



Highlighting a Tertiary Family Violence Prevention Program – Men's Counselling Service of the Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter

Prepared by: Gillian Weaver-Dunlop, MSW, RSW, Director Client Services

For the past several decades, the focus of family violence programming and services has primarily been on supporting victims and their children through emergency shelters, second stage shelters, and counselling programs. While these services remain critical, in order to end violence, it is increasingly recognized that we must intervene at all levels on the prevention continuum. One aspect of a secondary prevention approach is to engage men and boys who are at high risk of perpetrating violence, and an important strategy in tertiary prevention is working with people who are perpetrating violence with a view to preventing the re-occurrence of the violence (Turner, Wells, Morley, Ruse & Hansen, 2018).

The Men's Counselling Service (MCS) of the Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter (CWES) is a voluntary preventative program that provides free group and one-on-one therapy to individuals who are wanting to change their abusive behavior and improve their relationships with their partners and children. The MCS offers counselling through a response-based approach¹, which encourages individuals to critically examine their behaviour, and amplifies their desires to treat their partners and/or children more respectfully. The MCS is open to any individual who is concerned about their abusive behaviour, and the therapy is guided by regular contacts with their partner/ ex-partner where possible.

Demand for this voluntary men's program is consistently very high. Men identify four main reasons for seeking services from the Men's Counselling Services, including 1) to get help dealing with their anger issues in relation to their family or spouse, 2) to work on aspects of their personal relationships with family, spouse or friends, 3) to have better control over their emotional states, and 4) to improve themselves through better communication and self-control.

On average, approximately 75% of men are engaged in counselling services between 4-8 months. Seventy percent of the men stay the course of therapy and report that they achieved their goals of therapy. In a program evaluation of 101 clients, the vast majority reported positive changes as a result of counselling, including that they listen better to others (88%); are more respectful of their partner (83%); take responsibility for their abusive behaviour towards their partner (89%); feel more in control of their actions (89%); and feel confident they can respond to emotionally charged situations without being abusive (93%).

Feedback gathered from 64 women whose partners were receiving counselling from

¹ Response-based Approach (originated by Dr. Allan Wade and Dr. Linda Coates - see responsebasedpractice.com; Todd, Weaver-Dunlop & Ogden, 2014)

MCS reported that, since their partner participated in therapy that, they felt physically safe with their partner (81%); they felt emotionally safe with their partner (89%); and, they feel safe from control and intimidation (87%).

Men who attend the Men's Counselling Service also have the opportunity to attend a group called Caring Dads², which is for fathers who have perpetrated family violence against their partners and children. Key components of the Caring Dads program include a focus on parenting, fathering, and abuse. The program aims to help fathers to keep their children safer and to enhance their well-being.

CWES began offering the Caring Dads program in the fall of 2019. Despite a small sample size for the first pilot group (12), pre to post changes were statistically significant on several measures, including variables related to improved interactions with their children, more respectful co-parenting with the mother of their children, better relationships with their partner, improved responses to their children when their children made mistakes or were upset, and increased emotional regulation. Comments about the program from clients are often very positive, and all of the men reported that they felt they were treated with dignity, the supports were culturally appropriate, their strengths were recognized, the experience had made them a better parent and helped them to be more knowledgeable, and they had learned skills.

Further information about the Men's Counselling Service can be found at www.mcscalgary.com, or by phoning 403-299-9680.

References

- Todd, N., Weaver-Dunlop, G., & Ogden, C. (2014). Approaching the Subject of Violence: A Response-Based Approach to Working With Men Who Have Abused Others. *Violence Against Women*, 20(9), 1117–1137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801214549638>
- Turner, A., Wells, L., Morley, H., Ruse, K., Hansen, C. (2018). Shelter 2.0 Discussion Paper – Women's Shelters: Enhancing Impact to End Violence.

² Caring Dads (developed by Dr. Katreena Scott, Dr. Claire Crooks, Tim Kelly, and Dr. Karen Francis (<https://www.caringdads.org/about-caring-dads-1>)).