandated for family violence. I found out that he has flown off to the UK and planned to fly further on to his home country. So I called up the probation officer and he was shocked. He didn't know about it. So that is useful.*

*Back and forth information checks and balances. If I'm struggling with a client who is not giving me any information and I call the partner and there are some real concerns then I could potentially call the probation officer and talk to him.*

*It is one more eye into the life of the client in between probation visits. I understand probation visits are all of 15 minutes so it is one more bit of information to make sure the client is on the right road. It is important; it is a fine line between checking in and making sure the victim is safe and being a spy on behalf of the legal system. I don't want to do that. So I'm walking a line there. I don't want to rationalize it to be the extra hand for the justice system. My motivation is always to do good counselling and to stop the domestic violence. That to me is the rationale for the partner checks and making sure she is safe is important. It's a fine line.*

*For probation it is incredibly helpful because it is a way for them to check to see is the person just going through the motions or getting something out of it. Is the person then reporting to the probation officer the next day saying, "Yeah I went and it's great." It is a check for probation as well. It is the accountability again.*

*To make sure that the victim has access to legal resources, the police and/or probation to see if the person is violating those terms. That kind of feedback is more straight forward in the sense that we don't share with the abuser what is going on but if the victim calls up the police and says this is happened and there is a legal violation there is immediate feedback for the abuser.*

Four interviewees saw accountability as a major way that the partner checks were useful for the criminal justice system.

*It is a way to hold the person accountable and to get another perspective on whether or not the person has stopped violent behaviours. It allows probation and the justice system to know that. The other thing is that it identifies concerns earlier. I work a lot with probation clients so if a person has re-offended and they have violated their peace bond then it allows earlier intervention and action.*

*It is part of our community approach where we are attempting to engage with the other party in hopes of providing something useful.*

*It provides accountability around what we are doing; for probation and police as well. Some of them have great relationships with Partner Support and the court caseworkers, the Domestic Conflict Unit and it's nice to know there is that other connection because sometimes engaging a victim of violence is very challenging. Sometimes police or probation may be frustrated with that so to be able to work together is invaluable.*

*It ties into if we've been accountable and people are feeling safe. Then they're more likely to phone the police and be more proactive in being safe.*

One individual mentioned victim safety as an important rationale for conducting partner checks with respect to the criminal justice system.

*As I said before, the safety of the victims is very important. Part of the safety plan is contacting the police, of course. Where it is appropriate it is a critical part of the safety plan. What is her plan if he violates a no contact order? The right answer usually would be she is going to contact the police or the probation officer and notify them that he has violated the no contact order. That is a plan we support. Frequently the victims are still living with their abusers or the abusers have access to them or the abuser might violate that so you want to make sure that the victim has access to resources, in this case the*

*legal resources, the police and/or Probation. So, overall it is about victim safety and decrease in further assaults and danger to the victim.*

### *Challenges with Conducting Partner Checks*

Beyond focusing on challenges about their own programs (already described in the previous chapter), the interviewees were invited to raise concerns about the partner check process in general. The interviewees identified four issues: administrative challenges, the resources needed to mount the partner check programs, addressing what the victims want and dealing with victims' fear.

Six individuals described the complications of administering the partner check program, several of which were mentioned earlier in connection with the two specific programs.

*Any problems? I think administrative. It is hard to figure out who is in treatment, who got kicked out the month before, what happened, do I still ask this complainant or not? For some high risk complainants it is not appropriate for them to participate in a partner check because there are other issues that wouldn't make them a good candidate for a partner check. So that tracking element is going to be always very challenging.*

*To have the right phone number and make that contact has been a problem. The victims in many of these relationships change their phone numbers, leave, maybe for good reasons. Even the courts lose track of their numbers so there's the issue of not being able to reach them. As many as 30-40 percent of the victims we've attempted to reach, we don't have viable contact information.*

*We have an advantage because there are people here five days a week during the evenings that can make several attempts to contact at different times of day. So from an efficiency and an economical standpoint, that was the best way to go.*

