

Bereavement Services Study for Central Alberta

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INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY:

Canadian Mental Health Association, a key provider of bereavement support, recognized that bereavement services in Red Deer and Central Alberta were fragmented and in some instances, non-existent. Application was made in 2007 for a grant through the Wild Rose Foundation for a Bereavement Services Study of the Central Alberta Region.

METHODOLOGY:

The study involved four steps:

1. Key informants were asked nine questions.
2. A survey consisting of 28 questions was made available online as well as in paper form.
3. Current operational practices of ten bereavement centres and hospices were investigated.
4. A focus group was held in 4 communities to identify how to achieve a coordinated approach to bereavement services in Central Alberta.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

The purpose was to increase awareness of:

- Current services available for bereavement support
- What communities desire for bereavement support
- Current barriers to accessing bereavement support

Key informants consisted of pastoral care, churches, mental health therapists, neighborhood places, FCSS agencies, funeral service providers, volunteers, palliative care nurses, continuing care coordinators, seniors centers, AADAC, counselors,

physicians, volunteer coordinators, social workers and any other provider of bereavement support that was identified.

Current services: generalist counselors, bereavement support groups with trained facilitators; peer support groups both drop-in and structured available when interest justifies; drop-in Walk and Talk support; public grief information sessions (Loss Lectures); Community Connections – bereavement education; Christmas services for bereaved through Churches and Hospice;

Communities desire: education and support about bereavement and anticipatory grief; coordinated, up-to-date easily accessible information on available bereavement services; people specifically trained in complicated grief issues; bereavement services for children, youth and families.

Barriers: support not available in a timely manner or in their home community; significant wait for service; lack of therapists trained in bereavement; staff/volunteers to sustain the service; cost.

GIVE GRIEF A VOICE; DEATH, DYING, LOSS SURVEY

The survey was available March 1, 2009 to April 30, 2009. 531 individuals took the survey with 50% of the respondents from Red Deer and 50% from communities throughout Central Alberta.

Identified needs included:

- Services for children and youth
- Coordinated services throughout the Region
- 24/7 support availability
- Grief education for the public and professionals
- Personnel specifically trained in bereavement
- Wide range of service options
- Low or no cost for service

FOCUS GROUPS

The results of focus groups held in Wetaskiwin, Olds, Stettler and Red Deer were:

- Limited availability of support for anticipatory grief
- Limited support for family and care-givers after a death has occurred
- Difficulty in locating resources and services - professional and public
- Desire for service in home community
- Difficulty in sustaining bereavement support in small communities

- One-on-one counseling is lacking or difficult to access due to wait times
- It is vital for professionals to be specifically trained in bereavement
- Consistent, supervised and regulated volunteer training is crucial
- Enhance and support local agencies in providing bereavement services
- Complicated grief needs specifically trained professionals
- Regional coordinator of bereavement services

OPERATIONAL PRACTICES

Informal research was conducted into the operational practices of ten hospices and/or bereavement centres in Alberta, Canada and the United States. This would be beneficial in guiding the bereavement services study's ultimate goal of implementing service in Central Alberta. It should be noted that all agencies recognized bereavement services as a critical community need and all applauded our efforts in taking on this bereavement services study.

Services and resources offered are as follows:

- Facilitated and structured bereavement support groups (open or closed groups, age appropriate groups, gender groups, type of loss groups, anticipatory groups)
- Drop-in and informal groups
- Education for the public and professionals
- Website information
- Lending library including books, DVDs, manuals etc.
- Out reach supportive care
- One-on-one counseling by bereavement specialist

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The key informant interviews, survey results and focus groups identified the challenges involved in locating bereavement support. We also struggled to locate individuals and/or agencies that were providing bereavement support and therefore we recognize this study only represents a small portion of Central Alberta.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are recommendations:

1. Hire a Regional Bereavement Services Coordinator
2. Coordinate all bereavement support services in the Region
3. Create ongoing educational opportunities for professional and public
4. Ensure individuals providing bereavement support follow best practices
5. Create a website – Regional access to bereavement information
6. Initiate a 1-800 phone number for information and referral purposes