

# COORDINATED COMMUNITY APPROACHES TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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## **Introduction**

Over the course of the last twenty years, communities across the country have identified domestic violence as a social problem of significant proportions and, in myriad ways, have initiated strategies to stop the violence and protect battered women and children. This social reform movement, birthed in women's centers and led by battered women and advocates, has generated profound change in public discourse, law and institutional practice. Initially, a primary emphasis of this reform effort was the development and institutionalization of community-based shelters and counseling programs for battered women and children. Thereafter, advocates expanded the work to target systemic reform. The system receiving first attention was the justice system, both civil and criminal. Efforts preliminarily sought to effect change in practice of the individual components of the justice system. Job responsibilities were modified. Policies and practice guides were developed with each component. Practitioners received training on domestic violence and on revisions in practice embodied in the new protocols. Systems to monitor or track perpetrators were established.

However, the limitations of parallel reform within discrete components soon became apparent to advocates and colleagues within the justice system. Parallel reform did not foster meaningful intervention. In fact, upgrading the response of individual components may have placed battered women in more jeopardy, encouraging them to take action in the justice system to achieve safety when systemic response was uneven or addressed to perpetrator sanctions while indifferent to victim safety. Parallel reform also appeared to exacerbate fragmentation between the components. There was often no shared vision and no mechanism for problem identification and solution development. There was no vehicle to move recalcitrant components. Neither was there communication, coordination or interface between sectors. Public accountability by justice system sectors was also lacking. No method or authority to monitor adherence to standards or practices was adopted; nor were systems implemented to evaluate the efficacy of practice or to incorporate community input. Therefore, advocates concluded that a process must be devised to create a unified vision about the goals of reform, the fundamental principles of intervention, the roles of each component, the merit of collaboration, and the necessity for public accountability. A number of models for organizing and institutionalizing coordinated justice system response were designed. (*See below, **Approaches to coordinated community response.***)

One unanticipated outcome of increased intervention by the justice system was a sharp increase in demand for individual advocacy and supportive services of domestic violence programs. Programs instituted civil and criminal advocacy components to assure that battered women are informed about participation in the justice system and able to safely and effectively participate therein. Victims may become reluctant or unable to participate in the justice system if their basic safety and survival needs are not met during the pendency of civil and criminal proceedings. Other essential supportive services include temporary housing, food, clothing, counseling, transportation, child care, safety planning, relocation resources, and employment development. Domestic violence programs are significantly underfunded in most communities, such that as many as one in five battered women are not able to access essential services.

In recent years, those engaged in reform efforts identified other essential activities for coordinated community response. It became apparent that the interventions developed were often not culturally sensitive. Issues of race, language, religion, culture, class, kinship networks, and perspectives on the efficacy of participation in legal process, all must be factored into crafting culturally sensitive practice. This work has begun. With the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, P. L. 101-336, domestic violence programs began to make structural change in offices and shelters to accommodate victims with physical disabilities, to develop communications systems for advocacy with deaf or hard of hearing impaired battered women, and to create effective programs for battered women with mental disabilities. Advocates are working with colleagues in the justice system to identify the ways that the justice system can eliminate barriers to victims with disabilities. Systemic reform has just begun. In many regions of this country rural battered women confront critical barriers to safety and justice; transportation, communication and housing. Collaborative efforts continue to craft solutions to these impediments.

Few justice system personnel have been willing to grapple with the fact that some battered women are charged with crimes but are, nonetheless, victims of crime requiring the protections that the civil and criminal justice systems afford. Battered women sometimes are coerced into criminal conduct by their abusers; forced to write bad checks, purchase controlled substances, engage in prostitution, convert food stamps into cash, complete fraudulent loan applications, steal to clothe their children, etc. Other battered women who have fought back to escape from a batterer or to stop his violence have been arrested and charged with assault or homicide. In a number of communities, advocacy, counseling and legal services for battered women defendants are included in the plan for coordinated community response.

