

## 'Slow' progress on third-party sexual assault reporting

By **Avery Zingel** - February 20, 2019

Third-party reporting has been identified by RCMP as a way to address underreporting of sexual assault in Canada, but the NWT is making "slow" progress to implement such a measure, says MLA Julie Green.



*B.C. and Yukon both have established models for third-party reporting, but the NWT is lagging behind on a mechanism that could improve sexual assault reporting outcomes and establish third-party reviews of unfounded cases.  
Avery Zingel/NNSL photo*

"I don't get a sense of when it is going to be important," said Green. "I don't get a sense that it is a priority. I think the amount of time that it has taken to develop the options is unreasonably long given that there are models to follow that are close at hand."

There are existing blueprints in B.C. and Yukon that can guide the territory to implement its own mechanisms, said Green in an interview.

In the legislative assembly Feb. 14 and today, Green pressed Justice Minister Louis Sebert on the status of the collaboration between the GNWT Department of Justice, RCMP G Division and frontline service providers to advance third-party reporting in the territory.

Sebert acknowledged that "considerable progress" has been made in other jurisdictions and not in the NWT. He reported to Green Feb. 20 that the working group is studying and refining options for third-party reporting and will be prepared to share information by April.

Since October 2018, RCMP and the justice minister indicated interest in working on systemic issues around sexual assault. Department officials and RCMP are exploring

"alternative options" for victims to report sexual assault, including third-party reporting and external review committees, said Sebert on Feb. 14.

There is, however, no allocation or a business plan in this budget to put resources behind implementing the mechanisms, said Green.

"We've been talking about this now for a couple of years and I don't get any sense of urgency from (Sebert) at all. I don't think anything is going to happen in the life of this assembly and so I'm disappointed with that," she said.

"We have very high rates of sexual assault in this territory. Having both third-party reporting — which would facilitate women reporting this to Alison McAteer House, for example — and providing third-party oversight for sexual assault complaints both make a lot of sense," she said.

"The minister is treating this like it's a very big ask and very time-consuming and expensive to implement, where in fact, it's been implemented in other jurisdictions without a lot of fuss," she said.

## Improvements called for after Unfounded investigation

In Canada, victims face barriers to reporting their assaults to police. Some of those concerns include a fear of being revictimized through the criminal justice system and whether they'll be believed by their local police force.

In 2017, an investigation by the *Globe and Mail* into unfounded cases uncovered that one in five sexual assault allegations between 2010 and 2014 were determined baseless by Canadian police. The reports by Robyn Doolittle also gave rise to reforms in how Canadian police handle sexual assault reporting and review of cases designated as unfounded.

Yellowknife RCMP's five-year unfounded rate is 36 per cent. In 2014, [42 per cent of cases were cleared as unfounded](#). In Whitehorse, that rate is 29 per cent, compared to cities like Toronto (seven per cent) and Winnipeg (two per cent). The highest rate of unfounded cases was in St. John at 51 per cent.

The GNWT Department of Justice is continuing to work with RCMP, who have made their own efforts to implement change following the 2017 review titled [The Way Forward](#).

That review included actions to make police more sensitive and aware through training on sexual assault. RCMP were set to take a sexual assault myths course.

As of Jan. 21, 71.2 per cent of territorial RCMP have completed the course, said Sebert.

"That was the RCMP's commitment," he said, adding that there "may be operational reasons as to why they could not get that done."

Progress on improving sexual assault reporting and training for law enforcement is too slow, said Green.

*News/North* has request information from the RCMP about when all of its police force will complete the training.

In 2016, there were 138 reported sexual assaults in the NWT according to Statistics Canada.

Sexual assault is underreported because of shame, guilt and stigma surrounding sexual victimization, the normalization of inappropriate sexual behaviour and the perception that sexual violence does not warrant reporting, states a 2017 Statistics Canada report.

Of 636,000 self-reported incidents of sexual assault in 2014, only five per cent were reported to police, the report states. Women were victims in 87 per cent of these incidents.

Negative experiences with police can put a chill on survivors willingness to report sexual assault, say RCMP. The force hopes to address underreporting by exploring alternative options for victims to report sexual assaults, including third-party reporting.

## Neighbouring jurisdictions moving ahead

Yukon and B.C. governments have moved ahead on third-party reporting. Yukon introduced the mechanism in 2014. The Women's Transition Home in Whitehorse offers the option for external reporting for victims of sexual assault of all genders who are above the age of 19 and have made an informed decision to not report to RCMP.

People who are not ready to make a report to the police can give their information to staff at the transition home and details will be relayed to RCMP without the victim's name attached.

RCMP are given the name of the assailant and details to form a record, should someone decide to report directly to police.

The third-party report does not trigger an investigation, but gives RCMP an opportunity to collect information and identify alleged perpetrators with multiple victims. The external reporting gives police an opportunity for police to liaise with victims if the same perpetrator assaults another victim, to see if a victim wants to provide more information.

It also offers sexual assault evidence kits that will be stored nameless for up to six months before they are destroyed should a person decide to not go forward with the legal process.

Establishing such a service in the NWT requires collaboration between the GNWT, non-governmental organizations and RCMP, said Sebert.

"This is an important matter, and I realize that considerable progress has been made in this area in other jurisdictions," said Sebert.

Sebert did offer Green a timeline for when the NWT would see the implementation of third-party reporting.

"I'm going to be really happy when you report that we are making considerable progress in this jurisdiction on this issue," she said.

"The overall message here is that while the minister says this issue is important, the walk is not equivalent to the talk," said Green.

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