

London Free Press (Ontario)

March 12, 2011 Saturday
FINAL EDITION

Don't let budget destroy inroads on abuse

BYLINE: JOE BELANGER

SECTION: EDITORIAL/OPINION; Pg. E4

LENGTH: 727 words

Change, or waiting for it, can be a frustrating thing.

You look around and see dedicated people working for it, hoping all the effort, tears, successes and losses will one day amount to something.

As you wait, sometimes the news headlines -- Mother, daughter terrorized; Boyfriend charged with murder; Baby beaten to death -- make you think things are getting worse, not better, that, perhaps, it's a battle that can never be won.

Thirty years in the newspaper business and you get a sense of how slow change can come when those same headlines keep appearing with a regularity that makes all the words, all the actions, all the efforts of so many seem so futile.

As a man, it's impossible to truly understand the depth of the tragedy, the horror of woman and child abuse. Few of us have had to live with it, day in and day out. Few of us can relate to the constant fear some women and children still face in their own home every day, or just walking alone at night on their own street.

Yes, we can empathize, preach, perhaps even intervene, strategize, lobby, donate and walk a few kilometres to fundraise, protest or show unity.

Men can never truly know what it's like to walk that darkened street. But, if we're listening, we can hear our sisters, wives, mothers and daughters, their friends and our female friends say how they hate walking across that parking lot or a sidewalk at night. They tell us or imply with their words and actions nearly every day how they are forced to live in a constant state of caution, fear and/or trepidation.

Incredibly, these are the women who lead the fight for change, not the women and children trapped in living nightmares where the physical, sexual and emotional abuse is a perverse routine.

Then something comes along that reaffirms and validates the efforts of everyone. Thursday was one of those days when Statistics Canada released a report that says London has the second-lowest stalking rate in Ontario, behind only Ottawa.

According to Stats Can, London has a stalking rate of 42 per 100,000 population, Ottawa 28.

And, according to anyone you talk to in the business of protecting women and children from violence, London's rate of stalking is directly linked to a community-wide effort, from the London Abused Women's Centre to various agencies and committees and, especially, police.

"This is what makes London so unique," said Megan Walker, executive director of the London Abused Women Centre. "Most communities aren't doing what we're doing, they don't have the relationships we have."

Barb McQuarrie, community director for the Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women and Children, said it's clear the city's strategy to reduce domestic violence is taking hold.

"It gives me hope for the future because stalking is a sign of the highest risk behaviours," said McQuarrie.

"It does take a whole community and that's the approach we've always promoted in London to fight women abuse. Nobody can do it on their own." The various women's groups in London have done an incredible job of informing the public of the issues, holding politicians to account for non-existent or bad laws and supports, and developing partnerships and training programs.

Meanwhile, police, pushed by women's groups for years, have to take credit for the improvement, having established a permanent domestic violence unit and safe bail officer, who monitors court orders to ensure abusers are complying.

Police have adopted a zero tolerance attitude to domestic violence and taking action as soon as abusers commit any number of "sentinel" offences -- threats, harassment, mischief and property damage -- before the acts escalate to violence.

So, it's clear there has been improvement, but there's still lots to be done and much to worry about, not the least of which are budgets.

The police budget is under constant scrutiny because it has more than doubled over the last decade, during which time more officers were hired, allowing police to establish specialty units to handle issues such as domestic violence and cyber crime.

Well, any budget can be cut, and when it comes to policing one of the first targets will be specialty units because front lines can't be cut without compromising safety of all Londoners.

So, while the news is good for abused women and children, this is no time to rest on our laurels.

joe.belanger@sunmedia.ca