

HOMEFRONT

STOP IT WHERE IT STARTS

RESPONSE TO THE SYNERGY FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

Introduction

HomeFront is pleased to accept the HomeFront Evaluation Final Report submitted September 21st, 2004 by Irene Hoffart and Michelle Clarke of Synergy Research Group. The report was presented to the HomeFront Board of Directors on October 7th, 2004 at which time it was formally accepted by unanimous vote.

This document is to be read as an accompanying document to the Synergy Research Final Report. Its purpose is to summarize results, recognize the need for ongoing work and to recognize and credit community partners.

HomeFront's cutting edge initiative and successes would not have been possible without the coordinated efforts and support received from dozens of our like-minded community partners.

The commitment and support of our funders can be neither overstated nor undervalued. Their generosity and vision have permitted this important work and our learnings from this research bring our society that much closer to our dream of a community free from domestic violence:

Alberta Law Foundation
An Anonymous Donor
The Calgary Foundation
The City of Calgary
MATCH Solutions
Government of Alberta
Alberta Mental Health Board
Justice
Lottery Fund
Community Initiatives Program
Government of Canada
National Crime Prevention Centre
Status of Women Canada
Jerry P. Selinger Memorial Fund
The United Way of Calgary and Area

HomeFront History and Background

HomeFront, a collaborative justice and community response to domestic violence, was launched in May 2000 in conjunction with the opening of a specialized domestic violence docket court in Calgary. HomeFront brings together social service agencies, law enforcement and the criminal justice system in order to provide a coordinated, seamless and timely response to families impacted by domestic violence in Calgary.

The dedicated docket court uses a team of individuals (specialized Crown Prosecutors, a member of the Calgary Police Service's Domestic Conflict Unit, Probation Officers, Legal Aid Duty Counsel and HomeFront's Domestic Violence Court Caseworkers) in order to

ensure an improved response from the justice system and the community when incidents of domestic violence lead to charges in criminal court. Pre-Court Conferences, in which all team members review each case prior to its appearance in court, are an important part of the process. Each member of the team brings important background information before the Court. This enhanced communication results in dispositions that better hold offenders accountable and better protect the safety of victims and their children. Within this context, the rights of an accused for due process are carefully protected.

A fundamental intent of the Domestic Violence Docket Court is to provide an opportunity for early case resolution. Early case resolution refers to the ability of the Court to avoid lengthy delays, to set court dates as quickly as possible and to facilitate rapid referral of eligible offenders to intensive batterer treatment programs.

It was hypothesized that an effective response to domestic violence required close collaboration among community support networks and the justice system. In the past, a lack of coordination and lengthy court delays had often resulted in offenders not being held accountable for their actions and victims feeling frustrated and continuing to live in unsafe environments. Children in these families perhaps suffered most of all.

In addition to the important work described above, HomeFront has a number of other stated objectives:

- To increase accessibility of diverse groups and populations to the justice system;
- To reduce gaps and avoid duplication of services through coordination and collaboration within the justice system and between the justice system and the broader community;
- To increase public confidence in the justice system by providing a more immediate and appropriate response to domestic violence.

The Synergy Final Evaluation Report speaks directly to HomeFront's success in achieving its objectives. HomeFront's Board of Directors wishes to acknowledge that the measure of success achieved to date has been possible only because of the partnership with and contributions made by dozens of domestic violence serving agencies in Calgary. On behalf of the clients we all serve, HomeFront thanks the project partners for their contributions and commitment.

Research Strategy

HomeFront (originally called the Calgary Justice Working Project) was launched as a four year national demonstration project. Since HomeFront's inception, the National Crime Prevention Centre provided funding for a comprehensive, independent program evaluation. This funding was later augmented by important contributions made by the Alberta Law Foundation, an Anonymous Donor, Status of Women Canada and RESOLVE Alberta.

Of special note are some key contributions to the Report made by RESOLVE Alberta. Not only did they provide significant funding for the evaluation project, but particularly in the early stages of the work of the Evaluation Committee, they provided invaluable assistance in conceptualizing some of the over 900 variables. RESOLVE also contributed to the body of the Final Report by conducting interviews with seventy victims in Calgary, thereby allowing victims' voices to be heard.

The two key purposes of the research were to compare results to objectives and to assess the total impact by comparison of results pre- and post-establishment of HomeFront's unique program. HomeFront awarded the contract for the external, independent evaluation to the Synergy Research Group. The research project was very ambitious and is expected to inform practice across Canada. The Final Report documents the findings of four years of data collection. It is believed that no other entity in North America possesses the breadth and depth of data collected during the extensive evaluation of the HomeFront initiative. This wealth of raw data will prove invaluable as the work goes forward.

The HomeFront Board of Directors wishes to express appreciation to all the funders who supported this remarkable research project and to Synergy Research Group for its diligence and competence in completing the work.

Research Results – The Successes

Comparison and analysis of data on hundreds of domestic violence cases appearing before the courts before the introduction of HomeFront and after clearly show a remarkable, positive impact on the rate of recidivism. Recidivism has been reduced by 2/3! (12.2% since the introduction of the HomeFront compared to 34.1% which was the norm before HomeFront!) This data reflects the measure of new domestic violence charges being laid against the same perpetrators within 24 months of a previous court appearance for the same kind of offence. This is incontrovertible evidence that the HomeFront initiative is having a powerful, positive effect.

Offenders who participated in and completed domestic violence treatment programs have shown a further reduction in re-assault charges to a rate of 5.7%. The treatment agencies responsible for providing batterer treatment during the course of the evaluation (Calgary Counselling Centre, YWCA Sheriff King Family Violence Prevention and Intervention Centre and, until November 2002, Discovery House) are all to be commended for the quality and effectiveness of their programs.

