



RPCI

GREYSTONE

Bereavement Centre

Moving Forward

Counselling Services for Families of Missing Persons

March 31, 2013

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Moving Forward: Executive Summary

The Saskatchewan Association of Chiefs of Police web site shows 112 people registered as missing in our province as of March, 2013. The repercussions of these disappearances are felt by anywhere from 12 – 20 other individuals whose lives have changed irrevocably. Families are thrust into a world where normal life is left behind as they deal with policing institutions, media, and search teams. Each night they go to bed wondering if their loved one is alive or dead.

Specialized support is available for dealing with a multitude of different losses; everything from divorce to death of a newborn, yet when someone vanishes and the mystery remains there is nothing. Loss that continues without resolution remains an open wound, with no evidence suggesting that time heals. The ‘not knowing’ freezes grief and can lead to a multitude of physical and psychological problems within family members. Referred to as an *ambiguous loss* because of this lack of clarity, current counselling methods are insufficient.

During the traumatic period immediately following the discovery of the disappearance, initial help may be available through Police-based Victim Services programs in Saskatchewan, depending on a number of factors, including where one lives and whether or not a referral has been made. But as the days turn into weeks and the weeks into months, these absent husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, children, grandparents and dear friends become ‘cold cases’. Families are expected to return to a regular routine, minus an absent family member, and are left wondering if they’re to blame in some way; speculating that foul play may be involved, thinking a tragic accident might have occurred, or simply not knowing. It is at this turning point, usually around six months, that counselling services are often required. Although frequency of sessions will vary, waxing and waning as needs change, involvement over a lengthy period of time is anticipated.

Australia, the UK, and the US provide the most support to families of missing persons and their insights have been useful. In Canada, especially in the western provinces, we have an added dimension: deep concern over the number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls.

Although there is disagreement between policing institutions and Native organizations as to the true numbers, as a caring society we need to help ease the suffering these families face.

Meeting with Elders from the Aboriginal community confirmed their culture's grief is deeply rooted and encompasses more than missing and murdered women. Our correctional institutions and drug and alcohol rehabilitation centres are filled with Aboriginal people laden with intergenerational mourning for the decimation of their culture. Service delivery for Aboriginal families of the missing will require a cultural component developed in a slow, respectful, and collaborative manner.

After careful review, the following are recommended as a foundation for service delivery to families of missing persons:

- *Establish specialized counselling services for families of long term missing (six months or more) in Saskatchewan*
- *A component to service delivery will be culturally based service to the Aboriginal population and will start with consulting Aboriginal Elders*
- *Consideration will be given to forming an advisory group of parties with an interest in missing persons' issues*
- *Greystone Bereavement Centre in Regina will take the lead in ensuring counselling services for families of the missing are available throughout the province.*
- *Curriculum planning and training modules will be developed and will be informed by worldwide best practices models*
- *Training of professionals and volunteers will be completed prior to any service provision*
- *Individual family-based counselling along with telephone and/or on-line support will be piloted. Support groups and various educational events may also be offered as determined by client need*
- *Both rural and urban clients will be served equally while honouring all cultural and spiritual beliefs*
- *An evaluation component will be built into all training programs and service interventions*

Families of the missing in Saskatchewan do not have access to the counselling services they deserve. *Moving Forward* is the first step in a process to address this void.

The Great Eternal Silence

*Missing in the darkness,
vanished without a trace,
with only the memories and photographs,
to fill an empty place.*

*Aquinas T. Duffy*¹

Overview

The goal of this Greystone Bereavement Centre document is to make recommendations for counselling families of missing persons as they move through an extremely traumatic life event.² This lofty goal cannot be accomplished by any one person, agency, or organization, but will need a collaborative approach to service delivery beginning as soon as a missing person has been reported and continuing as long as required. Woven throughout this report are cultural considerations that require consideration. Of particular concern is the high number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls, especially in Western Canada. This issue will be at the forefront when service delivery options are considered.

To develop a framework for therapeutic intervention with families of missing persons, the following will be presented:

- statistics pertaining to people who go missing in Canada
- an environmental scan of service provision in Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and Canada
- Saskatchewan services, including recent initiatives around missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls
- Elder wisdom
- counselling models
- recommendations for service provision

The Greystone Bereavement Centre

As of March 1, 2008, bereavement programs and services have been offered at the Greystone Bereavement Centre in Regina. Under the auspices of Regina Palliative Care Inc., the Greystone

¹*The Great Eternal Silence*. (June, 2000). Written following the disappearance of the author's cousin. Retrieved from http://www.missing.ie/_aboutus/aboutus.asp.

² The term 'family' will be used to include all who have a deep concern for the individual who has disappeared.

Bereavement Centre is unique in Canada in terms of capacity and variety of programming offered. Currently the Greystone Bereavement Centre employs an Executive Director, two full time grief and bereavement counsellors, an Administrative Assistant, Intake Coordinator and a Provincial Bereavement Coordinator. Support groups, individual counselling, grief camps and retreats for children/adolescents, and various educational events are offered. As well, a Provincial Bereavement Advisory Committee, spearheaded by the Greystone Bereavement Centre, meets regularly to ensure a voice for stakeholders throughout Saskatchewan. The multiple community partnerships involved with this non-profit charity provide invaluable support in the areas of fund raising and public awareness. The help of many volunteers also allows the expansion of programming options.

Introduction

Picture, if you can, someone in your immediate family who is expected home and never arrives. The local police service is contacted. You begin a terrifying odyssey that may go on indefinitely. As time continues to go by with no happy ending in sight where do you turn? Navigating the land of the lost as police involvement lessens and people return to their everyday lives can add to the trauma already experienced. What can we do to help the wounded whose days continue to revolve around someone who is not physically present?

As of March 2013, 112 Saskatchewan people are listed on the Saskatchewan Association of Chiefs of Police (SACP) web site as long term missing, meaning they've disappeared for six months or more. It is estimated that for each of these 112 there are anywhere from 12 to 20 people seriously impacted by their absence.³ For many of these 'left behind' individuals, life has changed irrevocably. Although sometimes referred to as 'cold cases' these missing people are present every day in the minds of their families and friends.

As the months go by with no resolution, support starts to thin. Friends may encourage family to accept the premise that their loved one is likely not going to be found alive. Media attention has

112 Saskatchewan people are currently missing, while 12 – 20 significant others are seriously impacted by their absence.

cooled and public interest has waned. Especially when the person gone has been engaged in what is often termed 'a risky lifestyle', others may see the disappearance as brought about through irresponsible choices. This can lead to lack of community support as the public may think that the loss resulted from "an immoral act or a deficiency" (Boss, 2006, p. 16) and the family is less deserving of sympathy than they would be, for example if it was a youth vanishing while on a school trip.

Our society tends to devalue the lives of those with addiction and mental health issues, as well as those who survive through trading sex for money. Racist attitudes also come into play, as

³ Based on Australian research as reported in Child Find Saskatchewan (June 2012), *Strategic Business Plan*.

evidenced by the handling of the Pickton case in BC involving missing prostitutes, many of them Aboriginal. These marginalized people who vanish still have others concerned about their welfare. Their families still suffer when faced with a missing child, mother, father, extended family member, or close friend/colleague. As well as being painful, this suffering can lead to mental health and substance abuse problems, work absenteeism, and fractured families. Given the wide circle of individuals severely impacted by this issue, it's appropriate that resources are deployed to help these families.

Peeling back the layers, it became more and more evident that service gaps for families of missing people do indeed exist, and these gaps stem in large measure from our limited knowledge around specific needs of this population. For example:

- how is the loss of a person missing through unknown circumstances different than a death loss?
- are we able to follow guidelines developed for helping trauma victims?
- is individual counselling more useful than working with families?
- do models for complicated grief work?

Loss related to a missing loved one certainly involves trauma and grief, yet there's something more here. The issues this client group grapples with are inherently different, and this difference is what needs to be understood before any attempts are made to offer assistance. Undergirding any services is a requirement for trained people willing to companion families as they carry on, day after day, trying to live normal lives not knowing if someone they care deeply about is dead, possibly suffering untold agonies somewhere, or alive and possibly choosing to remain absent. What can help in such distressing circumstances? We need to begin by looking at what we know about this devastating life event.

Environmental Scan

Australia

Reviewing the literature on missing persons, Australia has come to the forefront in terms of family support. The United Kingdom (UK) has used the Australian model as a guide to improving their supports, while Canada is just now beginning to envision what a full complement of services to families of the missing might look like.

Australian families of the missing access help through the Attorney General's Department of New South Wales (NSW) via two agencies. The first agency, the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (NMPCC) is located within the High Tech Crime Operations portfolio in the Australian Federal Police and is based in Canberra. The NMPCC unit is not involved with searching for missing persons, but offers information, counselling and referrals for those left behind. Their mandate also includes recommending reforms to the laws, facilitating interjurisdictional communication, conducting research, and developing publications for service providers and families (*New South Wales, Lawlink, n.d.*).

The NMPCC employs two staff, and among their duties is the coordination of meetings between lead 'missing persons' officers from the different state and territory police forces. At the time of this writing there is no national database system in Australia for sharing missing person's reports.

The second agency, Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU), was established in 2000, because of lobbying efforts on the part of the Missing Persons Committee of NSW, and is mandated to *provide "crisis counselling, ongoing emotional and practical supports, telephone and face-to-face counselling, liaison and referral, information on legal issues and search agencies and support during times of reunion"* (Worden, 2011, p. 8).

FFMPU is currently run by three staff members, who offer direct support to families. It's important to note that these innovative service delivery models are in NSW only, while the rest of Australia "may have no support other than the police officers who are assisting them" (Morrell, 2011 p. 28).

As a counsellor and now coordinator with FFMPU, Susan Wayland was awarded a Fellowship by the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust to study counselling methods for working with families of people who go missing. Wayland traveled internationally and her research was accomplished through clinical work and focus groups held with families. She also engaged in consultations with other national and international clinicians, including Professor Pauline Boss from the United States. Wayland's methodologies are targeted to counselors working with families of longer term missing persons and are rooted in best practice guidelines.

In 2007, Wayland authored *Supporting those who are left behind*, which outlines a counselling framework for professionals who provide service delivery to families of the missing. This was the key document that spurred Helen Morrell, U.K. Service Manager for the charity Missing People in London, to travel to Australia and produce her own narrative *Lessons from Australia: Developing a new counselling service for families when someone is missing*. Both of these documents will be looked at in more detail under the curriculum development section of this paper.

United Kingdom

The UK charity Missing People is located in London and offers support to families of the missing across the country by way of phone and email services. Missing People does not offer counselling, but their ultimate aim is to build a nationwide network of trained counsellors, as a survey they conducted in 2010 showed 65% of family members would use emotional helpline support, 62% would use therapeutic face to face counselling, and 4% would use therapeutic telephone counselling (Morrell, 2011, p. 4).

The present approach utilizing phone and email services was based on findings by Research Manager Lucy Holmes who met with families of the missing. Her qualitative research study,

Living in Limbo (2008), helped inform Missing People about the lived experience of the families they serve. Holmes' insights regarding intentional and unintentional disappearances may prove useful when actual curriculum planning is undertaken.

Morrell's *Lessons from Australia* report cited earlier outlined recommendations that Missing People' hope to implement over a three year time frame. The following is a summary of these recommendations (p. 30):

- Consider a model for counselling at Missing People that includes a step by step guide for practitioners
- Ensure expectations of clients are clear, with both potential and limitations of the service explained
- Ensure a smooth continuum between helpline team and the counselling component
- Explore resources that would help generic counsellors support families of the missing
- Develop further understanding of grieving processes that will best support this clientele
- Train staff and volunteers and see that they have time to explore their own unresolved losses
- Support staff and volunteers, watching for signs of vicarious trauma and ensuring opportunity for regular self-assessments
- Adapt the counselling environment to ensure a quiet space to talk
- Develop partnerships with other stakeholders
- Maintain links with Australian agencies and further develop international relationships to further shared understanding

At the conclusion of this report, Missing People was looking at further research to expand knowledge in best practices for family work.

United States

The North American Missing Persons Network reported that no known longer-term services exist solely for families of missing persons. However, Dr. Pauline Boss is a noted American authority on ambiguous loss, and her work includes counselling with families of the missing which will be cited throughout this document.

Canada

Within Canada, there has been an increased attention being paid to issues related to missing people and their families, both at the national and provincial level. According to Public Safety Canada data from 2005:

- more than 100,000 people are reported missing annually, with about 4,800 still not found after twelve months
- around 20 – 30 sets of human remains are discovered each year
- the vast majority of missing persons are found in the first 24 hours
- 93% of the lost are located within three weeks
- in any given year there are 57,600 to 96,000 distraught family members in Canada coping with the stress of being unable to locate a loved one

The Canadian Centre for Information on Missing Adults (CCIMA) is a bilingual online resource that acts as an information and referral centre for Canadian families and friends of missing individuals. They have a number of fact sheets for parents, siblings and extended family members. The CCMA website states they also provide resources for professionals working with families of missing adults.⁴

Individual provinces have various on-line supports that provide information and guidance to families of missing persons. For example, Ontario's Missing Adults (OMA), works to increase public awareness and also is a data collection repository. There are wide variations in how missing people are tracked and what specific support is available to the families; however, no

⁴ See <http://missingpersonsinformation.ca/what-we-do/> for further information on CCIMA.

counselling services explicitly for families of the missing has been uncovered, although there may be individual therapists that offer such services privately or as part of a counselling practice.

In the case of a long term missing person, the issue of ‘presumed dead’ is a difficult matter.

There are three perspectives when time passes with no resolution:

- **Family Perspective:** The family may never be ready to accept their loved one is dead, regardless of how many months or years have passed, without a body being found. As well, there is not always agreement among family members over this issue.
- **Law Enforcement Perspective:** The investigation may shift from locating a live, missing person to a homicide investigation.
- **Legislative/Judicial Perspective:** After seven years the courts will declare a missing person dead in Canada. This can be appealed by the family, but it is unlikely the decision will be reversed. A family can request the court to declare a person dead before seven years, but must be prepared to prove they have done everything possible to find the person.⁵

Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women and Girls

Alarmed by the growing awareness of missing and murdered women within their population, the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) secured funding to begin studying this issue in more detail. Sisters in Spirit (SIS) was started in 2005 with the support of the Status of Women Canada and Amnesty International “to address the root causes, circumstances and trends of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls”(p. i). This initiative began tracking the numbers and stories of murdered and missing Aboriginal women through a large data base that was updated weekly. SIS also engaged in education, holding workshops and nationwide conferences to increase awareness. Research involving families of the missing and murdered women resulted in a 2009 report, *What Their Stories Tell Us*, which is now in its second edition.

