

SAFETY *and* SECURITY *of* VULNERABLE WOMEN *in* B.C.

A STATUS REPORT IN RESPONSE TO:
FORSAKEN – THE REPORT OF *The Missing Women Commission of Inquiry*



Ministry of
Justice





MESSAGE *from* the MINISTER

The cases of women who were murdered or are missing will not be forgotten. This was a tragedy for the families and friends of these women and for our province. Our opportunity now is to continue to make changes to help ensure something like this never happens again.

Responding to the recommendations included in *Forsaken – The Report of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry* is a priority for our Government and for the Ministry of Justice. Not only are we committed to creating a legacy of safety and security for vulnerable women, but it is also my hope that the families of these murdered and missing women – along with all British Columbians – can see from this status report that progress is being made.

In the decade which has passed since the period of time under review by the Commission, substantive changes have taken place. In addition to significant reforms in policing practices, there have been national-, provincial- and local-level initiatives to intervene and prevent violence against vulnerable women and to examine issues related to the investigation and prosecution of cases involving the serial murder of women. Work on these issues is ongoing.

Since the release of the *Missing Women Commission of Inquiry Report*, significant action has been taken by the B.C. Government and others and work is underway on many of the recommendations. Steady progress is being made, but we recognize there is more that can and must be done. That is why, through this year's civil forfeiture grants, we will be providing communities with funding to prevent the sexual exploitation and trafficking of vulnerable women, especially Aboriginal young women. Addressing vulnerability issues is critical as we continue in our work, but we cannot undertake this journey alone.

Building on the work done to this point, we are also now engaging with key stakeholders and looking to them for their expertise and advice with respect to the recommendations as we continue to move forward. In addition, we will be starting a multi-phase project to examine how policing is structured and funded to further protect vulnerable women in British Columbia. Important work continues on many fronts, with the recommendations contained in the *Missing Women Commission of Inquiry Report* serving as a blueprint to provide direction as we continue to make progress on our commitment to build a legacy of safety and security for vulnerable women in B.C.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'A'.

Honourable Suzanne Anton, QC
Attorney General, Minister of Justice

INTRODUCTION

On Dec. 17, 2012, *Forsaken – The Report of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry (MWCI Report)* was released. The report discusses the findings and recommendations of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry, which was established in 2010 to examine the police investigations conducted between January 1997 and February 2002 into women reported missing from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and the circumstances surrounding the decision of the Criminal Justice Branch in January 1998 to stay criminal charges.

This status report provides an overview of activities undertaken since the release of the *MWCI Report* and outlines our plans moving forward.

RESPONSE *to the* RECOMMENDATIONS

The B.C. Government is committed to responding to the *MWCI Report* recommendations as part of its overarching justice reform initiatives. These reforms will improve public safety and access to justice, and guide policing reform and law enforcement over the next several years.

Two key public plans set out the justice reform initiatives: the White Paper on Justice Reform and the draft *BC Policing and Community Safety Plan*. Both reports contain actions in response to a number of the *MWCI Report* recommendations and can be accessed here:

<http://www.ag.gov.bc.ca/justice-reform-initiatives/>

<http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/policeservices/publications-index/docs/BCPolicingPlan.pdf>

There are also a number of connected initiatives across government that are taking action to address violence against women in all its forms. In addition to the actions outlined in this status report, Government is also implementing B.C.’s three year action plan to combat human trafficking and finalizing a three year provincial plan to address domestic violence. We are also working with our federal, provincial and territorial counterparts on initiatives to prevent and address violence against women.

The *MWCI Report* is comprehensive. It contains 63 recommendations and two urgent measures that cover a wide range of issues, including those to prevent and address violence perpetrated against vulnerable women. This status report outlines the actions taken so far to respond to the recommendations using three broad categories: 1) safety and support for vulnerable women, 2) an effective and accessible justice system and 3) legacy and healing. Advancements on issues in each of these areas have been made, with more to come. The Province remains committed to working with other levels of government, police and communities as we undertake our work in response to the recommendations.

