



OCTEVAW Court Watch Project Summary

Background Information:

Ontario's Domestic Violence Court (DVC) Program is the most extensive DVC program in Canada. It is designed to facilitate the prosecution of and early intervention in domestic assault cases, provide better support to victims and increase offender accountability.

In a DVC program, teams of specialized personnel, including police, Crown attorneys, Victim/Witness Assistance Program (VWAP) staff, probation services, Partner Assault Response (PAR) program staff and community agencies, work together to ensure priority is given to the safety and needs of domestic assault victims and their children. There is now a Domestic Violence Court Program in each of the province's 54 court jurisdictions.

An operational DVC includes the following components:

- A Domestic Violence Court Advisory Committee
- Specially trained domestic violence Crowns, VWAP staff, and interpreters
- Specialized evidence collection and investigation procedures by police
- Case management procedures to coordinate prosecutions and ensure early intervention
- A Partner Assault Response intervention program
- Expanded training for police, Crowns, VWAP staff, court staff, Probation and Parole staff, and interpreters

(Reference: <http://www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca/english/about/vw/dvc.asp>)

Purpose:

The purpose of Court Watch is to collect quantitative and qualitative data during DV court proceedings (one component of the entire DVC program) from the perspective of an outside observer, to examine the functioning of the DV Court, case dispositions and sentencing of offenders.

Goals:

1. To increase community and public presence in the DV court.
2. To increase public awareness and understanding of how woman abuse cases are responded to within the DV court.
3. To work collaboratively with the justice system to improve offender accountability and victim support and safety within the DV court.

Why?

Observing a court process regularly has proven to be an effective method of examining the justice system's attitudes, responses and systematic procedures around the handling and prosecution of cases. (Reference: <http://www.watchmn.org/>) In addition, many in the Ottawa community have a vested interest in how our justice system works and want to participate in a meaningful way to improve the experiences of victims in the DV court.

In Ontario, the DVC program was created to provide better support to victims and to increase offender accountability. Court Watch is a means in which the community can hold their justice system accountable to those specific objectives. Recording information allows for concrete and clear recommendations to be brought forward to policy makers leading to positive change.

Moreover, **“offender accountability and system responsibility should be part of a coordinated community response to domestic violence.”** (American Probation and Parole Association, May 2009)

History of Court Watch in Ontario:

Court Watch was first introduced by the Woman’s Abuse Council of Toronto (WACT) in 1995 as a pilot project based on a similar program initiated by Mother’s Against Drunk Driving. The project was developed to identify the successes and the challenges within the specialized DV court and advocate for change. In 1997 and 1998, the project confirmed the following beliefs: a) DV courts had more sensitive questioning of witness, b) appropriate sentencing of perpetrators was occurring, and c) DV courts were an effective reform. (Reference: WACT, Women’s Court Watch, Volume 1, Issue 1, 2005)