



Ministry of Community & Social Services

CAS/VAW Collaboration Agreements Stakeholder Consultation

SUMMARY REPORT

February 2011

Introduction

This document is a summary of input received at the Ministry of Community and Social Services' three consultation sessions with representatives from the Children's Aid Societies (CAS)/Violence Against Women (VAW) sectors regarding the CAS/VAW Collaboration Agreements held in Toronto in November 2010.

Background

In 2002, the Ontario government made a commitment to increase collaboration and communication between the VAW and CAS sectors, through supporting the development of local protocols known as CAS/VAW Collaboration Agreements (local "agreements"). The intent of these local agreements was to increase the safety and wellbeing of women and their children through better coordination between the two sectors and contribute to the goal of holding perpetrators of woman abuse accountable for harming women and their children.¹

The 44 local collaboration agreements currently in effect throughout the province were developed in 2003 following a comprehensive province wide-consultation process with representatives from the VAW and CAS sectors to provide input into the development, including the values and the principles of the agreement template.

To support the development of local agreements by community Collaboration Agreement Committees, the ministry provided communities with a document entitled, "Collaboration Agreement Implementation Guidelines and an Agreement Template" (referred to herein as the "agreement template"). The template identifies the intersection points between the two sectors (e.g. a woman and child are involved with both a VAW and CAS agency), the outcomes to be achieved (e.g. the CAS and VAW produce a written agreement on their respective roles and responsibilities in relation to the mother and the child) and the collaborative action required (e.g. CAS and VAW agencies work collaboratively in developing and implementing a safety/service plan to assist a woman and her child).

In addition to the primary focus on collaboration between VAW and CASs, the flexibility of the agreement template was intended to encourage collaborations between the VAW and other relevant sectors (e.g. law enforcement, criminal justice, probation, family court etc.) in order to acknowledge their role in responding to issues pertaining to safety of women and children and abusers' accountability.

¹ CAS and VAW agencies can collaboratively assist women in using measures available to hold the perpetrator accountable (where it is part of the risk reduction strategy) by, for example: assisting the woman to access available legal interventions; jointly ensure the crown asks for the appropriate legal measures (e.g. appropriate bail conditions); be willing witnesses on behalf of the woman at a court hearing, etc. For more details, refer to the 2002 CAS/VAW Collaboration Agreement Curriculum.

Each Collaboration Agreement Committee is responsible for developing the local agreement, overseeing the implementation of the agreement and providing ongoing monitoring of the agreement. Collaboration Agreement Committee's establish a monitoring process that:

- demonstrates the achievement of the outcomes listed for each intersection point;
- identifies where problems exist with the agreement or its implementation; and
- demonstrates that the guiding values and principles of intervention have been followed.

Collaboration Agreement Committees report annually to MCSS with the intent of helping these committees and MCSS determine:

- whether the outcomes for each intersection point have been achieved;
- what changes are needed to improve the results; and
- whether the agreement has resulted in strengthened collaboration between the CAS and VAW agencies.

Since implementation in 2003, MCSS has heard that although progress has been made, there is still room to improve the collaboration between the two sectors. MCSS has heard this through:

- leaders in both the VAW and CAS sectors, including the annual reports submitted to MCSS;
- MCSS regional office staff;
- the 2009 Domestic Violence Advisory Council Report; and
- the 2007 Domestic Violence Death Review Report.

In response to issues identified since implementation, MCSS hosted three consultation sessions with committee members of the 44 local agreements in November 2010. In keeping with the intent and content of the agreement, MCSS worked collaboratively with its regional offices and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) to plan the sessions. The purposes of the consultation were to:

- better understand issues affecting collaboration between the CAS and VAW services;
- gather suggestions about possible strategies to strengthen the effectiveness of the relationship between the sectors; and
- gather suggestions about strategies to improve the agreement template (and resulting local agreements) and the reporting template.

Each community was invited to send a maximum of four participants to the consultation sessions: one representative from the CAS and VAW local agreement signatory partner agencies and one representative from designated Aboriginal and/or francophone services in the CAS or VAW sectors. A total of 114 representatives from CAS and VAW sectors attended one of three consultation sessions. Additionally, representatives from MCSS, MCYS, Ministry of the Attorney General, the Ontario Women's Directorate and the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) attended the sessions.

The remainder of this document outlines the common themes that emerged at the consultations related to:

- progress achieved to date through the local agreements;
- issues and challenges identified; and
- suggested strategies for improvement.

These themes were also identified by several communities who prepared written submissions prior to the consultation sessions.

Progress Achieved to Date through the Local Agreements

Discussions during the consultations revealed that although the experiences with agreements varied significantly by community, the agreements generally were seen to have been:

- most effective in initiating, generating or supporting positive change in the area of cross-sectoral collaboration and communication;
- somewhat effective in promoting the development and implementation of procedures or practices designed to help keep women safe; and
- least effective in helping organizations work together to hold abusers accountable for their actions. It was noted by some that while the agreements should contribute to this goal, it is a goal dependent on many other collaborative forums/avenues, stakeholders and policies.

