

LIARD ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S SOCIETY

Together for Justice

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Final Evaluation

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## Introduction

### Background

The *Together for Justice* project arose as a vision of the Kaska women of Liard Aboriginal Women's Society (LAWS) as a means to extinguish violence against their people, and in their community. With the support of women's organizations in Whitehorse and RCMP, the women of LAWS embarked on a journey of inter-organizational relationship building that would become known as *Together for Justice*. Improving the accessibility and efficacy of services provided to women who have experienced violence became the main objective of the process, the prime intention being that women would more easily be able to transfer into violence-free lives.

Recent incidents had underscored Yukon Territory Government's urgent need to address serious discrimination within, and legitimate local public distrust of RCMP in the territory. Two notable cases are the in-cell death of Raymond Silverfox in Whitehorse in 2008, and the two officers acquitted of rape in Watson Lake in 2010. Relations between the First Nations community and RCMP in the Yukon (as in elsewhere in Canada) are particularly strained and continue suffer from the effects of colonialism and residential school. This distrust has exacerbated dangers of domestic and sexual violence to Aboriginal women in the area because they are both more at risk and less likely to report.

Correspondingly to recommendations advanced in the policing review to improve services, LAWS strategized to entice dialogue between community members, RCMP, Justice, and local service providers by hosting a series of gatherings that they could all attend. Gatherings were held in both Watson Lake and Whitehorse. RCMP and service providers alike developed an enriched knowledge of services the quality of services required by women who have experienced violence. Community members were anticipated to familiarize themselves with individual RCMP members and gain insight into Yukon's policing and justice system, and all were expected to build understanding and develop mutual trust.

Consequently, the evaluation will measure the extent to which service delivery for women living in Kaska traditional territory and Yukon has improved throughout the course of the project, and the extent to which RCMP of the area remain accountable in their commitment to preserve the safety of Aboriginal women and their loved ones.

## Project Objectives

Indications of the project's success were identified for short, medium, and long-term trajectories. The most forefront short-term targeted outcome for the project was that RCMP and other service providers develop a more comprehensive understanding of the needs of Aboriginal women and the realities they face. RCMP member educating and training in local First Nation tradition and culture has been identified as critical to developing understanding. In addition, women were expected to gain familiarity with relevant tools and resources within the community, and service-providers were expected to have an increased awareness about the roles of the other organizations.

Longer-term anticipated outcomes included changes or actions by RCMP to respond to the needs of Aboriginal women who have experienced violence, increased trust in law enforcement officials and other service providers, and increased access to these services by Aboriginal women in the community. These objectives were to be accomplished through the implementation of community tools which respond to the problem of chronically high rates of violence against women in northern, rural and aboriginal communities.

The paramount community safety tool created during the course of the gatherings is the Liard Aboriginal Women's Society – Royal Canadian Mounted Police *Together for Justice* Safety Protocol. Part of the document sets out expectations for the respective parties regarding how they are to maintain sustainable relationships and implement the community action plans that address unremitting high levels of violence against Kaska and other Yukon Aboriginal women. Effectually, it is hoped that the involved parties build cooperative working relationships that last for generations to come.

## Research Method

The *Together for Justice* gatherings are constituted by facilitated discussion, demonstration, sharing of knowledge, debate, and small group activity. The project required monitoring with tools that would reflect the Being that the proceedings would be subjective and dynamic nature of the proceedings, so the evaluator took the following steps in order to ensure that the information gathered would be accurate and representative:

1. Distributed surveys
2. Conducted interviews
3. Observed group interaction
4. Reviewed related documents
5. Analyzed all data

Additionally, the project evaluator attended meetings with the director and facilitators so that she could be familiarized with the history of the project and the planned proceedings. The evaluator also attended gatherings in order observe tone and get to know participants on a personal level.

**Surveys**

In total, ten sets of surveys have been gathered over twelve total two day gatherings. They were distributed to participants near or at the end of the second day of the meetings to all participants, and they were filled out and returned at participants' discretion. Those who were unable to write were given assistance. All who were involved were promised confidentiality.

