

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes November 10, 2015

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Minutes by Rachel Smith, edited by Chris Huffine

Topic: Risk and victim safety (short term vs. long term)

Focusing on short-term safety may negatively impact the long-term safety of the victim, and vice versa. So, how do we balance these and how do we navigate this tension? How do we address that in our work with abusive men? Regarding working with abusive men around this topic, building relationships with the men is important, especially fostering those relationships over time while he is denied contact with the victim and through the honeymoon period for those who have reconciliation with the partner. One way to think about long-term safety is focusing on helping him make a long-term sustainable change, as the primary focus in our intervention work. Short-term safety is more along the lines of no-contact orders, probation, etc. (i.e., temporary measures to increase safety at the moment).

There are also issues to consider for the partner's situation. For example, some victims are more concerned with their risk of homelessness if they call the police over their concern for their safety with their abusive partners. If there were those financial resources out there to have a life outside the financial abuse, there would probably be much less push back on no-contact orders. Helping her become safe is not just as simple as arresting him or filing a no contact order or even putting him on probation. It is important to have patience with the partners and help them navigate the process on their terms, while thoughtfully advocating for her safety.

It is also important to consider what is going to lead to more abuse and what may not. Advocates have the option to ask the victim what feels safest for them, but addressing victims' safety in the context of the work with abusive individuals is more complicated. On the victim advocacy side, we look to her determination of what safety is going to be, and hold on to the facts that (a) there are always going to be choices and (b) you can never know for sure what is going to happen next. On the batterer intervention providers' side, the safety issue is much more manageable when the partners' perspectives inform how we interact with the abusive individuals in group (e.g., what questions are likely to lead him to be abusive after group versus what topics might keep him from being abusive). What's really important for long-term safety is ongoing

communication with the victim during the transition period of the couple getting back together, and being able to trust that what the victim is telling the advocate is true.

Many providers have little to no contact with victims. As a result they can't use her perspective or concerns to inform the work. This is especially important when the men are really pushing for reuniting and reconciliation.

Often times the courts also do not have contact with the victim or take into consideration what they are wanting and needing in terms of contact. So, for example, the courts might lift the no-contact orders if they just do a minimum level of intervention (e.g., "just do 5 more classes").

Arguments in favor of providers having contact with partners is that it allows them to take into consideration their perspectives as indicators of the men's level of change, particularly if they are having contact.

There is often an inequity where the system is providing the abusive partners more support than the abused. The men are coming every week, they're getting information and support in their efforts to change. In a sense, the men have a lot of support in that they have all of this attention, while the victims get put into further isolation. To what extent is the system offering the victim on-going support and services?

There is much debate within the field about to what extent it is okay to make victims do things. While some feel it is justified if it increases her safety, others believe she has the right to make her own choices and given that she has committed no crime should not be made to do anything. Asking partners to do anything as part of the intervention with abusers is sometimes a slippery slope toward "making" victims do something, which may be furthering the abuse. Instead, focusing on educating victims about what their options are at each juncture of this process can be a productive approach.

These concerns reiterate the importance of having contact with partners, as well as the importance of engaging in a coordinated community response and having a system where each side of the system is in communication with one another.

We are dealing with a deep cultural issue here, and we have to have patience with the change process, which is why engaging with the community at large and getting the word out is also a very important component of our work. There are increasingly more public service announcements about domestic violence coming out, which indicates that people are finally putting money into this, although it is also concerning that there remains a focus on physical abuse.

Change takes a long time. When there is real change, you can hear it in the voices of the victims when they talk about the abusers. The process takes multiple instances of intervention over a period of years.

When talking about victim's safety, we aren't just talking about physical safety, but also emotional safety. If the victim does not feel safe emotionally, then we (intervention providers) have not been effective with their abuser yet.

Another question is about the partners' longer-term plans to stay or leave. For some providers, knowing the partner's intentions with the relationship can help in how they work with each abusive individual, and how providers address victim safety. Regardless of whether she definitely wants to leave or reconcile the relationship, it is important to tell her that she needs to be assertive while he is still in services. He has the power to change; she has the power to say whether the change has actually happened.

In some communities, the victims do not recognize emotional abuse as abuse and have a really high tolerance for abuse in general, which makes it harder to assess and maintain victim safety. There is a big difference between victims who have been through victims services or have had exposure to information about domestic violence (e.g., books like [*Why Does He Do That?*](#)) in terms of their level of empowerment. Another important part of safety is raising the consciousness of the abused partner.

Controlled separation. The controlled separation (or no-contact) allows the abusers space to really take-in the intervention. It is basically a no-contact order for voluntary clients. It allows the abused partner some respite from the abusive partner's bad behavior while they are trying to make real, sustained change. It is intended as a step towards reconciliation and involves gradually increasing the amount and level of contact based on the abused partner's wishes. It is also reflective of the pace of change the abusive partner is making. The slower the change, the longer the controlled separation may continue for.

In conclusion, when discussing issues of victim safety, safety planning, and decisions related to intervention, it is important to consider the trade-offs of immediate vs. delayed or long term safety. While both are important, sometimes it may be necessary to make decisions which favor one over the other. Key within this is to keep the abused partner well informed and central in the process.