

CENTER FOR FAMILY POLICY AND PRACTICE



SAFETY AND SERVICES

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speak about
their communities*

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~ OCTOBER 2011 ~

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SAFETY AND SERVICES

Women of color speak about their communities

JACQUELYN BOGGESS AND JILL GROBLEWSKI

Introduction

Founded in 1995 as the policy arm of the Ford Foundation’s *Strengthening Fragile Families Initiative*, the Center for Family Policy and Practice (CFFPP or the Center) focuses on the impact of national and state welfare, fatherhood, and child support policy on low-income parents and their children. Because of limited advocacy and policy analysis from the perspective of very low-income and unemployed men of color, our work focuses on their perspective with regard to these issues.

While the Center’s work concentrates on the unique barriers affecting no- and low-income fathers, throughout our history, CFFPP has also reached out to and worked with women’s organizations and domestic violence advocates. The intent of this deliberate outreach has been to openly discuss the potential impact of fathers’ involvement¹ on women and children in general, and on victims and survivors of domestic violence in particular. The Center entered this discussion, not with the intention of furthering the “fathers’ rights” agenda or encouraging marriage or family formation, but to provide education and information about the need for comprehensive social services—for men and women—that address the complex issues low-income families face. Over the years, CFFPP has facilitated a number of dialogues and served as a bridge between women’s advocates (primarily at domestic violence programs) and practitioners at community-based fatherhood programs that provide educational, employment, legal, and peer support services to low-income men of color.

In 2005, CFFPP received funding from the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) within the U.S. Department of Justice to work in collaboration with other national organizations on a technical assistance project. This project involved a series of national cross-training discussions and seminars among leaders, practitioners, and advocates in the fatherhood and domestic violence

fields. The discussions focused on the situations of low-income families and communities and provided information 1) on fatherhood issues (i.e. issues affecting low-income men of color) to domestic violence programs and 2) on domestic violence and its impact to traditional employment-based fatherhood programs. As a result of this process, CFFPP created the *Collaboration and Partnership Guidebook: Fatherhood Practitioners and Advocates Against Domestic Violence Working Together to Serve Women, Men, and Families*. The intent of the *Guidebook* is to help fatherhood and domestic violence programs consider how they might address the issues of poverty, violence, and discrimination in the communities they serve and to account for these issues in the context of providing services to their clients. Collaboration between fatherhood and domestic violence practitioners is not necessarily about being directly involved in the work of another organization, but rather entails becoming informed about the other's expertise and gaining a shared understanding of how both fields address the needs of low-income communities.

The process of developing the *Guidebook* included a series of discussions among recognized leaders and innovators in the seemingly unrelated fields of fatherhood and domestic violence. As these two groups do their respective work of providing social services for low-income men and intervention and safety planning for victims of domestic violence, there is little apparent practical common ground. Moreover, one of the challenges to successful outcomes in these discussions is the critical view that each group tends to have of the other. Some battered women's advocates' perception of fatherhood programming and services can be negatively associated with so-called "fathers' rights" activists or government-sponsored marriage programs. While on the other hand, some fatherhood practitioners are concerned that battered women's advocates think all men are violent, or more specifically, that all poor men of color are violent.

Although each of these fields has developed an expertise that comes from years of providing community services and advocacy, advocates and practitioners may not understand the fundamental perspective of each other's work. In particular, advocates against domestic violence ground their work in an understanding and analysis of gender oppression and violence, while community fatherhood programs are rooted in an understanding and analysis of racial discrimination and poverty. It is worth noting that most of the well-established and respected fatherhood practitioners at the national level are African American and Latino men, whereas national leadership in domestic

violence primarily consists of women. As a result, discussion between these groups can unintentionally lead to a polarized conversation about specific oppressions and the relative impact of gender and race and urgency of need in low-income communities of color, pitting the broader needs of communities of color against the more specific needs of women and survivors. Our experience in this area has led us to the stark conclusion that the very structure of that debate can exclude African American women and other women of color, who frequently have a different perspective on the intersection of race and gender oppression. Therefore, the Center wanted to intentionally ensure that the voices of women of color occupy distinguished and distinctive space within the growing conversation about “domestic violence and fatherhood.”

The project that is the subject of this report intended to help fill that gap and expand the conversation by inviting African American women, in particular, to express their views on services for victims and survivors of domestic violence. This project focused on developing and improving the delivery of culturally competent domestic violence services in underserved low-income communities of color, particularly African American communities. To that end, we spoke with and listened to African American survivors and advocates regarding the particular needs of survivors in low-income communities. With this project, we have worked to ensure that the voices and perspectives of women of color are included in this national and local conversation, and it has been an important addition to our previous work.