The surveys consisted of three to twelve open-ended questions that were designed to elicit group feedback regarding conference proceedings and the project's progress. Additionally, the surveys functioned to reinforce presented information as well as stimulate thought and promote action on behalf of individuals.

**Interviews**

To obtain a deeper understanding of the views of the involved parties on specific issues, the researcher besought women and Elders from Kaska and other first nations to divulge. Representatives from women's organizations and the RCMP were also interviewed. The following is a list of those who acceded and were thenceforth interviewed:

- |                      |                     |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Agnes Chief       | 6. Rick Aird        |
| 2. Ann Maje Raider   | 7. Rose Peter       |
| 3. Barbara McInerney | 8. Rose Marie Peter |
| 4. May Brodhagen     | 9. Teena Bazylnski  |
| 5. Peter Clark       | 10. Tootsie Charlie |

## Analysis

### Openness

“I never dreamed that we could get together and talk things over, but it’s happening.”

*-Elder interview*

Indications of success to engage local women and RCMP are apparent from observations in the progression of gatherings, including self-report, surveys, and interviews. Prominent themes follow.

“I don’t think I would have said what I said today if I didn’t feel safe.”

*-interview clip*

When asked about positive changes observed in the group, many participants have been responding with words like ‘trust’, ‘openness’, and ‘willingness’ to participate and speak up. Most group participants indicated that group discussion is increasingly honest and respectful. One participant remarked,

“The first couple of meetings, I was wondering if I should keep on going because it was just too surfacey... Now, it feels more like there’s enough trust.”

*-interview clip*

Likewise, numerous participants reported feeling more comfortable or at ease, and many commented that there was more open dialogue within the group or a more positive tone overall. Many participants noted the RCMP’s willingness to listen, and correspondingly, about the propensity of “First Nation women starting to speak up!” (*survey response*). Group support and mutual respect have acted as a catalyst for relationship-building. One participant recounted the following:

“I was having a difficult time with an RCMP officer who was attending this meeting.

I had a run-in with him in the past and was frightened by him,

but there was so much support and understanding from participants...

...that I wasn’t alone and shouldn’t feel that way because I did nothing wrong.”

*-survey response*

This rendition exemplifies how a safe, supportive environment and appropriate social response can nurture confidence and increase a one’s propensity to speak out, thereby empowering women.

### **RCMP Involvement**

Cultural knowledge of Yukon first nations' ways has been repeatedly identified as key for service providers – especially RCMP – to better meet the needs of Aboriginal women in the area. Over the course of the meetings, an enhanced understanding has been indicated by Aboriginal women and RCMP alike. For example, one member of the RCMP stated that he once understood aversion of eye contact by an interviewee as an indicator of guilt; he now knows that not using eye contact is traditionally a show of respect for first nations in the area.

Since the very first gathering, it has been voiced that RCMP need to integrate further into their respective communities by attending events, spending time on the land with locals, visiting schools and the like. The RCMP have been doing this consistently. They have visited the schools both in and out of uniform multiple times, and even engaged in a friendly snowball fight with community children. On the Discovery Days weekend of 2012, a few members from the Watson Lake detachment volunteered to sit over a dunk tank. Watson Lake RCMP have also been speaking to Elders to help better understand first nation customs and history, and some have even been lucky enough to be brought along trapping and hunting.

“It is their involvement not just because they're on the agenda. Involvement because they want to be involved. Shows that they care.”

*-survey response*

It seems that this willingness of RCMP to fully participate with the indigenous population both in and out of the meetings has contributed to the women's amplified tendency to speak out and voice their opinions at the conferences. This is an observation echoed by participants in the surveys. When asked, “What have the RCMP done here that signifies that we are heading in the right direction with them?” every single participant gave a positive response.