*We also need to challenge ourselves around hours of operation and availability. If I'm only calling when the guy is in group, well that only gives me a couple of hours to phone someone. Frankly if I don't have kids and my partner's out that might be the time I'm taking to do something for myself. As far as disclosures, if I need help I'm not probably going to disclose to a treatment agency because I'm rightfully going to think what are they going to do for me? If I really need help I'm going to phone the police.*

*They are time consuming. You often have to try several times to reach the partner. Do I think that they are effective? I think they have incredible potential but they also require commitment on part of the treatment provider. In some of the circumstances we are facing, our hands are relatively tied because technology has changed the process of access to people. They can be very effective. At other times they are not effective at all because there is some constraint firstly in them being conducted, secondly the person may not be in a position where they engage in that process.*

*As far as the agency, there is a time crunch in general though you would have people who would be more motivated to follow through on the partner checks to take that extra step if the first telephone number didn't work to try to get another telephone number depending on where you are in the agency. Some are more adept than others.*

Four individuals were concerned about the cost-benefit of the programs, given that only a small proportion of victims ever report new abuse.



*I have concerns about all the resources going into it, with us being able to connect with so few of them. I can't even think of 5 cases in 15 years where we actually had to take action because of what a woman told someone about.*

*All the time I've done this I've had about maybe three partners call me when they were in crisis. I had done a partner check, we engaged and the situations were quite critical and they did call me. But that's in all the years I've been doing it.*

*Unfortunately, 90% of the time your phone calls are pretty mundane in the sense that there is really nothing going on and the client is, "Why you are phoning me because it is pretty boring here." But every once in a while, you get that call where risk is elevating and there is something going on or even sometimes a domestic incident happening as you are calling. Those calls, for me, justify the partner check.*

*Recognizing that partner checks take time and commitment. If you are going to do family violence treatment, you need to allocate time and resources because partner checks are important. So somebody starting up needs to make a commitment to that from the get-go and it's not going to happen without training.*

Three respondents mentioned boundary or ethical issues that they associated with the partner check process. All were with respect to specific situations.

*Boundary issues - being able to do partner checks skilfully and being aware of the ethics involved. You do not violate confidentiality and say, "Well he's like this in group or he attended here and there." You don't do that. Some people might initially do that and that would be not okay.*

*Confidentiality can be breached in organizations where the therapist in the group did partner checks. Sometimes triangulation happens very quickly. There is some risk where there can't be anonymity. I've worked with people in rural communities where the person calling up the partner knows the partner and the victim and the victim knows the partner check person. Everybody knows everybody and it gets really weird so those situations are difficult. If you could have boundaries and anonymity and keep clear about what you can do you could avoid that.*

*I don't think it is ethical to have the same person do partner checks on both partners.*

Another three respondents questioned whether the partner check programs actually provide victims with what they want (and need).

*We need to ask "what do these people want?" If I'm a treatment agency, I offer this person information about the program and about the offender in the program because that is what they are interested in. They are not interested that Sheriff King, for example, offers a full range of domestic violence counselling services. That is nice, but what I want to know is whether my partner or ex-partner is getting better. So, if our policy is I can't tell you, then what motivates me to be excited about your call? I think we need to understand what do these folks want and what can we offer them? My experience working with victims over the long haul with the Partner Support Program is many of them don't want a victim treatment program and yet that is what the agencies that are calling offer. I think we need to stop presuming that they are victims.*

*There needs to be a collaborative structure where the partner check person can check with the clinician or, if the court is involved, bring in other people around safety planning. It can be critical for safety planning and is an often-used part of the process.*

*Occasionally a victim reports something that we wish they would report to probation or the police and they don't. If it doesn't involve danger to them or to a child, we respect that. We encourage her to call the police if it looks like the risk is not high. Then we let her make that decision.*

Several individuals recounted stories in which individuals presented problematic behaviour with respect to the partner check process. Importantly, the narratives recounted below are atypical occurrences.