Participants reported that significant gains were initially made as a result of bringing both sectors together to explore and discuss their working relationships resulting in an increased:

- understanding of and appreciation for the different roles and responsibilities of staff in each sector; and
- trust “on both sides of the table” at the conclusion of the development process.

Examples of Achievements Realized to Date

Several communities reported moderate to significant progress resulting from the development and/or implementation of their agreements in the areas of collaboration, women’s safety and accountability. The following depict the achievements reported in some communities:

Collaboration

- The development processes allowed representatives from both sectors to acknowledge their differences, identify additional barriers to effective collaboration, and eventually work to bridge the differences in philosophy,

mandate and approach to service delivery that had previously hampered their communication and working relations.

- CAS and VAW agencies have supported activities between the two sectors including regular meetings between frontline staff, onsite visits and job shadowing and use of capacity building dollars for joint training has been critical to the success of the agreements.
- A commitment to mandatory training for all incoming staff has helped to maintain the agreements as “living documents” in both CAS and VAW organizations.
- A dedicated “Domestic Violence (DV) Liaison” or “DV Intake Team” within CAS organizations has resulted in more effective communication between typically smaller VAW organizations and larger, multi-department child welfare agencies.
- Effective collaboration, in combination with co-location, has resulted in a “team approach” to abused women which, in turn, has decreased the fear and anxiety abused women often experience when interacting with CAS staff.
- CAS and VAW staff have worked together to develop a Collaborative Service Plan when involved with abused women and their children.

Women and Children’s Safety

- The agreement has served as an impetus for addressing issues and improving outcomes relating to women’s safety within the child welfare sector. CAS and VAW agencies the responsibility for the safety of women and children.
- The agreement, in combination with co-located services, has facilitated earlier intervention with abused women involved with CAS.
- VAW and CAS staff have worked together to co-facilitate a women's group: “Women Moving Forward”.

Abusers’ Accountability

- CAS and Partner Assault Response program staff are currently co-facilitating offender groups.
- Local CAS staff obtained restraining orders, particularly in high risk situations with potential for lethality.
- CAS files are opened in the abuser’s name to reflect and reinforce understanding that the abuser is responsible for CAS involvement, not the victim/mother.

Communities reporting positive changes typically took advantage of the flexibility in the agreement template to best suit their needs. For example, some communities incorporated their agreement into existing Partner Abuse Protocols thereby expanding the number and diversity of agencies involved in the collaborative process and enhancing their ability to keep women safe and hold abusers accountable. Similarly, other communities established their CAS/VAW Collaboration Agreement Committee as a sub-committee of their Domestic Violence Coordinating Committee or assigned responsibility for the implementation of their agreement to the High Risk Task Force in their area, again expanding the number and diversity of partner agencies responsible for effective collaboration, women's safety and abusers' accountability. In some instances, the local agreement has been "married" to related initiatives, such as a transition to co-located services, in order to maximize benefits realized.

Areas in Need of Improvement

Participants at the sessions articulated that although there are successes, there are also areas for improvement with the template itself and some local agreements. Certain themes emerged from some communities through the pre-session written summaries and the consultation group discussions.

- The exclusive focus on CAS and VAW organizations creates challenges for staff to address the increasingly complex challenges experienced by many victims of woman abuse (e.g. mental health and addiction issues, custody and access issues etc.)
- An acknowledgement that many other (e.g., justice) system players play critical roles in holding abusers accountable for their actions, reinforcing the value of bringing them into the local agreements and committees.
- The expectations and requirements for collaboration are not the same for VAW and CAS organizations; and current resources are not adequate to support and nurture effective working relationships between CAS and VAW sectors. As a result, relations between CAS and VAW organizations are at times challenging and some VAW organizations feel they carry a disproportionate responsibility for collaboration in their communities.
- The current resources are not seen as adequate to provide the basic and enhanced training required to promote a shared understanding of woman abuse and effective implementation of the agreements.
- Both the agreement template and local agreements should incorporate a focus on developing links with other children's services in general to adequately address the needs of children (e.g. mental health).

- The agreement template should be explicit about the need for local agreements to be culturally appropriate and/or sensitive.

In addition to these suggestions for improvement, participants also identified several new and emerging issues requiring attention, such as the recent and pending changes in the child welfare sector, as well as several other issues in the following areas: philosophy, mandate and approach to service; relations between sectors; training issues; implementation challenges; reporting issues; needs of Aboriginal women; and needs of francophone women.

Suggested Strategies for Improvement

CAS and VAW representatives generated an extensive list of strategies and suggestions, in pre-session written submissions and during the consultation process, to address issues and challenges identified in annual reports.

Some of these suggestions relate to the agreements themselves while others go beyond the scope of the agreements.

MCSS would like to take the opportunity to thank participants for the feedback received. Many innovative suggestions were put forward for not only improving the agreement template and the reporting template and process, but also for improving collaboration in general between the VAW and child welfare sectors and with other sectors. The ministry will consider the suggestions submitted as we move forward to develop our action plan.

The following is a high-level summary (arranged in no particular order) of the most commonly suggested strategies to strengthen the agreement.

