



Keeping victims, families safe

By Sue Newman January 28, 2012

The best gift Ashburton can give victims of domestic violence is to have a well-planned emergency strategy that swings into action when a call for help is made, domestic violence expert Rob Veale says.

He was in Ashburton this week, speaking to representatives from community organisations who work with victims of domestic violence. He said he was there to listen, to share the experiences of similar organisations in other parts of New Zealand and to provide whatever advice he could.

Mr Veale brought with him a 30 year stint as a police officer, the last 16 working in the violence reduction unit.

He's also worked as part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs team in Pacific Island communities and that meant when he left the police, work in the field of domestic violence had an immediate attraction.

Ashburton is uniquely placed when it comes to dealing with domestic violence, because of its size, Mr Veale said. "Your size is your strength but it's also your weakness.

"You're small enough that people know one another but it's also small enough that you don't want your private family business put out there." He's spent time in the Wairarapa working with communities to develop a strategy to help domestic violence victims and said much of what he learned there could be used in Ashburton. "As well as focusing on reporting cases they formed an early intervention alert for non-police agencies. We're in the business of saving lives so we need to look at what our options are and we need to look at what the definition of violence actually is."

Mr Veale spent time in Ashburton as an EOC assessor and said that meant he gained some knowledge of issues in the community, the challenges and the stresses people faced.

The definition of violence was much broader than most people thought, he said, and he includes suicides in the violence group because they are self-harm. If an attempted suicide was treated as violence, then the person involved would become part of the helping agency system. By adopting this approach in Wairarapai, there had been a significant reduction in successful suicides, he said. "An attempted suicide would go to an inter-agency panel and they'd wrap around this person."

In South Canterbury reported incidents of family violence had risen in the past year and some of this was due to greater awareness that you did not have to put up with living in a violent situation, Mr Veale said. "Bottom line, if you're scared, then it's in the crime bucket."

For Ashburton the challenge was to come up with a system that would automatically be activated whenever there was a family violence incident. "It is everything about what is in the best interests of keeping victims and families safe. "You need one in Ashburton."

That didn't necessarily mean Ashburton needed either a Women's Refuge or a safe house, he said. "Money in this area is so tight, it would be better spent in other ways. "You need a safety plan for people who are abused, a plan where everyone knows exactly what they have to do."

Ashburton had the challenges that came with being a smaller town that also had a large number of people living well away from immediate help, Mr Veale said. "You have different dynamics but you're not that much different to anywhere else in New Zealand and perhaps you can work with areas like Wanganui and Balclutha to develop a provincial model for a safety plan."



Pictured: Anti-family violence expert, Rob Veale during a workshop in Ashburton.

Photo Kirsty Graham