⁵ January 31 – meeting notes from conversation with Regina Victim Services Missing Persons Liaison Worker Rhonda Fiddler & Dwayne Yasinowski, Provincial Bereavement Coordinator, Greystone Bereavement Services.

SIS helped raise the profile of murdered and missing Aboriginal women in Canada by serving to inform and mobilize professionals in the area of missing persons as well as policy makers, and the public at large. However, SIS was only funded for five years, and in 2010 the funding for their data base was terminated and money redirected to the Department of Justice for a \$10 million endeavour that would create a national approach to missing persons and data collection. On January 31 of this year, RCMP National Media Relations announced their launch of a public website for missing persons and unidentified remains.

Police officers, medical examiners, chief coroners, and the public can submit information through the web site, which is then relayed to the investigating agency.⁶ This is the first attempt to seek public participation in a central on-line web site across the country.

RCMP and Sisters in Spirit far apart on numbers of missing and murdered Aboriginal women

At the time of this report, there is a difference in the number of reported missing and murdered Aboriginal women, with SIS quoting a figure of close to 600 and the RCMP 54.⁷ Only building and strengthening relationships between Aboriginal leaders, especially women leaders, and policing institutions can begin to close this gap.

Western Canada

The western provinces have a higher than average rate of missing persons as compared to Canada as a whole, and a disproportionate number of them are female. A working group composed of representation from western Canada and southern Ontario produced a document that found these women are also likely to have been victims of violent crimes and share one or more of the following profiles:

- Aboriginal
- Living in poverty
- Homeless, transient, and lacking in social networks
- Addicted to alcohol or drugs
- Involved in sex work or other dangerous activities, such as hitchhiking

⁶ See www.canadasmissing.ca.

⁷ *CBC News*. February 16, 2013, 6:54 AM MT.

- Experiencing mental health problems (*Coordinating Committee of Senior Officials Missing Women Working Group, 2010, p. 3*)

In Alberta, Project KARE has garnered interest for their novel approach to missing persons. With both an investigational unit and a team that works with the community, KARE operates proactively by focusing on those at highest risk to go missing. Such individuals are registered, and are provided with a KARE 24 hour phone number to use in case they require assistance at any time.⁸

The *Report on the 2011 Western Regional Forum* (WRF) was drawn up following a forum held in Regina and hosted by Child Find Saskatchewan in March, 2011. With attendees from across western Canada, as well as representations from Justice Canada and Public Safety Canada, the forum hosted approximately 60 interested stakeholders over two days. The questions they focused on were:

- What do families of the missing need, both in the short and long term?
- How are jurisdictions currently meeting these needs?
- Are there gaps in service provision?
- What improvements can be made in service delivery, both within and between jurisdictions? (*p. 1-2*)

During the forum Ms. Freda Ens, a representative from British Columbia, spoke on what was learned during the Pickton trial. She described groups for families of the missing and murdered women that were started while the investigation was in progress, and how these proved to be “*extremely helpful in supporting the families as they had many questions to be answered*” (*p. 14*). Unfortunately these groups have since been disbanded.

Goals were developed over the course of the forum, and can be accessed on pp. 20-21 of the WRF Report. One of the goals was to develop a business plan, and this was completed in June, 2012 by members of the Saskatchewan Provincial Partnership Committee on Missing Persons (PPCMP). More on the formation of the PPCMP will be provided in the following section.

⁸ KARE claims that 90% of those approached choose to register. See <http://www.kare.ca> for more information on KARE.

Saskatchewan

Current Statistics

As mentioned, the Saskatchewan Association of Chiefs of Police (SACP) website documents 112 people missing for six months or more. Ten sets of unidentified human remains are also recorded. It is important to recognize the vast difference in numbers between short and long term missing people. For example, in January 2013 there were 160 people reported missing in Regina alone, but likely no more than two would go on to become long-term missing. Most of the others are young people who are found at a friend's house or in other safe situations.

The highest numbers of individuals who go missing from Saskatchewan are Caucasian men, followed by Aboriginal males. Specific breakdown, according to Victim Services:

Caucasian men – 45

Aboriginal men – 34

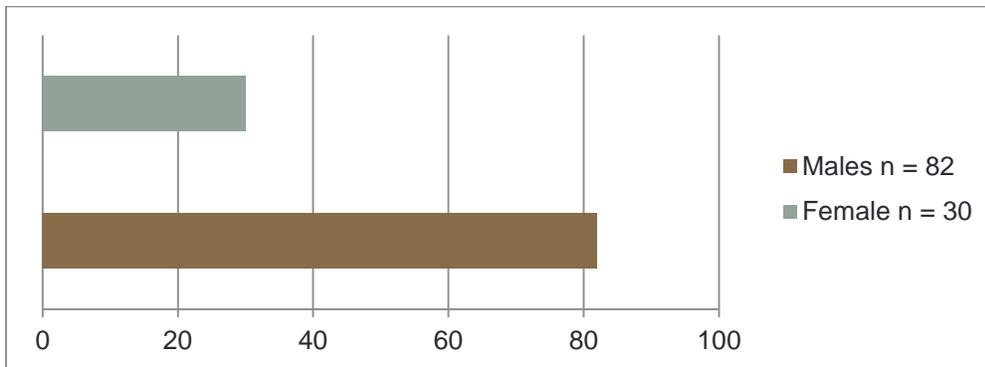
Aboriginal women – 17

Caucasian women – 13

Other men – 2 (Asian)

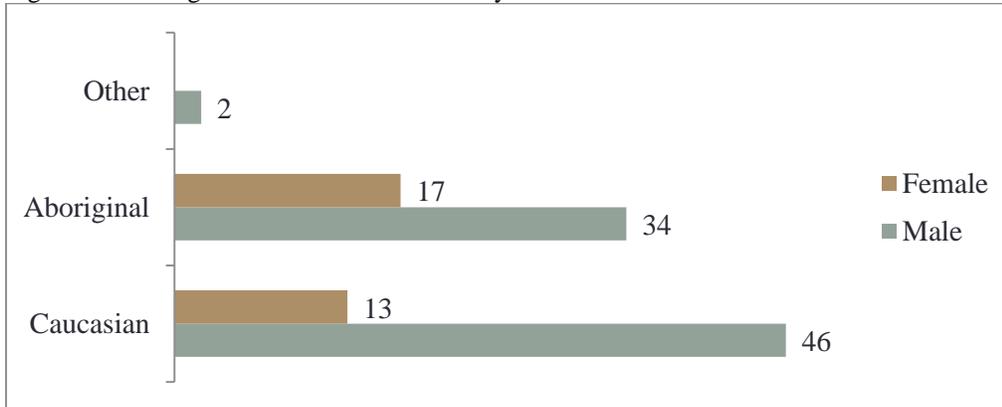
Looking at gender only, 82 men are missing, as compared to 30 women. Converting to percentage, 73% are male and 27% female (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Missing Persons by Gender



As illustrated in Figure 2 (below), when gender and race are considered there is a higher rate of Caucasian men who go missing (n=46) as compared to Aboriginal males (n=34). The opposite is true for women, with 13 Caucasians and 17 Aboriginal. According to Statistics Canada 2006 Census, Aboriginals make up approximately 12% of Saskatchewan’s population, yet account for about 33% of missing people.

Figure 2: Missing Persons in Saskatchewan by Gender and Race

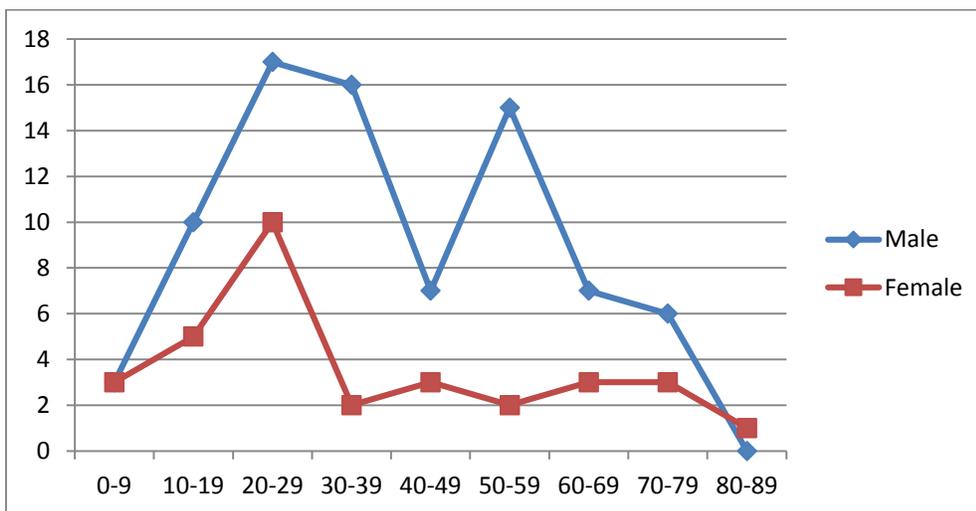


If we look at age and gender we see some interesting variations (see Figure 3 below):

- a spike in missing males occurs in the 20 – 29 and 50 – 59 age groups
- a slow decline for men in the 30’s and then a drop from 40 – 49
- a sharp increase in the sixth decade

Gender makes quite a difference, as females are more likely to go missing in their twenties followed by a sharp decline in the later life years.

Figure 3: Missing Persons in Saskatchewan by Age and Gender



According to Victim Services, running from domestic abuse is the major reason Caucasian women disappear, whereas it is believed that Caucasian males in the older age group go missing due to risk-taking activities, such as skiing, rock climbing or sky-diving. Others are frequently the result of boating and hunting accidents. Some men simply leave home and family and are never heard from again. These ‘walkaways’ do not want to be found and if they are, will request no information on their whereabouts be given to anyone. As it is not a crime to go missing (unless criminal activity is involved), these males may simply be checked off as ‘found’, with families still left in the dark as to where they are or why they left in the first place.

Aboriginal men are more likely to go missing due to violent situations that may involve foul play, gang-related events or suicide. There are also a small number of Asian men who disappear due to gang-related violence.

The profile of missing Aboriginal women includes those fleeing domestic abuse, with many having addiction problems, working high risk professions and/or living on the streets.⁹ Aboriginal women go missing in numbers disproportionate to their population in western Canada, with 65% of the murdered and missing Aboriginal women originating in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan or Manitoba. As well, although Aboriginal women make up only 3% of the female population in Canada, they represent 10% of female homicides (*WRF, p. 4*).

Looking at demographics, those living in rural Saskatchewan are more than twice as likely to go missing as compared to their urban counterparts.

Committees, Reports and Forums

In 2005, the Saskatchewan government established the Provincial Partnership Committee on Missing Persons (PPCMP). This Committee was formed as a result of the concern expressed by the public over the number of missing women, particularly those of Aboriginal descent. Composed of representatives from 14 organizations around the province, the mandate of the PPCMP is to “*work towards a future that ensures that when people go missing there is a full*

⁹ February 4, 2012 – information obtained through meeting with Rhonda Fiddler at Greystone Bereavement Centre.

response that mobilizes all necessary participants and that recognizes the equal value of every life”(WRF, p. 4).

The final report of the PPCP released in 2007 makes recommendations in 20 different areas pertaining to improved services for missing persons. One of these recommendations addresses increased support for families and friends and includes the desire for a roster of counsellors trained to work with families of the missing.

Following up on this 2007 report, four members of the PPCMP moved forward on the recommendations by documenting *Strategic Business Plan: Addressing the Needs of Missing Persons and their Families* (SBP), completed in June, 2012. Highlighted within the SBP is the increased attention being paid to the missing persons’ issue.

Momentum to address this concern has intensified as a result of continued public pressure and media attention related to missing and murdered Aboriginal women. Their guiding statement reads, in part: *“The plan sets out a number of activities intended to enhance collaboration, raise public and political awareness and improve support for families” (p.3)*. It is the recommendations relating to service provision for those left behind that is particularly pertinent to this present report.

The SBP planning process included a community consultation incorporating an online survey as well as telephone and in-person interviews. An encouraging statistic from this consultation reveals that 79% of respondents felt the issue of missing persons was significant or very significant in their community.

The three priority areas documented in the Plan for moving the issue of missing persons forward are:

- Working together
- Raising awareness
- Supporting families

The Plan is intended to be carried out over a two year time frame, and the following are the desired outcomes in the area of family support:

- Work will have progressed to develop a roster of specifically trained counsellors with representation from each region.
- Presentations on family support needs along with a handout depicting family support needs will have been delivered to agencies throughout the western region of Canada.
- Existing agencies will gain an improved understanding of issues related to missing persons and supporting families through receipt of, and review of, all documents developed.
- Agencies will have continued to develop plain language resources to support families. Resources developed will be made available online.
- Families will have access to coordinated collections of information such as a resource list or resource directory. Existing resources, such as Victim Services and the Child Find Connecting Families programs will have been promoted and will have gained improved recognition.
- The need for research will have been promoted to several academic institutions. Expanded understanding gained through research and documented evidence may influence policy and improve decision-making (p. 28-29).

Even from this cursory look at the SBP, it is obvious that collaboration among such agencies and organizations as Victim Services, Child Find, our provincial universities, and The Greystone Bereavement Centre is vital for moving this issue forward in Saskatchewan. The importance of ensuring the voice of our Aboriginal population is heard as services are planned cannot be overstated.

Services for Families

Victim Services

The Ministry of Justice offers victims of crime in Saskatchewan a range of programs and services through their Victims Services Branch, including Police-based Victim Services programs (VS). VS programs are funded by the Victims Services Branch and are based in municipal police services and RCMP detachments. Three of these programs, Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert have Missing Persons Liaison (MPL) positions which provide specialized

support to families of missing persons within their respective VS units. They also provide training to the staff of other VS programs in Saskatchewan on how to support families of missing persons, and provide consultation on complex missing persons cases.

VS personnel provide the following the following services to families of missing persons:

Support

VS workers provide a listening presence, and talk with families about what they're experiencing and how they're coping.

Victim Services require a referral to become involved with families of missing persons. They offer support, but not counselling services.

Information

VS provide families with investigation updates, court dates, and resource guides. Additional information may be provided depending on the needs of each family, but may include kits to help with talking to the media, useful internet sites, and self-care sheets.

Referrals

VS will refer families to various professionals, such as counsellors and lawyers, as needed.

Advocacy

Difficult issues related to property and children may require the VS worker to advocate on behalf of the family.

Police refer missing persons cases to VS in accordance with the *Missing Persons – Police Referrals to Victim Services in Saskatchewan Protocol*. In order to be referred, cases must meet at least one of the following criteria:

- Suspicious or unusual in nature
- Involve Major Crime Unit investigation
- Require Search and Rescue
- Have distraught family/involved persons who need support
- Have a family/involved person who request help from VS

As VS does not have the capacity to become involved with all missing persons, chronic runaways or walkaways (people who are transient and have a history of leaving for periods of time without notifying family) are not referred to VS unless they meet the above protocol.