*We had a woman who would try to sit in the group with the guys. When we called her she would complain about him. He would get on the phone at the same time. They were supposed to have a no-contact order. They were a mess. She would invite him over then she would call the police then she would drop charges. What we did was to not have Partner Support involved. We tried to engage her with a counsellor around setting boundaries. So Partner Support ended up making things worse because she was not able to separate from him. So occasionally, and it is very unusual, Partner Support can trigger more stuff with both people. That could be a risk.*

*If the Partner Support person ends up contacting the abuser, then the abuser starts pursuing the Partner Support person and starts blaming. In one case, the abuser decided the Partner Support person wanted to end their marriage and was going to sue her and wanted her name. That one actually made it worse for the victim. It certainly was very uncomfortable for everybody involved for a while.*

*Year ago we had some problems when we did them ourselves, those of us doing groups. In general, we did an amazingly good job but that required a balancing act, especially when the guy knew you were talking to his partner. I remember one of my colleagues doing a partner check and the woman decided they (Partner Support and the accused) were having an affair and became somewhat paranoid and did some stalking. So that can create suspicion sometimes, partner checks.*

*Another client just wanted to tattle-tale. There had been struggles defining who was the real abuser. There have been some shady areas but when I did the partner check it was, "Did you know this, did you know this?" I'm happy to hear that but if it is not consistent with other things it is very difficult to figure out what to do in treatment. There had been one-sided abuse from her reported by him but there had been only one arrest and that was him. So I listened to that and then the partner hasn't talked again and won't take my phone calls. Basically it was a big tattle-tale session and it was hard to decide if it was real or what was going on. I'm going to tell you everything that is going on badly with him because he is the one there not me.*

*I had a story that was never validated where an interpreter was a family friend of both the accused and the victim and was somehow able to obtain her confidential contact information, even when she changed the cell phone. There was just confusion. Now this wasn't a mistake with Sheriff King or Home Front, but it did cause potential conflict as the victim didn't know how else this could have been given because this interpreter said it*

*came from Sheriff King. It was obviously a person that knew the right things to say and was able to get this information by some means other than us. But I really don't think that the norm or how or the positives, the ninety nine percent other than that one small thing. It was investigated and it was no fault of the partners.*

*Where problems can arise is when you get into a "he said, she said." So do a partner check and the partner will give you information that conflicts with what he is telling you and she's not particularly happy with what is going on and is not feeling that the justice system is helping her out; "What are you people doing, I get so many phone calls; who are you people; why are you all calling me." You can have that response as well. Mostly it's when you get into not feeling this is helpful. She is not feeling this is helpful. She may have put lots of faith in the system before and it is not working for her. "Can't you people do anything? I've told you he's been drinking." Nobody is doing anything so her sense of feeling supported is not optimistic any longer.*

A final individual underlined the victim's fear of retribution from the accused as a longstanding concern with respect to the partner support process.

*I wouldn't call them problems so much as challenges that have been around as long as the issue has been around and that's dealing with the fear of the victim to report for fear of retribution; the offender finding out. We do our utmost to ensure that she's safe and what she can do to take some control back and be proactive in looking after her safety, the safety of her children, having options as to where to go and what to access.*

### **The Most Important Reason for Conducting Partner Checks**

In response to a query regarding the most important reason for conducting partner checks, offender accountability (8) and victim safety (7) were the most commonly mentioned reasons (note that several respondents mentioned more than one reason).

Eight program respondents perceived offender accountability as the central reason for conducting partner checks.