HomeFront's Domestic Violence Court Caseworkers were successful in contacting victims in 71% of all cases in which charges were laid. Information relative to family history, issue relating to children, safety concerns, requests for no contact orders, information about mental health and substance abuse – all from the victim's perspective – is now available to the specialized domestic violence docket court in a majority of cases prior to disposition. The Synergy Report concludes that *“Overall, the results indicate that HomeFront has been successful in increasing victim involvement in the criminal justice system and in providing many victims with the information they need.”*

Offenders who pleaded guilty to incident(s) of domestic violence and/or who agreed to accept responsibility for their actions by entering into a peace bond are offered immediate access to domestic violence treatment. 85% of these offenders entered treatment within 30 days of disposition. This contrasts greatly to the experience in previous years when waiting lists of many months were the norm. The Alberta Government, through the Alberta Mental Health Board and Department of Justice made this quick access possible through provision of treatment funding. The research validates that the **relatively quick response of the justice proceedings together with immediate access to treatment have contributed to the tremendous reduction in recidivism.** A further factor in achieving this success may also be attributed to improved community supervision and quicker response to breaches of court orders by police, probation officers and the Court.

Children impacted by domestic violence in Calgary now have a better chance to escape the cycle of violence. Between 2000 and 2004, children were directly abused in 7% of all specialized docket court cases and approximately 30% had witnessed incidents of violence in their homes. The intergenerational aspect of domestic violence is well documented; in great measure, domestic violence is a learned behaviour. It is widely accepted that one of the most important factors affecting children's wellbeing and mental health is the behaviour of their parents. This underlines the importance of an effective preventative intervention designed to stop and modify the abuser's behaviour. As offenders face legal sanctions and participate in domestic violence treatment, they learn to model new, more appropriate behaviours. Children are thereby protected from experiencing further trauma and, through counselling and support, have the potential to escape the devastating cycle of violence and abuse.

HomeFront recognizes the need for future research in this area to firmly establish the link between positive changes in parental behaviour and reduced incidents of violence later perpetrated by their children. HomeFront's large database will permit such research to be undertaken over the next several years and will be invaluable in informing future practice.

Community stakeholders continually rated HomeFront's ability to enhance community awareness of domestic violence as one of its greatest successes (71.5% in 2001, 92% in 2002 and 82.4% in 2003). Much like the issue of drunk driving, HomeFront recognizes that the issues of domestic violence and the creation of greater public awareness must be consistently addressed over the long-term. As quoted in the Synergy Report: *"The victim has a face and a voice. The Court brings this issue to the forefront of important societal issues."*

Community stakeholders were very pleased with HomeFront's collaborative efforts. HomeFront is honoured to play an integral role in Calgary's coordinated, seamless, collaborative approach to domestic violence. According to the Synergy Report: *"Over 90% of survey respondents over three years consistently identified improved collaboration and coordination of services as a continued area of success (96.6% in 2001, 92.8% in 2002 and 90% in 2003.) Stakeholders participating in the 2004 interviews and focus groups confirmed those findings."*

Research Results – Areas for Continued Work/Improvement

While a great deal of progress has been made, much work remains to be done. Recognizing the positive impact the work was having, in 2003 the HomeFront Board developed its forward-looking strategy to build on successes and expand the initiative. In keeping with organizational capacity, HomeFront set the following priorities for areas requiring improvement or continuing development:

- The need to establish a dedicated domestic violence trial court;
- The need to do more to help children impacted by domestic violence;
- The need to find more effective means to reduce the treatment drop out rate of high risk offenders and for those that do choose to drop out, to provide a more effective justice system response to hold them accountable;
- The need to continue to address access issues for marginalized groups.

Synergy's findings confirm HomeFront's vision and assessment of the issues that remain to be addressed. HomeFront is actively engaged in this work and will continue to examine and, when necessary, revise its priorities.

Next Steps

HomeFront is committed to continuing its work to improve the coordinated community/justice system response to the issues of domestic violence in Calgary. Maintenance of strong connections with key members of the justice system, community partners and all levels of government will be necessary to address the need for systemic change and to enhance the community's potential to effectively support those impacted by domestic violence. That said, HomeFront's sole intent is to achieve its goals and objectives and is not politically based.

HomeFront will continue to foster coordinated efforts designed to further reduce the number of incidents of domestic violence. HomeFront data confirms that domestic violence permeates all social strata of any community. It is not an issue that resides only in homes where there is poverty or substance abuse, as many might assume. HomeFront will act to raise public awareness to the fact that domestic violence is everyone's business and does not belong behind closed doors. A number of new public service announcements to raise public awareness of the devastating effects of domestic violence on all family members are currently being developed.

HomeFront plans to build on its work to date by introducing a new initiative, an Early Outreach and Intervention Program in the winter of 2004. This program is designed to offer assistance to families where an incident of domestic violence has resulted in the police being called, but no criminal charges being laid. By offering support and appropriate referral to community resources, it is hoped further incidents of domestic violence may be reduced. The success of this initiative is contingent on collaborative and coordinated action involving HomeFront staff, the Calgary Police Service and domestic violence serving agencies.

The future is promising and HomeFront looks forward with renewed commitment, determination and hope.

Contact Information/Request for Feedback

HomeFront hopes that its experience is helpful to other communities seeking new and innovative means to address their own challenges in the area of domestic violence. Feedback is welcomed from all individuals and/or groups who choose to read the Synergy Final Evaluation Report. HomeFront's contact information is:

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Those interested in learning more about HomeFront and its work in the area of domestic violence are invited to explore the HomeFront website:
www.homefrontcalgary.com

HomeFront Board of Directors
Bonnie Knox, Executive Director