In 2012, funding was provided to VS to increase services to families of missing persons while incorporating the unique needs of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. Some of this funding has been used to support the MPL positions in Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert. Monies will also support the delivery of services through community-based organizations, designed to aid in promoting culturally sensitive service delivery through individual and family counselling and/or specialized support groups for family members.

When Victim Services are involved, families have a presence to guide them through the initial stages of the investigation into their loved one's whereabouts. However, VS is unable to offer counselling services to families who face the staggering stresses of a long term disappearance or the often difficult reunion of family and missing person.

Child Find Saskatchewan

*My life ended the day my child
was taken. At some point I had
to find a place to start over.*

Heather Cox (Slowikowski, J., 2010, p. 61)

Child Find Saskatchewan is a provincial charitable organization that educates and advocates for the protection and rights of children. Located in Saskatoon, with a satellite office in Regina, Child Find Saskatchewan has volunteers in 43 different towns and cities within the province.

The goals of Child Find Saskatchewan are:

- To locate and reunite missing children with their lawful parent or guardian
- Increase public awareness of the need to protect children
- Deliver and maintain a Child Find Program Canada-wide
- Provide an educational program on personal Internet safety
- Support families of missing children through the Connecting Families program

According to their 2011 Annual Report, “*Connecting Families is a lifeline to assist and empower families with missing person(s) by offering resources and emotional support from other families who have experienced a similar situation, aiding in the creation of a strong peer support network*”(Child Find Saskatchewan, 2011). Connecting Families emphasizes the emotional health of the entire family, including the siblings (14-18 years of age) of a missing person. Recognizing that children are seriously impacted when someone in the family goes missing, they offer assistance regardless of the reason for the disappearance. Services are free and provide a Canada-wide network of families to offer support.

Cultural Challenges

Man, when he does not grieve, hardly exists.

Antonio Porchia, Voces, 1943, translated from Spanish by W.S. Merwin

An Aboriginal Perspective

The high rate at which Aboriginals go missing, plus Saskatchewan's increasing immigration population (7,615 people recorded new immigrants in 2010) speaks to the necessity of culturally sensitive counselling approaches when working with families of the missing (*Keatings, Down & Garcea, 2012*).

In an attempt to understand how services for families of missing persons might be more inclusive to the Aboriginal population, esteemed community leaders Elder Tony Cote and Elmer Escappe were invited in to the Greystone Bereavement Centre to share their perspectives. As they talked, their conversation was recorded and close attention was paid to the stories of these well-respected men. Their insights allowed us to better understand the lived experiences of a grieving community that has been sadly underserved.

Elder Cote is former Chief of the Cote First Nation, and has been an active leader in the Saskatchewan First Nations community as well as a role model for First Nations' youth. He has held many senior positions with the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations and was an advisor for Human Resource Development Canada. His many accomplishments include supporting the formation of a safe shelter for battered women, working to advance higher education for the Indian Nation, founding the Saskatchewan First Nations Summer Games, and contributing to many community improvements in housing, water, and industrial expansion. Elder Cote's visionary accomplishments over the years have earned him the Tom Longboard Medal in 1974 and the Saskatchewan Centennial Medal.¹⁰

Elder Cote explained how the present situation can only be explained in light of the historical context from which it spawned. He spoke at length about the abuse his people suffered through

¹⁰ Information in this section summarized from taped conversation February 20, 2013 at Greystone Bereavement Centre. See Appendix for Elder Tony Cote's full biography.

the residential school era. Children were forcibly removed from their families and a totally different culture informed their days. Native languages, traditions, ceremonies and religious beliefs were belittled and vilified. Many children suffered psychological, physical and sexual abuse. Visits home were infrequent; some returned when they were sixteen and didn't even know their siblings. Others became ill and died of pneumonia or tuberculosis and their families were unaware of this for years. A generation returned from the residential schools strangers to their family, and simply drifted away, sometimes into the cities. The skills of hunting, fishing, and farming became lost. In essence, a culture was decimated.

While their children were gone, Indian agents and Roman Catholic Church leaders further eroded the Indian ways by denigrating the teachings of the Native Elders. The Indian Nation became a populace of grieving people, torn from all the supports and beliefs that their proud heritage had built up over generations. Rites associated with loss – Elder counsel, death rituals, sacred ceremonies – were forbidden. Men who fought for Canada in the war returned and Veteran's Affairs denied them the usual benefits or opportunities for further education. Instead, they were told that the Indian Agents would take care of them. Elder Cote said that he applied for further education following his stint in the Korean War, but was told by the Indian Agent that he was too old. Other ventures were refused, ignored or denied, leaving these men with few options to help them care for their family: *"In uniform you were equal"*, but once home, things were different.

Defeated and feeling hopeless, many turned to alcohol to try and dull the pain and still the grief that permeated their being. Gradually anger filled their hearts and souls as attempts to regain what was lost became impossible. Loss of community meant the grief became buried and only the anger emerged: *"There were a lot of angry people and they passed that on to their children and grandchildren. I think we have every reason to be angry. We were denied everything"*.

Elder Cote expressed great concern for the youth of today, noting that there are gangs both on and off reserve. *"Indian people are now mean and cruel – even to each other."* Their grandparents were residential school survivors and many were unable to parent as they had no role models to follow. Effects from these experiences trickled down and continue to impact the present generation. Elder Cote states: *"Our young people are lost. We have to concentrate on*

them. They didn't get what they deserved." The difficulties faced by urban youth in particular troubles both men greatly, as these young people have wandered far from traditional beliefs and yet don't fit into the white mans' world either. They also talked about how the native respect for women has been tainted, as Elder Cote adds, *"You cannot give what you do not have"*.

***"Indian people are now mean and cruel – even to each other" –
Elder Cote***

Elder Cote is not aware of any resources that their people can access at this time to begin to deal with the generational grieving pattern that has poisoned their world. He believes this needs to be addressed, but cautioned against moving too fast as *"you're going to have a lot of resistance"*. They recommended advancing gently and not imposing. Elmer Cote explained that all five tribes in Saskatchewan have their own way of dealing with grief and it could cause friction to bring people together from various tribes. He recommended approaching the Aboriginal councils and talking with them first, as *"Indian communities have different views and methods"*. He feels that bringing in Elders separately from each tribe and getting to know their practices would be the best way to start. Sweats are one common element among all the tribes and there is some intermingling in this area, particularly in urban sweat lodges.

American psychologist Pauline Boss would see the shattering effects of colonization as *"forced uprooting"* (2006, p. 125) where the loss of a cultural identity has created a situation whereby Aboriginals don't know where they fit in, what is their culture. Is it that which preceded them prior to the residential schools, of which they know only what they've been told, or is it the lived reality of the white mans' world where most now live?¹¹ This identity crisis is at the heart of their grief; compounded by the hurt, hate, and righteous feelings of injustice that have built up over the years. Attempts to override the destruction done to their people; a cultural annihilation, has caused devastating social problems, such as alcohol addiction and criminal activity, to flourish. How does one begin to try and right the wrongs that have been done over generations?

¹¹ Reconstructed identity as it applies to missing persons will be discussed further in *American Insights* section of this document.

Through the words of Elmer and Elder Cote it would seem that services to address grief within their community are certainly needed. Both indicated they felt attending to grief work is the right path, as Elder Cote believes *“if we really want to cure our young people we have to draw the hate out”* and he believes the hate is due to repressed grieving.

Based on the above discussion, offering grief services to the Aboriginal population needs to proceed slowly and with considerable input from the various Aboriginal councils and their Elders. Missing and murdered Aboriginal women is definitely part of what such services would focus on, but the need is much broader and deeper than this alone. However, it is the attention this group has received through the media and through public reaction that can serve as a catalyst for service delivery to Aboriginals that focuses on complicated grief, part of which is related to the missing and murdered women in their communities, and much of which is grounded in a much deeper grieving. As Betz & Thorngren (2006) affirm: *“The residual effects of ambiguous loss – grief surrounding the loss of a way of life and cultural identity – are passed down through the generations”* (p. 362).

After this powerful afternoon with Elder Cote and Elmer Escappe, it is clear that the road to service provision for Aboriginal families of missing people needs to be carefully planned, comprehensive in nature and expansive in scope. Counsellors must be cognizant of the historical antecedents and willing to work with the immense sadness that reaches beyond the loss of any one missing person. For this to succeed, a sound background in Aboriginal history is required by the helper, as well as a desire to push below the surface and uncover long-buried grief and/or trauma. In addition, the counsellor needs to be prepared to learn what the particular Aboriginal beliefs and ceremonies are that provide meaning to that client.

Medicine Bear Counselling Support & Elder Services Programs

As grief services must be culturally sensitive and require a collaborative approach, we need to seek out other stakeholders who may be working in the area of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. One such service is located in Winnipeg, Manitoba where such families are offered counselling and support groups.

Colleen Robinson is heading this three year pilot project funded by Victim Services. Speaking with Colleen by telephone, she said they have about 25 families utilizing their service but only one of these families still have a member who is missing, as the other 24 are grieving for a deceased loved one. Colleen states that in their support groups that run once a week they combine both the families who are still searching and those who have located a body. When asked, she said it seemed to work not too bad to have both groups together, although sometimes it was “a little difficult”.¹²

Vacated Project

To begin, we need to seek out other stakeholders who may be working in the area of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. One project in our own province, currently called “The Vacated”, is spearheaded by the Aboriginal Friendship Centres of Saskatchewan. The Vacated Advisory Committee (VAC) is developing a public awareness campaign around the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and planning support groups that will be piloted in various communities for the families who have been left behind.¹³

In terms of public awareness, the VAC plans to campaign and produce materials that will *“include a gendered approach with special emphasis upon youth and families”*. The plan is also to *“promote awareness over the history of colonization, residential schools, addictions, entrenched cultural attitudes towards Aboriginals and women generally, and how these factors often intersect to create the conditions which place many Aboriginal women at risk”* (p. 3).

VAC’s goal is to make the availability of their support groups known throughout the province by having various organizations, bands, police services, friendship centres and other stakeholders publicize these events. It is their wish to *“house support groups on a weekly basis in all the friendship centres and establish a continuum of supports and by providing gateway services to other areas of need . . . such as legal advice, media campaigns, one-on-one counselling,*

¹² Telephone conversation with Colleen Robinson July 22, 2013.

¹³ Information on the Vacated Project obtained at a stakeholder meeting held January 24, 2013 at the Saskatoon Aboriginal Friendship Centre. References refer to an internal document distributed at the meeting outlining the Project.

etc.”(p.6). These groups are expecting to follow a format similar to Alcoholics Anonymous, with a rotating chair of individuals who are “*linked by common experience*” (p. 5).

Another aspect of this project involves a desire to

. . . record and write a compendium of stories which communicate the nature of losing a woman (sic) or child in an Aboriginal family. . . . By exposing and sharing these stories we feel we can communicate . . . root causes to a larger audience and thereby impact a measurable change in policy, advocacy, victim services, and clearance rates (p. 6).

It is the hope of the VAC that their project will yield

- a published manuscript and pictorial highlighting notable stories and
- greater awareness of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and children in Saskatchewan and abroad (p. 11).

Ambiguous Loss Defined

The sorrow which has no vent in tears may make other organs weep.

Henry Maudsley

Loss of a loved one through death allows the bereaved to see the body and know for certain the person has died. When someone is missing days, months, and years can go by with no resolution. Sometimes families have no idea what happened; in other instances they may feel fairly certain, such as in the case of a natural disaster, their beloved is dead, yet it is hard to comprehend without knowing for sure.

For some, life continues to be forever halted at the time of the disappearance. The ramifications of this for the family system are deep and long lasting and can cause severe stress and possibly estrangements within the family at a time when cohesiveness is most desired. Members individually find their own way to cope; some may move from the initial panic, fear, and anxiety to a slow acceptance that the missing person is not likely ever going to be seen again. Others may struggle more with feelings of guilt and anger, resulting in serious mental health issues such as depression. With no answers to the ‘why’ questions, their pain continues to be an open wound that never heals.

Rituals related to death, such as funerals and memorials, developed to help with accepting the loss of the physical person are seen as giving up hope by many of those left behind. Search and rescue attempts might be winding down and the case has now moved to the back burner. Some friends and family gradually move on with their lives, leaving intense isolation and sadness for others who are unable to forget, even for one day, that someone they love may still be alive and possibly needing help. The lack of answers is tortuous and support may be needed for a very long time.

The crisis point is often reached when people look for help in figuring out if they should be letting go or holding on. Frequently their lives have been tied up for so long with finding the missing person that they don’t know how to step back into a more normal groove.

This is a description of what is called *ambiguous loss*. Simply defined as “*an unclear loss that defies closure*” (Boss, 2006, p. xvii), ambiguous loss refers to the most stressful form of loss that may last forever, waxing and waning over an individual’s lifetime. It is traumatic in nature and can result in all manner of dysfunction, both within individuals and in families as a whole.

Pauline Boss, a professor from the University of Minnesota, is considered the principal theorist in the study of ambiguous loss, and coined the term in 1975. She has worked with countless survivors of missing persons and served as leader in such horrific circumstances as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia. Her academic and clinical work has spanned many decades, and her work is well documented in both books and scholarly articles penned over the years. Boss (2006) believes *ambiguous loss “freezes the grief process and defies resolution” (p 11)*.

“Ambiguous loss freezes the grief process and defies resolution” - Boss

As a culture we tend to believe that we are in control and can manage whatever comes our way. Just as adolescents may think they are immune, immortal and infertile, we are prone to believing that traumatic events happen to other people, and often with the implicit corollary that these other people have done something to deserve their fate. Yet no one is prepared to deal with a person who is simply here one day and gone the next. Our resiliency, and even our identity, is tested to the extreme when faced with the uncertainty of not knowing whether we’re still a mother or a sister or a father. Life becomes devoid of meaning as the assumptive world, that world we assumed functioned in a predictable manner, suddenly behaves without rhyme or reason and our faith in our own ability to cope with the ups and downs of life topples. It is this chaotic picture that we need to reframe for the families of the lost; for it is how we view events not what they are that determines whether individuals can manage a trauma of this magnitude.

Boss goes on to outline two types of ambiguous loss:

- *physical presence with psychological absence*

This occurs when a loved one is present in body, but has changed so much as to be almost unrecognizable, such as in the case of dementia, a severe head injury, serious mental health problems or addictions.

- *physical absence and psychological presence*

In this category the actual person is not there, but because of the uncertain nature of their whereabouts, they are still seen as part of the family within the minds of those left behind. Such losses encompass natural disasters, kidnapping, unknown disappearances, soldiers missing in action, runaways, and those who have chosen to go missing.

