

Family Violence
Death
Review
Committee



2017/2018 Annual Report

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Family Violence Death Review Committee 2017 Annual Report

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Message from the Chair of the Family Violence Death Review Committee

In Alberta, between January 1, 2017, and December 31, 2017, there were 14 family violence incidents that resulted in the death of 16 Albertans (15 victims and one perpetrator). The rate of family violence deaths in the province has remained relatively unchanged in recent years, despite the collective, ongoing work that is being done to address family violence. Family violence deaths are preventable, and the Family Violence Death Review Committee has been working to support the reduction of family violence since becoming operational in 2014.

In June 2017, four new members were appointed and six returning members were reappointed to the Committee. The second term of the Committee began meeting in the fall of 2017 and examining cases for review. In 2017, the Committee provided four Case Review Reports to the Minister of Community and Social Services for public release. To date, the Committee has submitted six in-depth examinations of individual cases to the Minister. These six cases generated 32 distinct recommendations to government to help improve services and supports and to prevent future tragedies.

Through the Committee's reviews, it has become evident that ongoing strategies must be developed, validated, and continually improved to address the issue of family violence. Family violence has moved beyond being understood as only a social issue — it has become a pervasive health, mental health, justice and economic issue, and must be addressed and managed appropriately. Work to understand and respond to family violence, to provide victims with a voice, and to provide people and families with resources to develop skills that foster healthy relationships is an ongoing challenge we must all undertake together, as a unified community.

Family violence has moved beyond being understood as only a social issue - it has become a pervasive health, mental health, justice and economic issue, and must be addressed and managed appropriately.

To that end, the Committee's work is made possible through supportive relationships with Government of Alberta ministries and community partners. The Committee would like to thank the Ministries of Health, Children's Services, Community and Social Services, and Justice and Solicitor General. We would also like to thank the Alberta Association of Chiefs of Police and Alberta's Police Services throughout the province for their excellent work and for their help, support and cooperation. The Committee would also like to recognize Alberta's women's shelters and community organizations that work to address and prevent family violence.

Preventing family violence is an important goal that we all must work together to achieve. During this new Committee term, I look forward to collaborating with returning members, developing relationships with new members, and continuing to work towards ending family violence.

Dr. Allen Benson, LLD (Hon.) Chair

Executive Summary

Alberta's Family Violence Death Review Committee (the Committee) is a multi-disciplinary, cross-sector group reporting to the Minister of Community and Social Services. The Committee derives its authority from the *Protection Against Family Violence Act* (PAFVA). The role of the Committee is to review incidents of family violence resulting in deaths and to provide advice and recommendations respecting the prevention and reduction of family violence.

The 2017/2018 Annual Report provides an overview of the Committee's membership, structure and accountability. The report also explains how case reviews are completed, the processes used to complete the reviews and the resulting recommendations.

The 2017/2018 Annual Report also provides a detailed examination of information collected on the 14 family violence incidents in 2017 that resulted in 16 deaths (15 victims and one perpetrator). Key findings from this report include:

- The majority of incidents occurred while the partners were a couple.
- In nine of the 14 incidents, the perpetrator was a spouse or boyfriend.
- There was one case involving murder-suicide.
- Eleven of the incidents occurred in major metropolitan areas of Calgary and Edmonton regions. One incident occurred in the southern region and four occurred in the northwest region.

In 2017, family violence deaths in Alberta highlight that:

- Family violence continues to be a gendered crime.
 - Approximately 53 per cent of victims of family violence deaths were female.
 - Approximately 79 per cent of perpetrators of domestic violence homicide incidents were male.
 - Victims reflect the lifespan, with the youngest in their teens and the oldest in their 70s.
 - The majority of victims were between 20-29 and 50-59 years old. The average perpetrator age was between 20-39 years old.
- The majority of family violence deaths continue to involve the use of a weapon. Stabbing was the most common means of perpetrating domestic violence homicides:
 - Seven of the 15 deaths were due to stabbing, four of the deaths were due to blunt trauma/blunt force injuries, and two of the 15 deaths were due to firearms.

Introduction and Overview of the Committee

In 2009, Community and Social Services (formerly Human Services) led a cross-ministry committee to set the foundation for a mechanism to review family violence deaths in Alberta. Subsequently, a working group of community partners and police agencies was formed to provide options for an operational structure for the Committee. In 2013, legislation was passed that established the Committee under the *Protection Against Family Violence Act* (PAFVA) www.qp.alberta.ca/documents/Acts/p27.pdf.

