“Successful Domestic Violence Prevention in Rural Communities”

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BACKGROUND

Port Pirie is a regional city with a population of 13,600 and is a service centre to many small rural communities in the mid north of South Australia.

The Port Pirie Domestic Violence Action Group Inc. (PPDVAG) is a representative group from agencies and the community, with primary aims of:

• developing a regional structure for the co-ordination of effort, policy determination and review of Domestic Violence strategies;
• placing Domestic Violence on the community’s agenda as a shared responsibility;
• reducing the incidence of Domestic Violence;
• developing effective liaison between involved agencies and promoting attitudes and practices within agencies that lead to a constructive resolution of incidents of Domestic Violence;
• providing effective local support structures to those affected by Domestic Violence;
• maximising the use of resources available to the region; and
• promoting legislative and social policy changes that lead to the protection of the victims of Domestic Violence.

Following a broad based Summit held in 1995, PPDVAG sits within a collaborative support structure within the community consisting of the Port Pirie Regional Council’s Social Development Advisory Committee and Crime Prevention Committees and Port Pirie Regional Health Service Inc Women’s Health Team.

Since 1992 the Port Pirie Domestic Violence Action Group has embarked on a training and development program pitched at four levels; the professional domestic violence worker, agency staff and volunteers, those affected by domestic violence, and community members. Initially Port Pirie DVAG contracted external providers for training, predominantly from Adelaide. Within three years over 170 people in the Port Pirie region accessed training opportunities including "Working with Women", “Grief of Domestic Violence” and “Effects on Children of Domestic Violence.”
PPDVAG established a Training and Development Sub Committee in 1996 to ensure the best use of existing skills and knowledge within the community and to provide specifically targeted Domestic Violence training locally.

It is a model that can be adapted for other communities and/or other social issues.

Training programs have been conducted for Port Pirie Regional Police, Port Pirie Regional Health Service Staff, Swimming Instructors and male perpetrators. Some programs are ongoing and future programs are planned.

The following example illustrates the operation of the Training and Development Sub Committee.

POLICE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (DOMESTIC VIOLENCE)

The aim was to enhance the skills and knowledge of Police staff in the region so that they could more effectively respond to Domestic Violence incidents and more efficiently handle associated administrative tasks. The project recognised that all Police Officers undergo structured initial inservice training in Domestic Violence and that SA Police offer further staff training opportunities in Adelaide.

The need for this project was primarily identified through feedback from victims of domestic violence to agency workers, including some police officers. The other need identified was the frustration of Police Officers over requests to remove restraining orders, often within days of them being issued.

Capitalising on the culture of collaboration established at the Summit, PPDVAG initiated the project by negotiating with the Chief Inspector of SAPOL North East Division to secure his endorsement.

The team of facilitators was assembled to include a Police Sergeant, Police Prosecutor, domestic violence survivor as well as training and development, counselling and health professionals.

Police Officers at various levels were consulted to ensure that content and methodology of the one day professional development program was appropriate.

The program was offered on seven occasions to all police officers in the North East Division and whilst their participation was voluntary, patrols were rostered so that they could attend on a team by team basis. To improve accessibility for officers based in small rural towns, the program was held in Peterborough as well as in Port Pirie. This also recognised the special demands placed on police officers responding to domestic violence incidents in small communities.

The professional development program content was oriented towards practical policing and included survivor insights and selected video segments and promoted lively interaction around issues. The program challenged individual belief systems and the relationship between attitudes and policing practices. The
survivor’s story was the catalyst for much of the discussion on issues and attitudes, and interestingly, most of the challenges to practice were initiated by participants.

Feedback from participants was used by the facilitators to continuously improve both the content and methodology to the extent that the final program differed significantly from the first. Some segments were removed and others were rearranged to match Police Officers’ logic.

The commitment by the team of facilitators was significant as they met at least three times between each session to debrief, review feedback and rework the program. Emotional and practical support for the survivor was an important consideration and the responsibility of one facilitator was to ensure that she was not re-victimised by the process.

The program was offered seven times over a period of twelve months. An acceptable rate of participation was achieved with 90 per cent of police officers in the division attending.

Evaluation of the program was conducted from participants, facilitators and senior Police executives.

Participants indicated that they thought the training was practical, relevant and challenging. It gave them an opportunity to reassess their attitudes and practices when responding to domestic violence victims.

Facilitators were pleased with the continual improvement processes that were adopted and the opportunity that they had to develop their skills as facilitators. The survivor indicated that her role gave her the opportunity to progress through her personal grief issues and changed her attitude to Police. She realised that her story had a powerful impact on Police participants, especially their perception of her previous partner as ‘Mr Nice Guy’.

Both the Chief Inspector and the Senior Sergeant expressed their belief that the program was of great value and resource efficient in that officers did not have to leave the district to access professional development and they were able to contribute significantly to the program.

One specific outcome from the program was the initiation of a more streamlined work practice for domestic violence offence reporting by Port Pirie regional police officers. Other outcomes were in relationship to restraining orders, with more emphasis on negotiated variations and stricter enforcement rather than revocation.

CONCLUSION

The Police Professional Development Project (Domestic Violence) has demonstrated the effectiveness of collaborative processes in a community setting in providing cost effective training opportunities for professional groups meeting locally identified needs.
The training is more acceptable to participants when they have taken an active role in developing the content and influencing the process.

The value of using local networks, local skills and knowledge and local resources to meet locally identified needs has been demonstrated.