Counselling Approaches

Not being able to “cure” or “fix” an ambiguous loss, we intervene to lower distress and anxiety and most important, to increase the family’s tolerance for the ambiguity that persists. People can and do learn to tolerate and even thrive despite their unanswered questions.

(Boss & Carnes, p. 463)

Many therapeutic modalities offer approaches that might be useful for families of missing persons. Every counsellor has a repertoire of familiar tools they employ depending on the issues presented by their clients. With ambiguous loss related to families of the missing, the focus is on supporting people as they search to manage a life turned upside down; a life we can’t change unless their person is found. Ambiguous loss is not a problem to be solved, nor is it a maladaptive mindset that needs altering.

Not knowing whether the missing person is dead or alive, the goal of therapeutic intervention doesn’t fit under any traditional model of counselling. There is nothing abnormal in most family’s response to the calamity of finding out someone in their close circle has vanished. Therefore, counselling is not solution-based, but is aimed instead at strengthening the family unit and bolstering a resiliency they may not even know exists. Teaching families how to carry on successfully in spite of not knowing if they’ll ever find the lost piece of the puzzle is at the heart of working with this clientele.

Through their family stories, the counsellor begins to understand the dynamics that make each family unique. Zeroing in on strengths honed through previous hard times the family has weathered successfully, the counsellor begins to assist in expanding resiliency to allow adaptation to losing a member under mysterious circumstances. Drawing on these strengths shame, blame, guilt, bitterness, anger, intense sadness, and other difficult emotions are brought to the surface in an atmosphere of trust and safety.

Counselling sessions will need to be tailored to the needs of each individual family . . . as long as clients deem necessary

This may be the first time individual family members have shared in this way, and learning others' true feelings around the disappearance serves to unite the group as well as possibly opening up differences that can then be dealt with in an open, honest manner. Such shared awareness of how others perceive the loss may lead to disclosure of family secrets that could require referrals elsewhere before continuing with the loss issue.

For example, a missing person's daughter may be isolating herself from the search for dad, thereby angering others in the family. Through counselling, it is determined that this daughter has suffered abuse at the hands of her father that was unacknowledged by the rest of the family. Thus the importance of having seasoned counsellors able to recognize when collaboration with other helpers is needed cannot be overstated.

Counselling sessions will need to be tailored to the needs of each individual family. They may need to be scheduled regularly and frequently at first, then sporadic at other times. All of the limited research with families of the missing points to the need for being available to clients as long as clients deem necessary (*Boss, 1999, 2006; Holmes, 2008; Wayland, 2007*). Special holidays and unexpected ups and downs in the investigation can reignite the need for support at any juncture.

Having said this, it is worthwhile to briefly look at some of the possible counselling methods that may be of use when working with this clientele. These interventions are certainly not exhaustive, but are therapeutic approaches that may have the best fit for people facing ambiguous loss. Chosen for examination are: trauma and PTSD, family systems work related to stress management, and grief/bereavement counselling. Narrative therapy will be discussed as an overarching theme for supporting those dealing with an ambiguous loss.

Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

“My father will never ever get over it ever. It’ll be 14 years in January and he’s still as sad today as he was [14] years ago. ...it’s yesterday in your mind.”

(Sister of missing woman, Holmes, L., 2008, p. 25)

Crisis counselling, along with PTSD, is often needed in the immediate aftermath of discovering someone has gone missing. At that time, the family or individual might receive help through Victim Services or a crisis agency. Even when counselling families of long term missing people, events such as the sudden reappearance of a loved one after many months can precipitate a reaction requiring immediate intervention. Severe signs of PTSD are always crisis situations and need to be managed accordingly.

A traumatic event, which would certainly include being unable to locate someone you are closely connected to, typically *involves “the actual or threatened death or injury to one’s self or others, around which feelings of fear, helplessness or horror were present” (Hesse, 2002, p. 296).*

Herbert and Wetmore (2008) consider an experience to be traumatic when a person is unable to cope with an event that is emotionally overwhelming. Following a trauma, symptoms of PTSD may arise, such as sleep problems, suicidal ideation, overwhelming feelings of sadness, fear, or anxiety, and/or flashbacks, and depression (*Hodgkinson & Shepherd, 1994*). PTSD, in effect, deals with events that happened outside the normal realm of experience and were never fully resolved.

Boss (1990) compares PTSD to ambiguous loss, as both are psychologically distressing, traumatizing, and lack resolution. However, she sees differences between the two, as the trauma of ambiguous loss “continues to exist in the present. It is not *post* anything” Similarities also exist in terms of outcome, as *“both can result in depression, anxiety, psychic numbing, distressing dreams, and guilt. But ambiguous loss is unique in that the trauma goes on and on in what families describe as a rollercoaster ride, during which they alternate between hope and hopelessness” (p. 24).* Reports of possible sightings alternate with periods when no news predominates. To accept and respect the hope of families, no matter how misguided this may

appear at times, is part of the counsellor's role, as is determining when a referral elsewhere is indicated.

Family Stress Management

One cannot get through life without pain...What we can do is choose how to use the pain life presents to us. Bernie S. Siegel

Wayland (2007) states that a traumatic loss “*places a magnifying glass to the challenges and areas of concern within a family's coping capacities*” (p. 24). Regular stress relief tactics are insufficient when coping with a loss such as that of a missing child or other beloved family member. The intensity of the feelings and helplessness that cannot be fixed causes a heavy weight on the structure that is the family system. Roles, boundaries, and family routines may all be challenged as attempts to achieve control in a world turned upside down fail. Therefore, Boss (2006) believes the family stress perspective is the conceptual base for working with families of the missing.

Determining who is considered a part of the family is an important place to begin when working under this model. Boss (2006) discusses the concept of the *psychological* family, which may include people who have died or gone missing, as well as the *physical* family, who are those present. Culture also plays a part in who is defined as the immediate family, as Aboriginals may see many extended family members viewed as equal in importance to the mother or father of a missing child.

When there is too big a gap between the psychological family and the physical family, *boundary ambiguity* results. This can create situations of conflict if members of the family are not in agreement as to who is in and who is out. For example, the brother of a missing person may think the deceased parent would want them to continue to search forever for the missing sibling, while another family member may discount what someone who is dead might think.

“High boundary ambiguity is a compromise or risk factor for individual and relational well-being; it is a barrier to the family's management of their stress from ambiguous loss” (Boss, 2006, p. 12). In other words, if the family is elastic enough to tolerate the stressor of a missing

person they have a low boundary ambiguity and are better able to cope with changes in the family constellation. The aim in counselling is to help the family develop more resiliency for dealing with such ambiguity, thus enabling them to better manage the stress they are burdened with each day that their loved one is still not found.

A number of methods for strengthening resiliency in families is presented in Boss' 2006 book *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss*, and may be useful for family work with this clientele.

Ambiguous loss is relentless in its uncertainty. People become worn out from worry, and family members may become isolated as they see not everyone is of the same mind when talking about missing issues. When one person is adamant their person will be appear safe and sound, while others think the likelihood of a good outcome is slim, tension is exacerbated. This can lead to blame and guilt which causes the family system to crack and can lead to estrangements at a time when cohesiveness is most needed. Additional stressors related to family life cycle issues, such as having a baby at the same time an older member of the family goes missing, creates an even more unstable environment. At the root of this uncertainty is a desire for control.

Our society places great value on mastery and problem-solving skills. When something occurs that cannot be mastered or solved the pressure and strain can be overwhelming. In some cases, the roles and responsibilities of the missing person have to be assumed by others who are already devastated by the disappearance itself. This relentless unpredictability creates a barrier whereby the family may begin to feel that anything unrelated to finding the missing person is superfluous.

Yet life continues and someone has to be responsible for seeing that children get to school, bills get paid and clothes are washed. Financial problems, if the person missing contributed to the family's bank account, can augment other troubles and possibly even lead to bankruptcy. Having to continually deal with media and law enforcement personnel can wear away at an already beaten unit. All of these issues place the family at risk for losing equilibrium and being swallowed up by the pressures they're facing.

Taking a systemic view of ambiguous loss, counsellors can ensure everyone in the family has a chance to hear and be heard. Helping with authentic communication and tolerance for varying viewpoints will bolster their ability to problem solve as a group. For example, when searching has been exhausted the time comes to take what Boss (2006) refers to as *a family gamble*, where an educated guess has to be made as to the most likely way to proceed from this point.

Uncertainty over whether it is the right decision may plague the family forever, and can lead to blaming and guilt if the best guess proves incorrect; some are unable to forgive those seen as cheerleading that decision. Part of the healing process is for the family to *“give up the idea of perfection and absolute truth. They may have to make some difficult decisions based on very little information. At some point, the family must be willing to live with their decision”* (Betz & Thorngren, p. 363).

Working with the family as a unit, the counsellor can provide tools to promote healthy coping behaviours while reducing isolation, increasing resiliency, and helping them *“construct a new meaning system that incorporates what they have learned about themselves and each other”* (Betz & Thorngren, p. 364).

Grief and Bereavement

OK, if you lose somebody, they die and it's devastating, but there is time when you can move from that. Maybe not move on but accept it. I think when somebody's just missing it's just hanging there. You don't really know. It's a little bit like a torture.

(Sister of a missing woman, Holmes, 2008, p. 25)

No one would dispute that discovering a loved one has been killed in a car accident or murdered in a school shooting is one of the most traumatic events life can bring, yet the presence of a body provides definitive evidence that the person is no longer alive and the grieving process can begin. The ambiguity around a person missing leaves those left behind in a state of limbo for other reasons too.

First, ambiguity is confusing and creates a feeling of helplessness, both in those experiencing the loss and in the helper. It isn't reasonable to expect loved ones to 'let go and move on' when perhaps tomorrow their loved one will be found. Guidelines exist to suggest when grief becomes pathological, but these guidelines are based on knowing someone is not coming back. When does searching for a loved one become pathological? Or does it ever? Few would think that leaving regular life behind to look for a missing son or daughter is unusual, but what if this goes on for years? If finding the missing person takes over the lives of the family completely, is that pathological?

Boss emphasizes that it's important to recognize responses to ambiguous loss are not signs of an internal weakness, but are due to unprecedented external factors occurring in one's life (Boss, 2006). One also has to be cautious about judging how people cope with tragic events most of will never encounter in our own lives.

Second, ambiguity has no formalized rituals in society. Once a body is present, plans for a funeral, memorial or wake can begin. But to families of the missing, no such benchmark exists. When, if ever, should there be a formal recognition that the person is likely dead, and what would that recognition entail? Do those left behind even want such an event, given there is no absolute proof a happy ending is still not possible?

Boss (2008) states: *"having no rituals and traditions for this inexplicable situation, they often deny the ambiguity—by acting as if the missing person is clearly dead—or clearly alive. Neither extreme is useful because each ignores the reality of not knowing"* (p. 19). In an earlier publication, Boss (2002) tells the story of one family who buried their son's guitar in a creative approach to ritual when a body was not to be found, thus finding a resolution that worked for them.

Wayland (2007) states: *"grief is associated with death, while missing is associated with trauma"* (p. 14). Most people are able to cope with death of a loved one, particularly an expected death, such as that of an aged grandparent, without professional intervention. After an initial period of acute grief, most will gradually carry on with their life while holding memories of their loved

one close forever. Some will need the services of a counselor to reach this point, while others may wish to seek solace through meeting with people experiencing a similar loss. However, the grief of missingness is all-encompassing and has no end, which makes it hard for others, even professionals, to understand.

***“Grief is associated with death, while missing is associated with trauma” –
Wayland***

The extensive grief and bereavement literature available does inform work with missing persons’ families to some extent.

The work of Dr. Therese A. Rando and Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt in particular may be useful strategies to incorporate when working with families of missing persons.

Dr. Rando is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Warwick, Rhode Island. She has written and lectured internationally in areas related to loss and grief, received many awards for her work, and is a frequent guest and speaker at conferences and on news and talk shows in the United States. In her book *Treatment of Complicated Mourning*, Rando addresses issues related to grief from a sudden, unexpected death. Many of her insights can be extrapolated to the lived experience of grief faced by families of the missing.

Rando believes ‘suddenness’ is one of two risk factors that are red flags indicating the likelihood of a difficult bereavement experience. The second is *“a markedly angry, ambivalent, or dependent premorbid relationship with the deceased”* (p. 554). Both of these factors are often at play when a person vanishes. Given the interrelatedness of an unexpected death and an abrupt disappearance, the following thoughts by Rando related to sudden death can be helpful in planning curriculum material for counsellors of families of the missing:¹⁴

- The capacity to cope is diminished due to distress
- The assumptive world is violently shattered and control, predictability, and security are lost; expectations and beliefs upon which life has been based are violated
- There is no sense to the loss, so absorbing what has happened is compromised

¹⁴ Summarized from Rando (1993), pp. 555 – 557.

- There is no opportunity to say good-bye or deal with unfinished business
- Symptoms of acute grief and physical and emotional shock persist for a prolonged period of time
- The mourner obsessively reconstructs events in retrospect and may feel responsible for not attending to cues that may or may not have been there, leading to guilt
- The loss puts emphasis on what was happening in the relationship at the specific time of the death rather than looking at the broader picture
- Emotions are heightened with more “*anger, guilt, helplessness, death anxiety, vulnerability, insecurity, need to understand and (where appropriate) affix blame and responsibility, confusion and disorganization, obsession with the deceased, and [a relentless desire to]search for meaning*” (p. 557)
- Secondary losses are often prevalent¹⁵
- Post-traumatic stress response is more likely to occur and require treatment

Although research describing what families of the missing live through is sparse, it can be surmised that they often cope with after-effects similar to those experienced following sudden death. Thus, therapeutic measures to help with sudden, traumatic loss would likely be transferrable, to a lesser or greater extent, to work with families of missing people.

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is an internationally noted author, educator and grief counselor. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School’s Department of Family Medicine. Dr. Wolfelt is an educational consultant to hospices, hospitals, schools, universities, funeral homes and a variety of community agencies across North America. Perhaps best known for his ‘companioning philosophy’ for working with the bereaved, Wolfelt’s approach to helping bears consideration. His companioning philosophy reads:

- Companioning is about honoring the spirit; it is not about focusing on the intellect

¹⁵ Losses that happen secondary to the loss of the person, i.e. losing one’s home as income is now reduced

- Companioning is about curiosity; it is not about expertise
- Companioning is about learning from others; it is not about leading
- Companioning is about walking alongside; it is not about leading
- Companioning is about being still; it is not about frantic movement forward
- Companioning is about discovering the gifts of sacred silence; it is not about filling every painful moment with words
- Companioning is about listening with the heart; it is not about analyzing with the head
- Companioning is about bearing witness to the struggles of others; it is not about directing those struggles
- Companioning is about being present to another person's pain; it is not about taking away the pain
- Companioning is about respecting disorder and confusion; it is not about imposing order and logic
- Companioning is about going to the wilderness of the soul with another human being; it is not about thinking you are responsible for finding the way out
(Lesser, R., 2009).