Revisions to CAS/VAW Collaboration Agreement Template

Analysis and Language

Review and revise the agreement template with attention to a gender-based analysis of violence against women. More specifically, incorporate “best practice guidelines” based on gender-based analysis; and replace references to “bilateral violence” with an appropriate definition of woman abuse. The agreement should reflect an understanding of the scope of the Aboriginal definition of “family”.

Encourage Participation by Other Sectors

Participants expressed concern that the agreement alone was insufficient to address issues pertaining to women’s safety and particularly, to abusers’ accountability. Suggestions were put forward that in order to address these issues, other sectors such

as law enforcement, criminal justice, probation, and family court should be included as part of solution.

Reporting Template and Process

Annual reports submitted by communities should be summarized, including key findings and key successes, and shared with VAW and CAS organizations.

Cross-sectoral CAS/VAW Training re: Collaboration Agreement

Allocate resources to develop and implement standardized or consistent cross-sectoral training on an ongoing or annual basis. Training should promote a common understanding of the agreements, provide opportunities for presentations by both VAW and CAS personnel and encourage networking.

Other Strategies Suggested to Increase Cross-sectoral Collaboration

Promote Women's Safety via Standardized Risk Assessment

Develop a common risk assessment process and standardized risk assessment tool to be used by both CAS and VAW sectors. Tool should be appropriate for use in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

Open Files in Abusers' Names

Encourage CASs to consider, as some already have, to open any new files in the abuser's name in those instances when woman abuse has occurred.

Strategies to Increase Collaboration Across Other Sectors

Cross and Multi-Sectoral Training

Allocate resources needed to provide on-going (mandatory) training for CAS and VAW personnel on woman abuse and related issues. In some instances it may be appropriate and helpful to open training to representatives from other sectors, particularly law enforcement and justice partners.

Training priorities include but are not limited to:

- patterns and dynamics of woman abuse;
- dispelling myths about woman abuse;
- impact of woman abuse on children and children's mental health;
- complex and concurrent challenges facing many abused women today (i.e., addictions and mental health);
- legal issues;
- cross-cultural issues (i.e., human trafficking and honor killing) and cultural competency;
- Aboriginal issues, delivered by representatives from Aboriginal communities;
- francophone issues; and
- engaging and working effectively with offenders.

Inter-ministerial Cooperation and Collaboration

Create opportunities for all appropriate ministries to collaborate together to address VAW issues. More specifically, acknowledge the importance of a provincial strategy to reduce violence against women and increase services to victims and perpetrators of woman abuse.

Create a provincial framework to examine and confirm all sectors' and ministries' roles and responsibilities in addressing violence against women, including MCSS, MCYS, Ministry of the Attorney General, Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, Ontario Women's Directorate and Ministry of Education. A framework would help identify trends and confirm best practice recommendations. This information would be communicated regularly to local communities and used to improve safety of and services to women and children in accordance with mandated directives from each ministry.

Augment or Replace Agreements with Multi-Sectoral Protocols

Augment or replace the current agreements with mandated, multi-sectoral protocols or collaborative agreements outlining expectations and roles of police, crown attorneys, victim/witness assistance programs, probation & parole, CAS, and VAW organizations, hospitals and medical/health services, mental health services and other related services/sectors.

Augment or Replace Collaboration Committees with Multi-Sectoral Committees

Augment or replace CAS/VAW Collaboration Committees with multi-sectoral coordinating committees or other suitable bodies. Alternatively, assign responsibility for agreement oversight to existing coordinating committee or high risk committee.

Next Steps

The consultations emphasized that changes are required to increase the efficacy of the agreement template, improve services and supports for victims of women abuse and their children, and promote abusers' accountability for their actions.

MCSS, is in the process of reviewing the suggested strategies for improvement and developing a follow-up action plan. .

MCSS recognizes that an action plan must consider the experiences and needs of those communities that have realized some success developing and implementing their agreements as well as those that attribute limited or no positive benefits to their agreements.

Some of the strategies put forward fall outside the mandate of MCSS and scope of this initiative, but the ministry will work with partner ministries, as applicable.

As an example, MCSS is working with the Ontario Women's Directorate, MCYS and the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies to ensure all CAS agencies and MCSS funded VAW agencies receive a copy of the *Critical Connections: Where Woman Abuse and Child Safety Intersect - A Practice Guide for Child Welfare Professionals in Ontario*. During the consultation process, representatives from both sectors expressed a desire for a copy of the practice guide as a valuable resource, but were concerned that the cost of purchasing the guide was prohibitive to many agencies.

MCSS recognizes the need to involve other sectors when working with victims of woman abuse, their children and perpetrators of violence. It should be noted that although the required agreement is between the CAS and VAW sectors only, the agreement template is intended to be flexible and does not preclude involvement of other sectors as needed.

MCSS is committed to building upon the progress made and the information shared during these consultations and will continue to communicate with both sectors regarding any proposed changes to the agreement template, report template and/or the reporting process. It is our goal to keep the avenues for communication open and we encourage you to continue dialogues with your MCSS and MCYS regional representatives, as well as your community partners regarding the ongoing process of improving collaboration within your communities.