

Op-Ed:

Why Specialized Police and Court Support for Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Survivors Must Be Recognized and Funded

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Sexual assault and child abuse are among the most traumatic crimes, carrying deep and lasting impacts on survivors. Yet, despite significant progress in victim services, survivors navigating the criminal justice system are too often met with traumatization, misunderstanding, and systemic barriers that obstruct their healing and access to justice.

Specialized Police and Court Support (SPCS) programs must be recognized not just as a compliment to Victim Services, but as an essential, expert response proven to improve outcomes for sexual assault and child abuse survivors. The Office of the Federal Ombudsperson for Victims of Crime's "Rethinking Justice" report provides the clearest evidence yet: truly survivor-centered justice is impossible without dedicated, expert advocacy capable of addressing the unique trauma and systemic barriers in these cases.

Data-driven Evidence: The System Is Failing Survivors

According to the "Rethinking Justice" systemic investigation, sexual violence is "one of the most underreported crimes in Canada." Despite decades of reform, only 6% of sexual assaults are reported to police. The investigation surveyed 1,000 survivors, finding that most feared reporting due to disbelief, re-traumatization, or further harm, and many described the system as a source of secondary victimization rather than safety or justice.

Specialized Police and Court Support (SPCS) programs directly confront these realities. The Ombudsperson's report highlights that "service providers who sat with survivors through a trial, advocated for them, explained things, listened, and treated them with dignity... had saved their lives" (Survivor Survey Response 222). When the service is part of a Child and Youth Advocacy Centre (CYAC) or a Sexual Assault Centre, those that have been harmed have access to an array of services that serve to stabilize, educate and treat the trauma.

The process of healing is holistic and goes far beyond reporting and court support functions. Where Victim

Service Units deliver necessary navigation across all crime types, SPCS staff are specially trained to counter rape myths, recognize trauma symptoms, and support vulnerable and marginalized survivors, groups the "Rethinking Justice" report repeatedly identifies as most at risk of harm from the system.

Specialized Police and Court Support (SPCS) programs, like those operating within the Chinook Sexual Assault Centre and our Chinook Child and Youth Advocacy Centre and across Alberta's sexual assault services and CYAC network, provide a vital, focused service uniquely tailored to the complex needs of sexual violence and child abuse survivors. Unlike Victim Service programs that serve a broad array of victims of crime, SPCS programs bring trauma-specific expertise and a deep understanding of sexualized violence and its impacts.

SPCS workers are highly trained professionals with extensive knowledge of both sexual violence trauma and the criminal justice system. They offer more than general emotional support, they provide informed advocacy, accurate and timely information about legal processes, safety planning, court preparation and accompaniment, and trauma-informed liaison with police, crown prosecutors, and other justice stakeholders. Importantly, they operate independently of the justice system's institutional structures, ensuring survivors' safety and autonomy remain paramount.

Victim Services and Specialized Police and Court Support programs are not redundant but complementary. Victim Services provide the foundational support to victims of all crime types, while SPCS programs deepen this support for sexual assault and child abuse survivors, addressing their specific legal and emotional hurdles. Collaborative protocols and referral pathways between these services maximize survivor access and system navigation efficiency without duplicating efforts. Both are needed!

The Chinook Sexual Assault Centre's Justice Navigators and our Child and Family Advocates in our Child and Youth Advocacy Centre, illustrate this specialization in action, helping survivors understand their legal rights, prepare for and attend court, and access an integrated continuum of care without losing agency or being overwhelmed by the legal maze. Their work improves survivor engagement with the justice system, reduces case attrition, and fosters outcomes that honour survivors' dignity.

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Survivor Voices: “Believe Us” and “Sit with Us”

Survivors are adamant: “Believe us. It’s that simple. When we tell you something happened, don’t blame it on what we were doing or what we were wearing or if we deserved it or not. Regardless of what we were doing or how we were dressed, we didn’t deserve what happened to us.” (SISSA Survivor Survey, Response 59). Many other survey respondents and interviewees credited specialized advocates with their ability to continue participating in the justice process. In the words of Dr. Benjamin Roebuck, Federal Ombudsperson for Victims of Crime: “Survivors have spoken to me about you. They told me you are their lifeline; without you they would not have been able to carry on. Despite all the barriers, you make such a difference to those you support”.

The Path Forward: Enact the Recommendations - Fund Specialization

The Ombudsperson’s concluding position is blunt: “A fundamental shift is necessary. After decades of systemic failures, it is evident that the system is deeply flawed and in desperate need of reform. To truly address this crisis, we must prioritize the voices of survivors”.

Key recommendations include:

- Sustainable funding for survivor supports and trauma-informed responses.
- Replication and expansion of evidence-informed models like SPCS and CYACs for adults and children.
- Making testimonial aids and independent legal representation an automatic right for survivors

These recommendations are echoed across over 1,000 survivor voices, frontline and legal experts, and independent systemic reviews captured by the Ombudsperson’s investigation. The story could not be clearer: “Support services for survivors are struggling to keep up with the increase in demand with minimal funding. Survivors of sexual violence should always have access to support services that treat them with dignity and respect”.

Call to Action

Specialized Police and Court Support is not a luxury, nor a duplication of Victim Services, it is the difference between justice delivered and justice denied for some of the most at-risk members of our communities. As echoed in the words of survivors themselves: “Survivors need a lifeline. Specialized support provides one”.

Reference:

Government of Canada, Office of the Federal Ombudsperson for Victims of Crime (2025). Rethinking Justice for Survivors of Sexual Violence, A Systemic Investigation. <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/ofovc-ofvac/doc->

[uments/sissa/OFOVC_Rethinking_Justice_Report_exec-sum.pdf](#)

About Chinook Sexual Assault Centre

Organization Overview

The Chinook Sexual Assault Centre (CSAC) is a stand-alone, non-profit organization located in Lethbridge, Alberta, serving over 35 communities across Southwestern Alberta, from the British Columbia border to the U.S. border and east to Taber and Claresholm. CSAC provides leadership, advocacy, and comprehensive services for individuals impacted by sexual violence. Our vision is to end sexual violence through prevention, intervention, and systemic change.

Mandate

CSAC’s mandate is to deliver trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and person-centered services to victims and survivors of sexual violence, while advancing education, awareness, and collaborative strategies to prevent sexual violence. We are committed to equity, diversity, and inclusion, and acknowledge our responsibility to act on Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation framework by integrating Indigenous perspectives and addressing systemic barriers.

Core Services and Operations in SW Alberta

CSAC offers a continuum of services, including:

- **Crisis Response & Support:** Crisis management, intervention, and safety planning.
- **System Navigation and Integrated Case Management:** Stabilization and support.
- **Therapy & Peer Support:** Individual and group therapy for survivors of all ages and identities.
- **Police & Court Support:** Specialized Justice Navigators assist victims through reporting, court preparation, and testimony.
- **Child & Youth Advocacy Centre (CYAC):** Forensic interviews and wraparound supports for children and youth impacted by sexual abuse, severe physical abuse, neglect and domestic violence.
- **Public Education & Prevention:** Community education and training, awareness campaigns, and school-based programs.