To this end, CFFPP held a series of listening sessions in four states (Minnesota, Missouri, Texas, and Wisconsin) to explore and document domestic violence service priorities as identified by: 1) women of color who are victims/survivors of domestic violence,² 2) advocates of color, and 3) a broad range of community service providers. Each group was asked a similar series of questions about the kinds of services that are available to low-income women of color, barriers that get in the way of women utilizing services, unmet and outstanding needs, the kinds of services that are available for men in the community, and perspectives on providing collaborative, community-based services in low-income communities of color (see Appendix A).

Several important points should be highlighted here. First, it is our understanding that many low-income women of color who have experienced domestic violence identify a need for services that extend beyond the scope of traditional programs. Of course, traditional domestic violence services (such

as shelters, crisis hotlines, support groups, etc.) are vital and urgent, and those services will continue to fill a critical need for victims and survivors. At the same time, survivors in low-income communities and communities of color are expressing a need that surpasses direct intervention responses to violence and immediate security. Women express an urgent need for economic security, personal and cultural understanding, and family and community stability,³ and they suggest that this necessitates services, resources, and support for the fathers and men in their communities. Therefore, this project aims to contribute to the discussion regarding services for victims and survivors of domestic violence by exploring a range of issues that communities of color identify as important, including the issue of men in low-income families and communities.

Second, the listening session discussions about “men” centered on men in the community in a broad, general sense. The aim was to discuss the kinds of services that exist for all low-income men, not specifically for men who have used violence or been victims themselves. Women were asked whether services exist in their communities for men who need economic and other supports; whether the women themselves identify a need for such services; and whether they believe social services for men would affect women’s safety or the work of advocates against domestic violence by either complementing or impeding anti-violence efforts. As discussed further below, the overwhelming response was that some men (specifically, low-income African American men) are in dire need of social services and that such services are largely unavailable (see p. 14). The women who participated in these listening sessions also said that they would like to see services for everyone in low-income communities. There was no suggestion—from survivors or advocates—that support services for men in low-income communities could or should be provided by advocates against domestic violence or their agencies. They did, however, suggest that advocates (and coalitions, service providers, and policymakers) should understand that providing services for men need not preclude or get in the way of providing services for women who have experienced abuse, or vice versa. In fact, most of the women in our listening sessions expressed that, in general, they believe social services for men would support individual, family, and community safety and could potentially—in and of themselves—reduce the incidence of domestic violence.

An underlying premise of this report is that differences in race, culture, class, and gender frame people’s experiences and delineate their options. Our

goal is to appreciate the context and attend to the impact of race and class in the lives of low-income women of color as we work to develop and improve domestic violence services in traditionally underserved communities.

The following sections of this paper:

- provide more information on the listening sessions,
- explore services that are available to women and men within low-income communities of color, as well as some of the outstanding needs,
- share ideas for expanding service delivery for women who belong to low-income communities of color, and
- highlight unique service approaches that are being used.

Listening session participants

With the incredible assistance of our agency partners in each of the states, 237 people participated in 19 listening sessions over the course of 2008-2009. Sessions were held in Dallas, Madison, Milwaukee, St. Louis, and the Twin Cities. In each state, the listening sessions consisted of at least one group each of 1) African American victims/ survivors, 2) African American domestic violence advocates, and 3) community and agency service providers (of mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds). Overall, we additionally held one listening session with Latina victims/ survivors and one with Latina advocates. The advocates and service providers who participated represented a broad array of agencies (see Appendix B). This report is an attempt to capture and distill a wealth of information, knowledge, and experience that was shared regarding services for and needs among low-income communities of color.

What do survivors need?

The goal of advocacy and service provision is to respond to the needs of women who have been victims of domestic violence. Though the listening session discussions expanded into issues and areas beyond this direct response to and intervention on behalf of individual women (i.e. into the needs of their communities more broadly), we recognize that an effective response to victims' needs is the essential focus of this project and this work. In order to firmly

establish that perspective, we first talked with women about their needs and the resources available to them.

