

Sask. domestic violence survivor says lack of services could make victims 'suffer in silence'

By [Kendall Latimer, CBC News](#) Posted: Mar 10, 2020 3:00 AM CT | Last Updated: March 10

Sparse services in high-demand for domestic violence victims in southern Sask.



For the first time in 25-years, the local counselling agency that serves Weyburn and Estevan is operating over capacity with wait-lists. (Shutterstock)

Savannah Hodgson says she thought she was going to die.

She and her husband had been married about three years when the relationship took a near-deadly turn. They have a son together and she had two girls from a previous relationship.

He came after her — first with a chainsaw and then with a gun — at their acreage in Kennedy, Saskatchewan on July 2, 2018.

"He came home drunk and stoned and tried to kill me and the kids," she said.

He went to the garage as she called police. She thought "I'm going to f---ing die on hold with 911," but she stayed on the line with her phone in her pocket and didn't give up.

She describes him coming up the stairs with a running chainsaw as she went to the bedroom while her daughter cried. Hodgson said she thought, "if I was gonna die I was going to go out fighting. I want my girls to see their mom fighting for them, so I did."

She said she was able to get the chainsaw turned off, but the fight continued. Hodgson said she screamed at her daughters to run she she tried to buy time.

"We had never practised anything like this, so we had no safety plan."

Hodgson said her husband was going to, "get the gun and finish it," so she grabbed her son and ran away through bushes, around fences and into the trees. She said it was about half an hour before the police arrived. She and her kids were physically safe, but emotionally damaged.

Hodgson's husband was sentenced In February 2019 to 156 days in jail and a 24 month probation period for assault with a weapon, uttering a threat and a firearm charge.

She didn't testify in the trial. She said he husband agreed to get a divorce if she didn't testify and she wanted freedom more than anything else.



Savannah Hodgson said she's grateful for the support of her mom and stepdad. 'I just couldn't imagine women who don't have those trying to be free of someone who is going to abuse you mentally emotionally and physically spiritually.' (Submitted by Savannah Hodgson)

After the night of th attack, Hodgson worried she and her daughters might be at risk of post-traumatic stress disorder, so she contacted Envision Counselling and Support Centre almost immediately. It has four centres serving the southern part of the province.

They've since made dozens of trips to Estevan for counselling. Her daughter is about to complete her 37th counselling session.

"It's free of charge, but it's a two hour and 15 minute drive there, and then back, so it has been a huge financial obligation."

The counselling has been critical in their recovery, but others may not be able to get the same help. For the first time in 25-years, Envision is operating with wait-lists.

Communities like Estevan and Weyburn, which both have populations of more than 10,000 — are considered "shelter deserts," because they're more than 100 kilometres away from the nearest short-stay domestic violence shelter.

Southeast Saskatchewan is the region of Canada where the most people live more than 100 km from a shelter, according to an exclusive CBC News analysis.

"It makes me extremely sad for so many families, for those women out there who have to suffer in silence, and for those children who are broken and there's just not enough people to reach them," Hodgson said.

Crisis shelters for domestic violence victims are needed as demand grows throughout southern Saskatchewan, according to community experts.

Absence of crisis shelters creates challenges

Christa Daku, executive director for Envision Counselling and Support Centre, said the pressure on staff grows as the wait-lists get longer.

"When someone is coming in in a crisis and our case loads are at capacity as they are, we have to do a significant amount of rejigging and manoeuvring," Daku said.

She said they will find a way to support people in immediate crisis but noted, "it would be much easier if there was a safe shelter for them to access."

Daku said people are staying in unhealthy relationships "because they have nowhere close to go."

