

# November is Woman Abuse Prevention Month

## Victim Abuse Support Agency SAVIS offers free services in Acton Reporting sexual violence is key

By Jane Dougan

Here are some sobering statistics. According to Kathryn Baker-Reed, Executive Director of SAVIS of Halton (Sexual Assault and Violence Intervention Services), one-half of women and a minimum of one-sixth of men are survivors of sexual violence.

Here's some good news. Kathryn puts the emphasis on the word 'survivors' instead of 'victims' for a reason. Victims can become survivors with the help of focused agencies like SAVIS.

Here's even better news. SAVIS has a presence in Acton as of November 12<sup>th</sup>, and should have a base in Georgetown by early 2015. Bi-weekly individual counseling sessions may be crisis (1-3), short-term (1-8) or long-term (up to 24).

Here's the best news. SAVIS counseling and educational services are free, not only for victims of abuse but also for their families and friends, anyone 16 or older. (Plans are in the works for this to come down to 14 years

within the next year.)

SAVIS also does extensive public education (382 presentations last year to over 8800 members of the Halton community). There is a growing educational role for high school students with the rapid rise of cyber-stalking and cyber-violence. As Kathryn explains, "Part of what we're noticing when we go into high schools is that we really need to work with 14 and 15 year olds as well as 16 and older. Everything's been expanding with the ways people can access information and cause harm to one another. So much spyware is available now that someone can be listening in on your phone even when you don't know it! That's why in counseling sessions, we ask clients to power their phones down."

SAVIS gives priority to ensuring confidentiality. The agency chooses neutral unadvertised locations (often 'nesting' with other agencies to keep costs down) so that office visits can be made without the risk of being seen to be seeking help.

SAVIS keeps turnaround times for appointments as short as possible, and encourages people to use their 24-hour support line and touch base with staff even before their first visit.

Kathryn is understandably excited about their new locations in Acton and, shortly, Georgetown. "We have a really strong community profile, excellent support from Catholic and Halton District School Boards, and work closely with other agencies. We're very fortunate – anytime we knock on a door, schools and agencies just welcome us!"

SAVIS offer volunteer training programs, and are always interested in getting community feedback. You can also help by simply spreading the word that this resource is now available in Acton.

If you or someone you know is the victim of abuse, phone SAVIS at 905 825-3622, or toll free 877 268 8416. They also have a 24-hour support line at 905 875-1555. Visit their website at [www.savisofhalton.org](http://www.savisofhalton.org)

By Dawn Brown

Often in cases of sexual violence, survivors are hesitant to report an assault. Nicole Pietsch, Coordinator of the Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres, explained that in many cases reporting the assault is not always the victim's first concern emotionally, that she is often more focussed on piecing her life back together again.

There are other factors that keep women silent. In many cases they fear that they will not be believed. More often the offender is known to the victim—a friend or neighbour—leaving family and friends uncomfortable. Also the criminal justice system is not always effective. Even with physical evidence, a woman must prove that she did not give consent.

"It is not enough to tell women to go and tell your story to a system, which, over the course of most-times more than a year, will simply function to challenge, disbelieve or scrutinize her in the face of a crime," Pietsch said. "This is not supportive to

most women; nor does it hold offenders accountable. Yes, women can report: but they will also need information, support—and alternatives to reporting, should they choose not to."

In order for more women to come forward, Pietsch believes several factors must be addressed. The first is a focus on preventing sexual assault rather than merely imprisoning offenders. Helping women to better understand the laws and their rights concerning sexual assault versus consent, as well as bystanders to learn how to best intervene or support someone who has been targeted by sexual violence. She also feels more needs to be done to support women who do decide to report, especially increased awareness of victim-blaming myths.

"Victims of other crimes (i.e. robbery, muggings, etc.) do not face the same suggestions that they somehow are responsible for their victimization, or were complicit with the offender. Yet victims of sexual assault face this on a regular basis," Pietsch said. "Many of these

myths are rooted in sexist ideals about how women "ought to behave", and so are challenging to unroot."

Pietsch advocates that sexual violence to be taken seriously, for policies and laws that work for victims. "Today, conviction rates are very low, which de-validates the experiences of survivors; and works to suggest that sexual assault is a rare crime."

Pietsch would like to see policy-makers and politicians work closely victims' advocates and the victims themselves to learn where systems can improve, and where to make changes.

"Remember, most improvements to domestic violence, stalking and sexual assault laws since the 1970s occurred because of the relentless advocacy and demands for change from women's activists and services! And that is a positive thing to keep in mind."

For more information or for support, visit the SAVIS (Sexual Assault & Violence Intervention Services) of Halton website, [www.savisofhalton.org](http://www.savisofhalton.org)

## Together we can make it happen

By Jane Dougan

You may not think you know someone who's been a victim of abuse but you do, almost certainly. Who they are might surprise you.

That woman in your office who seems like she's got it all, including a charming spouse? When she met him, she was swept off her feet by his attention, flowers and gifts. The control started slowly. The mood swings, the unpredictability, the walking-on-eggshells, her constant strategizing to avoid triggers. Driving home she stays in the car for as long as she dares, trying to stop her hands from shaking before she goes inside. She's told herself she'll leave when it starts to effect the children, but she can't admit that it already has. She daydreams about what a different life might look like (she even has a board for it on Pinterest) but she can't take that first step, let alone the second or third.

That friend you haven't seen for a few days? You figure she's been busy or visiting family. Coast-to-coast media coverage of abuse

allegations against a well-known Canadian radio host triggered painful memories for her of past sexual abuse. Her heart is pounding and her skin feels like it is on fire. She just can't be around people right now. She's too vulnerable; all her defenses have been stripped away and she needs time to reflect and rebuild.

Look carefully at that older lady in the pew beside you at church. Her scarf is carefully arranged to hide bruises from elder abuse by 'caregivers'. Your teenage niece is terrified that a cellphone video from a party that got out of control is going viral. Already she's frozen-out by peers at school, but that's nothing to what's being texted to her.

That nice man who lives down the hall? Him too. Men (one out of six) may not be abuse victims as frequently as women (one out of two), but agencies such as SAVIS suspect that the statistic for violence against men is on the low side.

Here're some things survivors of abuse suggest. Keep the conversation around abuse going amongst

your friends and community. Embolden people experiencing violence to speak up, knowing they will be listened to and believed. Challenge friends, family, coworkers, whoever and whenever you encounter abuse against women or men. It can be as subtle as language or gestures that diminish or embarrass – and it may be passed off as a 'joke' – but if it's allowed to take seed, it can quickly grow. Keep informed – in Acton and region, we're fortunate to have access to a range of social and educational services around physical and mental health, including combating abuse. Learn from them. Support them. Get the word out. And if you suspect you are the victim of abuse, take that first step. The idea around this month's theme on abuse prevention is clear and straightforward: it is everyone's fundamental right to live in safety and security in her home and community. Together we can make it happen. Let's start with Acton, and see where it ends up.