Listening session participants, most of whom were African American advocates or survivors of intimate partner violence living at or near the poverty line, had a lot to say about the availability of social services and family supports. A variety of services exist for women in the sites we visited, and participants were asked about both general social support services and also services that are specifically directed at victims of domestic violence. Services that explicitly address the needs of domestic violence victims and survivors include shelters, crisis hotlines, counseling, legal advocacy, and case management. Additionally, more general services are available for women who qualify for income assistance programs based on their position as low-income custodial parents, including rent assistance, medical assistance, and child care. Despite the fact that a variety of services are available, the current social support networks (for a number of reasons that are not unique to any of the cities we visited) are not capable of fully meeting the needs of low-income women of color who experience domestic violence.

Safety

Obviously, safety is paramount to domestic violence service provision, and shelter services are a key component of promoting women's safety. It is widely reported, however, that only a fraction of the women in the United States who experience violence in their homes seek assistance from domestic violence programs, and at the same time, current levels of funding for traditional shelter services are not sufficient to meet existing demand. The unfortunate reality is that some women who do seek help may not receive it because shelters are consistently full and only have the capacity to serve those who are at the greatest risk of imminent, severe violence.

Shelter access is further complicated for many women who have young teenage sons. In every state, victims and advocates discussed the common challenge posed by rules that do not allow males over the age of 12 or 13 into shelter. As a result, victims often find themselves facing the difficult choice of needing to separate from their sons in order to gain entry into a shelter's safe haven. Many women in the listening sessions raised this as a concern, not only from the painful perspective of the decision mothers have to make, but also from the awareness of how it must feel to be the child who is left behind.

Another important issue when it comes to individual choice and safety is the fact that many domestic violence service providers are not programmatically equipped or funded to provide safety planning, advocacy, or other services to women who remain with their partners. Services are rarely available to women who stay or who are still in contact with a partner who has been violent. As a result, many of these women never seek help from domestic violence programs, and those who do may be turned away. For women who have said that they want the violence to end, but who wish to maintain their relationship, shelter, safety planning, and advocacy are complicated but essential services.

As one advocate put it, a variety of “push-pull” factors contribute to women’s decisions to stay or leave. Generally speaking, traditional domestic violence services have encouraged women to leave their partners, knowing that the only way to guarantee safety is to ensure that the abusive partner does not have access to the victim. These services have been invaluable to saving lives. But some women—for many and various reasons—decide to remain in contact with partners who use violence. Not all contact involves living together under the same roof in a married or cohabiting relationship. Co-parenting, as well as neighborhood and social circle mutuality, are among the most common circumstances where women may still have contact. According to many of the women we spoke to, survivors who have decided to maintain some form of contact are in desperate need of services, particularly around safety planning.⁴

Women also talked about situations where some combination of family, friends, and community might compel her to stay in contact. Although victim safety ideally would come first, the reality is that many women experience extensive pressure—both explicit and tacit—to maintain relationships regardless of the presence of domestic violence. For example, in our discussions, some African American women said that family and

“If it isn’t for counseling, what services are African American survivors going to come in for? So, for us, they’re going to come in for transitional housing, but if you’re coming in with the batterer, you can turn right back around. Now, I understand, I don’t want to pay for rent when the batterer is in the home, but if you turn them away before they can even get in for an advocate to talk about some other options . . . We need to hear from them even when they’re with the batterer.”

friends encouraged them to stay with men who could contribute to the economic security of the family even though he may use violence. Some of the Latina women we heard from felt similar pressure from their families and communities to live in abusive situations for the sake of keeping families intact. Furthermore, the church can play a large role in encouraging both African American and Latina women of faith to fulfill their marriage vows by staying with husbands who use violence. Therefore, the very real desire victims often have to preserve their families is frequently supported and reinforced by cultural norms, and it is important that these perspectives inform the development of services for communities of color.

As one last point on the issue of safety and the role of culture and community, the advocates and survivors we talked with emphasized the importance of the church in their communities and its potential to be an important site for domestic violence intervention and prevention. In each of the cities we visited, listening group participants identified the handful of church groups and programs that are working with advocates to provide outreach and support to women who might be reluctant to approach mainstream services. Their very persuasive argument is that, in their communities, the church often operates as a community center and is perceived as stable and safe and a place to reach out for help. Most of the advocates who are engaging with and promoting church-based approaches to domestic violence also understand that this may entail working within the patriarchal or non-feminist reality of some churches. Advocates clearly voiced their concerns about women in vulnerable situations meeting with church leaders who aren't sufficiently knowledgeable about domestic violence. However, they believe that because of its role both as a social and communal center—a place where people in their (African American) communities turn for emotional and moral support—the church could not be discounted or rejected as a site of support and advocacy for victims. One particular advocate knew of survivors in her community who had anticipated, but were relieved not to experience, rejection or moral judgment from church-based service providers. It is important to note that many of the advocates we spoke to were members of the churches doing this work. Moreover, most of the advocates in our listening sessions took for granted the power and authority of the church in the African American community. As a result of that presumption, they assigned a responsibility to the church and its leaders to help ensure the safety of women and children and work to end violence against women.