The Committee became operational in February 2014. The work of the Committee is supported by a secretariat of staff from Community and Social Services.

Committee Membership

The Committee is a multi-disciplinary group of 10 family violence experts. Members represent various sectors—including legal services, law enforcement, sexual assault services, victim advocacy and community organizations. On October 31, 2016, the first term of the Committee ended. The second term began when members were appointed in June 2017. The second term of the Committee is made up of four new members and six returning members.

The 2017 Committee is made up of the following members:

- Committee Chair: Dr. Allen Benson, Native Counselling Services of Alberta
- Ms. Sylvia Kasper, former prosecutor (Queen's Counsellor) and Manager of the Calgary Domestic Violence Unit, Q.C.
- Superintendent Donnan McKenna, RCMP
- Superintendent Cliff O'Brien, Calgary Police Service
- Ms. Karen Pease, Victim Advocate
- Ms. Debra Tomlinson, Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services
- Ms. Monique Auffrey, CEO, Discovery House, Calgary
- Inspector Carlos Cardoso, Edmonton Police Service
- Mr. David Grauwiler, Executive Director, Canadian Mental Health Association, Alberta Division
- Ms. Salimah Walji-Shivji, Vice President and General Counsel, AgeCare

The Committee will also utilize Ex-Officio members when cases require expertise on a specific subject matter. These temporary members are still subject to all governing legislation and code of conduct as standing members.

Mandate

The Committee derives its authority from the PAFVA and has the responsibility to review family violence deaths in Alberta. The Committee provides expertise to contribute to evidence-informed policy, legislation and practice, through their analysis and recommendations from the review of family violence related deaths. The Committee reviews information and data for all family violence deaths that occur in the province—including the circumstances surrounding the deaths—to identify family violence trends and risk factors. The Committee also completes in-depth reviews of family violence-related deaths and makes recommendations aimed at preventing deaths and reducing family violence in general.

Definitions and Methodology

Under the Canadian Criminal Code, a person commits homicide when they cause the death of a human being—directly or indirectly—by any means. The Committee considers homicides to be family violence-related if:

- The victim(s) and perpetrator(s) were spouses or partners, former spouses or former partners, adults with children in common, or adults or teens who had been in a dating relationship.
- The death was a homicide of a person other than the intimate partner and it occurred within the context of family violence. This would include the homicide of a bystander or someone who attempted to protect a family violence victim from harm.
- The homicide was a child death that occurred as an extension of or in response to ongoing abuse between adult intimate partners.

Source of Information

The Committee compiles summary data from the total number of police-reported family violence homicides committed in Alberta in a given year. It is important to note that the number of police reported family violence homicides in a year may change as police progress through their investigations. The Committee receives data about family violence deaths from the 11 different police agencies in Alberta on a yearly basis. The Committee reviews the police reported data and determines whether the data meets the definition of family violence related deaths, as set out in PAFVA and the criteria established by the Committee, as noted above.

Confidentiality

Under PAFVA, the Committee must not disclose any identifying information about the individual whose death is the subject of review, or any other individual involved in the death, in publicly released reports. Additionally, committee members take an oath of confidentiality during their tenure. In accordance with provincial legislation and in order to protect the privacy of the individuals involved, the names of victims and perpetrators are not made public and only non-identifying statistics are provided.

Code of Conduct

In accordance with the *Alberta Public Agencies Governance Act*, which governs all agencies, boards and commissions, the Committee is guided by a oath of conduct and established Mandate and Roles. The code of conduct is reviewed by the Office of the Ethics Commissioner before it is approved by the Minister of Community and Social Services. The code of conduct can be found online at <http://alberta.ca/ags-ministries.cfm#Human>.

Operating Principles of the Committee

Systems-Focused

The Committee strives to understand how systems and communities are effective in responding to family violence victims and perpetrators, and to identify whether barriers exist. The Committee is not a fault finding body. PAFVA prevents the Committee from making any findings of legal responsibility or any conclusion of law. Through thorough review of individual cases, the Committee examines how systems respond to victims of family violence and perpetrators. The objectives of in-depth reviews are to identify:

- barriers to safety and support-seeking behaviours;
- how institutions can discourage or encourage an informed and appropriate response to family violence;
- gaps in training, policy, practice, resources, communication and collaboration; and
- how programs and policies of government and agencies may need to adapt and change.

