

## Sexual assault services needed for BC's residents

Sexual assault is an urgent safety issue for women and girls and other equity seeking genders. But it's one that continues to be seriously neglected in both the justice and the health care systems in BC. An effective response to sexual assault will include a specialized and integrated cross-sector approach, justice and health system policy, adequate community support services, adequate training at all levels, and public education and prevention initiatives. We need to do more to keep women safe in and out of the workplace. It's time to level the playing field.

### Some facts and figures:

- 1 in 3 women will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime.
- 39% of women 18 years of age and older have suffered a sexual assault at least once since the age of 16.
- Quantifying sexual assault continues to be a challenge, since 95% of these crimes are not reported to police.
- Nationally, rates of self-reported sexual assault have increased from just over half a million in 1999 (or 2.1% of the adult population) to 677,000 incidents (or 2.4% of the adult population) in 2009.
- Police-reported aggravated sexual assault rose 9% in 2013.
- In 2002, the majority (61%) of victims of sexual offences reported to police were under age 18. The group with the highest rate of sexual victimization was girls aged 11 to 19.

### THE PICTURE IN BC

There is no system-wide sexual assault policy in BC. The justice system's Violence Against Women and Children Policy was intended as an over-arching guide for police and the justice system to respond to domestic and sexual violence. However, despite years of work by an inter-branch committee, and a consultation process that included both government and community agency personnel, the Sexual Assault component of this policy has never been implemented, leaving those who experience sexual assault vulnerable.

A coordinated police-hospital response is almost non-existent in most BC communities. Out of approximately 100 hospitals in BC, only 16 BC communities have a sexual assault protocol in place for a coordinated, specialized hospital response to sexual assault. These include: Powell River, Sechelt, Vancouver, Squamish/Whistler/Pemberton/Mount Currie, Victoria, Nanaimo, Surrey, Abbotsford, Cranbrook, Kamloops, Kelowna, Trail, Vernon, Penticton, Fort St. John, and Prince George.



The lack of a specialized response to sexual assault can result in serious and often debilitating longer term trauma, both physical and psychological and the lack of proper evidence collection and storage can lead to barriers to accessing justice which in turn leads to no interruption of prolific, repeat, sexual predation.

Funding for community-based sexual assault response services is not adequate. There are only 69 specialized community-based victim service programs in BC, leaving most communities including all of those with a population of less than 20,000 without a program that specializes in responding to victims of sexual assault.

There is little encouragement for women to report sexual assault to police. The lack of a cross-system policy and lack of adequately funded specialized, coordinated services for sexual assault victims does little to ensure an effective response to victims of sexual assault that will facilitate women's trust in the system and encourage women to report sexual assault to police.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The BC Federation of Labour recommends the following to address urgent sexual assault issues faced by women:

1. Develop and implement a Provincial Sexual Assault Policy, taking into account the particular needs of marginalized women and girls, especially Indigenous women and girls, trans community members and sex trade workers.
2. Provide funding for new community-based services for victims of sexual assault and funding to enhance specialization and cross-sector approaches to sexual assault, including enhanced counselling services and hospital responses to ensure that every BC hospital is able to provide a coordinated health care response to sexual assault, including collection of medical forensic evidence.
3. Ensure that existing specialized, community-based services for victims of sexual assault are adequately funded, including developing a strategy for a 24-hour emergency response.
4. Support the provincial approach to Third Party Reporting of sexual offences developed by EVA BC and police.
5. Assess province-wide capacity for emergency response to sexual assault and develop and fund a strategy to respond to any shortcomings determined to exist.
6. Provide and enhance specialized training for all justice, health and social service personnel, on the dynamics of sexual assault trauma, victim responses to sexual assault, the needs of sexual assault victims, and best practices in terms of investigation, prosecution and intervention.



#200 – 5118 Joyce Street  
Vancouver, BC  
Canada, V5R 4H1

604.430.1421

[bcfed@bcfed.ca](mailto:bcfed@bcfed.ca)

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*“What we desire for ourselves, we wish for all.”*

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