

Circles of Safety by Justice Options for Women

Snapshot View of the Practice: Circles of Safety by Justice Options for Women is a collaborative safety planning process. The survivor in need of the safety plan builds a team of 4-7 support members, which may include both personal contacts and community members such as police, family members, and employers. The group is led by a facilitator who is trained in interest-based mediation and facilitation, with a focus on the values and needs of the client. Together, they generate multiple solutions that work for all members of the circle.

Name of Practice: Circles of Safety

Name of Shelter: Justice Options for Women – Prince Edwards Island

Type of Organization: A partnership of community and government focused on increasing safe and effective justice options for women experiencing family violence.

Location: Prince Edward Island

Category: Wrap-around client services

Budget: \$50,000-\$500,00

Time investment: High

Prep Time: One year to build and launch

What is Circles of Safety?

Circles of Safety is a collaborative safety planning process. In this practice, the survivor in need of the safety plan is an integral part of the planning process and is called a core member of the Circle. The core member builds a team of 4-7 support members (maximum 20) with the help of a trained facilitator. This may include police, family members, employers, probation services, and mental health counsellors. The lead facilitator is trained in an interest-based mediation and facilitation model that focus on the values and needs of the client, rather than jumping to solutions. For example, interest-based questions are open-ended, starting with who, what, where, when, and how. The “why” is not asked because it may result in the client becoming defensive, and feeling like they are being judged. The goal is to invite them to share more and get a better understanding of their interests and values. Together, they explore the interests and values of the core member and other people in the circle to generate multiple solutions that work for all members.

“You want her to feel she has dignity within the process. Too often services are trying to tell people what to do...[but] if you can explore and get underneath what is important to the survivor, you'll be able to come up with a better plan that works for them...If the plan isn't working, you can pivot easily to something that will work.”

Background:

In 2008, Justice Options for Women worked with a survivor who felt at risk and threatened by their abusive partner. Even after having all the typical protective strategies in place, like the police, trusted

neighbours, and a shelter, they were still feeling unsafe. They felt the services were not communicating with each other and were also unaware of the various limitations of service providers. Members of the Justice Options Committee had taken training in interest-based conflict resolution from the University of PEI and decided to try something new to help them. They brought all the service providers, personal supporters (e.g. family), and the survivor to one table at the same time in an informal set-up. The team used interest-based mediation facilitation to encourage and generate ideas that could help them feel safe. This ensured that everybody had the full story, service providers were on board, and everyone knew how to help. The team held a couple of Circles with different survivors and noticed it was very successful and comprehensive. After the first year of this practice, they developed training on a condensed version of interest-based conflict resolution to train more facilitators. They then formally launched Circles of Safety and held information sessions. This program has now been successfully running for 15 years.

How does the program work?

Victim Services or the Family Violence Prevention team identifies a client who could benefit from Circles of Safety. They become the referring member for that client and guide them through the process. The referring member would contact the facilitator and the three of them would meet to discuss the situation. It's important that the client, as a core member, is fully involved in this planning process. Sometimes, this process results in a request for a Circle. Other times, after the first meeting a client may not want an entire Circle but be satisfied with a few case planning meetings.

Using the interest-based process, the client, facilitator, and referring member identify the other members of the Circle. They would ask questions like: what are the benefits of having each person participate? What are the consequences or drawbacks of having somebody at the table? They may use consequential questions to find out what problems could be caused by having a particular person at the table. For example, exploring the presence of a particular family member or Child and Family Services.

The facilitator then contacts the identified members to participate in the Circle and shares the process and what is expected from them. The facilitator takes this opportunity to also prepare the group by developing a foundation of collaboration and good relationships. They discuss confidentiality and guidelines for the Circle meetings.

The meetings typically take place in community boardrooms, police board rooms, or at a Victim Services office. Some meetings have taken place online during the pandemic. There are usually snacks offered during the meetings. The in-person meetings offer an opportunity for face-to-face interaction and relationship building between the client and service providers. Each meeting lasts 2 hours, sometimes a bit longer if it has many participants. On average, there are 4-6 meetings for each client.

In the meeting, the facilitator focuses on what is important to the survivor. Using the interest-based process, the group explores a few plans that work for them. Coming up with a plan together ensures that everybody has buy-in and can do their part for the survivor's safety. The group is aware when the safety plan is not working so they're able to re-plan and pivot if required.

Depending on the situation, in the beginning, the group may meet twice a month. Once the plan is developed and they get a sense that things are in place, they may meet once a month. Or instead of

meeting, they may have the means to ensure that the group's decided actions are taking place. A Circle can remain active for up to a year, depending on the complexity of the situation.

What is the impact of this program?

Survivors who have experienced a Circle of Safety have shared that they have a good safety plan that has made them feel empowered, supported, and heard. Having a Circle ensured they felt less isolated and knew people they could reach out to. They have also shared that the Circle made them feel strong, making them less inclined to return to abusive relationships. [Read this CBC report](#) on how the Circles of Safety have proven lifesaving for survivors.

Circles of Safety has also ensured that there are no gaps in services because it informs everybody at the table of a particular service and its limitations. It ensures that service providers are not doubling their work and that they can complement each other when one service provider is unable to step in.

What were the challenges in implementing this program?

Getting everyone at the table for the first time is a challenge because people have very busy and hectic schedules and the needs are urgent.

Sometimes the clients are not on the same page with the referring member about needing a Circle for safety planning.

Tips for those who wish to do something similar:

Be curious when you're talking to your client. Try to get at underlying issues. Instead of saying, "You need to do this," find out what's important to the client. Another example of an interest-based open-ended question is:

- Instead of asking "*Did you have any difficulty getting to the meeting?*" which can be easily answered as Yes or No, ask "*What has getting to and attending the meeting been like for you?*" This will prompt a more in-depth response, which can reveal what is working or what challenges to be addressed. The first question shuts the conversation down. The second question could be also answered with one word, however, it promotes a more in-depth response, and it is easier to follow up with another question to get further information if needed. Such as, "*What has been working well for you to attend the meetings?*" Framing the question differently will encourage more communication.

Contact information:

Name: Justice Options for Women or PEI Family Violence Prevention Services

Email: justiceoptions@gmail.com / admin@fvps.ca

Website: <https://www.justiceoptions.ca>

<https://www.fvps.ca>

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