Economic Security

In addition to the influences of culture and community, women's decisions are also made within the context of their economic status. Poverty constrains one's options regardless of the issue. For example, African American women who work at low-wage jobs often have to rely on partners who are not employed to provide child care. Therefore, the context of deciding whether to leave a partner who uses violence may include the risk of losing her job and her means of supporting her family. Similarly, many Latina women—particularly those who are undocumented immigrants—are frequently in the position of depending upon their partners for economic support and for navigating social networks. Women who are undocumented face greater isolation, marginalization, and limited choices expressly as a result of their immigration status. Even beyond the barriers of language and the fear of deportation, women who are not documented are often not eligible for a variety of community-based and economic support services. Thus, they have even fewer options than other women facing the choice of whether to leave their partners.

Another example of the significant role economic status has in the lives of victims and survivors is the fact that domestic violence is often cited as not being the most pressing or immediate need for low-income women who experience abuse. Across listening sessions, participants stressed that low-income victims who access domestic violence services are in desperate need of basic economic supports, including opportunities for family-sustaining employment, affordable housing and rent assistance, food security, reliable transportation, and child care. In fact, many low-income women do not initially discuss the violence with advocates because their children's basic needs are their primary concern. Although women verbalize these kinds of basic needs to advocates, programs often cannot address the multiplicity of women's needs because they are primarily funded and structured to provide safe housing (often limited to 30-60 days), counseling, support groups, and legal advocacy. Such services are extremely important, and at the same time, it is equally important to address this mismatch between the types of services that are available and the needs of low-income victims and survivors.

“Women identify basic needs. I told them I had this, but they came to me for clothes, food, other things. Domestic violence counseling was secondary.”

“It becomes such a dilemma. Everywhere you call, depending upon I guess when you call, they have no funds. That’s what I hear 99.9% of the time. I assume it’s connected to the economy. And it’s frustrating when you’re in a real crisis.”

Further compounding the problems of poverty is the fact that while advocates can make referrals to other resources throughout the community, many economic support programs have such long waiting lists and/or strict eligibility requirements that the services are essentially unavailable to many who need them.

The recent economic recession also added to the level of need throughout communities, while simultaneously constricting funding for a variety of services. In the end, there simply are not enough domestic violence or economic support services to meet existing needs, nor is there adequate funding to ensure that services are fully responsive to the realities and circumstances of low-income women of color. While the examples above do not capture the breadth or depth of women’s experiences, they are illustrative of the fact that culture and class impact lives, options, and decisions in a variety of ways and that services have to be intentionally designed to respond to women’s different realities.

Empathic Service Provision

Women who are desperate for safety and security are vulnerable to the decision-making power and responsiveness of shelter, social service, and health service professionals. We talked with many victims across all four states, and in each of those conversations, African American women said that their pain, fear, and frustration was exacerbated by agency representatives who used the advantage of the power dynamic to pass judgment and deny relief. The term

“[Service providers] can say things that’ll send you over the edge . . . with one action or one word you said and I knew you were judging me. And you can’t judge me. You don’t know where I’ve been or where I’m coming from. And you need to be trying to find out where I’m trying to head to and help me get there.”

one survivor used to describe this was “the face.” Most of the other women in the room responded immediately, and their reaction revealed that they understood what she meant and had shared similar experiences with social service providers. Though this survivor was the only participant to use that particular phrase, many others—in each of the groups—

talked about similar situations and feelings. Women said that they were demoralized and sometimes reluctant to access goods and services from the person across the desk with “the face” that showed disgust or boredom or a lack of understanding of their lives or their needs.

African American advocates suggested that this situation could be aggravated by a lack of cultural understanding and sensitivity. Some of them who worked in more mainstream agencies talked about their attempts to address this concern that many survivors face and felt that agencies should prioritize responding to issues of cultural and class insensitivity that impact low-income survivors who are women of color. Most believed that the best way to address these concerns would be to work toward having more women of color in agency leadership positions.

“Some people—when you go to find out information—some of the people that hold those positions are gatekeepers and they make judgments based on what they see of you.”