The above philosophy is in line with Boss' (2006) belief that we must bear witness to the distress families are enduring and *"join them in the lack of knowing"* rather than trying to find answers that aren't there.

General grief and bereavement counselling helps people find meaning around the death of their beloved and encourages self-care while undergoing the stressful period of bereavement. All of this correlates to goals that might be applicable to working with families of the missing, except for the fact there is no known death. This is where the tenets related to ambiguous loss can be woven in to other well-known counselling models such as Wolfelt's companioning approach.

Narrative Therapy

In the face of events that threaten to overwhelm our lives, storytelling gives us a way of reclaiming ourselves and reaffirming our connections with other people – those who listen to our stories and, by doing so, bear witness with us.

Victoria Alexander, In the Wake of Suicide: Stories of the People Left Behind

The ideology behind narrative therapy appears well suited to working with families of the missing, as Morgan (2008) writes:

- Narrative therapy seeks to be a respectful, non-blaming approach to counselling and community work, which centres people as the experts in their own lives
- It views problems as separate from people and assumes people have many skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them to change their relationship with problems in their lives
- Curiosity and a willingness to ask questions to which we genuinely don't know the answers are important principles of this work.
- There are many possible directions that any conversation can take (there is no single correct direction)
- The person consulting the therapist plays a significant part in determining the directions that are taken

It is from this basic therapeutic stance, (which is not dissimilar to Wolfelt's companioning philosophy) that counselling for the families of the missing can be built.

Curriculum Development

For the first months following a disappearance, loved ones are focused on attempts to find the person at any cost. Crisis intervention may be necessary, depending on the emotional needs of the particular individuals. This document is concerned with counselling after the initial shock is over, likely around four to six months, when hope is changing from a frenzied desire to find the person to coping with the possibility that will never happen.¹⁶

The limited research that has been done so far, including qualitative work with the survivors themselves, points to the need for specialized counselling interventions with professionals well versed in general grief therapy, trauma counselling and stress management, who have additional understanding of the unique issues surrounding ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999, 2006).

Australian Insights

Those offering counselling to the families and friends of missing persons need a detailed knowledge of the psychological and emotional experiences faced by such individuals and family units as well as an awareness of the personal, social, inter-personal, legal and practical issues confronting their reality.
(*It's the Hope that Hurts*, New South Wales Government FFMPU, 2001, p.18)

Two Australian documents cited earlier offer suggestions regarding therapeutic interventions with families. In the first one, *It's the Hope that Hurts*, best practice models are discussed, and counsellors are encouraged to:

- Ensure they possess well-honed basic counselling skills recognizing the particular importance of empathy and genuineness
- Ensure they are well informed of the particular needs of the family and friends of missing persons
- Avoid a dogmatic attachment to a “stage” approach to loss theory and particularly any unmodified application of grief and loss models that emphasize ‘closure’ and ‘resolution’ as end products

¹⁶ Australian data usually considers ‘long term’ to mean at least a year, although this counselling framework is for families where the disappearance occurred about six months prior.

- Be familiar with the ‘lived experience’ of the family and friends of missing persons
- Maintain currency in the literature surrounding loss and grief and the issues facing family and friend of missing persons
- Engage in a therapeutic philosophy that assists the family and friends of missing persons to helpfully redefine and reinterpret their altered status with the missing person (p. 7).

The following recommendations from this 2011 report offer suggested content that might be included in a training guide:

- Contributions by clients on the lived experience
- Applicability of various counselling models and theories
- Details of various search agencies and procedures
- Legal issues when someone goes missing
- Information on support groups or other resources
- Problems in reunions
- Found but estranged
- Avoiding the less helpful

Also of note in *“It’s the Hope that Hurts”* is the statement that 57% of those left behind *“have a breakdown of trust, arguments, and expressions of hostility and anger directed at others”* in the aftermath of a lost family member. In addition, *“people report shame, embarrassment, shock, sadness and helplessness [over] the disappearance”* (p. 9). Particularly when it is a child who vanishes, competency as a parent is questioned: *“I couldn’t protect him from doing one foolish thing, and that one thing cost him his life. I’m a failure as a father, I feel so hopeless”* (p. 10).

Supporting those who are left behind is the second Australian document, and is published through the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre. Five themes for working with families of missing persons are outlined. Written by S. Wayland, then Project Officer with the Centre, these themes were developed from her discussions with Pauline Boss, through focus groups with families of the missing and from other clinicians working in this sector.

Themes are not mutually exclusive, may overlap, and are developed for working with people once the initial crisis has abated. They are deemed to be suitable for any missing person situation.

Reanimation

Those left behind can become ‘stuck’ at the time the person vanished, and reanimation is a useful tool to begin looking at the disappearance from another perspective. This theme is asking family members “to ‘reanimate’ their lives – including before, during and after the person went missing – not only in relation to their current experiences” (Wayland, 2007, p. 8). By talking about the person, not just the event, the lived experience of having someone missing is revealed. This narrative approach includes helping them tell their story and exploring the paradox of both absence and presence. This starts the process of understanding how the two concepts of ‘both here and gone’ can co-exist.

Wayland stresses that families need to be assisted in *moving forward* rather than *moving on*, as the latter is suggestive of closure, which is usually not what families are interested in hearing.

“Families need to be assisted in moving forward rather than moving on, as the latter is suggestive of closure” - Wayland

The phrase ‘moving forward’ suggests families *can* “retain the memories and the hope that the missing person will return” (p. 9). Under this theme, counsellors can also discuss the changing face of hope over time.

Questions that might be used to guide discussions around reanimation include:¹⁷

- Can you tell me about . . .? (referring to the total person)
- How does your culture respond to traumatic events? Who are the members of your ‘psychological family’?
- How does this family strengthen you?
- Are you aware of the term ‘ambiguous loss’? What does it mean to you? Have you ever experienced an ambiguous loss before?
- What is useful to you when you hear about ways in which other people have coped with an ambiguous loss?

¹⁷ All questions adapted from Wayland (2007), Appendix 1.

- Have you had an opportunity to share with other members of your family what your thoughts are about how to cope with someone missing?
- Would it help to share the dark thoughts about your fears for the missing person?
- What do you find to be the most challenging ambiguities present in coping with a loved one being missing?
- Does the word ‘missing’ reflect the ‘stuck’ space you’re in right now? Is there a better word?

A celebration so far

This theme looks at rituals that may be useful for families. It’s a delicate balance, as anything that is suggestive of ‘missing equals dead’ will likely create distance in the counselling relationship. Wayland is suggesting that celebrations can be a way of honouring the person who has vanished, yet not precluding the possibility of his or her return:

[Celebrations] may involve taking some time to play a favourite song, cooking a person’s favourite meal or simply stopping and remembering. Acknowledging special dates within the ‘celebration so far’ may be multi-faceted . . . including ‘drop in’ picnics that invite people to bring special memories of the missing person, creating an altar to give the missing person a prominent position in the home, a photographic collage of the relationship between the family and the missing person, or even relaxing and drinking the person’s favourite drink (p. 13).¹⁸

Celebrations can also reflect the spirituality of the family and thereby create some familiar structure as they labor with the ambiguity that is their present life.

Questions that might be asked to aid with this second theme are:

- What happens if you give yourself permission to reminisce about the person who’s currently missing from your life?
- What would happen if you focused on other times in your relationship with the person rather than just the missing time?
- How challenging would it be to celebrate their life in some way when you don’t know where they are or when they may return?

¹⁸ This is not unlike bereavement ‘celebrations’; it is more the careful use of language that differentiates.

- If I asked you to think of the best way to invite the missing person back into your life what might that look like? How would you celebrate then?
- Are there other words besides ‘celebration’ that would be more comfortable for you?

The trauma timeline

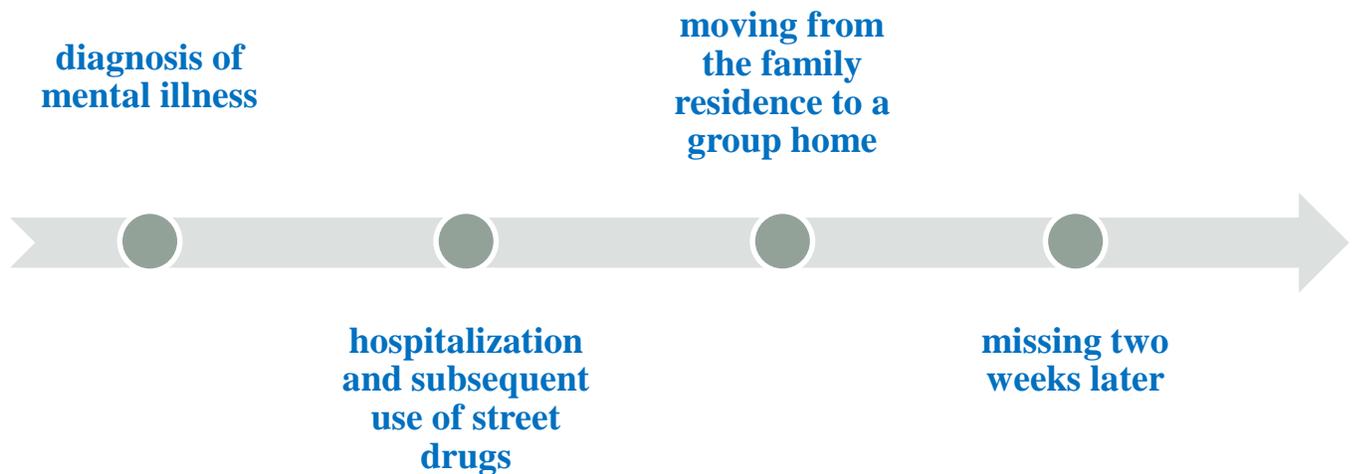
Families have likely detailed everything they know about the disappearance of their loved one many times to police officers, the media and others. This recital of the facts, as they know them, includes minute details of the clothing the person wore, where they were when last seen, and countless other specific pieces of information required for searching purposes. The trauma timeline is much broader in focus. In the majority of cases, stressors existed for the family prior to the person leaving without a word. The trauma timeline seems particularly useful for situations where mental illness, addictions, cognitive problems, relationship issues, criminal activity or other difficulties have preceded the actual departure. Completing the timeline, it is possible to see the disappearance as simply compounding what may have been years of stress leading up to the disappearance.

Working on a timeline can also help families see that there is much more to the story. For example, if the disappearance occurred when a family member was taking a break from constantly being available to the absent person, recalling times when a vacation went smoothly and served as a positive step in the relationship with the missing person can assuage guilty feelings. Moreover, the timeline may also provide an opening to explore the ambivalence around the disappearance itself. For example, after years of conflict where the missing person’s struggle with mental illness has impacted heavily on the family, there may be some relief at having days free of the continued responsibility for someone else’s behavior. However, the feeling of relief, albeit mingled with fear for the person’s safety, creates a ripe climate for guilt to flourish if not openly addressed.

Kenneth Doka (2002) also talks about “*relational guilt*” (p. 220), where the inability to be an effective parent, spouse, or friend has contributed to the disappearance. Or possibly one member of the family blames another for being partially responsible for the person now being absent. In

some cases, there may be an unspoken feeling that the missing person has still managed to retain control by causing even more chaos within the family.

Through use of the timeline past, present and future aspects of the loss may provide context to what is happening, reducing the feelings of hopelessness and helplessness that prevail when concentrating only on the factors surrounding the unresolved loss itself. Wayland sees the timeline as “*unpacking*” prior events and uncovering some of the emotions, such as shame, that are part and parcel of the label ‘family of a missing person. In doing so, there is the possibility of opening up old wounds, such as family violence, that may need to be explored before anything further can be accomplished.¹⁹ The timeline is usually constructed on a large piece of construction paper and may start out by looking something like this:



It is hoped that working together on the timeline will also serve to put perspective around the missing event by showing the historical beginnings. Of course this activity may not be suitable for some losses, but even when it is a sudden, forced, and totally unexpected occurrence, such as a child kidnapping, the timeline can serve as an opportunity to reflect on the child and some of the happier memories of his or her life.

¹⁹ A multi-disciplinary approach to missing persons work is often necessary when issues related to previous unresolved traumas are discovered.

A protected place

Families need a way to contain all the heavy emotions that continually dominate their life. Working in palliative care, caregivers frequently cannot let go of their role, even for brief periods of respite, saying, “I might as well stay home as I’ll be thinking about him all the time anyway.” Suggesting they ‘put these thoughts in a drawer’ that can be opened later gives informal care providers permission to rejoin the community for a while, thus taking care of themselves with less guilt. Extrapolating this idea to families of the missing, Wayland suggests helping clients use the analogy of being in a fenced area with a gate where they can “*move in and out of their anguish*” (Wayland, 2005, p. 12).

Using this cognitive approach, there is a sense of control and an ability to ‘move in’ to a space when there’s a desire to think about the missing person and a gate to ‘move out’ if these thoughts become too overwhelming. Wayland (2007) adds: “*Introducing the idea of the protected place is a tool that links the ideas of reintroducing a family to a missing person by giving them time both with and away from their loved one – a way to live and survive the trauma of not knowing*”. This concept is particularly useful when working with people whose loved one has been missing for six months or more as it uses “*the insight and coping capacities that the families have had to draw on thus far*” (p. 21).

Opportunities for growth

Within grief there is always the potential for growth, regardless of the cause of the suffering. Whether it is going through a divorce, losing all one’s possessions in a fire, or facing the death of a spouse, we can learn many life lessons as we struggle and cope with some of the most difficult aspects of being human. Surviving adversities can result in a reorganizing of our priorities, new insight into our own behaviours, or perhaps a heightened sense of caring and compassion for others. This growth, if it happens at all, comes at the end of a long journey and through much pain. And not many people would say the growth they experienced was worth the price they paid.

When the issue is an unresolved loss, it is sometimes possible to help families learn to live with this ambiguity through activity that is growth-promoting. Such activities can then be shared with

other families as suggestions on how to “grow whilst they wait” (Wayland, p. 22). Some examples cited by Wayland are:

- Become proactive by telling the story to the media or professionals as a way to gain awareness of the missing people issue
- Write articles or books about the journey
- Offer to meet and help support others who are missing someone in their lives
- Lobby for changes that will improve the services to families of the missing
- Take on an issue that is sometimes related to a person disappearing, such as child safety or domestic violence
- Honour the missing person in some manner, such as having a scholarship started bearing his or her name

Under this theme is also the idea of cognitive restructuring, whereby the counselor is able to help family members see things in a slightly different light. For example, if, instead of gut-wrenching sadness when looking at a picture of the missing person on his or her wedding day the focus can shift to a remembrance of how wonderful that occasion was, it becomes possible, even if only for a short time, to feel grateful for having good memories of the past.