SAFETY *and* SUPPORT for VULNERABLE WOMEN

“Most of us will never have to worry about where we will get our next meal, what we will do to get the money we need to live or where we will sleep. We don’t understand what it feels like to be consumed by fears about our physical safety and yet afraid to contact the police. On your own, easily forsaken”

— COMMISSIONER WALLY OPPAL, EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE MWCI REPORT, P. 4

COMPLETED ACTIONS:

Improving Services

- ▶ Government is providing annual funding of \$750,000 (via BC Housing) to the WISH Drop-In Centre Society to improve services to vulnerable women who work in the sex trade in Vancouver. (MWCI Report – Urgent Measure #1)
Status: Completed, December 2012

Preventing Crime and Addressing Violence

- ▶ In 2012/13, \$1 million in Civil Forfeiture Crime Prevention and Crime Remediation Grants was provided by Government for crime prevention and remediation community initiatives, including funding for projects that prevent violence against women, stop sexual exploitation and combat human trafficking. This includes funding for two outreach workers in the Downtown Eastside who are connecting women involved in the sex trade with information, referrals and emotional support. It also includes several projects where young women at risk are provided with support and mentorship to build their resilience and prevent them from becoming victimized.
Status: Completed, March 2013
- ▶ Government released *BC’s Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking 2013-2016* in March of this year. The plan focuses on preventing and addressing trafficking of youth for sexual exploitation and preventing and addressing domestic trafficking of Aboriginal youth. Focus is on the development of age-appropriate information alerting youth to the tactics of traffickers and on identifying culturally appropriate resources to prevent and address human trafficking in Aboriginal communities.
Status: Completed, March 2013

With the new funding that has been provided, the WISH Drop-In Centre has extended their hours of operation and more vulnerable women are now attending and receiving services from the Centre as a result. WISH Drop-In Centre provides women with warm meals, showers, clothing, personal care items and support. The Centre has become a stable and safe place that women can turn to throughout the night, when they face the highest risk to their safety. The extended hours of operation have also meant that staff from the Centre are able to connect more often and in an increasingly powerful way with women.

ACTIONS UNDERWAY:

Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Human Trafficking

- ▶ Government will provide grant funding to communities to prevent the sexual exploitation and trafficking of vulnerable women – particularly Aboriginal young women as they transition from rural to urban settings. (Rec 6.2)

Status: Target Completion: March 2014

Enhancing Support Services

- ▶ Indigenous Cultural Competency Training is taking place for individuals who work with victims and family members across B.C. The training is increasing the knowledge and enhancing the skills of up to 540 workers in delivering culturally sensitive services to Aboriginal people. Ensuring that support services are provided in a culturally sensitive way is important to meeting the needs of victims of crime and family members of missing and murdered persons. The training was developed by the Provincial Health Services Authority and is being provided with the support of the federal government.

Status: Target Completion: March 2014

Increasing Transportation Safety

- ▶ The Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure has assessed the transportation options currently available for communities along the Highway 16 corridor and is planning targeted consultations to identify and promote safe transportation options. (MWCI Report – Urgent Measure # 2)

Status: In progress

CONTEXT:

Certain recommendations in the *MWCI Report* focus on improving responses to the needs of those who are marginalized and most vulnerable in our society. Although each woman's situation was unique, most women who went missing from the Downtown Eastside were marginalized by a number of factors, including poverty and addiction. Government is committed to improving policies, practices and services to make sure the needs of vulnerable women are appropriately addressed.

Currently, more than \$70 million a year is invested in services to support victims of crime in B.C. This includes outreach to vulnerable women who are at risk of victimization, and supports for women who have been victimized. Although a number of services and supports are currently in place, new initiatives have been implemented or are underway as we continue to build upon and improve responses to vulnerable women in B.C. The actions detailed in this report outline new initiatives to provide safety and support for these women.

Vulnerable young women can be drawn into the sex trade or forced to remain there through sexual exploitation and human trafficking. Young women who are marginalized are at particular risk of victimization. This includes Aboriginal young women who are transitioning from the North to an urban centre without supports, resulting in their isolation and further vulnerability. Grant funding will provide communities with assistance to address these issues at a local level – focusing on what will work to prevent sexual exploitation and human trafficking within their particular community.