Prevention-Focused

The Committee's in-depth review process looks at what conditions led to family violence deaths and how the death itself may have been prevented. Members examine:

- What factors could have prevented the violence from escalating or prevented the death from occurring?
- What conditions shaped the victims' and perpetrators' options?
- What systems were available and accessed by the victims and perpetrators?
- How did the systems respond to the victims and perpetrators?

The Committee uses these questions to develop recommendations targeting systemic change to prevent future tragedies.

Data-Driven

In addition to the information learned from conducting in-depth case reviews, the Committee analyzes data on family violence deaths throughout Alberta to provide a comprehensive picture of the prevalence and circumstances surrounding family violence deaths in the province.

In-depth Case Reviews

Method for In-depth Case Reviews

The Committee reviews all family violence related deaths in Alberta; however, not every incident is examined through an in-depth case review. Before the Committee can conduct an in-depth review of a case, any criminal investigations or proceedings must be concluded.

Cases that are eligible for an in-depth review:	Cases that are ineligible for review:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Homicides and murder-suicides by an intimate partner (current or former) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Homicide committed by an intimate partner where there is an ongoing police investigation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Friends, family, new partners and bystanders killed by the perpetrator in the context of intimate partner violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The perpetrator is facing criminal charges and has not yet been tried or sentenced
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children killed by the perpetrator in the context of intimate partner violence (as retaliation or to punish or hurt the other partner) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suicide death of perpetrator who was unsuccessful in a homicide attempt against their intimate partner (near misses)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Abuser killed by victim in self-defense 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Homicide of a family or a household member not related to intimate partner violence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Abuser killed by victim's friends, family member, or bystander intervening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child abuse homicides
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Abuser killed by law enforcement while responding to a family violence related homicide. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Death by suicide of a domestic violence victim.

When conducting in-depth reviews, the Committee identifies the presence or absence of systemic issues and makes recommendations to the Minister for effective prevention/intervention approaches that support the reduction and prevention of family violence deaths. All recommendations are made using the **SMART** Criteria.

SMART criteria guides the formation of recommendations and stands for:

