



Apropos...

Batshaw Youth and Family Centres

News from Michael Udy, Executive Director

SPECIAL EDITION

VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE

(Prepared with the help of Beverley Robinson, Project Manager, Batshaw Violence Task Force and Frema Engel, consultant with the Task Force and provider of Employee Assistance Programs to Batshaw)

The New Year brings a close to the holiday season and an opportunity for new resolutions and reflections to become reality. Violence in the workplace is not a new phenomenon but many recent events have highlighted the difficulty in preventing violence and adequately dealing with these situations when they arise. As an organization we need to work at becoming more effective in: our response to potentially violent situations, our management of incidents, and our support to staff who are involved. We are speaking about not only violence manifested by physical aggression or harm, but also other forms of behaviour which are aggressive in nature and have undesirable consequences for those exposed.

Both the literature and the experts tell us that while work-related violence is a complex problem, it can be managed and often prevented. Given the nature of our work, it is unrealistic to expect to eliminate all threats to our safety and security, but we can certainly reduce them significantly. To do this, we need to become more effective and better equipped at handling violence in all its forms.

Batshaw has many measures, practices and protocols in place across the agency. Sometimes these have been effective, other times inadequate. We recognize that the agency's response to violence in the workplace has been at times piecemeal and largely left to the discretion of individual staff and managers. Staff have told us that violence is one of the most difficult aspects of the job to deal with, and we are aware of the heavy cost to our employees both professionally and personally when a violent act is perpetrated against them or a colleague. It is for this reason that we have made the problem of violence in the workplace an agency priority.

We have begun by creating a Task Force which has broad-based representation across the agency. Spearheaded by Henri Derome, Director of Human Resources and Administrative Services, the members of the Task Force come with a wealth of experience and ensure that every area of the organization is represented. We have recognized that a serious commitment requires concrete manpower to see it through. To that end we have temporarily relieved Beverley Robinson, who is a manager in Youth Protection Services, from her responsibilities so that she can assume the role of Project Manager. We have also hired Frema Engel as an external consultant. She brings to the table a wealth of experience in this field and will assist in developing a program that is truly reflective of current theory and practice. The Task Force began its work on December 1st, 2002, and has given itself a rigorous timeframe for its activities. Its goal is to develop an integrated prevention program on violence in the workplace. More specifically, its mandate is to:

- Define and identify potential violent situations which can occur within the organization.
- Identify and propose preventive measures.
- Clarify actions to be taken while these situations occur.
- Clarify actions to be taken after these situations have occurred.
- Outline measures including training to ensure the full implementation of the prevention and intervention programs as adopted.

While the work of the Task Force will focus primarily on violence related to clients, a parallel initiative will proceed under the umbrella of Human Resources to address concerns about violence between and among staff. It is expected that the findings of the two groups will merge to produce a comprehensive analysis and approach to address violence in our workplace.

The project process will be transparent, consultative and as thorough as possible. The Task Force wants to have input from as many people as possible about the nature of the problem, what works well and what to do to improve the situation. The input of every staff member is vital to the success of this initiative.

As part of its information gathering activities, focus groups are being arranged within each division to give as many staff as possible an opportunity to share their thoughts about the problem and their recommendations. We will also make use of a questionnaire to ensure wide participation and get an accurate scan of the environment. These activities, which will guarantee you *complete anonymity*, will occur during the months of January, February and March, 2003.

If we are to be truly successful at fulfilling our mission, we must begin to demonstrate by our words and actions that VIOLENCE of any kind is unacceptable. This means that at all levels and across the agency, it will be clear what constitutes violence, that it is not tolerated, and that it will always trigger both prevention and intervention. If we are to be successful we will need a shared responsibility in identifying the problem and implementing the solutions. Everyone's ideas and support are needed. I am therefore asking you to participate fully in these consultative processes so that the quality of the recommendations will reflect our reality.

While the Task Force undertakes its work, we know the problem of violence in the workplace continues. We do not have any magical solutions. Pending the results of the project, we encourage use of existing policies, procedures and resources and encourage and value local leadership initiatives by staff and management.

Addressing this issue in a positive and meaningful way will have a tremendous impact on our service delivery, our mission and how we work together. While this is by no means an obvious or simple task, the time has come for us to definitively tackle and address this problem. All the pieces to create a new way of thinking and reacting to violence in the workplace are present. We need to seize this opportunity and make this happen so that we can feel safe where we work and proud of what we do. The agency is ready to take a leadership role in making the work environment safe but you are the driving force behind any initiative and any success. Over the coming months, you will have several opportunities to make your voice heard regarding violence in the workplace. I am confident that by working together we can not only tackle this problem effectively, but we can also create an approach to dealing with violence that can become a model for other organizations.

The Task Force:

Henri Derome (*Chairperson*), Beverley Robinson (*Project Manager*), Frema Engel (*Consultant*), Clarence Bourque, Sandra Carruthers, Maureen Cohen, Roy Durant, Bob Guezen, Sherwin Laptiste, David Lubert, Lorne McNeil, Josée Mirabella, Brian Moores, Ed Potter-Mäl, Terry Newcomen, Gérald Savoie, Mignon Tyler, Brian Voelk.