

Liard Aboriginal Women's Society and Watson Lake RCMP sign groundbreaking safety protocol

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The Liard Aboriginal Women's Society (LAWS) and Watson Lake RCMP have broken new ground with a unique community safety initiative.

"Together for Justice" is a protocol for building community safety that confirms the new relationship that has been built between LAWS and the local RCMP. On International Women's Day, Friday March 8, 2013, the parties will celebrate their success and commitment to continue a collaboration that advances safety for women.

The protocol follows a series of workshops that took place from February 2011 to March 2013. The project was initiated by LAWS and held in both Watson Lake and Whitehorse.

RCMP employees have joined with Kaska women, Yukon Women's Coalition delegates, representatives from government and community organizations. Sessions have carefully focused on the justice system, policing, culture, historical colonialism and residential schools to explore and understand how society responds to women who experience violence.

The participants have shared both difficult and humorous experiences while learning about each other. They now share a perspective that has already directly impacted policing. Sergeant Cam Lockwood, of the Watson Lake RCMP Detachment says that "the workshops provided a new lens that the RCMP has used to examine its practices. We saw the need to change the way we respond to women who experience violence, we asked for advice from women, and we made changes".

The Protocol establishes principles, objectives and core commitments which capture the new relationship.

"The shared commitments centre around improving how police and community respond to women who have experienced violence. The training places us on common ground regarding First Nations culture, and how people are responding to residential schools and challenges with the justice system. It teaches us to recognize women's courage, support their decisions and ensure our responses do not attach blame," says Chief Superintendent Peter Clark, Commanding Officer for Yukon RCMP.

"Many people and many resources have allowed this to happen," says Ann Maje Raider, of LAWS. "Elders, residential school survivors, educators, First Nation government, the Watson Lake Police Advisory Board, shelters, youth, advocacy groups, police officers and many Kaska women and men all contributed to getting us to where we are today."

The work doesn't stop with the signing of the protocol, however. "We now have to make it real by living up to our commitments," says Sergeant Lockwood. "There is an implementation plan and process that we will follow with members of the community to ensure that the lines of communication we have built stay open." He adds that keeping doors open to ongoing collaboration with LAWS, community groups and individual citizens will be critical to the success of the protocol.

Dr. Allan Wade, and Dr. Cathy Richardson, of the Centre for Response-Based Practice in British Columbia facilitated the two year process.

Even before the historic protocol was signed, the collaborators were seeing positive differences in the community. "We now see a very different relationship has evolved between the RCMP members and many women and organizations," says Dr. Wade. "Police and the women's community are now closer together. We're seeing increased understanding of each other, of new language and responses that improve safety for all women" says Dr. Richardson.

Kaska elder May Broadhagen believes that the training and protocol could become a model adopted elsewhere. "These meetings have already had positive results. We know more about each other and women are once again enjoying the benefit that comes from having personal relationships with RCMP members in our community. We hope that the path we have traveled will also take others to the success we have found."

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Photo (courtesy of Billy Gossen, Watson Lake RCMP)

Ann Maje Raider of the Liard Aboriginal Women's Society and Sergeant Cam Lockwood, commander of the Watson Lake RCMP Detachment, reinforced their commitment to communication and collaboration with the signing of "Together for Justice: A protocol for building community safety" in Watson Lake on March 5, 2013.