

Victim Service and Violence Against Women

COVID-19 Pandemic

Subsector Resource Guide

PURPOSE

The victim service (VS) and violence against women (VAW) subsector resource guide (the guide) is a tool to support British Columbia's VS and VAW programs in their continued efforts to ensure the safe and consistent delivery of services during the COVID-19 pandemic. As we move into the fall season with schools resuming operations and many more people returning to the workplace, this is an opportunity for organizations to review their safety and operational plans.

Given the dynamic nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, this guide focuses on highlighting the current key resources and guidelines that are applicable to supporting VS and VAW programs to continue providing services safely. The guide will be reviewed periodically in response to changes to guidelines and orders in response to the pandemic.

SCOPE OF SERVICE PROVISIONS

The Community Safety and Crime Prevention (CSCP) branch contracts with over 400 programs across the province for the provision of victim services and violence against women programs.

Victim Service Programs

Community based victim service programs serve victims of family and sexual violence, ethno-specific and diverse communities, children and Indigenous peoples and operate out of non-profit organizations.

Police based victim service programs serve victims of all types of crime and trauma and assist police and communities in situations involving multiple injuries or deaths. These programs operate out of BC's RCMP detachments and municipal police departments.

Domestic violence units involve co-located service delivery that pairs dedicated police officers with community-based victim services, and in some communities, a child protection worker, to improve case coordination and collaboration in highest risk cases of domestic violence.

VictimLink BC is a toll-free multilingual, confidential telephone service available across BC and the Yukon 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by calling 1-800-563-0808 or sending an email to VictimLinkBC@bc211.ca. VictimLink BC provides information and referral services to all victims of crime and immediate crisis support to victims of family and sexual violence.

Violence Against Women Programs

Stopping the Violence Counselling (STV) programs provide individual and group counselling for women who have experienced childhood abuse, sexual assault and violence in their relationships. These programs operate out of non-profit organizations.

PEACE programs serve children and youth, aged three to eighteen years (and their non-offending caregiver), who have witnessed abuse, threats or violence in the home. These programs operate out of non-profit organizations.

Outreach programs help women and children identify and access the services they need by providing supportive counselling, information, referrals, accompaniment and transportation to other services. These programs operate out of non-profit organizations.

Multicultural outreach programs serve eleven communities in up to 24 languages to ensure immigrant and visible minority women and children receive assistance by workers who speak their own language and are familiar with their culture. These programs operate out of non-profit organizations.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

In a [letter to the social sector on March 18, 2020](#), the Provincial Health Officer (PHO) advised that organizations work to adapt the ways in which services are provided in order to minimize the risk of contracting COVID-19. It is important for the VS and VAW sector to continue to maintain services and provide support to victims who have experienced trauma and violence. Any reduction in the availability and accessibility of these important services can negatively impact the ability for someone to report violence, seek help and support, and manage the impacts and consequences of violence.

The psychological effects related to the COVID-19 pandemic are driven by several factors, including uncertainty about the duration of the crisis, effects of physical distancing, lack of proven therapies and/or vaccines. These effects can exacerbate the impacts of crime and violence. There are also unintended consequences that can result from the pandemic and the current measures in place to prevent the spread of the virus including:

- Increased individual and familial stresses, changes in routines, and physical separation from family, friends, and community which can result in increased isolation and disconnection from key supports.
- Increased stress due to financial constraints, unstable housing, food insecurity, lost wages or employment, and increased substance use which can exacerbate unsafe situations or environments.

It is critical that victims have continued access to timely trauma-informed supports and practices during the pandemic. Individuals who are experiencing or are most at-risk of gender-based violence can face additional risks and safety concerns during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Research has demonstrated that gender-based violence is a predictable and consistent side effect of economic, epidemiological, and environmental crises, although evidence of increased gender-based violence may or may not surface immediately. Changes in the accessibility and use of services such as shelters, crisis lines, and emergency rooms for non-COVID-19 pandemic related reasons have varied across different jurisdictions in both BC and in other jurisdictions across Canada. Physical distancing measures can place families in closer and more regular proximity, thereby increasing their risk of violence. Activities that provide informal supports such as spending time with friends, co-workers, and extended family have been reduced or eliminated during the pandemic. As a result, victims of violence may face an exacerbated risk of violence coupled with additional barriers in accessing services.