“I’d rather struggle than go somewhere to beg . . . wasting gas and wasting time going to meet with people who won’t help you or [who] give you the run around.”

What do survivors want and need for their communities?

Although obvious, it is still worth noting that women who are victims and survivors of domestic violence are members of communities. This is a particularly salient point in communities of color. Women, of course, share membership in communities with children and men—other people—who are their partners, relatives, friends, and neighbors. Women share cultural and geographical space with these people, and—in the case of African American women—they share a history and a present of oppression and disenfranchisement.

Economic Security and Social Services

In general, women and men in low-income communities share similar economic needs (e.g. stable income, shelter, food, medical care, etc.), regardless of the presence or absence of violence in their relationships. However, because women are more likely to have legal custody of children, social services for basic needs

“I honestly think that some of the men may be stressed out like we are about not getting assistance . . . I’m thinking that if they got some of the assistance . . . like to help them get a job and help them get housing to get on their feet, then maybe it may cut down on domestic violence against women . . . and maybe all of this would slow down some kind of way.”

funded income support program that men in low-income communities are eligible to receive. Men who are homeless or involved with the criminal justice system may be eligible for some additional services (e.g. help finding housing or employment); however, such services are extremely limited even in the communities where they do exist. In all, low-income men of color have very few options, and in order to receive what services are available to them as noncustodial adults, they must be destitute, living on the street, and/or in trouble with the law.

When talking about men in general in the community—not necessarily men who use violence, but all men—the domestic violence victims, survivors, and advocates in our listening sessions resoundingly shared the view that men need social welfare services. Participants expressed many reasons for their belief that social services for men in low-income communities are essential; however, one of the most prevalent reasons they gave was that in the current state of affairs in their communities, men cannot do their part. They cannot make their equal contribution to their families. They cannot

“I think you would actually have a decrease in domestic violence if you give men coping skills for anger, hope on re-entry [from being incarcerated], that you can get a job, that we’re going to help you.”

are more often available to them as custodial parents. For example, cash welfare assistance, many housing programs, medical assistance, and child care are all available to custodial parents. Comparable services are not available for low-income able-bodied adults who do not have legal custody of children. The Food Stamp program (now called “SNAP” or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) is typically the only government-

support themselves or their children. Of course, when men are not in a position to provide this support, the burden on women becomes ever greater. Participants suggested that personal responsibility is one important factor in this regard, but they said that the issue goes

deeper than that and touches on the discrimination and stereotyping that African American men, in particular, experience in American society. They identified, for example, that black women have a significantly greater likelihood of securing and maintaining employment than their men counterparts. They recognized that, across all adult demographics, African American men face the highest disproportionate rates of both unemployment and incarceration. This is important on multiple levels, and it is also directly relevant to domestic violence and service provision. Both advocates and survivors said that while it should not be considered the cause, they believe that the stresses of discrimination and poverty contribute to the incidence of domestic violence. Women across listening sessions felt that men must be held accountable when they choose to use violence and, simultaneously, women expressed that they strongly favor community-based social services that would help all men with education, employment, and health services. Many of them expressed the belief that such support services would alleviate some of the stress and feelings of hopelessness the men experience, and that by reducing this pressure, services for men could increase women's safety.

Mental Health and Trauma-Informed Services

Women and men in low-income communities share multiple needs, with education, employment, and legal services at the top of the list. Men and women also share the need for mental health services. Although it may remain a taboo subject in families and communities, mental health and untreated trauma are critical issues in the lives of low-income people of color. Women and men alike have suffered trauma witnessing and experiencing violence—both as children and as adults. They have sustained the trauma of ongoing losses and early death in the community—both caused by and also completely unrelated to violence. And communities of color also continue to contend with historical trauma as well as the ongoing traumas of structural and systemic discrimination and racism. That is to say, both men and women of color interact with systems, agencies, and policies that are not overtly racially discriminatory, but that have disproportionately negative impacts on the well-being of their families and communities. Listening session participants viewed

“Dealing with men’s grief, loss, pain, and trauma . . . Men are not allowed to heal, and if you are not allowed to heal, then you’re gonna cause some pain, because pain begets pain.”

addressing untreated trauma as a pressing need for low-income communities as a whole, and also specifically for the women who experience and men who use violence in their interpersonal relationships.