*Many offenders are very manipulative and downplay what happened or they don't reveal what they've done to their partner. It's nice for the counsellor to see the past abuse, the severity of it because they're not going to get that from the offender.*

*The most important reason is to find out what's working. If the offender is going to class and he's putting on... A lot of these accused are absolute masterminds. They can go through the motions and convince people that they're changing. But if they go home and beat their spouse, that's not showing any change.*

*Accountability and safety. It's one thing to offer treatment, but to know whether or not these guys are actually taking any of it away and being responsible for their actions, it's huge. And not even just when they're in treatment. There needs to be long-term follow-up because habits might die initially but what's been retained and how safe is the victim? We have an advantage because we're often in contact with the victim for a year and beyond the initial court date and treatment has passed.*

*It keeps the client honest. In general, violence towards the partner involves a lot of secrecy and hidden behaviours. Keeping that mandated client in mind, like we will be*

*checking up on you. That checks and balances are really good. It may help the client go, "If somebody is checking on me, I need to behave in a certain way and keep that going." Honesty would be the most important thing with that.*

*The second reason would be that the client you are working with understands that we are going to be checking; so we are kind of like a probation officer. If it continues to go on #1) you are pulled into to look after the victim to make sure she or he is safe. #2) it give you a fuller picture of what is going on in counselling, what is working and what is not. What you need is openness and honesty and rapport and safety for the abuser in order for them to let their guards down and work on the problem.*

*They (accused) will be the first ones to tell you that there has been an incident because we check on safety with them too and in group we also check in with safety so if it is a self-report from our client we would watch for a self-report first and then we would deal with safety on that.*

Seven individuals raised the issue of victim safety as the most important rationale for conducting partner checks.

*Our main reason is to check up on their safety.*

*I honestly can't imagine not doing them; not checking in with the victims during any part of treatment or the court. It's just a necessity. Without that, it could spell disaster because we're not offering that accountability and a victim wouldn't know where to go, who to turn to. We're there for them to support them in that.*

*The most important reason is the opportunity to engage people in safety planning and assessing risk around their situation.*

*It was designed to look at her safety and to respond to safety if that came up.*

*Safety, safety. Safety of the partners and secondly to monitor the relationship and the use of alcohol and drug use in their lives. Safety of the children, so safety is the number 1 reason we do partner checks, safety and well-being of the victim and the children. The aim is that partners plan their safety and, if they need to exit that relationship.*

*To make sure that the partner is safe is the most important reason. To establish rapport with the partner so that the partner feels again a sense of safety that they can call you if there is something going on or if they need some help.*

*To provide safety, support and resources to victims of domestic violence.*

Three study interviewees mentioned empowering the victims as an important reason for conducting partner checks.

*The person who is being abused needs to be involved, needs to let the powers-that-be know that there is a problem. The victim needs to have a say. Letting you know that we care about you; we are not just about your partner and getting them treated. It is letting them know that we care about them too.*

*I know people say offender accountability but I really think it is also victim participation in the process. All the resources seem to be for the offender but not for them so finally*

*they have some power to a) ensure this person gets help or b) ensure this person is held accountable for what happened to them.*

Two key informants mentioned the opportunity to refer partners to appropriate resources as an important reason for conducting partner checks.

*We usually ask, "Do you require any referrals at this time?" It helps open up conversation with your client, emotions, which usually leads to providing referrals.*

*Are there services that she is not aware of that I can talk to her about so she knows that she is not completely alone, that someone is taking this seriously enough to give her a call. That is my approach rather than checking up on him. I want to know how she is doing more than what he is doing.*

One individual linked the safety of the victims to the safety of the children, which, in turn, affects the community.

*When we do the partner check and there is safety and more positive behaviours in the life of the victim and the children, it's going to have ripple effect in the community. For instance children in home where there is violence tend to be maladaptive in school life. Some of them are reacting in school. So if victims and children are helped, they are going to adjust and learn better so there is a ripple effect in the community.*

A final individual perceived accountability to the community as the most important reason for conducting partner checks:

*The most important reason is that if you are going to provide treatment to offenders which is some largely paid for by the public, if that is something your government is going to do (it is a controversial area of treatment for some) then you have to provide accountability for that treatment. That is by providing support and outreach to victims of violence. So to be accountable you can't just say we are doing this treatment and it works you have to be saying we are also doing something for their victims. I would say that is accountability to the community.*

## **Chapter Six: Conclusions and Recommendations**

The current research respecting the structure and processes of two partner check programs developed in the city of Calgary, Alberta, is unique. Although the literature on offering treatment for those mandated to batterer intervention programs often purports the necessity of accessing information from partners with respect to the possibility of ongoing abuse, we found little published or grey literature describing research on such initiatives.