Undertakings in the health care system, in educational institutions, in religious organizations, among providers of service for the homeless, in batterer education and treatment services programs, in the business sector, in civic groups, and in neighborhoods have also burgeoned over the last 10 years. Many of these endeavors involve partnering with domestic violence programs. However, reform again has been largely parallel within the disciplines or organizations; certainly it has been informed by the work of advocates and justice system professionals, but it often remains separate from the collaborative infrastructure. The problems arising from parallel reform are compounded by the amount of activity emanating from so many diverse organizations throughout the community. These particularly impose a heavy burden on underfunded, community-based domestic violence programs and state coalitions.

Even more recently, a number of practitioners have started dialogue about primary prevention; transforming community beliefs and norms about violence against women. Prevention strategies are being forged and implemented with a vision, not merely for managing the violence and protecting its victims, but one that anticipates an end to men's coercive and violent conduct toward their partners.

Achieving coordinated community response with this magnitude of activity can be daunting, but in many communities throughout the country coordination efforts are in process.

## **Approaches to Coordinated Community Response**

Approaches to coordinated community response to domestic violence are multiple. Often several may be employed at one time in a local community or within a state. The following are examples of the most commonly utilized strategies:

- **Community Partnering.** In many communities, the domestic violence program has elected to use the community partnering approach to build coordinated community response. In this model, the domestic violence program identifies a strategic plan for community action. Tasks are prioritized. The program partners with individuals and organizations in the community to work on the various initiatives in the plan. Work groups are established that are task specific and draw upon the expertise of members in the community. Work plans are developed and implemented. From planning through execution, the work is collaborative with selected actors in the community. The domestic violence program orchestrates and oversees the work undertaken.

As contrasted with other approaches, this one is decentralized by design. It readily works in many areas of the community contemporaneously. It is an approach that is accessible to professionals and other community actors who are interested in work but who are not necessarily the power brokers in the community. It also enables the diverse leadership within the domestic violence program to be fully employed rather than limiting participation to executive staff. Those engaged are likely to volunteer rather than being drafted. Thereby, team building among the work groups is facilitated. As the work groups are not public forums, problem-solving may be enhanced; public posturing and turf issues may be minimized. Community partnering does not require a formal infrastructure, and thus may be less costly and more manageable by grassroots organizations than other approaches.

Many domestic violence coalitions, as well as local domestic violence programs, utilize this model.

- **Community Intervention.** Intervention projects are private sector programs designed to enhance justice system accountability to battered women. Their work includes orchestration and oversight of coordinated community initiatives related to domestic violence. The intervention program works with all sectors of the justice system (i.e., police, jail personnel, pre-trial services, prosecutors, judges, pre-sentence investigators, probation and parole,

corrections) and the mental health system to create an effective deterrent to domestic violence, to safeguard battered women and children and to align the community in efforts to end violence against women. Elements of the work include the development, implementation and monitoring of protocols and practice guides with each component; training of all staff in every component on domestic violence, the goals of the intervention approach and the changes in job responsibilities and methods entailed in the reform; outreach to batterers in the civil and criminal justice systems, as well as education or treatment groups based in the Duluth curriculum or others; training and monitoring of the educators or therapists working with perpetrators; tracking of batterers and automation of data retrieval on batterer status in both civil and criminal justice systems; outreach, information and referral to battered women to enhance safety and autonomy; and community education and media initiatives to transform public understanding and response to domestic violence.

Like the community partnering model undertaken by domestic violence programs, the intervention approach establishes the hub of coordinating activity in a grassroots organization. The intervention staff are charged with primary responsibility for interface between the components. They negotiate changes that are essential, as identified through feedback from the several components or their own monitoring efforts. They convene meetings of the whole as necessary. They undertake independent evaluation of systemic function and coordination and seek modifications. In many ways they serve as cheerleader to the system. The overarching principle of their work is accountability to battered women.

Intervention programs differ from partnering initiatives in that they provide direct services to batterers from entry through exit from the justice system. The foci of intervention work are cessation, surveillance and batterer education. Direct services and advocacy for battered women are sometimes provided by domestic violence programs, rather than the intervention program.

- **Task Forces or Coordinating Councils.** Task forces seek to coordinate all the components of the criminal justice system to improve justice system practice and to better communicate and collaborate in work to end violence against women.

