

Assisting Women in the Child Welfare Process What Can Support Workers/Community Advocates Do?

A Summary of Strategies and Ideas

Safety Planning:

- Assist a woman in safety planning that includes a child welfare strategy. If she needs to call the police for protection, the police will call child welfare if they are concerned children have witnessed or experienced violence. What are her plans for her children? Does she have a list of family members and friends or other support persons with whom she could live or send her children, along with their contact information? Does she have this information handy for emergencies when she might call the police?
- OR if a woman reports to police **after** the incident, you can assist her in preparing her statement to the police and the safe timing of any police investigation.

Before a Family Enhancement Agreement is Signed:

- **It is best for women to receive legal advice before signing a Family Enhancement Agreement**
- Call Legal Aid Alberta [legal aid certificates available once there's a court application]
- General Information also available through Legal Aid Alberta staff counsel (call centre)
- Assist a woman in preparing/developing the terms of her Family Enhancement Agreement.
 - Make sure:
 - she understand the terms
 - the terms make sense for her life and circumstances and that she can live with them
 - the terms are as specific (not general) and clear as possible
 - that she isn't too afraid or traumatized to actually hear and understand
- Attend meetings with the woman and the social worker. This is important because you can:
 - Help the woman feel calm and supported
 - Make sure the woman understands what is said

- Ensure that all possible support persons for the woman are identified
 - Help the woman find a lawyer before she signs a Family Enhancement Agreement
 - If a Family Enhancement Agreement is being negotiated, help make sure the terms are clear, not general, and appropriate for the woman
- Bring a signed “consent” with you. This is a document that can be handwritten. It could say something like: “I consent to Ms. Support Person attending child welfare meetings with me and otherwise supporting me and assisting me in the child welfare process”.
 - If a Family Enhancement Agreement has not already been signed, you can present the social worker and/or Court with a proposed terms for the Family Enhancement Agreement or court order developed by the woman. It can be creative and tailored to the needs of the woman. It doesn’t need to use “jargon” or standard “pro forma” terms.

If a Family Enhancement Agreement has been signed you can:

- Negotiate a **Supplementary terms** with the woman and social worker which might make general terms in a Family Enhancement Agreement more specific, narrower and clearer (or more appropriate) for the woman and her specific circumstances
- If the woman wants to negotiate an entirely new Family Enhancement Agreement she can say “no” to a Family Enhancement Agreement that is already signed. The Director can re-apprehend the children or agree to negotiate a new Family Enhancement Agreement. This should be done with legal advice.

Where the Case is Proceeding to Court:

- Attend meetings with the woman and her lawyer (with a consent/release) to make sure the lawyer is aware of all the persons in the woman’s life who might give useful evidence/information
- Help the woman prepare for her meeting with the lawyer by making a list of all the possible resources available to the woman and/or the people who the lawyer might speak to and who might support the woman and be part of her Plan.
- Make efforts to contact and interview (even prepare written statements) of all persons (eg. grandmothers, sisters, brothers, etc.) who know about the family and can give useful information

- Go to Court with the woman as a support person
- If the woman does not have a lawyer, go to Court with the woman and, if appropriate assist her in telling her story to the Judge (the judge may limit how much you can say)

Other Forms of Support

- Often women say that the observations or reports of the social worker weren't "fair".
- You can be an independent but often more trusted set of eyes and ears
- You can attend supervised access with the woman and take notes (of what you heard and saw, eg. the child smiled, he hugged his mom, he laughed and was happy to see her). These notes may be useful, especially if the social worker did not record these observations and/or had a different view. They can also be useful in giving the woman perspective if in fact the social worker's "unfair" observations are accurate.