### **Permeating the Gathering Walls**

Improved relationships between service-providing organizations have already proven to be beneficial to addressing media. Barbara McInerney, Executive Director of Kaushee's Place, a transition home for women and children, and others have voiced a need to address how the media reports violent crimes against women:

When the media phoned the RCMP for an interview regarding what they were making out to be a “serial rapist on the loose”, Rick Aird said that he saw right away that if he went along with that, that “they were just gonna put us at odds because we really hadn't sat down and asked what is everyone talking about and what is going on”. The respective organizations concerned then had a meeting and planned a joint news conference. Peter Clark, Commanding Officer of

the Territory's police force, described their unified message to be "much more powerful". (Interview clips).

Moreover, several anticipated longer-term objectives of the Together for Justice project have already been met. For instance, local RCMP implemented changes in their use of language on their website that reflects understanding of appropriate social response when referring to issues of violence. Mutualizing language was one topic that was discussed at the meetings, to which some police were initially perceived as being unreceptive to. This is evidenced in survey responses and gathering that refer to RCMP's response as "defensive". Now, it has now become apparent from RCMP interaction with community members in meetings, as well as from surveys and interviews, that there is a general consensus of openness. RCMP's relationships with Kaska women, Elders, and others are now permeating far past the gathering walls.

'More RCMP are checking in with women as real people. Going out on the land,  
and integrating themselves into the community.

More visiting and getting to know people.'

-Elder interview

### **Increased Access to Relevant Tools and Resources**

*Together for Justice* aims to increase the availability and quality of services offered to women who have experienced violence. The gatherings hosted by LAWS have rendered steps in this direction, and the community safety protocol agreement has formally established these ambitions. Examples of improved service delivery are outlined in the following paragraphs.

Kelly MacQuarny, a member of the RCMP's Special Response Unit (SRU) has been receiving calls from women both in the community and women incarcerated at Whitehorse Correctional Facility. The SRU is a team of RCMP that is specially trained to respond to calls of domestic violence and sexualized assault. When implored, "What signs of increased trust of RCMP by Aboriginal women have you witnessed here?" one participant answered, "Kelly MacQuarny getting calls from women both in and out of jail". This statement indicates that community members trust as a critical element for women to access community resources like the RCMP.

Watson Lake's women's shelter director Caron Statham says that she has a better response from RCMP when she phones the detachment. Instead of being greeted with a "So what's the problem at the Shelter now?" her call is being cordially welcomed without any presuppositions of negative cause. Caron reported that she feels more confident that she will receive a positive response from RCMP, and is more likely to phone to converse about issues that don't require immediate assistance. This indicates not only that cooperation between organizations is

increasing, but also that these organizations are working together proactively to attain safety for women. In addition, it shows that service providers – including RCMP – are accessing community tools.

Ann Maje Raider of LAWS reported that she called RCMP to attend to assaults that she witnessed occur on her street during the summer of 2012, and that she was impressed with the RCMP's response time. More prompt RCMP responses to calls have been corroborated by other community members as well.

### **Getting Others Involved**

A desire to have more organizations and community members attend the meetings was indicated in more than one sense. First, many of those who attended expressed a concern about having more leaders and government officials present, and in particular, a need to have First Nations' leaders present. However, in Watson Lake, there have been some incidences where Chief and Council have worked against LAWS and to disempower Kaska women, and the political agendas that some leaders might bring could foil progress (*see attached*). It is imperative that women feel safe to speak up without having to worry about possible repercussions: With more men present for the discussions, the lesser propensity for disclosure.

Second, a significant amount of attendees expressed a desire for people from other communities to be made aware of the meetings. Some participants said that they would like to have more Elders and those who work directly with the First Nations people, such as justice and social service workers. This suggests that those who have attended must find the gatherings to be a valuable tool for safety and believe that others would benefit from them. It is noteworthy that while some participants stated that they would like to see more participants at the gatherings, others were remarking about how diverse the group of attendees was: When asked about positive changes observed at the gatherings, one participant noted, "More involvement from the Elders. A greater diversity of participants – different communities, et cetera".

