

# Domestic violence report for NT government soon

*Two local practitioners have researched the issue of domestic violence in the USA and Canada and will report to the government with recommendations for change.*

The Northern Territory's treatment of domestic violence is the subject of a report being prepared by Sally Gearin (William Forster Chambers) and Judy Harrison (NTLAC).

The report, which will go to the government at the end of September, is the result of the Northern Territory Womens Fellowship Award which enabled the women to travel to the USA and Canada to research domestic violence issues.

Gearin and Harrison established the NT Committee on Violence Against Women and Children and, through the work of that committee, discovered that the Northern Territory had no co-ordinated response to domestic violence.

Another issue was the way the criminal justice system deals with domestic violence.

"The system at present is victim-driven," Ms Gearin said.

"It needs to be law-driven."

Ninety per cent of victims of domestic violence do not proceed with charges.

"The message that gives the perpetrators is that it's okay to beat your wife because nothing will happen to you," Ms Gearin said.

She said that penalties for breach of restraining orders do not deter perpetrators and that reinforces the notion that domestic violence is acceptable and that perpetrators can get away with it.

Ms Gearin said community attitudes need to change, too.

"Domestic violence is a criminal offence," she said.

"Community attitudes to domestic violence need to be changed in the same way that attitudes to drink driving have changed.

"It used to be okay to drive drunk, but now it's unacceptable."

Ms Gearin said there was little infrastructure to deal with domestic violence in the Northern Territory, and what does exist provides only a short-term solution.

Dawn House is a Darwin refuge for domestic violence victims.

"Most women don't seek help until the fourth or fifth occasion," Ms Gearin said.

"The average stay in Dawn House is four nights.

"It's like a casualty ward.

"People go there in crisis, they're patched up and sent back.

"We need a holistic approach to long-term emotional support for women.

"And the forgotten parties in domestic violence on most occasions are the children.

"There are very few resources to help children overcome the emotional trauma of domestic violence," she said.

Ms Gearin said Canadian research had indicated the effect of domestic violence on children was similar to the children being physically beaten, as though they were the victims.

Women are most at risk of domestic violence on two occasions: (1) immediately after a woman leaves her spouse; and (2) during pregnancy.

Ms Gearin said American research has indicated that more than 50 per cent of birth defects in that country are the result of domestic violence during pregnancy.

She said most states in the USA have had a co-ordinated response to domestic violence for 10 years.

"In Canada and most states of the USA there is a 'no-drop' policy," she said.

"That means that the victim is not given the choice of proceeding with charges; the District Attorney prosecutes.

"In some states a first offence will result in gaol for a minimum of 10 days or participation in a perpetrators programme which runs three nights a week over 12 weeks.

"Attendance and performance in these programmes is monitored by the probation and parole authorities.

"While the husband is at the perpetrators programme, the wife is undergoing a womens programme to examine her life and her options - those options can include reconciling with the perpetrator," she said.

Ms Gearin said that in the USA in cases where the woman is in fear of her life because the husband has been charged with an offence, she goes into a witness protection programme.

"In the Northern Territory, if a woman is in fear of her life, we put her on a plane and send her to a refuge interstate," Ms Gearin said.

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