

# The system will work if followed through

By JACIE B. PALMER  
Herald Special

A victim of family violence is usually assaulted many times (thirty-five times, on average) prior to ever seeking intervention by police. Women are victims in one-third of homicides in Canada. One in three victims of family violence is beaten on a regular basis. Often the first act of violence against a woman will occur during pregnancy.

The reasons for not going to police include: the fear of retaliation by her male partner, the threat of losing custody of her children, the fear the abuser will lose his job, the fear of not being believed by police and not wanting to deal with a slow and inadequate legal system.

Police intervention appears to protect women from more

violence and from more severe injuries. Police will lay a charge where they have reasonable grounds even though visible injuries may be minimal. When police lay the charge the victim of the assault is twice as likely to follow through on the charge.

There are valid reasons to pursue an assault through the court system. The majority of assaulted women who enter the system report a reduction in violence. Yes, there may be fear of reprisal from a mate, but, he may be discouraged from further acts of violence because of the charge on record. For many women, just admitting they have been assaulted is a step in regaining their self-respect and self-esteem.

We must remember that some convicted abusers will still fail to



recognize their problem and will still blame their victim for the abuse despite police and court intervention and extensive counselling.

The male abuser must go to court for a first appearance and again for the trial. Because a charge was laid, he will know that his victim means business and that she won't stand for any more violence. Even if he is found not-guilty by the judge, he will be less likely to assault her again. It is unlikely that the penalty will be very stiff for a first offence but if he is convicted of assault he may be forced to obtain counselling.

Our system may be criticized for its ineffectiveness but it is there to help victims. A victim has a responsibility to protect herself and her children.

When a woman goes to court she is making a statement to her abuser and, indeed, for all abused women. She is saying, "Violence against women must stop!" It

takes a courageous woman to admit she has been abused. It takes courage to follow through. Fear of a dismissal should not discourage a victim for pursuing a charge through the court system.

When a victim speaks to police regarding her charge, she should be honest and open. She should check back with the investigating officer often. That will ensure her case is being given priority. The officer must know she is interested in following through. Prior to going to court, it is important to make contact again to be certain police have followed up on information provided and are prepared to proceed to court.

The Halton Regional Police have a Victim Services Unit which can support victims of family violence. They will also be able to refer victims to other available services within the Region.

Our criminal justice system responds only to sexual and physical assaults. Our system is not perfect but it is improving. Increased emphasis on family violence at both the federal and provincial levels of government will ensure continued funding to increase the level of awareness of issues surrounding family violence as it pertains to our policing and court systems.

Endnote: Statistics taken from Ontario Women's Directorate publications.

Feel free to contact Jacie by directing letters to her attention at The Herald. All correspondence will remain confidential. Should you wish to speak to Jacie, call the Distress Centre at 877-1211 and your call will be returned. If you are a woman or child in crisis or an abusive male wanting help, call the Distress Centre or dial 911.

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