The two partner check programs presented in this research report initially operated quite similarly. The two agencies, Calgary Counselling Centre and YWCA Sheriff King Home, have been offering treatment for men who abuse their intimate partners for decades. Notably, adding a partner check process in the past several years was administratively complex and challenging. Both agencies addressed the challenges differently, with Calgary Counselling giving the responsibility to conduct partner checks to the primary therapist, who may or may not lead the group treatment, and Sheriff King hiring part-time staff to conduct the checks. In the past several years, Sheriff King has shifted the partner check responsibility to the Partner Support program of HomeFront, a program that already connected with primarily women whose partners were on probation because of having been criminally charged with incidents related to domestic violence.

It is important to note that the intent of focusing on these two different programs was not to assess whether one works more effectively than the other. Both programs emerged from the needs of their particular organizations and, ultimately, provide two distinct models of partner check programs that may be a better fit for some depending on the resources in each community.

Despite these differences, both agencies have considerable experience conducting partner checks over the years and have changed their protocols or developed strategies to deal with any problems that have arisen. The quotations from the program administrators and frontline workers presented in Chapters Four and Five provide additional examples, even templates for how to verbally respond to some of the difficult circumstances presented in some partner check processes.

This chapter reviews the major themes of the qualitative data analysis including the challenges/issues and the strengths/successes of the partner check processes conducted by the Calgary Counselling Centre and HomeFront's Partner Support program. The final section suggests several next steps for further assessing the efficacy of partner check programs.

### **Summary of the Research Findings**

One considerable and continuing problem noted by both program administrators and front-line workers is accessing contact information for the partners. In most cases, the partner contact information is gathered from those mandated to treatment via the criminal justice process. This presents a number of complications, including the fact that, if the victims and accused no longer live together, he may simply not have access to her contact information. Another possibility is that he declines to provide the information, claiming that he does not have it when, in fact, he does. In some circumstances, such as when the partner had previous contact with HomeFront's domestic court case counsellors during the initial criminal justice process, the Partner Support program may have access to a partner's contact information and have already

established rapport with her. However, few communities have a program similar to HomeFront that would allow such access to contact information.

Once the partner's contact information is accessed, actually connecting with partners is often problematic. This occurs for a number of reasons including; not having current phone-numbers for the partner due to their mobility; partners not answering phone-calls without call-display information (Calgary Counselling Centre-specific); not leaving phone-messages as a safety measure; partners seldom returning phone-calls and partners being repeatedly contacted by a number of agencies and declining yet one more worker offering assistance.

A third challenge is that partner check programs are complicated to administer. Deciding who should make the phonecalls, how to schedule the phone-calls for otherwise busy workers and dealing with a large number of unanswered calls are just some of the issues that emerged from the program informants. Offenders may be in treatment one month but not the next and sometimes this information is not simple to obtain. In response to these issues, both agencies have developed strategies to document the calls and the partner's responses and representatives from both agencies see their current procedures as working well.

A final problem raised by the program interviewees was the extent of the resources needed, including time and funding, for a relatively small return in the number of partners willing to be repeatedly contacted for partner checks. The fact that a number of partners choose not to be involved in the partner check process should not be seen as a failure on the part of the programs. Adult victims of domestic violence must be considered as competent individuals who have the right to choose to decline services or information. Moreover, a respectful phone-call to a partner may encourage that individual to engage later if the abuse were to re-occur or she has changed her mind about needing the support offered.