EFFECTIVE *and* ACCESSIBLE JUSTICE SYSTEM

“Every contact that vulnerable women have with the police is an opportunity for empowerment through active offers of assistance and intervention”

— COMMISSIONER OPPAL, VOL. III OF THE MWCI REPORT, PG. 88

ACTIONS UNDERWAY

Support Bias-Free and Equitable Policing

- ▶ Practices and policies of police agencies related to ensuring bias-free policing and the equitable treatment of all people will be examined and where required, audits will be completed. (Rec. 4.1)
Status: In progress

- ▶ Training for police officers is being reviewed to determine gaps. Government is building on the established learning strategy for police and reviewing present training and best practices. Where gaps exist, Government will ensure the development of cultural awareness and sensitivity training for all police officers. (Rec. 4.12)
Status: In progress

Development of Policing Standards

- ▶ Priority is being given to the development of provincial policing standards consistent with those recommended in the *MWCI Report* including missing persons investigations, major case management, inter-agency cooperation, and bias-free policing. (Rec 4.2, 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.4, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4 10.1 &10.2)
Status: Target completion, March 2015 and beyond

Enhancing Police Investigations and Response

- ▶ Government is supporting the implementation of a regional Real Time Intelligence Centre scalable to the province. The Real Time Intelligence Centre will ensure that information can be shared more readily and will enhance the ability of police to investigate all crimes, including those of missing persons. (Rec. 10.3)
Status: In progress
- ▶ Government is also considering the development of missing persons legislation, which would assist police in their investigations of missing persons. (Rec. 8.1)
Status: In progress
- ▶ Work is also underway to review missing person police initiatives across BC and at the national level, which may provide options to improve public access to information about missing persons (Rec. 7.8)
Status: In progress

To work on the development of provincial policing standards, the B.C. government is consulting with a range of police and non-police stakeholders through the Advisory Committee on Provincial Policing Standards (ACOPPS) and other organizations.

Reviewing Police Structure and Governance

- ▶ Government is working with key stakeholders to review police structure and models of police service delivery, ranging from further integration to the regional delivery of services while retaining local community-focused policing. A committee of external experts will also be engaged to assist in this work. (Rec. 9.1 & 9.2)

Status: In progress

- ▶ Police board structure, function, selection practices and training are being reviewed and enhancements will be made where necessary. Government will also work with the British Columbia Association of Police Boards (BCAPB) and the Justice Institute of British Columbia (JIBC) to develop relevant training opportunities. (Rec. 11.2 & 11.3)

Status: In progress

Enhancing Responses to Vulnerable Witnesses

- ▶ A comprehensive policy review related to equality and vulnerable witnesses has been undertaken and an assessment of potential policy changes is currently underway. Action continues to be taken to strengthen prosecution practices. (Rec. 4.3, 4.4 & 4.5)

Status: In progress

- ▶ Strategies to strengthen prosecution business processes and promote increased collaboration are being explored, including the possibility of embedding police liaison officers within Crown counsel offices to enhance communication and training related to charge assessment and case management issues.

Status: In progress

A multi-phase project will begin in the coming months to examine how policing is currently structured and funded. The project will engage municipal leaders and police agencies working to better define federal, provincial and municipal policing responsibilities, including funding. This will lay the groundwork for exploring new service delivery models while retaining local, community-focused policing.

The federal government has recently been consulting with the provinces, territories, victims of crime, the public and other stakeholders on the development of a federal Victims Bill of Rights. B.C. supports the federal government in their efforts to ensure that victims of crime are effectively supported through criminal justice processes. The B.C. government has provided input into the consultation process and continues to encourage the inclusion of measures to facilitate the support of vulnerable and intimidated witnesses in the court process as well as other measures aimed at improving supports for victims. (Rec. 4.9)

CONTEXT:

A significant number of the *MWCI Report* recommendations focus on how to improve missing person investigations and the entirety of justice system responses in these cases. Since 2002, many changes have occurred in policing and in the justice system. The director of police services is now able to create binding policing standards and authorize audits of those standards.

This is to ensure police adopt common approaches to matters such as sharing case information and intelligence that will identify links and patterns in cases and help police work together to apprehend dangerous serial offenders who commit crimes in and across policing jurisdictions.

There is also improved cooperation between police forces through integrated teams (e.g. the integrated Homicide Investigation Team and the Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit). The Province has invested an extra \$22 million a year to support these teams.

The Government is also leading discussions with federal, provincial and territorial officials regarding the murders of marginalized women, and improving the investigation of missing women. The Government has funded ongoing investigations into missing women, including the task force into missing women by over \$80 million since 2005. Government also established the BC Police Missing Persons Centre, a resource for police in B.C.

