

Queen's Park hearing finds that wife beating is a problem that crosses all boundaries

By Leslie Scrivener Toronto Star

The child-care worker, soft-spoken and bespectacled, and the unemployed steel worker, shaggy-haired, rough-hewn and on parole, seemed to come from different worlds. But when they appeared before a Queen's Park public hearing on family violence this week, they spoke with brutal clarity about a common problem: Both beat up women. Both had trouble getting help.

Bill De Young, 31, referred to his "violent incidents" even before getting married three years ago. Steelworker Dave Burlock, 28, talked about smacking his old lady in the mouth and admitted he'd been beating up his girlfriends for 10 years. De Young was put on a five-month waiting list at a mental health clinic and was finally admitted, but only when he called back "in an emotional state." Burlock was convicted three times for assault causing bodily harm — serving two sentences of 6 months and 16 months — yet the courts never suggested counselling for him.

Their joint appearance delivered the message better than any brief or any social worker's testimony: Wife beating crosses all social and educational levels and it's a myth that women provoke the attacks. As Burlock said: "I didn't even need a good reason for hitting them anymore."

Their graphic admissions underscored the warning from James Bannon, the deputy chief of the Detroit police force: Unless doctors, teachers, clergy and the police recognize the problem and start reporting family violence, "we're going to be picking up bodies for the next generation."

One of the two probation officers running a group in London, Ont., for men, such as Burlock and De Young, who assault women told the committee that courts should order men into special counselling groups as part of sentencing. The members — from the standing committee on social development — will consider that and other recommendations with a view toward developing special legislation for wife assault.

Laying charges

"It will have to be much more than the Band Aid system of shelters. It will involve the whole business of police laying charges and changes in justice procedures," says Marion Bryden (NDP—Beaches-Woodbine).

The hearings come two months after a federal parliamentary committee filed a report on wife battering which recommended that the courts get tough with men who abuse women. Since many of the recommendations, such as provision of emergency shelters, fall under provincial jurisdiction, Ontario decided to consider the problem itself.

In the first week of a two-week hearing, the MPPs were shocked by much of what they heard about the problem women face in finding refuge, in dealing with police and in the law courts. They also heard surprising admissions from the police themselves.

James Bannon, a high school drop-out who earned a PhD in criminology and who one committee member labelled the Serpico of family violence, said it's not uncommon for police to beat their wives. "They're accustomed to the use of violence and the use of authority — of being obeyed

and being the controlling person."

But since the introduction in 1978 of a Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment Board and special domestic violence training, "there's been an obvious decline in the number of police officers' wives being beaten."

□ Metro police lay charges in domestic assault cases — a fuzzy area at the best of times — at their discretion. They prefer the victims to lay the charges. But as Gloria Hart, on the executive committee of Metro's Support Services for Assaulted Women said: "In my experience, police only lay charges if there is blood on the floor."

□ That same group, whose purpose is to educate the public about wife abuse, has received no money from the provincial ministries of Health or Community and Social Services, despite several requests. They operate on a shoe string budget aided in part by the Federal Secretary of State.

Exploding need

□ The need for housing for battered women is exploding in the province. In 1973, there was one hostel in Ontario — Interval House in Toronto — and now there are 35 with 463 beds and plans for nine more to open if they can get financing. The province gives them no start-up money.

□ Only one in five battered women who calls Metro's three shelters is accepted because there is so little room. Only one in three women can find shelter outside Metro.

□ Shelters in Metro receive \$23 a day — the highest rate in the province — for each woman resident, compared to Welland, the lowest which gets \$8.36. (The cost is shared between the municipality, the province and the federal government.) Yet, the costs of operating a shelter run 25 per cent and — according to some — 40 per cent above the allowance.

□ Municipal donations to shelters are entirely discretionary. As Dr. Doris Guyatt, of the Ministry of Community and Social Services said: "The municipality can decide whether or not to fund a hostel and who to fund in a hostel." The committee heard the story of one battered wife who was denied assistance because the municipal officer knew her husband and "he was a good man."

□ Immigrant women who are abused have even fewer places to turn for help than English speaking women. They are caught in a Catch 22 position because they rely on their husbands for sponsorship and fear being deported if they leave the family home.

But there was good news, too, and most of it came from London, where the police chief ordered his officers last year to start laying charges against wife beaters. Now police lay charges in 88 per cent of cases — compared to 3 per cent the year before — and as a result, courts are taking the charges more seriously.

Dr. Peter Jaffe, a psychologist at the family law clinic in London, said that the chances of the courts taking serious action — a fine or jail term — triple when the officer lays a charge instead of the woman. But the other side of the story is that in London it's estimated women were beaten an average of 35 times before they would call the police.

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