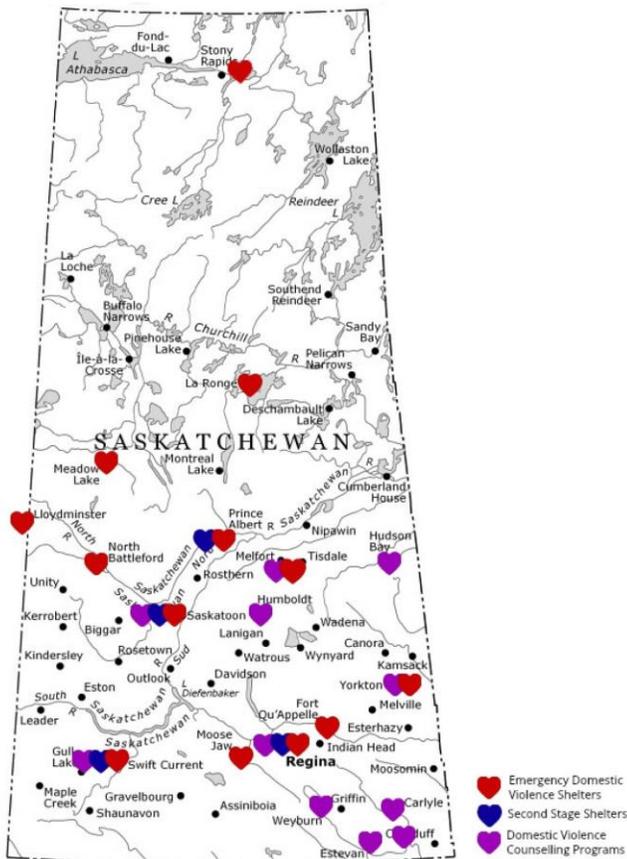
"It's really difficult to flee a domestic violence situation to start with, never mind uprooting yourself and your kids to a farther centre that they're not used to," she said.

Factors like pets, finances and job-security also complicate leaving the community. Hodgson said she's been lucky to have the support of her mom and stepdad.

The agency does safety-planning with victims and transports them to other shelters in places like Moose Jaw, Regina or even Yorkton. She said this is more complicated since the [loss of the inter-provincial bus service](#).

"There's someone out there who needs to hear that they're not alone and who needs to hear that they can do it." - Savannah Hodgson

She said counselling-alone does not address dangerous situations, adding the ideal scenario for isolated rural victims would be to leave the unhealthy relationship while maintaining most aspects of their life, by going to a local shelter.



A map from the Provincial Association of Transition Houses in Saskatchewan depicting available counselling and shelter services. (Provincial Association of Transition Houses in Saskatchewan)

Domestic calls to Estevan police doubled

Calls have gone up as the resource-economy trends further downward in the area, Estevan police chief Paul Ladouceur said.

"From 2015 to 2019 we've seen our reports of domestic violence almost double," he said. "The stress level in homes and things like that start to really have its impact," he said. "I'm not saying that economy and stress is an excuse for domestic violence, don't misunderstand me — but it's a reality."

Ladouceur said what's most concerning is police are only seeing the tip of the iceberg with domestic violence because "it's at the breaking point where the person reaches out for help."

Ladouceur said situations can become "catastrophic" if violence escalates when someone stays. Ladouceur came to Estevan from Ontario in 2014 and was surprised by the absence of a crisis shelter. The same year, a domestic homicide shook the community.

"The couple was somewhat forced to stay together," he said.

Nathan Mullen eventually pleaded guilty to manslaughter for killing his former spouse Leslie Dwyre, 27, in their home.

Ladouceur said service gaps come down to money, but that he believes the cost will grow if no action is taken.

"Sometimes it takes money upfront to save money and resources down the road, and more importantly, to ensure people are living a healthy and safe life for years to come."



Paul Ladouceur said it doesn't seem right that victims are the ones who have to uproot their lives, adding 'if there's any inconvenience occurred it should, you know in my opinion, be that at the cost of the accused and certainly not the victim.' (CBC)

Hodgson is encouraging others to reduce the stigma around domestic violence — and to get help.

"There's someone out there who needs to hear that they're not alone and who needs to hear that they can do it," she said. "It is the hardest thing you're ever going to do, but you can do it."

Looking back, Hodgson said she didn't recognize the signs of abuse, of her husband slowly became more controlling, isolating and aggressive. She saw it as he labelled it: "protective."

Now she knows differently. She's also upfront about what it's like to be a survivor. The challenges don't end when the counselling does and she said sometimes "it's the good memories that haunt you."

What makes it more complicated is that her former-husband is back in the community, having served his sentence.

Envision Counselling and Support Centre's Interpersonal Violence and Abuse program is funded in part by the Ministries of Justice and Social Services.

Daku said they've already begun talking with the government about "what needs to be done to prove the need in our area" for a shelter.

Last week, minister responsible for the status of women office [Tina Beaudry-Mellor said](#) the province is looking at how to increase resources for the Estevan area. Ladouceur said they are looking at a Police and Crisis Team (PACT) model that would see a mental health professional partner up with police officers to handle certain calls.

If you need help and are in immediate danger, call 911. To find assistance in your area, visit sheltersafe.ca or <http://endingviolencecanada.org/getting-help>. In Saskatchewan, www.pathssk.org has listings of available services across the province.