

Domestic violence death review committee seeks to prevent domestic homicides

Privacy is paramount while province looks for trends and risk factors among tragedies

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BEAT REPORTER

Manitoba recently became the second province in the country to introduce a domestic violence death review committee in the hopes of preventing future deaths.

The group is tasked with sifting through the history, circumstances and conduct of perpetrators, victims and their families in homicide cases involving domestic violence from the past 10 years, according to Janelle Braun, the assistant director of Manitoba Justice Victim Services.

By doing so, she adds, the committee will find trends, risk factors and patterns across these cases in order to learn about how these types of deaths can be prevented in the future.

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- BARBARA JUDT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, OSBORNE HOUSE

“A determination that someone died as a result of domestic violence is established by the police in their investigation of a death and through a medical examiner’s report,” said Braun.



CINDY TITUS

Barbara Judt, executive director of women's shelter Osborne House, is hopeful the recently introduced provincial domestic violence death review committees will help identify shortcomings in Manitoba's justice system.

Braun notes that while victim services staff do ask family members of homicide victims if they have any further information to share, they only do so with their full consent.

“Before the committee could begin its work, a thorough review of the privacy implications was undertaken,” said Braun. “This was in order to ensure that every effort is taken to minimize any further re-victimization of the family members or friends of the homicide victims who may be interviewed or involved in a domestic violence review.”

The committee’s findings will be shared with the Minister of Justice on an ongoing basis, Braun noted.

Selected findings will be shared with the public, shelters and other violence prevention organizations so long as doing so does not impact the legal needs to protect victims and families of crime, she added.

Barbara Judt is the executive director of Osborne House, a shelter for abused women and children. She looks forward to the recommendations that will come out of the

committee’s reviews.

“The purpose is not to go back and point fingers but to identify possible gaps that may exist (in our services),” said Judt. “This will help us look at what happened to this person, if they were in the system and where they were in the system (when the homicide happened).”

Manitoba is the second province in Canada to instate such a committee.

A similar committee has been operational in Ontario since 2003. The Ontario Domestic Violence Death Review operates under the Coroner’s Act and, as such, cannot conduct interviews.

It has, however, made successful recommendations, notes Anna-Lee Straatman, the manager of the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children (CREVAWC) based out of the University of Western Ontario.

“The Neighbours Friends and Families program, focusing on broad-based education and prevention, was created as a result of the Ontario committee’s recommendations,” said Straatman.

CREVAWC is working to create a national network to support the creation of similar committees across Canada, noted Straatman. Both New Brunswick and British Columbia are reported to be considering creating committees.

Operational since this summer, Manitoba’s committee is currently reviewing its first case with support from local organizations that deal with the repercussions of domestic abuse on a daily basis.

The review committee is one part of Manitoba’s six-point violence prevention strategy that includes a new website, a broad public education campaign and increased family support.