

Review urged for domestic homicides

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In the wake of a grisly murder-suicide last week that saw three young people shot to death and another badly wounded, the Alberta government is coming under renewed pressure to set up a "death review" committee examining each domestic homicide in the province.

The formal review process was floated in Alberta last year, but advocates are now growing frustrated the idea has not appeared to gain traction.

"As a province, a death review is definitely something we should be exploring and want to look into implementing," said HomeFront executive director Kevin McNichol.

A group of Alberta bureaucrats reviewed the idea last year and produced a "draft internal discussion document," said Ryan Cromb, a spokesman for Human Services, the government department responsible for domestic violence issues.

The government is now looking at "different options for what would be the best approach for Alberta," Cromb said.

The discussions come as Tabitha Stepple, 21, who was shot to death by her exboyfriend on Dec. 15, is being buried today.

Stepple died along with best friends Tanner Craswell, 22 and Mitch MacLean, 20, when her ex-boyfriend, Derek Jensen, 21, ambushed the group while they were driving on Highway 2 just north of Claresholm.

Jensen, who also wounded Stepple's close friend Shayna Conway, 21, turned the gun on himself.

With the perpetrator dead by his own hand, police are wrapping up their probe into the deaths.

Domestic violence experts say such circumstances should be closely examined, along with every Alberta homicide perpetrated by an intimate partner.

Domestic violence fatality reviews essentially learn from each death to protect the living. They're based on the idea new information can be gleaned from each case in which a domestic partner or family member attacks and kills a victim - murders widely considered highly preventable.

In Alberta, some domestic homicides are looked at under fatality inquiries ordered by the provincial medical examiner's office. However, the hearings, which are conducted before a judge, can be drawn out and costly. Further, not every case is eligible for review.

A specialized threat assessment unit, meanwhile, has begun getting drafted by Alberta police agencies to conduct "post-mortem assessments" of some domestic homicides.

The Integrated Threat and Risk Assessment Center (I-TRAC), under the Alberta Law Enforcement Response Teams (ALERT), has completed three domestic homicide reviews at the request of police and has a few more underway, said the agency's head, Val Campbell.

She'd like to see a dedicated domestic violence death review committee established in Alberta.

"I believe that every single murder or murder-suicide we have, there's something to be learned from it. We don't know what that is until we look at it," Campbell said.

"In order for it to have specific application to Alberta, it would be nice to have something specific for Alberta," she said.

Other provinces, including Manitoba and New Brunswick are looking at committees.

Ontario has the only fully functional domestic homicide review panel, in which a group of experts from a variety of fields work with the office of the chief coroner each year to provide a report.

Last year the committee examined 18 cases involving 36 deaths and put forward 14 recommendations to prevent similar homicides.

Those recommendations are key, said Peter Jaffe, a professor in the faculty of education at the University of Western Ontario who sits on the committee.

"Sometimes you're looking at issues around police or court system, other times it's really looking at issues such as what friends and family know. It's not a blaming exercise, it's not pointing fingers, it's ensuring things are put in place that could help prevent a tragedy in similar circumstances.

"We can't change the out-come, but can hopefully find information to prevent similar deaths."

Death review committees are far less costly than fatality inquiries, Jaffe said. By reviewing every domestic homicide, they're also able to help establish patterns and identify risk factors.

"I think it would be invaluable to have one in every province."

If Alberta does embrace a review committee, it must ensure resources are put behind implement recommendations, said McNichol. He said he remains hopeful the Alberta government will pursue the idea.

Jan Reimer, provincial co-ordinator of the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, said it's important for those who have lost a loved one to know the system is "looking at itself and saying, 'How can we make a difference.' "

"Having what we call a death review committee is not to focus blame, but to inform and motivate the public to get the systemic changes we need to end violence against women and children in Alberta."

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