

The Rural Women's Shelter Program – Making a Difference in Wellington County

By Janine Roelens-Grant

Scenario: An Abused Woman in Rural Ontario

Shirley lives in rural Ontario and is abused by her husband. There are no neighbours nearby to hear the abuse. Her doctor and other community and social service workers who have treated her injuries over the years have avoided the issue of wife assault. In spite of the physical and psychological abuse Shirley endures, she is pressured by society and her family and friends to remain in the relationship.

The nature and small size of her community inhibits privacy, making Shirley reluctant to seek help. And the nearest shelter and transition houses are located in urban centres, a fair distance from her home. Besides, restricted access to the family's vehicle and the constant surveillance of her activities by her husband further undermines Shirley's confidence and ability to seek help.

Finally, Shirley builds up enough courage to call the operator for the nearest 1-800 wife assault helpline. She purposefully calls a toll-free number that will not show up on the telephone bill; but Shirley is still taking a risk - someone may be listening in on the party-line. She tells her story and is believed by the crisis line attendant.

Shirley is told about the women's shelter program in her area and the services it provides. She is asked when the shelter program volunteer in her area can phone her back. The Program Co-ordinator for the area contacts the volunteer, who then calls Shirley discretely. They provide information and options from which Shirley is able to choose what direction she wants to take.

Rural Women's Shelter Program: Confronting Violence in Rural Wellington County

The Co-ordinator for the Rural Women's Shelter Program in North Wellington, Chris Vrooman, outlined

the above scenario. "Scenarios like this," she explained, "are typical of abused women in rural Ontario." The barriers a battered woman in an urban area has to overcome to remedy her abusive situation seem insurmountable; but the obstacles are even greater for an abused woman living in an isolated rural area or community.

From its beginning in 1977, women from rural Wellington County made use of the 24-hour crisis line available through Guelph-Wellington Women in Crisis. Rural women have also used Marianne's Place - a women's shelter in Guelph - since its establishment in 1978.

However, it was felt that these services were restricted to those women not facing long distance calling charges or long drives to Guelph. To help meet the needs of all abused women from rural Wellington County, Guelph-Wellington Women in Crisis (G-W WIC) launched the Rural Women's Shelter Program (RWSP) in 1986.

The range of services available to abused women through the Rural Women's Shelter Program include:

- a toll-free 24-hour crisis line
- a safe place to talk
- access to Marianne's Place (a shelter in Guelph) or a local overnight safe place
- transportation to the shelter or other necessary resources
- accompaniment to the hospital, police station or court
- self-help and other support groups at various locations
- on-going telephone support
- access to realistic information

The Rural Women's Shelter Program is considered a "grass roots" program - the only one of its kind in Ontario. There are three full-time employees responsible for administering and co-ordinating the RWSP in Wellington County and its roster of volunteers. The principles that shape their response to abused women in rural

communities are:

- violence against women is not a personal issue, it is a community issue;
- change is achieved when abused women accept responsibility for their lives, both the problems and solutions;
- women are the source of their own healing, if they have safety and support;
- rural women need rural support.

"If we strive to make the community the shelter, the community becomes a safe and secure place," explained Chris, Co-ordinator for North Wellington. This is done through the recruitment and training of local rural residents (volunteers), who can in turn help support abused women and advocate for more responsible community action.

All recruits are required to undergo a ten-week training session organized by Women in Crisis staff and outside professionals. The sessions clarify the extent of violence against women; as well, they cover the personal damage violence causes and the skills necessary to undo that damage. Volunteers are trained to work with individuals, as well as facilitate and lead self-help groups. "Real gratification," said one volunteer, "is when you see someone you help be strong."

Traditionally, an abused women was not believed by their doctor, social worker or the police. Chris stated that "the role [of the RWSP] is believing her, and giving her real information." She explained that abused woman often have unrealistic expectations of the police, and the "paper" methods of keeping their husbands away, such as peace bonds and restraining orders.

While police were directed to lay charges in all cases of wife assault beginning in 1982, many police forces remain unaware of the provincial charging policies or reluctant to enforce them on someone they know. In addition, "society still tends to blame women for what happens to them," explained one volunteer. But Chris stresses the impor-

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