- S**pecific
- M**easurable
- A**chievable
- R**ealistic/Reliable
- T**imely

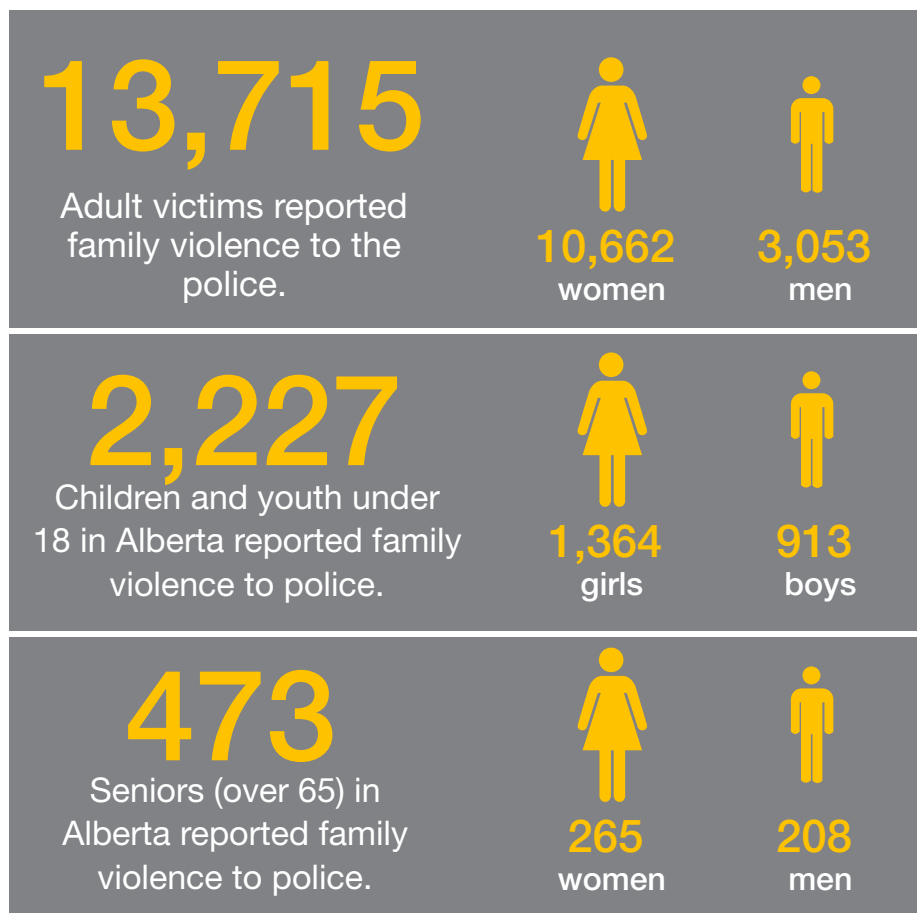
Completed In-depth Case Reviews

When the Committee completes an in-depth case review, a report is submitted to the Minister of Community and Social Services and subsequently released to the public. The report focuses on the recommendations and findings only, as legislation prohibits the release of identifying information to respect the privacy of the individuals involved. In 2017/18, four reports were submitted to the Minister for public release. Recommendations from previous reports can be found in online at www.humanservices.alberta.ca/departement/family-violence-death-review-committee.html.

Family Violence Statistics and Findings

Family Violence in Alberta

Family violence affects everyone; it occurs in high numbers across Canada. Alberta has the third-highest rate of police-reported family violence among the Canadian provinces.



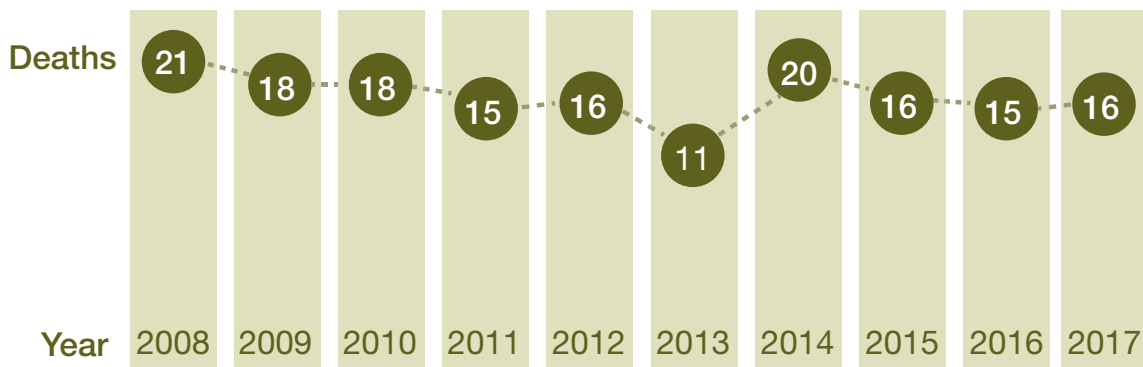
* Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Incident-based Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, Trend Database.

As high as these numbers are, Statistics Canada estimates the actual number of Albertans experiencing family violence is much higher, as it is expected that only 70 per cent of victims report family violence to the police.

2017 Family Violence Deaths in Alberta

- There were 16 deaths (15 victims and one perpetrator) due to family violence.
 - Between 2008 to 2017, there were 166 deaths due to family violence.

Family Violence Deaths in Alberta by Year



Characteristics of Family Violence Deaths in Alberta

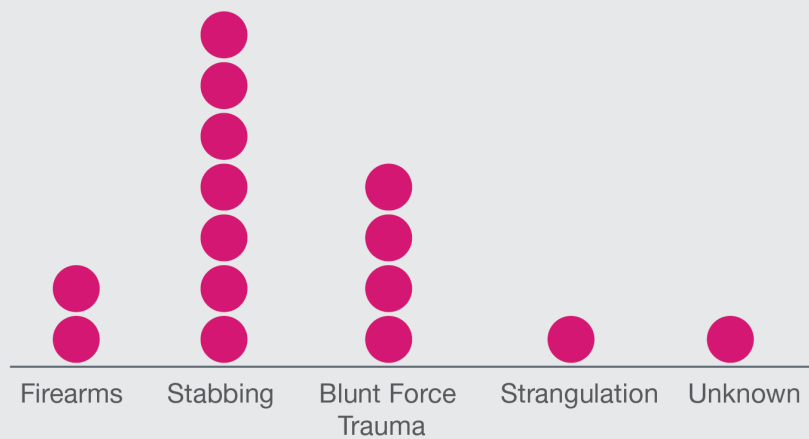
Sixty-nine per cent of family violence deaths were single homicides. Thirty-one per cent were homicide/ suicide or multiple homicides.



