

Project Angel is lifeline for those at high risk of violence

By Brock Weir

A good night's sleep is something we can take for granted. All too often, however, sleepless nights can leave you exhausted and stripped of energy to do the things that need to be done.

For a person in a violent situation, this can be paralyzing; leaving you without the internal resources to take that brave first step in looking for a new home away from the violence, the ability to apply for much needed programs, or simply go to work.

Indeed, that is the first measure of success of Project Angel, an initiative of the Victim Services of York Region. Project Angel aims equip to anyone in the community at high risk of experiencing violence from an intimate ex-partner with communication devices, complete with a GPS system, which, unlike other personal alarm systems, is connected directly to 9-1-1.

"Every second is imperative to these clients," says Gillian Freeman, Executive Director of Victim Services of York Region (VSY). Project Angel was launched in 2012 with start-up dollars received from the Magna Hoedown. This year, VSY is once again partnering with Hoedown and will use its share of the proceeds to get Project Angel into the hands of more people who need it most.

"Sometimes we underestimate some simple things," says Ms. Freeman. "When you think of a good night's sleep, when you're tired and exhausted you don't have the energy to do all the things you need to do in order to remove yourself from a violent situation: the energy to start looking for a new place to live that the accused might not know; the energy to apply for housing if you need to; or go to work; or all the other things that help you in your everyday existence.

"Every Project Angel client, the first thing they report is they got a good night's sleep. Something as simple as just sleep helps build their resources and give them the ability to start working to make other change that is needed in their lives in hopes of not needing the alarm again."

This is certainly a measure of success.

Before VSY received their start-up money for Project Angel, the organization facilitated a program called Support Link, which supplied mobile phones for persons at high risk experiencing violence. A government-run initiative, they soon found out that cell phones were not the most means in addressing clients' needs.

In some cases, clients would dial 9-1-1 but wouldn't have the capability of communicating their situation.

"On one 911 call, we were pulling off the satellite the area the mobile phone was communicating," explains Ms. Freeman. "That only gives you a general geographic area, so it wasn't very helpful."

The new system, however, was immediately embraced by clients, shelters and counselling services alike.

"It is completely confidential and no one really knows about [the device]. It is pretty small and you can stick it around your neck without people knowing. It has proved its value with every single client."

Ms. Freeman began working with Victim Services straight out of university. In 2001, she was in York Region and was struck by the strong arm's length relationship VSY had with York Regional Police.

"When I first started, I was a one woman show," says Ms. Freeman. "Over the years, we have been able to increase the number of people we have provided support to, which is always phenomenal. We have been able to expand programs and one of the other programs the Hoedown funding is supporting is a suicide bereavement support group.

"York Region has never really had a specific suicide bereavement support group. There are support groups based on the loss of a spouse or the loss of a child, but there is a unique aspect in relation to suicide."

In addition, there are a number of programs that help clients out in different ways ranging from back-to-school programs helping clients get their kids ready to hit the books with backpacks, lunch bags, and maybe even a new outfit. Around the holidays, they kick into high gear as well.

"Toy Mountain is lovely, but our clients are asking for dish soap and toilet paper because it is expensive," says Ms. Freeman. "I feel like Victim Services is York Region's best kept secret. I don't think most people know that we exist and that we're a separate entity from the Police. We are thankful to the Magna Hoedown for constantly supporting the community and for this year specifically Victim Services of York Region. The dollars are going to such worthy causes and we're thankful for all the support."

For more information on Victim Services York Region, visit victimservices-york.org. For tickets and further information about the 2017 Wild, Wild West Hoedown and how to support the 20 community partners, visit www.hoedown.ca.