Youth Prevention

In every listening session, participants expressed concern for children. Due to the pervasiveness of violence in some communities and the fear of its normalization, prevention education for youth was a common theme and a top priority for many advocates, survivors, and service providers alike. They expressed the belief that ending the use of violence in interpersonal relationships has to start with the children, and many suggested that prevention education—for both boys and girls—is the only sure method of finally ending violence against women. Participants strongly supported teaching prevention education in the schools. In particular, some felt that age-appropriate education on healthy relationships could counter some of the effects of witnessing domestic violence at home. Participants additionally expressed interest in a variety of approaches to promoting anti-violence norms and teaching youth about healthy relationships. These ranged from modeling and promoting anti-violence behavior in one-on-one interactions with youth—including one’s own family members—to broad public awareness campaigns, including messages on billboards, buses, and other public spaces.

Community Support and Accountability

During the listening sessions, there was some discussion about “fatherhood programs,” which, though few in number, have traditionally been community-based organizations or agencies where men can go to access some of the social services discussed above (e.g. employment, job training, re-entry, etc.). The women we talked to said that men—whether or not they had a history of violence

“He may not be ready to back away from the cycle [of violence], but he needs to continue to feel the standard of the community that his behavior is not acceptable. He needs to hear it in all corners of the community.”

or connection to the criminal legal system—would benefit from a place where they could spend time with other men, one in which they were held accountable and discouraged from using violence, but also supported and recognized for their membership in and responsibility to their community and family.

The criminal legal system is an important institutional response to violence in families and communities, and most of the women who participated in our discussions had relied on the police in situations that had arisen in their lives or work. The African American women we spoke with were also mindful of the reticence of some victims in their communities to involve the police. They reiterated the fact that such hesitance is based on the devastating reality (both past and present) of African American men and the criminal justice system. Similarly, Latina advocates and survivors expressed that women who are not documented are unlikely to contact law enforcement and risk the involvement of immigration officers. Therefore, the women strongly believed that a community-based agency where men could go for resources and support services could supplement the traditional sites of accountability and retribution, and that a community-based, restorative approach to holding men accountable for domestic violence has very real potential for increasing women's safety.

Family Strengthening

Both advocates and survivors talked about needing to find more culturally relevant ways of responding to and providing services for low-income women of color. As mentioned above, one of the suggestions from advocates was to develop church-based outreach and support services for victims of faith. Another suggestion was to work with family strengthening and "healthy relationship" services. Participants did not suggest that funding or advocates meant to respond to the intervention and safety needs of survivors should be used to provide healthy relationship services. However, they did say that some of the public and private funding intended for relationship services was being used in African American communities in ways that are not antithetical to the needs of survivors and other women in those communities. They suggested that advocates should seek out information, explanation, and outcomes from these programs and use that to assess whether working with those services might be of benefit to women in the community. In some of our listening sessions we heard about community-based and community-run shelter and victim support agencies that had developed close, mutually beneficial relationships with local healthy relationship programs. Advocates and other community service providers said that when these programs are community-run and community-structured, they can respond in positive and effective ways to the needs of men and women in the community and also have the potential to reach more people with domestic violence prevention education.

“I think it should be family-centered advocacy based on the fact that women of color, you can’t find their end of the road without looking at the whole family, including the person that is acting up . . . They will see themselves as caregivers of a family, not just [in] a relationship with someone who is acting up. Family is not one of the people, but all of the people.”

Holistic Solutions

The domestic violence victims, survivors, and advocates who participated in the listening sessions felt that, overall, low-income men and women alike need a variety of programs that lead to long-term economic stability for their families and their communities. The challenge for communities is to provide support and resources for social services for both men and women *and* continue to provide

support and resources to respond to domestic violence and promote women’s safety. Of course, individual agencies should not be charged with this broad, combined mission. Domestic violence advocates and agencies must continue to do the work of providing intervention and support for survivors and victims. However, it seems that from the perspective of the women of color who talked with us, agencies committed to supporting the survivor must also recognize her as a member of a family and a community. This, of course, is particularly important when she privileges that identity and makes decisions based on it. Across the board, listening session participants felt that all of these various services for women and men can and must co-exist in their communities, and that, in fact, providing services to men in their communities also meets the needs of victims and survivors.

Enhancing community-based service delivery for low-income women of color

The participants in our listening sessions had numerous ideas about enhancing service delivery for victims and survivors. One obvious way to increase the number of low-income women of color who are served by domestic violence programs is to provide sufficient funding for traditional services to meet the current need. Shelter programs have saved countless lives over the years and will continue to be utilized and necessary well into the future. Increased funding would allow shelters to expand services and assist more women who seek their help.