Growth can also come through helping the families to see they're moving forward by reflecting on small changes, such as the ability to sleep more than an hour or two at a time now, or attending a movie and being able to remember the plot for the first time since the disappearance.

United Kingdom Insights

Following Morrell's visit to Australia and her 2011 report *Lessons from Australia*, their Missing Persons Unit (MP) in London produced a guide designed to be “an overview of the currently available research, policy, knowledge and understanding about what it is really like to cope when someone you love is missing” (*An Uncertain Hope*, 2012, Foreword). Based on a survey done in 2010, 50% of families asked for more counselling specific to missing person's issues and

63% wanted guidance leaflets. A further feedback study in 2011 found families wanting help by telephone and face-to-face counselling as well as through family support groups.

In order to determine if these requests had resulted in changes within MP, telephone interviews were conducted with Lucy Holmes, Research Manager at MP and author of *Living in Limbo* (2008) and Helen Alves (nee Morrell) who penned *Lessons from Australia* (2011) and works as the MP Family Support Manager. The following useful information was gathered through those telephone conversations.²⁰

At the present time MP is working hard to advance their capacity to serve families of the missing. Since their inception about 20 years ago support has been telephone-based, and this continues to be their primary method of service delivery. They employ 22 paid staff to run the 24/7 phone line as well as a volunteer component who are supervised by the staff. If they so choose, individuals can have a main support person assigned, but most will simply call in when they need someone with whom to talk. Training is done through a 2-tiered system, whereby staff receives about 120 hours before beginning work, and volunteers receive around 70 hours. Employees are not necessarily professional counsellors, but are experienced in providing help through phone services. MP is currently piloting a more intensive telephone support program that offers clients a predetermined number of phone sessions, usually six, with highly skilled senior counsellors.

Another new service through MP is their Family Support Days. These are one day gatherings held twice a year where families can meet one another and have a chance to talk about their missing person with others. They are encouraged to bring photos and mementos, which makes for a very emotional and powerful day for these people who may have never before had the chance to talk with others who are also experiencing a loved one's inexplicable absence. The same groups come together at the same place each time, and three such days are offered by MP in various locations. Initially they ran a program involving three full day sessions, one each weekend over three weeks, but they found attendance was poor, so have switched to the present format.

²⁰ Consultation by phone held March 4 with Lucy Holmes and March 7 with Helen Alves

A third innovation started about a year ago is a confidential On-line Family Forum where like-minded people can connect via the internet. This is also a way for those attending the twice-yearly Family Support Days to stay in touch.

Helen stressed the importance of having staff and volunteers who are comfortable with talking and listening when solutions to problems are not the goal. She feels that workers need to be able to “sit with uncertainty” and believes “there’s not a lot of people out there who can handle that”. As a result, Helen strongly believes that counsellors in this line of work need to be well trained in ambiguous loss and be watchful that they don’t suffer vicarious trauma from all the sadness they hear.

The way in which MP is handling support issues for their families of the missing is of great value in helping to determine best methods for our Saskatchewan population. However, it must be remembered that they’re trying to provide a service to a much larger population, and they don’t have one dominant group of marginalized citizens to consider, such as exists here.

American Insights

Pauline Boss’ work with both physical and psychological loss has greatly informed our present understanding of how to work with families of the missing. The following section summarizes Boss’ six main tenets underlying ambiguous loss counselling.

Each of the following will be briefly discussed as concepts to guide a counselling framework.

The specifics falling under each heading will not be detailed here, but can be examined at a later date if/when curriculum is drawn up.

- Finding meaning
- Tempering mastery
- Reconstructing identity
- Normalizing ambivalence
- Revising attachment
- Discovering hope

Finding meaning

As human beings we seek to find a reason for what happens in our life. Within families, the meaning of an occurrence can be viewed through different lenses and will influence how each family member copes with a loss. Meaning is influenced by such factors as personality, religious beliefs, life philosophy and previous experiences with traumatic events. In simpler terms, it is our attitude towards what has happened that determines how stressful any happening will be perceived. For instance, if one believes everything happens for a reason there may be more tolerance for inexplicable events than someone who thinks good things should inevitably happen to good people.

Turning to the work of Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist who endured life in the concentration camps during WWII, we are helped in our understanding of how important meaning making is when faced with intolerable situations. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl outlines his belief that even the most painful life events can be withstood if one is able to attach some meaning to them. It was his observation that those who survived the concentration camps chose to find meaning in their suffering and were thus able to endure the ghastly events they watched and experienced.

Each family, and each person within that family, may have a different response when asked questions related to the meaning they attach to what has happened. When an individual cannot find any meaning to the disappearance or death, hope is destroyed and feelings of confusion, anger, and possibly a desire for vengeance may predominate. Therefore, it is the work of the counselor to help clients find meaning – their own personal meaning – for the loved one's disappearance.

Boss explains that as counselors in ambiguous loss, *"the goal of intervention is the joint creation of meaning, through discourse, symbolic interactions, rituals, and the telling and reframing of stories among loved ones and community in a safe setting"* (2006, p. 90). Boss goes on to outline ten suggestions on how to assist clients with making meaning out of an event shrouded in mystery:

- Naming the problem
- Dialectical thinking
- Religion and spirituality
- Forgiveness
- Small good works
- Rituals
- Positive attribution
- Sacrifice for a greater good or love
- Perceiving suffering as inevitable
- Hope

Ambiguous loss cannot be solved or 'mastered' unless the missing person returns home.

Tempering mastery

Mastery is our ability to control what is happening – we have a problem, we attempt myriad solutions to solve it. Ambiguous loss cannot be solved or ‘mastered’ unless the missing person returns home. Living with the uncertainty over whether or not someone we love will ever be physically present again creates a background of tension as mastery is challenged. Attempts to ameliorate this tension require an ability to acknowledge and accept that one may have little or no control over what is happening.

The problem arises when mastery is either under or overvalued. If one is inclined to undervalue mastery, there is a possibility of giving up too soon, while overvaluing mastery leads to continuing on in the face of mounting evidence suggesting it’s time to relax the search. If clients are able to find a comfortable middle ground between these two extremes, they are more likely to move in the direction of accepting what Boss refers to as “*an imperfect situation*” (2006, p. 103). If mastery is not tempered it can lead to feelings of helplessness, which increase the risk of depression, anxiety and physical illness developing.

To aid in tempering mastery, Boss recommends working with families around the following issues:

- Recognizing that the world is not always just and fair
- Recognizing where views of mastery originate
- Externalizing the blame
- Decreasing self-blame
- Identifying past competencies

- Managing and making decisions
- Increasing success experiences
- Softening attribution
- Accepting (sometimes) what will not change
- Having (sometimes) a sense of invincibility
- Knowing the exceptions
- Reconstructing rituals
- Mastering one's internal self

Reconstructing identity

When one has a child and that child disappears, regardless of age, it begs the question, *am I still a mother?* And if so, how does this new reality impact on the role of mother one had in the family prior to the loss? If you were also as a grandmother to your daughter's children are you still a grandmother or are you now considered the mother? It is not difficult to see how a missing person can create role confusion within the left behind family and cause untold stress in an already beleaguered family system.

As identity is reconstructed, what happens to the previous construction of that family as others have to backfill some of the responsibilities of a family member who has unwillingly been required to assume another position? And what does this do to family boundaries? These are examples of questions a counselor will need to address when helping families of the missing in the task of reconstructing identity.

Remembering that the overall goal of therapeutic intervention is to increase resiliency within the family, allowing expansion and shrinkage of boundaries as needed, for example if the missing person should return home, requires a degree of comfort with change. Boss believes this is best done through "*relational connections*" where self-esteem can be bolstered and ability to cope with new and difficult roles can be validated. Boss goes on to say:

Gaining confidence in who we are as a result of positive interactions with others, we grow more confident that we can cope with the pressures of new environments, new people, and novel situations. When there is ambiguous loss and few facts, being able to reconstruct who one is requires trust in self and others (2006, p. 127).

Intervening to help families in reconstructing identities is not simple. Narrative therapy is seen by Boss (2006) as the main avenue for exploring this task. Narrative Therapy is also closely aligned with Aboriginal cultural traditions where oral storytelling is highly valued, as Elder Cote demonstrated during our conversation.

Finding out who is seen as being part of their family is the beginning. Do they consider the husband, wife, daughter and missing son constituting their family, or do they include extended family members, deceased relatives, their tribe or community? How much importance is placed on the opinions and wishes of each member of the family? Does one person's desire override everyone else's? Is it considered acceptable to question the authority of the father? And what about 'exes'? Children from divorced households may see their father as very much a part of the family, whereas their mother may not hold the same view.

Basic family systems work, through narrative inquiry, is a good conduit to discerning the answers to these and other questions related to how the family functions as a unit. This is the backdrop from which other interventions may be chosen to aid in reconfiguring identities as the space at the family table remains unfilled.

Once family membership is determined, background questions that might help in selecting appropriate family interventions include:

- How open is the family to new information and changing preconceived ideas?
- What are the rituals that earmark special events?
- Is everyone able to express their feelings and ideas in front of the other family members?
- Are there other ambiguous losses, past or present, that the family has or have deal with successfully? (For example, is there a grandparent with Alzheimer's or a son with a traumatic head injury that has provided 'practice' in coping with some form of ambiguous loss?)
- How is behavior considered outside the norm viewed? Is the member ostracized or accepted as 'that's just the way Jack is'?

- Is the family able to see the strengths of individual members or only the problems they may present? *“By asking questions about strengths rather than pathology, a therapist can thicken client’s descriptions and create opportunities for more positive identities to develop” (Boss, 2006, p. 132).*
- How rigid are the rules and expectations for certain behaviours within the family?
- How does the family deal with problems?

Therapeutic work around identity issues include such tasks as creating genograms, family of origin work, and helping clients create new celebrations that incorporate past rituals while allowing for new formations that recognize the absence of the missing individual. Helping families accept what Boss refers to as the *both/and* of missingness is part of what is sought here. That someone can be both not here and yet part of the family presents a conundrum that needs resiliency to accept.

Normalizing Ambivalence

When we vacillate between two opposing factors, such as love and hate for the same person, we have ambivalent feelings. This can be anxiety-provoking, as our desire for black and white answers in life is challenged. One day families want the missing person to be found dead just to end the mystery and the next they wake up thankful that yesterday’s search did not yield a body. Finding a space, a grey area, that allows both thoughts is tricky and can be extremely stressful. By accepting that such dichotomy of thought is not unusual, individuals become better able to tolerate this ambivalence without overwhelming feelings of guilt.

In some cases, the first step is helping the client bring such opposing thoughts to light. Denial may be inhibiting the ability to face their ambivalent thoughts. Days filled with never-ending sadness and fear may create such intense feelings of anger toward the absent person that it becomes too painful to bring these thoughts to consciousness.

To help with normalizing ambivalence, Boss (2006) suggests the following:

- Normalizing guilt and negative feelings, but not harmful actions
- Using the arts to increase understanding of ambivalence

- Regaining person agency
- Reassessing and reconstructing the psychological family
- Seeing the community as family
- Reassigning everyday roles and tasks
- Asking questions about context and situation
- Bringing ambivalent feelings into the open
- Uncovering latent or unconscious ambivalence
- Managing the ambivalence, once aware of it
- Seeing conflict as positive
- Valuing diverse ways of managing ambivalence
- Knowing that closure does not lower ambivalence
- Developing tolerance for tension
- Using cognitive coping strategies

Boss summarizes these guidelines by saying:

“Resiliency does not lie in [eradicating ambivalence], but rather in being able to acknowledge and manage the tensions from ambivalence at a level that prevents traumatization. . . . Feeling love and hate simultaneously or fluctuating from grief to rage can traumatize people [only] if they cannot acknowledge and manage the tension” (p. 160 – 161.)

Revising Attachment

There is certainly nothing pathological in remaining attached to someone you love who may be alive or may be dead as long as the ‘not knowing’ doesn’t prevent redirecting energy from that love relationship elsewhere. Even with death, one may continue to have a deep connection to a beloved who is physically gone from one’s world. Yet with time, one is able to alter that attachment to allow other people or activities to fill up the space that was once occupied by that person. This is harder to do when there is still a small part of your being that thinks the missing individual may still walk through the door one day and explain their absence.

Although it’s not possible to completely sever this attachment, counselling can assist with modifying or, as Boss says, ‘softening’ this attachment by strengthening present relationships and allowing the formation of new connections. Boss also believes that *“Traditional methods of grief therapy and PTSD intervention are insufficient to revise attachment after a loved one goes missing” (p. 168)*. Her approach involves the following:

- Thinking dialectically
- Moving from despair to protest
- Thinking systematically, but not seeing maladaptations as bilateral pathology
- Developing memorial ceremonies and farewell rituals
- Knowing that fantasies of a missing person are common
- Watching out for no-talk rules
- Paying attention to developmental states that exacerbate anxiety
- Including children and adolescents in therapy when parents or siblings disappear
- Using multiple-family and couple groups to build new connections
- Encouraging the use of the arts

Developing Hope

For Pandora . . . was possessed of a lively curiosity. She had to to know what was in the box. One day as she lifted the lid – and out flew plagues innumerable, sorrow and mischief for mankind. In terror Pandora clapped the lid down, but too late. One good thing, however, was there – Hope.

(Hamilton, 1940)

Boss (2006) states “*hope must be discovered despite imperfect endings and unclear terminations.*”(p. 195). Thus one of the goals of any therapeutic intervention with these families must address the complex interplay of meaning and hope in ambiguous loss.

At some point the hope to be reunited with a missing person may become unrealistic. Strong evidence suggesting the individual is no longer alive may be the time when hope needs to be revised. This lost hope can then be converted to a more accurate appraisal of the situation rather

than lead to depression and possibly feelings of anger and revenge.

“Hope must be discovered despite imperfect endings and unclear terminations” - Boss

Boss goes on to say “*active coping*” is the key to helping clients at this critical point, and endorses support groups to help with this, as they can lead to “*various sources of*

hope and varied healing stories from diverse cultures and religions” (p. 187). Her guidelines for intervention around hope include:

- Finding spirituality
- Imagining options
- Laughing at absurdity
- Developing more patience
- Redefining justice
- Finding forgiveness
- Creating rituals for ambiguous loss
- Rethinking termination
- Revising the psychological family

As hope cannot exist without finding meaning around the loss, they are inexorably linked, and all the previous themes - finding meaning, tempering mastery, reconstructing identity, normalizing ambivalence, and revising attachment – lead back to the overall goal of fostering a climate where hope can grow around uncertainty. Helping families of the missing become less rigid in their thinking, seeing more gray and less black and white, fosters the ability to live comfortably with an ambiguous loss.