Notably, the current study was not intended to provide a cost-benefit analysis of partner check programs. One possible reason for the relatively high refusal rate by partners is that a large proportion no longer resides with the accused that attend treatment. These partners, therefore, have no vested interest or even the capacity to provide feedback about the accused's behaviour during the treatment process.

Nonetheless, when the safety of victims of domestic violence is considered, the numbers of partners connecting with partner check personnel should never be used as the primary measure of effectiveness. It would be an important discussion for individuals connected with the coordinated community response to addressing domestic violence in Alberta to struggle with how the "success" of partner check and other initiatives should be conceptualized.

With respect to the successes associated with partner check process, according to the program informants from both the Calgary Counselling Centre and HomeFront's Partner Support Program, the partners who are willing to connect with the partner check process are quite frank and use the opportunity to access support and information from the workers. Furthermore, once they have agreed to additional phonecalls, most are agreeable to the continuing contact.

An added advantage for the Partner Support Program is that they or another HomeFront staff member (domestic violence court case-workers, for example) have often already engaged with the partner after the police laid charges and the court process ensued. This likely enhances the willingness of the partners to speak with the workers.

The majority of the interviewees saw the partner check process as valuable to not only the victims and as a mechanism to hold the offenders accountable, but also for the agencies, the group leaders, the criminal justice system and the community. This question elicited strong theoretical support for offering partner check programs.

In the analysis of the most important reason for conducting partner checks, the most commonly mentioned aspects were offender accountability and victim safety. This is important as these are key goals of the program. Further, one would never want one without the other. The program informants noted numerous ways that they address victim's safety during partner check calls, and especially in the uncommon event that she is reporting new abuse. The procedures of both partner check programs very carefully consider the confidentiality of the victim's disclosures and have developed strategies to ensure that the accused could not deduce that his partner or ex-partner had informed the program staff.

The partner check process results in relatively few reports of new incidents of abuse. This could be viewed in several ways. On the one hand, partners may not trust the partner check process sufficiently to be willing to disclose new abusive events. Alternatively, as one administrator suggested, the recidivism rate in Calgary is relatively low, compared to many jurisdictions. The low recidivism rates, especially for accused mandated to treatment, were previously mentioned based on local research (Cairns, 2005; Hoffart & Clark, 2004, Tutty et al., 2011). From this perspective, the few reports of re-abuse may be a realistic representation, although one that must always be viewed cautiously.

Partner checks can provide very useful information to the treatment agencies, whether with respect to new or continued abusive behaviours or the partner's perception that the offender has changed as a result of the treatment. Both are invaluable from the perspectives of the program interviewees.

### **Next Steps**

Given the paucity of information about the efficacy of partner check programs as one mechanism to inform batterer treatment and ensure victim safety, the current study is an important first step, but more research is clearly needed. In addition to the two Calgary partner check programs highlighted in the current research, a number of other agencies that offer perpetrator treatment across the province of Alberta also conduct partner checks. It would be interesting to assess the extent to which their experiences are similar or diverse. Such triangulation of information about partner check processes would inform a more advanced discussion of what could be considered as best practices in this area.

This information could be more simply gathered through an on-line survey for the personnel from the other Alberta programs that rewrites the open-ended questions of the interview guide into close-ended, rating scale survey-type questions. This would both validate what procedures and processes have already been identified as helpful, but also potentially identify novel strategies to address some of the challenges that emerged in the current study.

A further research component that was recognized as important but was not feasible given the resources available for the current study, is interviewing partners who have been invited to participate in partner check processes. The only research that has accessed women's voices was the 1999 publication by Austin and Dankwort who interviewed 25 Calgary women in 1994-95 about their perceptions of the counsellors who carried out a partner check for a local



batterer intervention program. Interestingly, those partner checks included providing the women with information concerning how their male partners were doing in the group, which is clearly different from the current partner check programs. This difference, in addition to considerable changes in Calgary's criminal justice system response to domestic violence, as well as important changes in telephone technology, such as a call number display, suggest the need to update the research with partners.

