

Community response to sexualized assault launched by YWCA Banff

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A new community initiative to address sexualized assault and harassment in the Bow Valley has been launched recently by YWCA Banff.

The Harmony Project is a collaborative community response to sexualized assault, according to project manager Reave MacLeod.

MacLeod formed a committee of community stakeholders like the RCMP, hospital,

victim services, addiction and mental health and others to begin the process of looking at how Banff as a community provides services to victims of sexualized assault and how to educate residents of the Bow Valley on consent.

“There is an ongoing need for prevention in the Bow Valley to change social norms that will create a culture of consent – ultimately reducing sexualized assault and harassment in our community,” MacLeod said.

A 2015 survey commissioned by the Canadian Women’s Foundation found only one in three Canadians actually know what sexual consent means.

MacLeod said by educating on consent the widest range of people can be reached by that message – those who may have been, or could be victimized, and perpetrators. She said there is only one way to prevent sexual assault and it has nothing to do with how victims are behaving.

“Really, we know the only way to prevent sexualized assault is for the perpetrator to change their behaviour,” MacLeod said. “That is the only thing that stops it, so we want to put the focus back on prevention that way.

“One reason we have chosen to focus on consent messaging is that it is a strong message for those at risk of perpetrating, but it is also a strong message for people who could be victimized or have been – it reaches everyone. It is also a strong message for bystanders.”

There is more to the Harmony Project beyond the education campaign on consent, as it also looks at different agencies and people that victims may come into contact with and how to respond to them.

MacLeod said a major goal of the program is to streamline how services are provided to victims who come forward, noting only 10 per cent of victims of sexual assault report it to authorities.

Right now, she said, the Harmony Project is working with all stakeholders to make sure they are appropriately trained to respond to victims of sexualized assault, whether the trauma was recent or in the past.

MacLeod said it is important to recognize

that the trauma and effect of sexualized assault on a victim can last a long time and many victims seek help from resources in the community after significant time has passed. She said ensuring service providers are sensitive and aware of the long term effects of sexualized assault is part of the Harmony Project.

Agencies in the community will have staff undergo the training through the Harmony Project, which is funded through the Family and Community Safety branch of the Alberta Government.

“Being a part of the Harmony Project is a great fit for BanffLIFE; our volunteers have been eager to receive training, they want to know what services are available and how they can support an acquaintance, a friend or a co-worker,” said BanffLife coordinator Michelle Backhouse.

“We also have an opportunity to infuse our local events with information and positive messaging – I’m already noticing topics like consent coming up in everyday conversation, which is a promising trend.”

The program may also evolve to include a sexual assault response team similar to one in Calgary, according to MacLeod. But first the committee must better understand the needs of the community when it comes to responding to sexualized assault.

Banff, with a large population of young adults, has a unique demographic makeup with many in the community falling within the 18-30 year old category. Research has shown that women under the age of 24 represent 66 per cent of all victims of sexual assault, a relevant fact to consider for the Harmony Project in creating a response program.