

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

### **A Summary of Strategies and Ideas**

#### **Before A Plan of Care is Signed:**

- **Safety Planning:** Assist a woman in safety planning that includes a child welfare strategy. If she needs to call the RCMP for protection, the RCMP 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 RCMP?
- Assist a woman in preparing/developing her Plan of Care.
  - 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

#### **After Child Welfare is Involved:**

- 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 Plan of Care
  - If a Plan of Care 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”.
- **Connect the woman to legal aid/court worker/community outreach legal clinic**
- **It is best for women to receive legal advice before signing a Plan of Care**

- If a Plan of Care has not already been signed, you can present the social worker and/or Court with a proposed Plan of Care 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 Plan of Care has been signed you can:**

- Connect the woman to legal aid – legal advice is important after a Plan of Care is signed without legal advice
- Negotiate a **Supplementary Plan of Care** with the woman and social worker which might make general terms in a Plan of Care more specific, narrower and clearer (or more appropriate) for the woman and her specific circumstances
- Provide the woman with information about "repudiating" a Plan of Care and connecting her with a lawyer. You can also assist the woman with her lawyer, in "repudiating" the Plan of Care and negotiating a new one. Saying "no" to a Plan of Care that is already signed involves a formal process in which the Director can re-apprehend the children or agree to negotiate a new Plan of Care. 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 house 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.