Ideally, the research would entail qualitative interviews with both partners who have connected with and those that have been contacted but declined the opportunity to engage with the partner check process. Notably, those that have chosen not to give partner check information may also be more likely to decline being in a research study, but this issue could be addressed by providing honoraria for research participation.

In conclusion, the current study documents both challenges and successes of two local, well-established partner check programs. The program informants provided detailed information and frank opinions with respect to how well they see the programs working and what strategies were developed to address problems that arose in developing the program structure and protocols. All were relatively positive about the current iterations of the programs, seeing clear benefits that resulted in both keeping victims safe and holding perpetrators accountable.

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## Appendix One: Interview Guide

1. What is the current process of conducting partner checks in your agency? (Let the interviewee describe and then ask any of the following probes if not already answered)
  - Who does the partner checks in your agency? i.e. what staff position?
  - Is there a policy regarding the time of the partner checks (i.e. during treatment groups; time of day)?
  - By what means does your agency obtain consent to have the partner contacted? What happens if the offender refuses? How well is this consent process working? Do you have any alternative suggestions for how consent can be obtained?
  - What is the timing with respect to treatment beginning and partner checks starting? How does this work?
  - With what proportion of victims do you usually connect?
  - How many victim contacts are expected over the course of the group? How many times on average are you able to contact victims who give permission to connect with them?
  - Do you have a policy about leaving phone messages? If yes, what is this?
  - Is there a different procedure for dual charges? If yes, please describe.
  - Do you do partner checks for non-mandated clients?
  - What happens when there is a language barrier?
2. Is this partner check procedure a change from a previous process? If yes, please describe the previous partner check process and the reason for the change.
3. In general, how do victims respond to your invitation to do partner checks?
  - Is the victim often still in crisis?
  - In general, how do victims respond to subsequent calls when they have agreed to do the partner checks?
  - If you had not connected with the victim, do you think this person would have sought support from your agency or another agency?
4. When a victim identifies new abusive behaviours on the part of the partner, how does your agency address this?
  - How well is this process working? Are there any ongoing problems with it?
  - Is there a reporting procedure for probation? If yes, under what circumstances would a report be made to probation?
5. In your opinion what is the most important reason for doing partner checks?

Possible reasons (for probes if they do not mention, ask if they see each as a rationale and the reasons why or why not):

  - Safety for victims
  - To check on the partner's continued abuse,
  - To engage woman in services?
  - Accountability to the community?
  - To find out her attitudes to treatment?
  - To inform the criminal justice process? i.e. probation or to ask whether the



woman would phone the police again?

6. In your opinion, does the partner check process make victims safer? Why or why not?
7. In what way are the partner checks useful...?
  - Information for the treatment programs,
  - For the victims?
  - For the accused?
  - For the treatment group leaders?
  - For the agency?
  - For the criminal justice system such as probation, police?
8. In general, how well do you think your current partner check process is working?
9. Have you encountered problems with the partner check process? If yes, please describe.
10. Without revealing any identifying information, do you have any stories of partner checks that worked especially well?
  - That created problems?
11. Can the victim's experience with partner checks be improved? If so, how? Does the partner check process adequately address her safety? If not, what are your recommendations to address the safety concerns?
12. HomeFront is now conducting partner checks on mandated clients on behalf of YWCA Sheriff King's treatments groups? Any comments about this shift?
13. Have you had any experiences that would suggest the importance of partner checks?
14. Have you had any experiences that raise questions about conducting partner checks?
15. Do you have any advice for other agencies/locations that are setting up partner check processes?
16. A final few questions about your background: What is your current position at your agency and how long have you worked in the field of domestic violence?
  - How confident are you when conducting the partner checks?; Reporting re-assaults?
  - What advice would you give to staff members starting to conduct partner checks?
17. Do you have any other ideas about the partner check process?

Thank you for your time.

Not sure why the following two references are situated here?