

Rape Crisis Centre plans to extend services north

By Dianne Cornish

The Halton Rape Crisis Centre, headquartered in Burlington, provides support and information to victims of sexual violence.

While that's reassuring news for women in Halton, it doesn't end the "sense of isolation" felt by many female residents of North Halton who don't have the same accessibility to services as their counterparts in the southern part of the Region.

Isolation might also explain why the number of North Halton volunteers assisting the Centre are dramatically lower than those in the southern part of the Region. During a recent interview, the Centre's volunteer co-ordinator Margaret Perry noted that there are a total of 40 volunteers from Oakville and Burlington. In North Halton, there are five volunteers—three in Milton and two in Halton Hills.

While "geographic isolation" and the "size of the Region" make it difficult to extend services into Halton's northern communities, Perry said plans are under way to extend the Centre's reach northward. "It's difficult to provide services with only a few volunteers in North Halton," she said. However, on a brighter note, the Centre plans to do just that.

"Our ultimate goal is to provide training and counselling sessions for volunteers in North Halton," Perry said. In the meantime, efforts are being made to increase awareness of the Centre in Halton Hills and Milton and to increase the volunteer base. "If adequate response is achieved, a training session will be held (in North Halton), most likely in early 1993," the volunteer co-ordinator said.

Also among the organization's

goals is the establishment of "a physical presence" in North Halton. Acton Social Services and Information Centre (ASSIC) has already offered space for a satellite office, Perry said, adding there's a possibility that the Centre will operate there "once a week," if details can be worked out.

Wendi Hunter and Elizabeth Carmichael hope to see the Centre reach its goals and they're doing what they can to help. The women are the Centre's only volunteers from Halton Hills, but they're hoping to see their ranks grow in the weeks ahead.

Crisis line manned 24 hours-a-day

Hunter, who became a volunteer this past spring, is a Crisis Line volunteer and group co-facilitator for the Centre. The Crisis Line (875-1555) is a 24-hour help line manned by volunteers, who provide support and information to victims of sexual violence. It has a Milton number, which means that it can be reached from any municipality in Halton Region without a long-distance charge.

As a group co-facilitator, Hunter helps coordinate self-directed discussion for groups of four to eight women who are victims of sexual violence. "We're not therapists, but we do provide valuable peer support," the local volunteer explained.

Carmichael, who also became a volunteer in the spring, said Halton's rural area is definitely disadvantaged when it comes to accessibility to services because public transportation isn't as readily available in rural parts of the Region as it is in Halton's urban areas. "The accessibility isn't there if you don't have a car," she said,

noting that her ability to become involved in community groups is limited because she doesn't have a vehicle. She depends on Hunter to drive her to activities provided for volunteers of the Rape Crisis Centre.

A Crisis Line volunteer and outreach committee member, Carmichael is a steadfast supporter of the Centre's training program, which consists of eight weekly three-hour sessions covering a wide range of topics, including law and incest. "It changed my outlook on life...it matured me," she said.

Carmichael said Centre volunteers give "non-judgemental support" to women. They accompany victims of sexual violence to hospitals or police and they provide sensitive support and information every step of the way. Other volunteers, who don't want to be front-line workers, help in public education campaigns or get involved in committee work.

The outreach committee, for example, tries to inform members of Halton's multi-cultural community about the Centre and its work. Carmichael said it's important to involve people of different ethnic backgrounds because women from other countries are often subjected to "emotional blackmail." Some men who assault women from foreign countries frighten their victims by telling them they'll be thrown out of the country if they go to court with an assault charge, she said.

Hunter, Carmichael and Perry all expressed hope that North Halton's volunteer base will grow to meet the needs of the community. Women interested in learning more about the Centre or becoming a volunteer can call (416) 634-8182.

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