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Community League SafeWalk Program in a Box

Background

In 2022, Muslim women told Sisters Dialogue that many Muslim women were not feeling safe to walk, following a spree of violent, gendered, Islamophobic attacks in Edmonton. After this, the EFCL and Sisters Dialogue – a women’s collective formed to address the needs of Muslim women – partnered to create the Edmonton SafeWalk pilot, funded by the City of Edmonton. Please see [link to Final Report] for more details on the SafeWalk pilot.

The general philosophy of the SafeWalk pilot is that people are safer when they walk together, and communities are safer when neighbours know each other. Our experience is from one project in one part of the city. Still, the lessons learned are a good starting point for Community Leagues interested in creating their own SafeWalk program. We will share the model we used in the pilot, including successes and challenges, and possible other models.

Creating a League SafeWalk Program

1. Community engagement

Ideally, neighbours should be engaged about safety concerns specific to your area, and the type of program they’d like. One challenge is marginalized populations that have specific safety concerns may also not be involved in League discussions. For example, some of the Leagues involved in the SafeWalk pilot did not yet have relationships with newcomers and Muslim families in their areas. To build relationships that allow dialogue on community safety, we partnered with South Clareview Community League to create a low-barrier program for newcomer moms in the area. A summary of our learning about engaging newcomer neighbours in new programming can be found in the document ‘SafeWalk Case Study on Engaging Newcomer Neighbours in Community Leagues’.

During the pilot we received feedback about creating very low barrier opportunities for neighbours to walk together, versus a more formal structure with training, police checks and coordinator oversight.

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Questions and discussion points for community dialogue could include:

- Why are people looking for partners to walk?
- Most of the women who reached out during the pilot wanted to walk on nature trails and didn't feel comfortable going alone. They preferred opportunities to walk in groups and get to know each other. Is this the case in your neighbourhood?
- Some women reached out for commute walks, from their home to an appointment or to work. Is this the case in your neighbourhood?
- Some women wanted accompaniment over transit to various areas of the city. Many people expressed they didn't feel comfortable being downtown alone, for example. Is this the case in your neighbourhood?
- What would make people feel safe to connect with neighbours to walk?
- Some women in the pilot expressed they would feel comfortable going for walks with groups of women who lived in their own neighbourhood, even if they had not met yet, without the need for training or police checks. However, they did not feel as safe with the idea of walking with men from their neighbourhood. Is this the case in your neighbourhood?
- Sisters Dialogue received feedback from Muslim women that they would feel more comfortable meeting volunteers if they had completed police checks and had taken anti-racism and culturally sensitivity training. This may be true for other racialized or marginalized groups.
- Could offering group walks as a way for people to get to know each other and develop natural relationships work? This was valued by SafeWalk participants, and felt less intimidating than meeting someone new for a one-on-one walk.
- What would make the neighbourhood feel safer?
- Many women said getting to know neighbours through walking and talking with them is what increased their sense of well-being and safety. Is this the case for your



neighbourhood?

- SafeWalk participants naturally started talking about meeting together to camp or do other things as a group. If community building and connections are what people value, should you build in events and ways to amplify these social connections?

2. Choosing a walking program model

Walking group model, lowest barrier

Many Leagues offer a walking group that meets at the same time and place for walks each week. If Leagues want to offer a weekly group walk, specific to populations like seniors or newcomers, local organizations that serve these populations can help promote walks and events through posters and social media.

In our experience, some participants wanted to meet at different trails around Edmonton each week as a safe and comfortable way to explore new nature trails. This type of group can be coordinated by participants through WhatsApp, for example.

These low barrier walking programs offer ways for neighbours to connect and form relationships that may lead naturally to people talking about and finding ways to address safety concerns in the neighbourhood.

Resource Tip

EFCL rents out poles for safe walking in the winter.

SafeWalk model

A SafeWalk program involves the need for:

- Informing your insurance of the program
- A volunteer or paid coordinator
- Deciding on what training and orientation will be offered, if any, and coordinating it
- Promoting the program
- Managing participants
- Considering an app or other platform to connect users

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Key components of the SafeWalk pilot model:

- The pilot had a paid coordinator for 15-18 hours per week
- Sisters Dialogue acted as a cultural bridge, providing culturally sensitive guidance and support to engage Muslim and newcomer women throughout the pilot. Sisters Dialogue bridged relationships through their large network of Muslim women and organizations that serve Muslim women
- Our website (edmontonsafewalk.ca) was designed by Community Services Learning Students at U of A and allowed women to sign up as participants and request walks, and allowed the coordinator to assign volunteers to walks
- We held day-long orientation and anti-racism training for volunteers
- Volunteers completed Edmonton Police record checks
- We created a Community Resource list for volunteers
- We created a volunteer policies and procedures document

Because the pilot aimed to support racialized, visibly Muslim women affected by Islamophobic attacks, we had processes to ensure we got to know the people volunteering for the program and the coordinator was involved in tracking each walk.

SafeWalk provided an orientation led by the project coordinator, and anti-racism training led by a local consultant, which included cultural sensitivity to Islam and the effects of Islamophobia. Some League's may consider orientation and training unique to the League's neighbourhood.

A Safer Walk Local App

The website platform developed for the pilot may demand too many resources for League's to sustain a SafeWalk program. League's may consider using a local app being developed called A Safer Walk (asaferwalk.com). Basic use of this app is free and available to anyone who feels comfortable using the app to connect with other women to walk. The only requirement for accessing the app is to provide government identification, confirming you identify as female. The app includes safety features such as sending each other real-time photos to confirm you are who your profile says you are.



The app offers another level of security through a groups function, which is a paid feature. This feature allows Leagues to create their own group on the app and manage who is granted access to the group. This means that participants would not have to upload their government identification to join the group, removing a barrier that some populations like newcomers would face. It also means both males and females can be participants in the group.

Program costs

SafeWalk program costs may include:

- A coordinator for the program, although this could be volunteer
- Training and orientation, such as an anti-racism workshop, trauma informed conversations, intercultural sensitivity or other topics.
- Reimbursing police record checks, if these are required. (\$15 per person for volunteering with nonprofits)
- Creating a League Group on ASaferWalk app. As of January 2023, the cost of a group on A Safer Walk app is \$15 per person. For a League SafeWalk group with 20 members, for example, the cost would be \$300 per year

Sustainability

With A Safer Walk app, once the coordinator adds people to the League group, members of the group can then use the app self-sufficiently. They can chat with each other, request a walking partner for a certain time, book walks in advance or create group walks. The role of the League coordinator would be to manage adding or removing members from the group, and whatever training or vetting process the League decides on.