The initial work of a task force almost invariably is an assessment of the state of criminal justice (and/or human services) practice and resources in the community, followed by a report on effective practice and systemic deficits, along with a description of recommended remedies and potential resources therefor. A task force may then develop a work plan for incremental change and elevated coordination. The promulgation of compatible and definitive protocols or guidelines for practice in each component of the justice system is often the first step in a work plan. While each agency retains the exclusive authority to develop the protocol for that component, sharing of work product with a request for feedback from the other components, particularly in terms of interface of the various components, is routinely invited. Other collaboration in training and problem-solving follows. Evaluation may be undertaken and systemic reform considered in light of the results thereof. Informal systems of communication, conflict resolution and coordination among task force participants are an important outgrowth of the formal work of the task force.

- **Training and technical assistance projects.** Training and technical assistance projects are targeted at informed, improved justice and human service system practice have produced a plethora of training curricula and an almost equivalent amount of audiovisual materials. Legal advocacy training is offered in a number of states; some certify advocates and require continuing education to maintain certification. Police training manuals, court clerk handbooks, prosecution guides, bench books, pre-trial services seminars, probation workshops, correctional curricula on victims of domestic violence, electronic monitoring pamphlets, safety planning and survival skills workshops, guides to maximizing compensation and restitution, court audit tools, and innumerable other educational materials have been crafted and implemented. Training curricula for clergy, educators, health care providers, child protective service workers, public housing staff, private security firms, employers, civic groups, etc. have been developed. Media campaigns have been initiated. Clearinghouses have been established. Technical assistance projects to aid policy-makers and practitioners in the design of effective justice and human services systems have been instituted.
- **Community organizing.** Community organizing initiatives are those which invite members of the general public to actively engage in work to end violence against women. Domestic violence programs and community activists have utilized organizing strategies with the goals of enhancing safety and achieving social justice for battered women and children; objectives of community organizing are expansion of the constituency of active participants in the work, articulation of a clear, universal message that each citizen can take responsibility to end this violence, and transformation of the public discourse and consciousness about the causes of violence against women and the power of the community to end it.

Many community organizing efforts originated in domestic violence programs. Sometimes organizing addresses a discrete problem and at others it attempts to transform the consciousness and practice of the entire community. However, once organized the community team often develops a mission and tasks of its own; at which time the organizing effort is passed on to the community. Among all the coordinated community approaches, organizing projects have, perhaps, best engaged communities of color and other marginalized constituencies in full partnership in the visioning and implementation of work to end violence against women and children.

### **Overview of the evaluation literature on coordinated community response.**

The evaluation literature on coordinated community approaches is largely exploratory and preliminary. It lends support to the premise that multiple and coordinated approaches to ending domestic violence are warranted.

Data on the question of when battered women will seek outside intervention suggest that the more resources and apparent options a woman has for ending the violence, the more likely she is to act to seek intervention, to achieve protection or to leave the abuser. Thus, where a community offers multiple, viable options, it appears that the safety requirements of battered women will be better met than when a singular intervention is employed. If one defines coordinated community

response in terms of comprehensive, or at least multiple, options in the justice and human services systems, this appears to advance the goal of social justice for battered women.

It is critical to note, however, that there has been relatively little research on outcomes of individual justice system or human service system endeavors. The singular intervention of arrest has been investigated. A smaller amount of inquiry has been directed at prosecution, lawyers or the courts. A comparative treasure trove of research on batterer intervention services is now available, the results of which offer some direction for policy formulation. There is a dearth of evaluation study on advocacy and domestic violence program services and the needs of battered women seeking shelter. There is an emerging body of research on the efficacy of civil protection orders and court processes. However, it is clear that the evaluation of discrete intervention strategies has barely begun. Significant additional investigation on intervention initiatives in the justice system and community is essential, and it will inform research on coordinated community response.

### **Measuring success.**

The issues of how and what to measure in evaluating the efficacy of coordinated community approaches pose interesting questions.

- **How to effectively measure coordinated community response.** While quantitative empiricists may shudder at descriptive assessment pieces, in the field of domestic violence these practitioner inquiries have been instrumental in building theory and shaping the design of empirical work. An early, notable piece is the investigation of Finn & Colsen. The work relied on expert practitioner informants to render a broad brush picture of protection order practice. This reasoned appraisal of the intent of protection order law and the practice thereunder set the stage for significant research and policy development.