The majority of all family violence victim deaths involved a weapon (firearm/knife). Nine deaths involved a weapon (seven stabbing, two firearms), one method of homicide was unknown, one death occurred as a result of strangulation and four were from blunt force trauma.

The majority of family violence deaths in Alberta involved a weapon.

Method of Homicide (by incident) 2017



* "Unknown" cause of death is due to the information not being released publicly at this time.

* These statistics only include victim deaths and not perpetrator deaths.

Geographic Summary of Family Violence Deaths by Region

Alberta's major metropolitan cities had the highest rates of family violence deaths. The highest number of family violence deaths (44 per cent) occurred in the Edmonton region. This is a notable change as historically, the majority of family violence deaths (35 per cent) occurred in the Calgary region.



Region	Deaths 2017	Percentage
North East	0	0%
North Central	0	0%
Central	0	0%
South	1	6%
North West	4	25%
Calgary	4	25%
Edmonton	7	44%
Total	16	100%

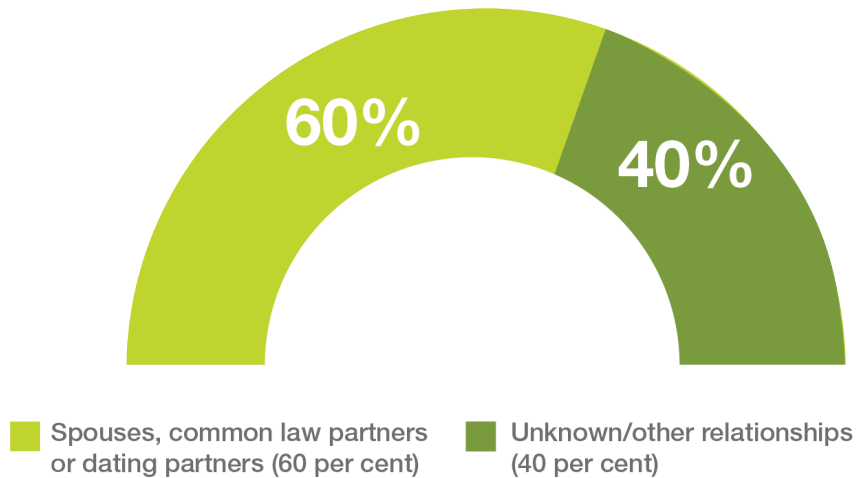
Portrait of Victims of Family Violence Deaths in Alberta

The highest number of victims of family violence deaths were women aged 41-50 who were in a relationship with their abuser at the time of their death.

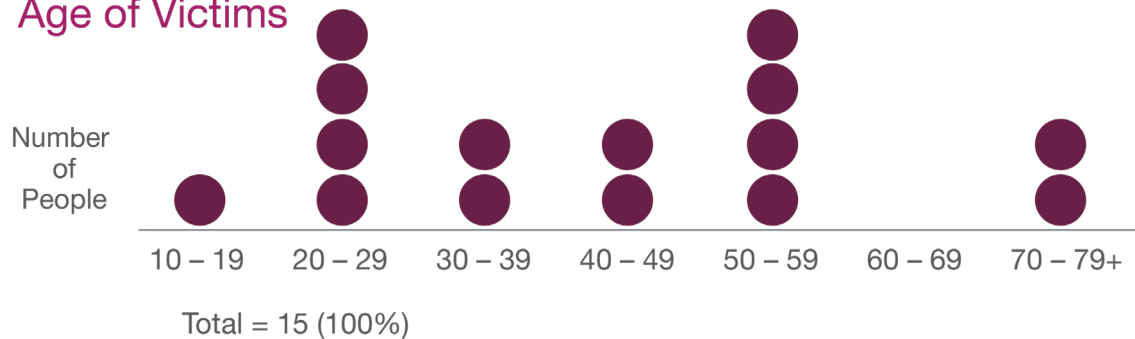
Of the 16 family violence deaths, 15 were victims and one was a perpetrator who committed murder/suicide. The 15 victims of family violence deaths were comprised of eight women and seven men.



