

Domestic violence support workers want to see further prevention through education

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By David Baxter, Reporter Global News

Last week, 33 year-old Abbie Speir's body was found in a burned home in the small town of Yellow Grass, Sask. near Weyburn. Hours later, Kevin Okafor, 38, was arrested in Swift Current and charged with first degree murder.

Okafor appeared via video in Regina's provincial court on Thursday morning. His case was adjourned until May 8 and he remains in custody.

This death hit home with Justice Minister Gordon Wyant, who is friends with Speir's parents.

"The fact that it's hitting closer and the fact that I'm the minister who has responsibility for ensuring domestic violence strategies are enforced and enhanced, it certainly is a more difficult situation I think," he said Tuesday.

The province recently approved changes to domestic violence legislation, allowing people fleeing domestic violence to break a lease penalty-free.

Further changes are expected once the Justice Ministry receives recommendations from the Domestic Violence Death Review.

Those who work on the frontlines, such as Christa Daku of Envision Counselling and Support Centre Inc, would like to see more emphasis on prevention; specifically through education.

"Over time the government has acknowledged prevention is important, but they don't put the dollars toward it that are required," Daku said. "We often get additional grants to provide education within our schools is where we like to start."

Envision Counselling serves southeast Saskatchewan, with nine counsellors. They have offices in Weyburn, Estevan, Carlyle, and Oxbow.

Daku said if a woman needs to go to a shelter, they work to transport the victim to a facility in Moose Jaw or Regina. These calls are rare, and Daku wants to see further emphasis on expanding counselling and education resources in the area.

The main area Daku wants to see expanded is their children exposed to violence program. "We only have a three-quarter time counsellor

funded for that position, and that's only based out of Estevan. So we have our other offices without that program," Daku explained.

The Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan (PATHS) find that rates of domestic violence are higher in rural areas. This is backed up by research from RESOLVE, a University of Regina based research initiative on domestic violence.

"We have a large rural population that's very isolated, which can make it difficult to seek services when you need them," Jo-Ann Dusel, PATHS executive director said.

Like Daku, Dusel wants to see more emphasis on education starting at a young age.

On a broader base, Dusel believes public information campaigns that outline warning signs of an abusive relationship can be helpful.

One of the key warning signs is the sudden isolation of a formally social person. Dusel said this can be amplified in a rural area.

"You don't have a next door neighbour who may hear shouting and call the police, or come over the next day and see if you're okay. You don't have the ability to call the police if there's a crisis occurring and know that someone will be at your door in five to 10 minutes," Dusel explained.

She says there is still a stigma in talking about intimate partner violence and it can be difficult to find a confidant in a small setting where everyone knows everyone.

"You may feel that because everyone in the community is known to each other, and may or may not like to talk about one another that as a victim in that situation it can be very hard to share what's going on if you think it will be a topic of conversation for everyone that you know," she said.

Wyant anticipates that recommendations from the Domestic Violence Death Review panel will be coming shortly. From there, ministry officials will draft further recommendations for changing Saskatchewan's domestic violence laws.

One of the items being considered are paid and unpaid time off from work for people dealing with the fallout of an abusive relationship.