### **Honouring Women's Resistance to Violence**

Recognizing women's resistance to violence is a process that begins by listening. Listening without judgment is critical to developing an understanding of the issues that affect Aboriginal women on a day-to-day basis. The women made it clear from early on that they need to know they will be believed in order to confide about violence against them – they need to feel trusted. When participants were asked about what kinds of social responses would help preserve the dignity, and contribute to the future personal safety of a woman who confided in them, prevalent answers were included: "Honour her commitment to talk about violence", "listen in a non-judgmental way", "LISTEN", "acknowledge steps she's taken to resist violence", "support her choices", "don't blame", "tell her you believe her", "assist her", and "explore options" (*see attached, survey responses, interview clips*).

With perceived openness and approachability by community members, more concerns are being communicated to RCMP, who have likewise proven to be more prepared to listen and respond to matters. RCMP have developed a better understanding of issues that the women are facing and the options that they do or do not have when dealing with those issues. The greater inclination towards openness by all parties involved is evident from the progression of gatherings, as well as interviews and surveys.

The RCMP sent members of their Specialized Response Unit (SRU) to the *Together for Justice* gatherings so that they could gain first-hand knowledge of the realities and needs of the women they serve, learn appropriate language for interviewing and report writing, and familiarize themselves with community tools and resources where victims can be directed support. Members have also been attending community events that support similar causes, including this year's 'Take Back the Night' march and the 'Sisters in Spirit' march and vigil.

### **Together for Justice Safety Protocol**

On March 05, 2013 a community safety protocol was signed between Liard Aboriginal Women's Society and the Watson Lake RCMP detachment. The purpose of the Protocol is to create safety and justice for women through increased collaboration between the RCMP, LAWS, and other service-providing agencies in the Watson Lake area. At the host of gatherings leading up to this unprecedented event, participants were asked to communicate their concerns regarding important safety issues in their community. Participant feedback was critical to the development of the document because it had to reflect the people it is intended to serve. In addition, meetings were held between Ann Maje Raider, Yukon RCMP Chief Superintendent Peter Clark, Watson Lake Detachment Sergeant Cam Lockwood, representatives of women's organizations, and Jeff Cook, a community planner hired by LAWS for the building of the document and facilitating of meetings therein. Jeff has 15 years' experience working with Kaska and other Yukon First Nations.

Forming a practical document presented as challenges on several fronts. First of all, the document would have to be flexible enough to allow for development, yet clear enough to circumvent ambiguity. The agreement sets out concrete expectations for communication, such as what information must be shared between organizations, who disseminates what information, and who is responsible for what roles in assisting women and their children to be safe in the community. Timelines have been set for various benchmarks, including review periods. Due to the directive nature of the document, it can function as a template for evaluating how well RCMP and public service organizations have remained accountable to their commitments.

The Liard Aboriginal Women's Society – Royal Canadian Mounted Police *Together for Justice* Safety Protocol not only denotes the newly formed bond between the two organizations, it confirms a shared vision and common guiding principles. It clearly defines its objectives and delineates corresponding commitments for LAWS and the RCMP to adhere to in pursuit of its objectives.

### Moving Forward

The signing of the Liard Aboriginal Women's Society – Royal Canadian Mounted Police *Together for Justice* Safety Protocol marks the beginning of a new era for social justice and policing in Yukon. The space for dialogue that has been created, in conjuncture with the agreement itself, represents an unprecedented opportunity for RCMP to collaborate with the Yukon Women's Coalition in addition to LAWS. The process has and continues to foster closer connections and deeper understanding between RCMP and other service providers. The result is an influx in knowledge sharing, which is indicated by changes to programs and services so that the needs of Aboriginal women can be more adequately addressed. A community safety protocol agreement for the Yukon Status of Women Council and local RCMP detachment is being confabulated in Whitehorse.

Further opportunity for community feedback in Watson Lake and Whitehorse is scheduled for the fall of 2013.