The VS and VAW sector is diverse and provides a range of critical services and supports on both an urgent and ongoing basis to victims across BC. Including but not limited to critical incident response (e.g., police call-outs and hospital accompaniments; critical incident defusing and stabilization), psycho-educational support, and practical and emotional support (e.g., emotional support in the immediate aftermath of trauma, assistance with completion of forms, assistance in accessing transportation). Services are provided in diverse settings such as offices, public spaces and schools and the variety of services and supports provided throughout the VS and VAW sector do not fit into a uniform guideline for all service providers.

RESOURCES

A series of resources, including those from the PHO and WorkSafeBC support the social sector in continuing to provide services safely. While the PHO and/or WorkSafeBC may in the future issue additional guidelines, the resources listed below provide current reference points for service providers in the assessment of what measures and approaches to service delivery need to be undertaken to ensure the continued safety of staff and clients.

The following resources are applicable to working with clients in the VS and VAW sector:

- [BC's Restart Plan](#)
- [Guidelines for Community Social Services \(non-residential community-based services and residential services\)](#)
- [Interim Guidance to Social Service Providers for the Prevention and Control of COVID-19 in their Facilities \(April 4, 2020\)](#)
- [BC Restart Plan – Guidance for PEACE Programs](#)
- [COVID-19 Safety Plan](#)
- [COVID-19: Industry information – Phase 1](#)
- [COVID-19 and returning to safe operation – Phases 2 & 3](#)

- [WorkSafeBC Health and Safety](#)
- [BC Centre for Disease Control - COVID-19](#)
- [HealthlinkBC - COVID-19](#)

ASSESSING SERVICES

Contracted VS and VAW programs are required to follow the guidelines and recommendations issued by the PHO and WorkSafeBC to ensure services are provided in a safe manner to both clients and employees.

WorkSafeBC has stated that employers must have in place a COVID-19 Safety Plan that assesses the risk of exposure at their workplace and outlines the policies, guidelines, and procedures they have put in place to keep workers safe. The [WorkSafeBC tool](#) guides employers through a six-step process to help create a COVID-19 Safety Plan.¹

As we enter the fall season, with school resuming and many people returning to their workplaces, it is timely to review current safety and operational plans and confirm that the appropriate protocols and practices are in place for your workplace. As the situation with the pandemic continues to evolve, it is important to have a clear understanding of the risks and also to recognize that it may be necessary to make adjustments to protocols and practices within your organization. The following information is taken from the WorkSafeBC guidelines:

Understanding the risk

- The virus that causes COVID-19 spreads in several ways, including through droplets when a person coughs or sneezes, and from touching a contaminated surface before touching the face. Higher risk situations require adequate protocols to address the risk.
- The risk of person-to-person transmission is increased the closer you come to other people, the amount of time you spend near them, and the number of people you come near. Physical distancing measures help mitigate this risk.
- The risk of surface transmission is increased when many people contact the same surface, and when those contacts happen in short intervals of time. Effective cleaning and hygiene practices help mitigate this risk.

Selecting protocols for your workplace

Note that different protocols offer different protection. Wherever possible, use the protocols that offer the highest level of protection and add additional protocols as required.

¹ Employers are not required to submit plans to WorkSafeBC for approval, but in accordance with the order of the PHO, this plan must be posted at the worksite. This safety plan can also be completed from any mobile device using the [COVID-19 Safety Plan app](#).

First level protection (elimination):

Use policies and procedures to keep people at a safe physical distance from one another. Limit the number of people in your workplace at any one time, and implement protocols to keep workers at least 2 metres from other workers, customers, and members of the public.

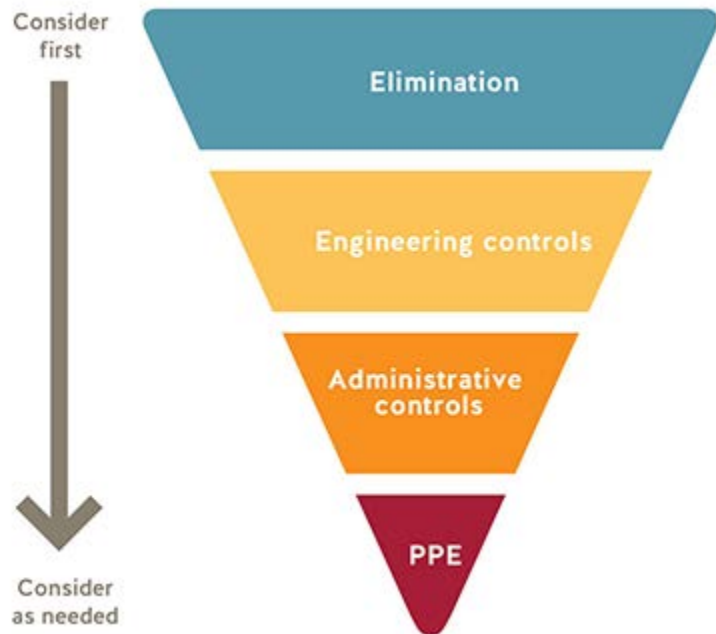
Second level protection (engineering controls):