The Merryman inquiry on court, advocate and attorney practice in dedicated protection order courts may similarly inform future investigation on the design of dedicated domestic violence courts and the comparative worth of specialized, as contrasted with unified and traditional court structure and practice. There are many questions on justice system interventions in domestic violence that would also benefit from the informed reflections of expert practitioners and battered women; questions, both qualitative and quantitative, for inquiry will be clarified and expanded by this deliberative process.

Beyond this, analysis of aggregate justice system data and other data sets that may be rich, but untapped, sources of information would greatly enhance the knowledge base on domestic violence and interventions to end it. All methods of statistical data collection, federal and state, should capture gender and relationship. Technology within the justice and advocacy system must be upgraded with dispatch.

Empirical investigation is also essential. It will be enhanced both by informed reflection by practitioners and by improved statistical aggregation. Research should be retrospective, developmental and experimental. Practitioners caution that the imposition of experimental design on communities should be undertaken most judiciously. The design should foster

coordinated community response rather than erect significant barriers between components and constituencies. Furthermore, since experimental design may have significant impact on the communities in which it is undertaken, examination of the environmental context of the experimental intervention both before and after its imposition should be employed.

- **What to measure in evaluating coordinated community response.** First and foremost, every investigation should evaluate the impact of an intervention on battered women. The impact should be measured in terms of the safety, autonomy and quality of life of battered women.

Secondarily, in measuring the impact of coordinated community response on batterers, issues of recidivism should be addressed. Research should also evaluate whether a batterer has made financial restoration to the battered woman for the losses occasioned by his violence, whether he acts as a parent in ways that eschew violence and are respectful of the battered mother, whether there has been a change in perpetrator belief systems about domestic violence, and whether the abuser acts to end violence against women in his social and work life.

Issues of race, class and culture must be carefully incorporated in research on coordinated community approaches to ending domestic violence. Reporting of the results should be crafted in such a manner that informs social change rather than reinforcing cultural and institutional bias.

Evaluation of individual components of coordinated community response to domestic violence should be undertaken, as well as investigation of the effectiveness of the entire community approach. Issues of systemic readiness for the interventions proposed, change in practice and procedures, fit between the changes adopted by various components, interface or communication between the systems and with the community, availability of advocacy and support services, leadership of advocates and battered women in the design and implementation, change in public discourse, and impact on battered women, batterers and the community should be examined. Essential components of a coordinated community response in various communities, e.g. metropolitan, urban, suburban, rural and tribal communities, as well as in specific communities of color and diverse culture, class and religion, should be identified. Comparative efficacy of the various approaches might also be evaluated.

A number of additional questions should be answered. It is critical that careful study be undertaken on whether "separation assault" occurs, how it is different from domestic violence before separation and after the batterer relinquishes perceived ownership of the battered woman, the dangers it poses and the specialized interventions that may be critical to avert severe or lethal violence during the time that the battered woman is separating from the batterer.

Investigation of risk-markers for severe or lethal assault by batterers is essential. Research on the effectiveness of specialized interventions by the justice system once life-imperiling risk-markers appear should be undertaken.

Practitioners throughout justice and human services agencies have begun to engage in "safety planning" with battered women to assist them in strategically assessing danger and identifying action steps possible to avoid life-imperiling assault. Studies on the utility of "safety planning" should be initiated.

**Building collaborative investigative processes.** Over the course of the last 10 years significant dialogue has been forged between practitioners and researchers about interventions to end domestic violence, research questions and both short and long-term research agendas, methods of investigation, measurement issues, ethics of research and intervention, analyzing data, developing reports on the research, crafting practice modifications in light of the results, dissemination and community education strategies, and building bridges between practitioners and academe. In many of these discussions the principle of evaluating our work in light of its impact, beneficial or adverse, on safety, autonomy and social justice for battered women has been articulated. Through this process of collaborative research many of the questions raised by advocates, practitioners and policy-makers are now being answered.

Collaborative initiatives within the justice and human services systems and between practitioners and researchers will well serve the critical social imperative to end violence against women. As we seek to institutionalize coordinated community approaches to end domestic violence, we should also endeavor to institutionalize collaboration between the practice and research communities.

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**People offering input and assistance, whose views may differ from the writer and whose assistance does not imply endorsement:**

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