Meeting the needs of underserved populations—including low-income women of color—also requires implementing different methods of domestic violence service delivery. In addition to the non-traditional approaches mentioned above, participants also supported the approach of co-locating domestic violence advocates in community settings with a variety of other services that address barriers low-income victims face. Such community settings could house a combination of education, employment, health care (including mental health and AODA), child care, and/or other services that address the pressing needs of low-income communities (such as food pantries, utility or transportation assistance, etc.). Co-locating advocates within this kind of a community setting would further increase awareness of and access to domestic violence services and simultaneously overcome issues of stigmatization and isolation for women who are victims of abuse.

Furthermore, advocates in such settings would be in the position to provide ongoing education and outreach through their continual presence in the community. Listening session participants stressed the importance of service providers not only being located in, but also participating in low-income communities of color. Such involvement increases trust and the likelihood that women in the community will access services. Providing services in a community setting also responds to the needs of women who are not ready, able, or interested in leaving their partners, boyfriends, husbands, and/or the fathers of their children. Advocates could build relationships, provide support, and safety plan with women right where they are, without them needing to first sever their relationships. Such services would increase safety for a vast number of women.

In regards to men, listening session participants emphasized that men in low-income communities of color are also in desperate need of services, and they strongly supported providing such services. Again, while the stresses

“Women go to clinics because some of us, that’s the only place we have to go to get any kind of help... Why not put [dv resources] into these clinics? Why not have an office just for that, where a woman, maybe she feels safe taking all her babies with her to the clinic, but in the mean time she can detour herself right over to this office and say, ‘Look, Miss So-and-so, there’s something going on and I’m scared.’”

“Why can’t they get an organization together to help both men and women? Get everyone the same help at the same time.”

of unemployment, poverty, and systemic discrimination do not cause men to use violence, working to relieve these stresses by supporting men in an environment that does

not tolerate its use is likely to reduce the incidence of domestic violence. A community center filled with service providers who are aware of and responsive to domestic violence would create a culture in which violence against women is not accepted and would break down the normalization of domestic violence in the lives of women, men, and children. In addition to responding to the kinds of holistic services that many low-income women of color who are victims/survivors of domestic violence are seeking, this method of service delivery would serve as both an intervention and prevention strategy.

Conclusion

The African American and Latina women in our listening sessions—advocates and survivors—are, of course, strong proponents of women’s safety and security. They have been regularly exposed to violence that men perpetrate against women. It was clear from our discussions that they believe women in their communities should not have to tolerate intimate partner violence under any circumstances.

They also recognize that, of all the men who are part of low-income communities, many have not, do not, and will never use violence in their interpersonal relationships. With regard to women who have experienced domestic abuse, some remain with their partners, some leave, and many return. Based on their clear understanding of these realities and on their perception of the challenges and strengths of their communities, they are calling for policies and practical supports that address the needs of women, men, adolescents, and children.

We were intentional in our goal of using these listening sessions to include the voices and perspectives of African American women (in particular) in the conversation about domestic violence services that are responsive to low-income communities of color. Our aim is to ensure that women’s lived experiences (which are framed by race, class, culture, and gender) inform the development and improvement of domestic violence services. One of the realities reflected in the listening sessions is that men are an important part of

communities in which women live and are a part of women's lives. It is therefore relevant to examine men's situations and what women think about men's ability to make positive contributions to their families and communities.

African American domestic violence advocates in each of the project sites helped us immeasurably by arranging the listening sessions and inviting the participants. Some of our listening sessions were made up of people who provide services to men. That is, in most of the cities we visited, African American advocates have close working relationships with fatherhood and/or batterer intervention service providers, and our partners invited them to participate in our community service provider listening sessions. Within this context (of victims, survivors, women who provide services to domestic violence victims, and men who provide services to men), listening session participants resoundingly agreed that there are not enough supportive services for low-income women who have experienced violence, and at the same time, men in the community are also in desperate need of social services and support.

Endnotes

- 1 CFFPP was founded during a time when social welfare policy began to seriously consider and focus on increasing low-income men's financial contributions to and physical presence in their children's lives. We take very seriously the potential risk posed to low-income mothers by this kind of social policy. For example, policies that strongly encourage men to assume a traditional position as head-of-household could: undermine women's autonomy to make basic decisions about their lives, place a single-parent family at risk of losing necessary social welfare income supports, and/or impede women's safety by supporting men who use violence to live with victims.
- 2 The terms "victim" and "survivor" are used somewhat interchangeably throughout the paper. It is similarly worth noting that our work focuses on violence against women, therefore, we use the pronouns "she" and "her."
- 3 Listening session participants expressed a desire for stable, nonviolent communities where members have access to opportunities and resources to meet their basic needs (e.g. safety, stable income, jobs, education).
- 4 For further information regarding this important issue, see Jill Davies' *When Battered Women Stay . . . Advocacy Beyond Leaving* (available at http://new.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/BCS20_Staying.pdf) and *Advocacy Beyond Leaving: Helping Battered Women in Contact With Current or Former Partners, A Guide for Domestic Violence Advocates* (available at http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/userfiles/file/Children_and_Families/Advocates%20Guide%281%29.pdf).