Professionals and Ambiguity

The trauma of ambiguous loss inherently challenges our ways of working. We may see people's failure to reach closure as our own failure. We may see the failure to ease suffering as our own incompetence. We are, after all, trained to make pain go away. But the goal with ambiguous loss is to help people live and live well with the suffering – perhaps for the rest of their lives (Boss, 2006, p. 198).

It is imperative that counsellors understand their own experiences with ambiguity, whether through physical losses, psychological losses or a combination of the two. The struggle inherent in some counselling situations is beautifully captured by Rich Horowitz. Although not specific to working with families of the missing, his words strike a chord that sings to the challenges inherent in supporting people whose lives have changed forever:

Never far from the surface, never removed from the real context of treatment are my own struggles with loss, my own vulnerable moments. No clinician can be unaffected by the ceaseless waves of sadness, the unrelieved gloom. Yet what I feel is but a shadowy representation of the sorrow that envelops Steven. Still, my own discomfort and uneasiness offer a mirror into his world, a refracted view of a world that I try somehow to know more intimately. In the midst of what is best described as a killing sadness, I must stand vigil against my own impulses to turn away from the abiding anguish. Recapturing the pain and despair of my own ordeals of loss makes of the therapeutic encounter a rich and privileged moment where I can draw from the core of my own self and honor the impassioned struggles of another for meaning and purpose in a world where both appear lost (2002, p. 18).

Boss stresses the importance of preparing counsellors for their role in working with families of the missing, and cautions: *“We must know ourselves and our ambiguous losses if we are to work without adding more ambiguity to the therapeutic process. We must recognize our own issues so that we can stay fully present and empathic when clients tell their stories of unresolved loss. . . .”* (2006, p. 203).

Skills for working with people who have someone they love disappear (a physical loss) are not unlike skills needed for working with families facing psychological loss. As more of the population is living longer, dementia, especially Alzheimer's disease, is more prevalent in our society. Preparation for work with ambiguous loss, whether of a physical or psychological nature, will become even more critical in the future. Thus training can be multifaceted and

address both types of ambiguous loss, as it would not be uncommon to have a family struggling with a missing loved one at the same time as they're trying to cope with a brain injured teenager and/or a parent with dementia. This would encourage collaboration with other helpers, such as social workers in the medical field and nurses in long term care facilities, to broaden the scope of the training.

Counselling Services for Families of the Missing

While the reasons individuals 'go missing' are almost as many as the number who go missing, there are common themes in the anxiety, anguish and despair felt by those who seek their return. Almost invariably it is the suddenness and inexplicability of the disappearance that is the source of anxiety and it is these who may well seek counselling and support.

("It's the Hope that Hurts", p. 8)

Helping people better cope with the vicissitudes of day to day living is the foundation of all counselling. Life is replete with losses, from missing wallets all the way to deadly car crashes where only one family member survives. How resilient we are in adapting to these stresses is dependent on a multitude of factors including our inherent personality, the perceived seriousness of the loss, our cognitive understanding of what has happened, our previous experiences with loss, and our personal support, value and belief systems.

Loss is never more difficult to handle than when it is ambiguous; when we aren't sure if something is *really* lost, but we know we don't have it and we miss it terribly. Such a loss is always complicated and complex and defies resolution unless the lost is found. As said earlier, ambiguous loss is not a problem to be solved or a pathology to be corrected. It is a life event thrust upon a family, usually through no direct fault of their own, that creates stress that does not abate over time as one gets used to the loved one having vanished.

There is some recognition that it is important to help families with all the red tape surrounding a disappearance – law enforcement protocols, media requests, search procedures. The same recognition of the importance of counselling is needed; not to have families learn to accept the disappearance, but to find ways to live a robust life without being immobilized.

Having examined the concept of ambiguous loss and looked at various counselling approaches, it's time to distill this information and develop an outline of how services to families of the missing might proceed. Some of the initial questions that arise are:

- To what theory or theories would the counselling be anchored?

- What would the structure of the service look like? Would it be offered to individuals, families, or in a support group format?
- Who would offer the services and where would they be held?
- How will people be made aware of this service?
- How would cultural considerations be woven into the fabric of the counselling structure?
- Would specially trained counselors be needed? If so, what training would be required and who would do it?
- What partnerships need to be honed for this to happen, and how can a smooth continuum of services be assured?
- What additional resources would be needed to get the service off the ground?
- What sort of evaluation structure needs to be in place?

To what theory or theories would the counselling be anchored?

To develop a therapeutic counselling service for families of missing persons the most basic tenet of best practice, active listening, is the cornerstone upon which other modalities can be built. Through narrative therapy, those left behind can tell their story as often as they need to and feel they are being heard. Not just the details of what they may know about the actual disappearance, but how they have absorbed the news, and what meaning the disappearance has for each family member will form the beginning of this narrative.

Normalizing their feelings and explaining what ambiguous loss is offers comfort as families learn there is a name for what they're experiencing and their reactions are accepted without judgment. Boss provides much insight into using story-telling therapy with families and her detailed work will help in planning specific activities that can be used with this clientele.

The Dulwich Centre in Adelaide, Australia is recognized for their excellence in narrative therapy work. Their website states: *“Narrative therapy defends people’s rights to name their own experiences, to define their own problems, and to honour how their skills, abilities, relationships, history and culture can contribute to reclaiming their lives from the effects of trauma”*.²¹

It is worth considering their Charter of Storytelling Rights written by David Denborough on behalf of the Dulwich Centre Foundation. These rights dovetail with the work of Pauline Boss in her affirmation of storytelling as the foundation of therapy with families of missing people.

Article 1 Everyone has the right to define their experiences and problems in their own words and terms.

Article 2 Everyone has the right to invite others who are important to them to be involved in the process of reclaiming their life from the effects of trauma.

Article 4 Everyone has the right to be free from having problems caused by trauma and injustice located inside them, internally, as if there is some deficit in them. The person is not the problem, the problem is the problem.

Article 5 Everyone has the right for their responses to trauma to be acknowledged. No one is a passive recipient of trauma. People always respond. People always protest injustice.

Article 6 Everyone has the right to have their skills and knowledge of survival respected, honoured and acknowledged.

Article 7 Everyone has the right to know and experience that what they have learnt through hardship can make a contribution to others in similar situations.

Moored on the above Charter, narrative therapy is once again shown to be well suited to the population we hope to serve. Other helping interventions, some of which have been brought forward in this paper, can be used as the counsellor deems appropriate.

²¹See Dulwich Centre www.dulwichcentrel.com.au

What would the structure of the service look like? Would it be offered to individuals, families, or in a support group format?

Boss is emphatic that ambiguous loss of any kind is not an individual disorder and therefore group work is preferred. She supports working with whole families, ensuring *family* is the psychological family as defined by the client, and that additional people may join this circle as needed. For example, if issues around loss of faith come up, the family might wish to have their spiritual guide (Rabbi, Minister, Priest, Elder or whomever) join them for a session. She does caution that individual issues, such as severe anxiety or depression, may reveal themselves over the course of the counselling and may require individual sessions or referrals elsewhere. It is also wise to be cognizant of how the needs of families change over time.²²

Support groups with others experiencing a similar loss are also endorsed by Boss. This might be offered after the individual family counselling, along with it, or whenever it seems appropriate. Dr. Geoff Glassock, a Psychologist and Anglican Minister who is involved in the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU) in Australia, has studied what he refers to as “*the grief of missingness*” and also believes in the value of having families connected to one another (Morrell, p.10).

It might be difficult for families to find others in a comparable situation without help, and distance may make face to face meetings difficult to structure; however, the use of social media might allow for contact via Skyping or through organizing Online Family Forums as suggested by Morrell (p. 29). Liz Davies, Coordinator at the FFMPU, stresses the importance of making sure families understand the purpose of the group gathering. She also said staff decided to call their get-togethers ‘information sessions’ as they felt support groups was “*too confrontational for some families*”(p. 16).

Educational evenings for families are another approach worth consideration. Such groups could include presentations on subjects of particular interest to families of the missing, such as how to talk with children about what is happening. Dr. Julie Clark, a social work lecturer at Griffith

²² Phone conversation March 7, 2013 with Helen Alves, Family Support Manager at Missing People in London, England.

University in Queensland, Australia, believes there's benefit in group psychoeducational sessions where families meet and "*identify shared issues and . . . challenge some of the 'life limiting decisions' they might have made*" (Morrell, p. 16).

Clark has also conducted some interesting research on the impact a missing sibling can have on other children in the family, and believes such youngsters are *disenfranchised grievers*, a term coined by Dona (2006) to mean grief that is not acknowledged or validated by others. Inclusion in a support group might help alleviate this feeling of isolation for the child.²³

As Greystone Bereavement Centre already offers support groups for children and adolescents related to a loss through death, it might be reasonable to include children who are saddened by the disappearance of someone special in their lives. This would, of course, be limited to those who live in, or are able to travel to, Regina. The option of allowing these youngsters to be part of the annual camp and/or retreat may be worthy of consideration too. Although this would require extra training on 'missing issues' for anyone leading the groups, it would provide much-needed support at an age-appropriate level for younger people who are dealing with a less common, though just as traumatic, loss.

Who would offer the services and where would they be held?

When someone goes missing all the energy of the family is targeted towards finding that person. Engaging with investigation officers and the media and following up with others to ensure no stone has been left unturned consumes the family's days. Little thought is given to anything that doesn't relate to locating their loved one.

Through this initial crisis time, Victim Services are well suited to support the family and help with the countless duties that need to be attended to when a missing person is reported to the authorities. As time goes by and the frenzy settles, yet the person is still absent, families can feel

²³ Clark, Warburton, & Tilse (2009). Missing siblings: seeking more adequate social responses. *Journal of Child and Family Social Work*, Blackwell and Clark, J. M. (2011). *You are going to drop the ball on this search*: Griffith University, Brisbane. *Using siblings stories to inform better inter-professional practice when someone goes missing*. These two articles are cited in the Reference section of Morrell, 2011, p. 31.

isolated and stress begins to take its toll. Cracks may start to show as families who have pulled together begin to fall apart. Each person is processing the loss in a different way and at a different speed. Tempers are frayed as hope is flattened and togetherness is tested. It is at this time that counselling is most likely to be required.

Manny Kassiotis, a counsellor with the Australian FFMPU, stresses the importance of moving at the “*family’s pace*”, which may mean an “*intense phase*” where counselling is on a regular basis and ongoing basis, or might involve times of “*engagement and disengagement*” depending on what else is happening in the life of the family at the time (*Morrell, p. 8*).

As grief is all about loss in its many forms, the Greystone Bereavement Centre would seem the logical choice to initiate an ambiguous loss component to the services they already provide. Flexibility is important in determining the location for service delivery. Counselling and support groups could be based out of Greystone Bereavement Centre as long as that met the client’s needs. Viewed as an agency to seek out for support when a loved one has died, Greystone Bereavement Centre may not appeal to those adamantly opposed to any thoughts their missing person is not coming back. Options then include meeting in a more neutral location, such as a library or other public building, or even a home environment where feasible. Brainstorming with clients around locale may result in other creative choices.

Training for work in the area of ambiguous loss would also require a cultural component, especially to work with Aboriginal populations. Location would be an issue here as well, and advice from both urban and reserve-based clients needs to be taken into account, as the best program in the world is of little use if the target population is unable or unwilling to gather where the service is provided. Local Friendship Centres might be one option, as well as making attempts to visit reserves whenever possible.

Developing on-line and telephone counselling services is definitely worth considering. This could perhaps be combined with face-to-face contact at regular intervals, either with trained counsellors or, as is done in the UK, through having regularly scheduled event days when families can come together. Geographical barriers certainly need to be carefully considered in a

province such as ours, and ideas that don't always require in-person attendance are therefore attractive.

How will people be made aware of this service?

Services would be advertised by Greystone Bereavement Centre on their web site, in their newsletter, and via email. This new endeavour could be presented to regional health authorities and other stakeholders through individual visits by Greystone Bereavement staff, through webcam presentations, and other media methods. Police departments in all parts of Saskatchewan as well as the RCMP, need to be informed of counselling options available to families of missing persons with whom they come into contact. Possibly these policing institutions and/or Victim Services could provide cards to families explaining the counselling available, and how to access this service. Looking abroad, Missing Persons in the UK receive 70% of their referrals from local police and 30% are self-referred, having heard of the service through any number of avenues.

How would cultural considerations be woven into the counselling structure?

Based on the afternoon spent with Elder Tony Cote and Elmer Escappe, it is vital that Aboriginal initiatives are slow, respectful, and created in collaboration with the Aboriginal community. The first step would be to consult with the different Band councils on a one-to-one basis, as Tony and Elmer stressed that one size does not fit all, and each tribe will need to have input as we move forward.

Using one-on-one peer support might be advantageous at times, and this would require a good working rapport with the Aboriginal community in order to have such support available when needed. Agencies and organizations that serve this population would also be consulted for their thoughts on how best to draw in these people who may have a deeply rooted distrust of programs and services offered to help them. Keeping abreast of the Vacated project will be paramount, as well as any further developments that occur related to missing persons in general.

Counselling other ethnic groups would require studying the beliefs, values, and cultural traditions of the family with whom they are working. Amendments to the usual counselling approaches may need to be made, and it will be important to start where the client wishes regardless of the counsellor's thoughts on where the greatest need may be. Community agencies and programs that work with immigrants would be good resources for knowledge and help with any language barriers, as well as providing insights garnered from years of working with people of varying cultures and religions.

Would specially trained counsellors be needed? If so, what training would be required and who would do it?

Although the numbers of individuals who will seek out counselling to help them cope with a missing person is unknown, *“the complexity of this group’s dilemma, the absence of research and the lack of fit with many of the common theoretical modes touching on loss, demand that those offering counselling . . . be highly experienced and aware of the many complex issues involved”* (*“It’s the Hope that Hurts”*, p. 9).

As Boss (2006) considers ambiguous loss the most stressful kind of loss, experienced counsellors with a background in grief work, trauma, stress management, family therapy and/or psychological loss would be ideal. Additional training for these professionals would be required, but their backgrounds would be useful springboards. Counsellors in fields such as mental health and palliative care may also be appropriate candidates for additional training.

FFMPU counsellor Manny Kassiotis believes generalist practitioners *“could be exposed to the issue of missing and afterwards add this specialized area to their repertoire of services provided”* (Morrell, p.8). At this time, however, Australia does not have the training in place to offer this exposure.

Professionals working with families of the missing believe counsellors need to be prepared to be engaged with their clients for a lengthy period of time, as:

The unique nature of their [families of the missing] needs necessitates that support services remain in place indefinitely. There may be no natural conclusion. The assumption that people over time will come to terms with the situation is unfounded in terms of ambiguous loss. The reality seems to be for many families, feelings don't get any easier, and in fact the ambiguity of the situation means that time-scales are irrelevant (Morrell, p. 28).

