

Time to step up and help victims of crime

The Province - Monday, April 30, 2007

Survivors, families offer suggestions

By Joey Thompson
The Province Staff Reporter

They were not who you'd expect to find huddled around a conference table: Rosalie Turcotte, whose son Ken was beaten to death with a bat so badly she had trouble recognizing his body; Marjean Fichtenberg, whose 25-year-old son Dennis was stabbed to death by a federal parolee in Prince George; Jean Cusworth, whose 19-year-old daughter Jennifer's battered body was found in a Kelowna ditch (her killer was never caught); Val Hughes, sister of 39-year-old mom Kerry Koski, one of the missing women on the roster of potential victims of Willy Pickton; Sherry Edmunds-Flett, director of LINC, a federally funded group that helps long-term inmates reintegrate into the community; and her husband Glenn Flett, a lifer who served 12 years for fatally shooting a store manager during an armed heist.

Trauma, grief, outrage, loss and criminal behaviour make for strange company, but this eclectic group, brought together by LINC for a panel discussion last week, have much in common. They want the federal and provincial attorneys-general -- who keep vigil over the nation's prisons and justice system -- to give survivors and families of victims of crime purpose in the criminal process.

Sure, they are kept in the loop more today than a decade ago.

They're entitled to be kept informed about the accused's trip to trial. They're allowed to say what's on their mind in court

and parole board hearings, and some provinces -- B.C. is one -- have victims' compensations programs that offer a few bucks for travel and grief counselling.

But for the most part, their role in the criminal justice process is arbitrary, dependent either on the whim of politicians, the workload of Crown or the mood of a judge. Their involvement is minor compared to the accused, whose constitutional rights are protected.

Here's what the panel wants:

- Guaranteed access to a provincially funded, provincially integrated victim-services program, much like the one provided by the Crown before the Liberals axed it, leaving the task to untrained, often-times insensitive police.
- A similar network of provincial services for families of missing relatives, who currently receive no support or assistance until an accused is found and charges laid.
- Information about the inmate's prison behaviour and involvement in rehabilitation programs, data Corrections Canada currently keeps under wraps, citing privacy laws.
- The ability to choose to be involved in an offender's prison rehab programs.
- The right to choose to work with the offender as he moves through the prison, parole and community release process.
- More accountability through longer sentences and fewer early release

opportunities for violent offenders.

The group says as long as victims have no voice in the process there is no pressure on offenders to be accountable.

“Society can’t hope to rehabilitate the offender while there is a lack of acknowledgement of the harm done to the victim,” said Fichtenberg.

“Prison actually helps us feel less bad about the crimes we’ve committed because we’re so removed from those we harmed,” Flett agreed.

“Having to face the victim forces us to confront what we’ve done.

“It’s also wrong to keep the victims in the dark. We gave up our rights to privacy and freedom when we broke the law. We must have to earn them back.”

© The Vancouver Province 2007