Appendix A: Listening session questions

The listening sessions more closely resembled semi-structured interviews than focus groups, therefore these questions were not read, but provided a general guide for the facilitator.

Services for victims/survivors

- What kinds of services exist in the community for victims of violence?
- Do women use them?
- What kinds of needs aren't met? What services are missing? (These can be any kind of service related to people's needs—e.g. child care, housing assistance, etc. Any service that would help victims, but that they don't currently have access to.)
- Are there any services that women who have experienced violence can't ask for? Or are there things they can't mention when they're receiving services because they worry that it will affect whether they receive services or will affect the kinds of services they receive?
- How do you think race impacts your challenges and opportunities?

Services for men

- Do services exist in the community to serve men in general (e.g. employment, housing, etc.)?
- Do services exist in the community for men who have been violent?
- If they do exist, do men use them? Are they helpful? Have they had any impact in the community (e.g. on the situations of men / on the situations of women and children / on violence)?
- If they do not exist, do you think services for men would be useful? If so, what kinds of services? Why do you think they would, or would not, be useful?

One additional question for advocates:

- As an advocate, what are the challenges you experience in representing the needs and concerns of women of color who are victims of violence? Do you face challenges in representing the community more generally?

Appendix B: Listening session participants

In addition to domestic violence advocates who provide intervention and prevention services, the people who participated in the listening sessions represented a wide array of professions and agencies, including:

- Health care providers, clinics, hospitals, SANE programs, health educators
- Mental health and AODA professionals
- Agencies serving the needs of people with disabilities
- Homeless shelters and housing services
- Law enforcement and criminal legal system representatives
- Child protective services
- Batterer intervention programs
- Employment-based services (job search, training, placement, support)
- Government economic support programs (TANF, food stamps, medical assistance)
- Refugee and immigrant crisis services
- Faith-based organizations
- Healthy relationship/marriage programs
- Education programs focusing on parenting and life skills

Further reading

Jacquelyn Boggess, Rebecca May, and Marguerite Roulet (2007)

Collaboration and Partnership Guidebook: Fatherhood Practitioners and Advocates Against Domestic Violence Working Together to Serve Women, Men, and Families

Accessible by contacting the Center for Family Policy & Practice at:
<http://cffpp.org/contact.html>

Jill Davies (2008)

When Battered Women Stay ... Advocacy Beyond Leaving

Accessible through the National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women at:

http://www.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/BCS20_Staying.pdf

Jill Davies (2009)

Advocacy Beyond Leaving: Helping Battered Women in Contact With Current or Former Partners: A Guide for Domestic Violence Advocates

Accessible through Futures Without Violence at:

[http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/userfiles/file/Children_and_Families/Advocates_Guide\(1\).pdf](http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/userfiles/file/Children_and_Families/Advocates_Guide(1).pdf)

Jill Groblewski (2010)

Comprehensive Advocacy for Low-Income African American Men and Their Communities

Accessible through the Center for Family Policy & Practice at:
http://cffpp.org/publications/Comp_advocacy.pdf

Marguerite Roulet (2003)

Fatherhood Programs and Domestic Violence

Accessible through the Center for Family Policy & Practice at:
http://cffpp.org/publications/TA_Fthd_DomViol.pdf

Joy Moses (Center for American Progress),

Jacquelyn Boggess, and Jill Groblewski (2010)

Sisters Are Doin' It for Themselves, But Could Use Some Help: Fatherhood Policy and the Well-Being of Low-Income Mothers and Children

Accessible through the Center for Family Policy & Practice at:
<http://cffpp.org/publications/Sisters%20are%20doing.pdf>



CENTER FOR FAMILY
POLICY AND PRACTICE

23 NORTH PINCKNEY STREET

{SUITE 210}

MADISON, WISCONSIN 53703

TELEPHONE: 608-257-3148

FAX: 608-257-4686

www.cffpp.org