The actual content of the training would involve learning about ambiguous loss, both within their own lives and beyond, and would form the nucleus of the education. In addition, a thorough understanding of the 'missingness issue', other stakeholders involvement, and searching protocols, needs to be part of the training. Another important adjunct would be seeking client input. Individuals prepared to share their stories and talk about what they see is needed to help others through the darkness they're facing would be of immense help in setting up a counselling program. University Social Work and Educational Psychology programs might also prove helpful through incorporating ambiguous loss into their curriculum structure.

Volunteers play an integral role in all of the grief and trauma counselling offered throughout Saskatchewan. There is every reason to hope that their valuable skills can augment those of the professionals, particularly for helping with support groups. Given the stressful and relatively uncharted area of service to families of the missing, it would be prudent to start with seasoned volunteers who wish to move into this demanding sphere and are prepared to accept further training.

The program will require a coordinator, who will receive initial training and then likely serve as the only counsellor until the service is well established. The question regarding how the coordinator will obtain training is trickier, as finding professionals to tap into without going outside Canada may be impossible. In the Strategic Business Plan drawn up following the 2012 Western Regional Forum, there is mention of the possibility that specific training for counsellors through the Canadian Centre for Child Protection might be on the horizon (p. 4). Attempts to find out more information about this venture were unsuccessful to date, but it bears further investigation in the future.

Possibly Skyping with someone such as Pauline Boss could be part of a teaching strategy. Other prominent therapists who could help shed further light on counselling with missing persons' families include Therese Rando and Kenneth Doka. The Dulwich Centre and other narrative therapy centres can be contacted if further help is needed with training in this modality. Trauma and cognitive approaches, along with the work done by Alan Wolfelt can all help to inform the eclectic approach needed for working in this unfamiliar counselling situation.

Attempting to secure professionals from Australia or the UK who are actively working in this field, while challenging to arrange, would be extremely beneficial. In addition, attending conferences is always a good way to enhance knowledge and link with like-minded professionals. Once a few people have had a chance to learn and develop some confidence in their ability to counsel these families, a train-the-trainer method could perhaps be the next step.

To summarize, a counsellor will obviously require core competencies underlying best practices in counselling and adherence to his or her respective professional code of ethics. In addition, reading in the subject area and participating in workshops and other training opportunities related to serving the needs of this client group would be a minimal requirement. A tolerance for work that may span a lengthy period of time due to the "continuous grieving", "chronic relapsing trauma" and/or "episodic stress" that encompass the lived experience of this clientele is also necessary. And perhaps most important of all is the ability to simply be there for people who are wanting answers when none are to be found:

In terms of more formal counselling, the theoretical basis of the counsellor's chosen model appears less important than the ability to convey meaningful empathy. The literature, sparse as it is, coupled with the combined anecdotal experience of families and friends of missing persons, supports the contention that no individual experience is the same as another and that satisfaction levels with the support and counselling offered will finally be determined by the clients. As in most other areas of counselling, the nature of the relationship between the counsellor and the client will be the most critical element of useful counselling ("It's the Hope that Hurts", p. 33).

What partnerships need to be honed for this to happen, and how can a smooth continuum of services be assured?

The lack of models to follow and research to lean on suggests that working in collaboration with other stakeholders is of great value. The justice system provides support to missing persons' families through their policing divisions and Victim Services. It is presumed that Victim Services would be a close ally, forming initial relationships with families of the missing. In *"It's the Hope that Hurts"* the authors state: *"Experience dictates that during this [early stage] psychological first aid and practical assistance are priority activities with the traditional forms of face-to-face counselling probably inappropriate"*. They go on to endorse the role of the helper at this stage as *"that of a crisis counsellor; offering support, calm reassurance, concerned objectivity, and providing information and assistance with practical matters and decision making processes"* (p. 19).

Partnerships with Aboriginal leaders and tribal councils are of the utmost importance. Keeping updated on pertinent committees such as the Oversight Committee, an offshoot of the PPCMP, along with watching how services in Australia and the UK continue to move forward in supporting families is also warranted.

To confirm that all stakeholders involved with missing persons are aware and updated on any new developments in their mutual area of interest, it would be worthwhile to host a workshop or conference annually. This event could serve as an opportunity for further education on best practices methods, a chance to learn of innovation approaches happening in the field, and a time to solidify working relationships with colleagues one seldom sees.

What additional resources would be needed to get the service off the ground?

To begin offering counselling services to families of the missing, education is the number one requirement. Once it is determined who will provide services, training goals need to be set and necessary resources gathered. This may include books and articles related to ambiguous loss, setting up on-line learning opportunities, and determining the content of what is to be taught.

Securing teaching space and hiring someone to coordinate the education piece would also be part of the early set up. Attempts to locate families who would share experiences around their missing person should also be started early.

What sort of evaluation structure needs to be in place?

Evaluation needs to include feedback from staff members providing direct clinical services to families, partners and stakeholders and, most important of all, from the clientele. For staff and external participants, evaluation forms could be developed and regularly employed as deemed necessary. For clients, evaluations would be a standard feature of any support groups, while individual counselling might have a form that clients would complete if they were agreeable to doing so. Focus groups could also be set up around issues related to a specific aspect of the program where further input is desired.

Morrell's *Lessons from Australia* outlines recommendations for improving services in her native UK. Her thoughts regarding family support are summarized below, and might be prudent to review before making definitive curriculum plans:

- Families of the missing should be consulted at each stage to make sure developments are *“informed, useful and needed”*
- Boundaries should be established in terms of when it is appropriate to make referrals for counselling
- Services for families should be well explained and transparent
- “The extent to which services for missing people ‘hold’ and ‘define’ people in their trauma” needs to be explored”
- Support needs to be accessible to all family members
- Developing rituals that are appropriate for families of missing people deserves consideration

- Avenues that will allow families to come together for mutual support needs to be considered (*p. 29*).

Some of the above have been detailed elsewhere in this document, but are worth a second look since they have been endorsed after in-depth study by Morrell following her visitation to Australia.

Next Steps

Thousands of families and friends in Saskatchewan continue to suffer with the knowledge that someone they care about is missing, maybe alive, maybe not, and every day the worrying and wondering continues. Others' lives move on, yet many of these families are frozen in time – unable to move elsewhere to accept a promotion in case the loved one returns, hesitant to take a long-planned and much-deserved vacation; afraid even to leave the house for more than five minutes without their cell phone. These hurting individuals are the reason for this document. It's time to make sure that even if their journey is never really over, someone is there to help them as they travel.

Following are recommendations on serving the counselling needs of families of long term missing people in our province:

Establish specialized counselling services for families of long term missing (six months or more) in Saskatchewan

These families are experiencing stress beyond what most of us can imagine as their daily lives continue to revolve around the disappearance of a loved one. The journey they're on is largely unmapped, and finding someone who understands the area of ambiguous loss can be challenging. As a result, these people are left to struggle on their own or with minimal supportive help. There is a general acceptance of the need to provide specialized counsellors in such areas as substance abuse, mental health issues, bereavement, and stress management, yet those struggling with ambiguous loss continue to be underserved. Particularly in the Aboriginal community, help is desperately needed to deal with the intergenerational grief that is only now being brought to light as a result of the high numbers of missing and murdered women and girls.

A component to service delivery will be culturally based service to the Aboriginal population and will start with consulting tribal Elders

An integral part of any counselling service to families of the missing in this province requires a thorough knowledge of Aboriginal culture and issues. This element of the program needs to be developed slowly and in close collaboration with interested individuals in the Aboriginal

community. Both urban and rural Aboriginal representative should be part of any advisory committee that may be formed.

Consideration will be given to forming an advisory group of parties with an interest in missing persons' issues

The advisory group could be modelled along the lines of the present Bereavement Advisory Committee, with meetings held as needed. Every attempt will be made to include involvement from the client group to be served.

Greystone Bereavement Centre in Regina will take the lead in ensuring counselling services for families of the missing are available throughout the province.

As provincial leaders in issues related to grief and loss, the Greystone Bereavement Centre is the logical organization to take on this role. Services may, at times, be offered out of their present location, although it is anticipated most counselling will be done in many different spots throughout Saskatchewan.

Curriculum planning and training modules will be developed and will be informed by worldwide best practices models

Counselling interventions for families of the missing is a new area around which there has been a dearth of research. As a result, planning needs to be based on models showing the most promise elsewhere, which will require collaboration with colleagues in Australia, the US, and the UK, who can continue to add value to our present understanding of how to help this clientele.²⁴

²⁴ The First International Conference on Missing Persons will be held over three days in June, 2013 at Portsmouth, England with speakers from the UK, Australia, USA, and Canada.

Training of professionals and volunteers will be completed prior to any service provision

Counselling families of missing persons requires people who are able to work comfortably in a situation where there are no answers and clients are the experts. Extensive training around ambiguous loss and the roles of all the partners involved when someone has disappeared would be required, as well as completion of any pre-determined training/education.

Individual family-based counselling along with telephone and/or on-line support will be piloted. Support groups and various educational events may also be offered as determined by client need

When determining which program component will be initially trialed, decisions will be made on the basis of clients' needs and available resources.

Both rural and urban clients will be served equally while honouring all cultural and spiritual beliefs

Given the size and widely dispersed population that is Saskatchewan, this may be the most important and also the most challenging aspect of program development. Flexibility is essential in planning services for cities, towns, and rural communities; for men, women and children; and for meeting the needs of those with varying races, religions, nationalities, and circumstances surrounding the absent person.

An evaluation component will be built into all training programs and service interventions

Evaluation tools will be developed as part of the curriculum development piece. Examples from elsewhere will be used as a resource and an attempt to save time and money by not reinventing the wheel.

Once the curriculum has been developed and training completed, the counselling component needs to be trialed and then evaluated in some fashion. After studying the evaluations, curriculum adaptations can be made. As with any new venture, there will be bumps along the

road, and better to make revisions early rather than later. Moving too quickly is unwise, especially related to the Aboriginal component.

Moving Forward

This document has outlined a proposed counselling initiative to serve families of missing persons in Saskatchewan. There is a gradual consciousness-raising worldwide that having someone you love disappear without a trace is a trauma unlike any other, and counselling is non-existent.

One story told to me by a woman in Ontario was of a family she described as “destroyed” when a member went missing. The mother suicided, the father lost his job, and a sister ended up on the streets. This same Ontario woman commented on her own ordeal since her son disappeared, saying she feels a huge void in her life, and acknowledging that their family dynamics have changed forever. Even though her son has been gone over two years, she is about to organize another search. Regardless of whether or not he ever returns, this woman has chosen to journey with others and continues to try and improve services for families such as hers, adding that whether or not she ever sees her son again, this ordeal has “basically set my destiny”. Her advice to counsellors: *“You have to throw away your old ways and be able to hear and understand our stories. They’re all different”*. If we do, we will indeed be able to say we’re *Moving Forward*.

Walk On

*You walk on
Still beside me,
Eyes shadowed in dusk;
You're the
Lingering question
At each day's end.
I have to laugh
At how
Open-ended you remain –
Still with me
After all these years
Of being lost.
I carry you like
My own personal
Time Machine,
As I put on
My lipstick, smile,
And head out to
The party*

Donna Carnes

Q and A's

Is this really going to make a difference for families of the missing?

Yes, it is. The qualitative research that has been done abroad suggests families are eager for this service. Anecdotal evidence both in the UK, Australia, and the Americas shows serious maladaptive behaviour can result if we don't help families through this experience. In counselling, families will learn to pull together and develop a resiliency to help them cope with their situation in much healthier ways. Counselling will also help to spot serious difficulties, such as mental health issues, and make referrals to other professionals as needed.

When can services start?

The goal will be to begin offering counselling with individual families by January, 2014.

What about the Aboriginal Component?

The Aboriginal component will be developed in tandem with the general program. The preferred approach to service delivery for this population will require discussions with a number of Aboriginal stakeholders from different parts of the province. It is hoped that culturally appropriate services can then be offered, accurately reflecting the needs of our Aboriginal population. For this to happen, trust must be built through respectful interactions and mutual sharing of ideas. This approach may take some time, as validated by Elder Cote during his visit to the Greystone Bereavement Centre, but is an essential first step.

How much is it going to cost?

Although a cost figure has yet to be determined, a budget will be drawn up with costs that include staffing, training expenses, and expenditures associated with the counselling sessions. Extra outlay will be needed as the program grows.

What happens if we don't follow through with families?

We can expect to see the health care system further taxed and other helping agencies overburdened as they handle a number of physical and psychological issues arising within this underserved population. It is also the right thing to do as a caring community.

What staffing will be needed?

We will start with one person who will function as coordinator and counsellor, then gradually increase staff as needed.

How soon do you anticipate more staff will be needed?

Although it's difficult to know for sure, it is likely a team of 2 – 5 counsellors will be needed by the end of 2014.

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Appendix

Biography of Tony Cote

Elder, Veteran and former Chief of the Cote First Nation, Tony Cote has been an active leader in the Saskatchewan First Nations community and a role model for First Nations youth. He held many senior positions with the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations and was an advisor for Human Resource Development Canada regarding employment services.

Elder Cote played an important role in the creation of many community, education, health and family services that increased the quality of life for band members, including assisting and supporting the formation of Project Safe Haven, a safe shelter for battered women and providing input into the document entitled “Indian Control of Indian Education”. He was part of a visionary team of Chiefs that developed the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College now the First Nations University of Canada, the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre and the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies. He initiated the Yorkton Tribal Council Child and Family Services. In 1995, he was elected as the Yorkton Tribal Council Chief.

A member of the 25th Infantry Brigade, 81st Field Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery, Elder Cote joined the Canadian Forces in 1952 and served in Korea. On his release from the Army in 1958, he worked as a Supervisor/Recreation Director at residential schools in Alberta. In 1968, he returned to Saskatchewan and became the first Welfare Administrator and Recreation Director for the Cote First Nation. He was elected Chief of the Cote Nation in 1970 and served for eight years.

During this time, the band flourished with the development of the Cote Recreational Complex, recreation programs for all ages, the first all-Indian Junior B Hockey Club, a minor hockey system, a girls’ fastball team and a sport facility. In 1974, he founded the Saskatchewan First Nations Summer Games, a sporting event available to every First Nations youth in the province. The Games encouraged training, competition, and healthy life alternatives to young people and were later expanded to include winter events. The Games have provided opportunities for community development and relationship building between reserves and neighbouring communities. He was instrumental in providing additional employment for Cote Band Farm Ltd. and contributed to new housing programs, water, sewer and lagoon systems, and the expansion of the Cote Wood Industries to include a sawmill.

Elder Cote received the Tom Longboat Medal in 1974 and is a recipient of the Saskatchewan Centennial Medal.