There are still further opportunities for improvement and B.C.'s overarching justice reform initiative sets the roadmap for change. In conjunction with the release of the *White Paper on Justice Reform, Part 2*, Government released a draft *BC Policing and Community Safety Plan*, which was open for public consultation. Once complete, this plan will guide reform in policing and law enforcement over the next three, five and 10 years. Recommendations from the *MWCI Report* have significantly influenced the direction of these justice reform initiatives. Recommendations regarding the treatment of vulnerable victims and witnesses through the court process were also highlighted in the *MWCI Report* and are now the subject of Government action.

The Government is not undertaking this work alone. For example, to further support the analysis and implementation of the recommendations relating to policing reform, Government has struck an advisory committee comprised of members of the BC Association of Chiefs of Police. The Committee brings together subject matter experts to provide strategic advice to Government on specific recommendations as needed.

LEGACY *and* HEALING

“Together, we can and we must, build a legacy of safety to honour the missing and murdered women who are remembered and missed.”

– COMMISSIONER OPPAL, VOL. III OF THE MWCI REPORT, PG. 216

ACTIONS COMPLETED:

Consultations

- ▶ Appointment of the Honourable Steven Point to champion the implementation of the *MWCI Report* recommendations and engage with family members, community stakeholders and those affected by the recommendations. (Rec. 12.1 & 12.2)

Status: Completed

ACTIONS UNDERWAY:

Consultation with Key Stakeholders

- ▶ Government is consulting with stakeholders for their input and advice on recommendations, including for example, the Minister’s Advisory Council on Aboriginal Women.

Status: In progress

Through the course of criminal justice processes and the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry, victim support was provided to families. This included emotional support, debriefing and crisis intervention services. It also included referrals to community resources, such as local victim service programs, and help connecting family members with ongoing counselling services and other benefits available through the Crime Victim Assistance Program.

The Crime Victim Assistance Program has provided approximately \$1.44 million in financial assistance and benefits to families in this case.

CONTEXT:

In December 2012, the Honourable Steven Point was appointed to champion the implementation of the *MWCI Report* recommendations and to chair an Advisory Committee on the Safety and Security of Vulnerable Women.

Between January 2013 and May 2013, Mr. Point undertook the important task of engaging with community stakeholders as well as with parties involved in the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry. Government recognizes that the inquiry process itself and the release of the *MWCI Report* was at times challenging, especially for the families. Engaging with community stakeholders and family members has been a vital step in moving towards implementing positive change for vulnerable women in our province. It has been part of the healing needed to move forward.

Mr. Point engaged with an extensive group of stakeholders. This process created an opportunity for important dialogue about the inquiry and the recommendations. Stakeholders that were engaged included: BC Police Complaints Commissioner; Independent Investigations Office; BC Association of the Chiefs of Police; DTES Coalition; Highway of Tears Governing Body; Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre; Aboriginal Life in Vancouver Enhancement Society (ALIVE); Assembly of First Nations; and family members of missing and murdered women, among others.

On May 17, 2013, Mr. Point announced his resignation as Chair of the Advisory Committee on the Safety and Security of Vulnerable Women effective May 30, 2013. The work he undertook provides a solid foundation for the work Government is currently undertaking.

MOVING FORWARD

Since the resignation of Mr. Point, Government has received suggestions and advice from the community and key individuals on how to proceed.

We have explored many possibilities, structures and formats that would best support the creation of a legacy of safety and security for vulnerable women in B.C. We know that advice to Government regarding the recommendations needs to include the perspectives of family members, specific community groups and other key stakeholders.

As the majority of the recommendations are directed to Government, we are taking leadership in their implementation. Given the scope and breadth of the recommendations and those impacted by them, we will proceed with this work by engaging with community stakeholders and others with expertise in areas such as:

- ▶ addressing the needs of families whose loved one have gone missing;
- ▶ providing services and supports to women in the Downtown Eastside;
- ▶ working with Aboriginal communities and supporting Aboriginal women in urban and rural settings; and,
- ▶ improving policing and other justice system processes.

As we move forward on specific recommendations we are committed to working with those who have the expertise and we will continue to consult with key government, police and community stakeholders. In addition to consultation work with the B.C. Association of Chiefs of Police Advisory Committee and the Advisory Committee on Provincial Policing Standards (ACOPPs), we have also begun an engagement process through dialogue with members of the Minister's Advisory Council on Aboriginal Women. Government is seeking their advice on recommendations that fall within their mandate. As we continue with our progress, we will seek advice from other key stakeholders in order to create a legacy of safety and security for vulnerable women in B.C.



Ministry of
Justice