**Safety Planning in Court**

After you have left an abusive relationship, there may be many occasions where you will have to see the abuser in court to deal with a protection order, custody, child support, divorce, or criminal proceedings.  Since you are in a courthouse surrounded by people and even court officers, you may feel like it is okay to let your guard down.  However, please remember that anytime you come into contact with the abuser, you have to take steps to protect yourself.  Here are some tips to help keep you as safe as possible.   
  
Following these suggestions (often known as a safety plan) can't guarantee your safety, but it could help make you safer.  However, it is important that you create a safety plan that is right for you.  Not all of these suggestions will work for everyone, and some could even place you in greater danger.  You have to do what you think is best to keep yourself and your children safe.

**Getting to the courthouse**

Try to get to court at a different time than you think the abuser will arrive to avoid seeing him/her on the street or on line to enter the court.  If the abuser is always late, try arriving early.  If the abuser always arrives early, try arriving closer to your hearing time or come with a friend.   Remember: make sure you arrive on time.  If you are late, the case may be called without you and dismissed.  Finding a domestic violence advocate to go with you can really help with safety.

See if your police department will take you to the courthouse.  Meet them somewhere other than the courthouse and then ask the officer to walk you inside.  Have the officer wait with you until you find the bailiff or courthouse security and let them know your situation.  Try to sit near the court officers or security guards if you can.

Bring a friend or family member with you so you won’t have to be alone at all during the day.

If your friend or family member cannot spend the day in court with you, ask that person to drive you to court.  It's best to get someone whose car the abuser doesn't know.  Ask him/her to drop you off at the courthouse entrance so you don't have to walk alone through the parking lot.

If you have to drive yourself, try to make your car unrecognizable.  If you can, borrow or rent a car that the abuser doesn't know or take a taxi or bus.

**Once you're inside the courthouse**

Stay together with whoever came with you while inside the courthouse.  Ask your friend/family member person to keep an eye on the surroundings and pay attention to safety considerations.  If you need to use the bathroom and it has a lot of stalls, ask your friend/ family member to come into the bathroom with you.  If your friend/ family member is of the opposite sex, ask him/her to wait outside the bathroom for you.

You can contact Court security (613-341-2845) to let them know your concerns, your fear, and ask them if they can provide accompaniment to and from the building and inside the building.

You can try to sit in another waiting area in the building (for example, you could use seating areas just outside the court security office or the OPP office) and talk to the court clerk to arrange to be paged when your case comes up.

You can try to sit as close to the front of the courtroom as possible and to the far side from the door, so that it would be out of the way for your abuser to walk past you and you would potentially be within earshot of the judge and lawyers.

You could use the washroom before you go to court to reduce the likelihood of having to walk past your abuser.

You could wear headphones (you will have to remove these in the court room) and bring a book so you look like you can’t hear others and have something else to look at.

Find someone who knows the courthouse well, like a domestic violence worker or someone who works at the courthouse.  Ask them about safe places you can sit that the abuser may not know about, such as an empty witness room or wherever courthouse security is located.  Ask them where all the exits are, in case you have to leave in a hurry.  Besides the main exit, there may be exits through the courtrooms, side exits, or fire exits that you could use in an emergency.

Ask the bailiff or courthouse security to keep the abuser away from you.  Let the bailiff or courthouse security know if the abuser sits near you or tries to harass you.  If you have a restraining order, remember that the order is still in effect while you are in the courthouse.   If the abuser violates the order while in the waiting room or on line to the courthouse, you can report it to a court officer or call the police.

At the end of your hearing, ask the judge or the court officer / bailiff to "detain" the abuser.  In other words, to hold him/her until you can leave.

If the judge doesn't detain the abuser, think about letting the abuser leave the courthouse first, then wait a long time before leaving and try to leave out of a different exit than the main exit.  However, even if you wait a long time, be aware that the abuser could still be out there waiting for you so be observant.

Have a police officer or sheriff walk out of the courthouse with you and walk you to your car.

Have a friend pick you up at the exit or if you had a friend/ family member come with you, make sure that s/he walks to your car with you.