The majority of victims were in a current relationship with their abuser at the time of their death: 60 per cent were spouses, common law partners or dating partners. The remaining 40 per cent were no longer in a relationship, had an unknown relationship status with the perpetrator and/or were a family member or bystander.

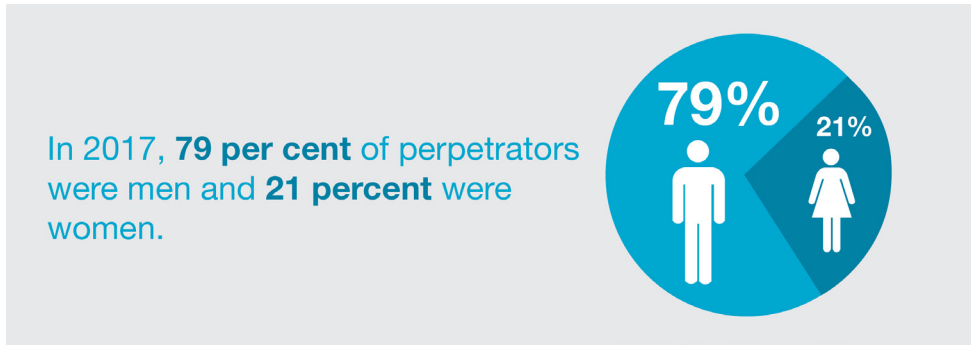


Age of Victims

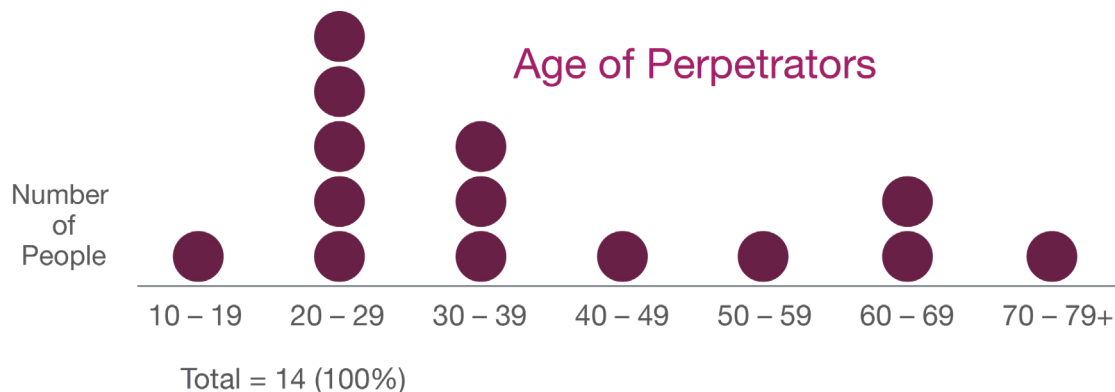


Analysis of Perpetrators of Family Violence

The majority of family violence deaths involved a male perpetrator aged 20-29 who used a weapon against his current partner.



In 2017, men perpetrated all deaths involving a murder/suicide and/or bystander death (3/16).



Looking Ahead

In its first three-year term, the Committee began the work of reviewing family violence deaths and formulating recommendations to promote education and reduction around family violence. While the Committee's initial reviews provided much valuable insight into the prevalence and seriousness of family violence, these reviews also highlight how much more investigation, research, data and learning is needed to address root causes.

Over the next three years, the four new and six returning Committee members have a considerable task ahead — to continue gaining a broader understanding of family violence and how individual circumstances and histories involved affect and influence the choices and outcomes for victims, perpetrators and their families. We continue to be committed to understanding the systemic elements involved in the prevention of family violence and to use this learning to develop recommendations that help enhance the way in which family violence supports can be accessed and delivered.

The second term Committee wishes to thank former members for their considerable expertise, contributions to the Committee, and for their time and dedication. As the Committee continues into its second term, we look forward to working with government and community partners to advance family violence prevention in Alberta.

Conclusion

Family violence is preventable, yet remains a persistent problem affecting the health, safety and well-being of Albertans. It is a complex issue that requires an ongoing, considered approach and the solution rests with all of us as a collective community and as partners working together. Educating Albertans around family violence and promoting healthy relationships plays a key role in the prevention of family violence. We are committed to continuing to review fatal family violence incidents, and to developing solutions to prevent future tragedies.