If you can't always maintain physical distancing, install barriers such as plexiglass to separate people.

Third level protection (administrative controls):

Establish rules and guidelines, such as cleaning protocols, telling workers to not share tools, or implementing one-way doors or walkways.

Fourth level protection (PPE): If the first three levels of protection aren't enough to control the risk, consider the use of non-medical masks. Be aware of the limitation of non-medical masks to protect the wearer from respiratory droplets. Ensure workers are using masks appropriately.



Key Subsector Service Delivery Considerations

In assessing and maintaining your safety and operational plans, it will be important to consider the following:

- Adaptations to on-scene crisis and critical incident response (adaptations may include suspension/reduction of these services and/or equipping workers with personal protective equipment (PPE), screening clients prior to attendance, discontinuation of transportation in personal vehicles, etc).
- Physical workplace adaptations (e.g. moving furniture, plexi-glass barriers, staggering shifts, alternating in-person days etc.)
- Technology and access to secure information sources.
- Face-to-face meetings (adaptations may mean reducing the frequency of or limiting non-essential face-to-face meetings, providing support virtually or via telephone if appropriate; COVID-19 screening questionnaires; physical distancing measures; restricting number of people permitted into a meeting; limiting the duration of meetings).

SUPPORT FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS

WorkSafeBC

The guide recognizes that many service providers have had to adjust their model for service delivery to maintain essential services during the different phases of the restart and may need to undertake further modifications moving forward as they continue to assess their services against the PHO guidelines and the WorkSafeBC assessment process outlined above. Specific workplace health and safety inquiries (e.g., requesting a worksite consultation, or obtaining information about workplace health and safety) can be directed to WorkSafeBC's Prevention Information Line at 1-888-621-SAFE.

Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General

Service providers are also encouraged to keep their CSCP Program Manager up to date on service modifications, particularly those that relate to the provision of contracted services (e.g., adaptations to remote/virtual services; meeting clients in outdoors spaces) and service demands. PSSG staff will continue to engage with service providers and provincial associations to assess needs and provide support.

Provincial Associations

Three provincial associations, the Ending Violence Association of BC (EVA BC), The BC Society of Transition Houses (BCSTH), and Police Victim Services of BC (PVSBC) provide support to contracted VS and VAW programs across BC. In the context of the pandemic, the provincial associations are a key part of the support network for local VS and VAW programs.

EVA BC provides information, training, and support to community-based victim service programs, Stopping the Violence Counselling programs and outreach and multicultural outreach programs and has developed and maintains a COVID-19 webpage to share up to date COVID-19-relevant information and resources for service providers and victims of violence: <https://endingviolence.org/need-help/important-covid-19-updates-from-eva-bc/>. On the webpage you will find COVID-19 resources from EVA BC, health and wellness resources, and Indigenous communities' response and resources. There is also information available on working from home and technology safety, gender-based violence and the pandemic as well as links to various relevant webinars.

BCSTH provides information, training, and support to PEACE programs, which assist children impacted by domestic violence and has developed and maintains COVID-19 specific webpages with relevant information and resources for service providers and victims of violence (including children and youth). BCSTH's COVID-19 webpage can be found at <https://bcsth.ca/blog/health-safety-covid-19/>. On the webpage you will find information and resources for anti-violence

workers, children and youth, and Indigenous communities. The webpage also includes technology safety and legal resources as well as links to various webinars on a variety of topics.

PVSBC provides information, training, and support to police-based victim service programs across BC. PVSBC has developed and maintains a COVID-19 section on their website which contains general COVID-19 information and resources as well as mental wellness resources and resources for children and youth. COVID-19 information can be found on PVSBC's website at: <https://www.policivictimservices.bc.ca/covid-19-info-resources/>.