

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes-7/10/01

Present: Stacey Womack (ARMS), Christine Crow (Choices), Songcha Bowman, Lee Parker (Change Point), Guruseva Mason (Transition Projects), Gustavo Picazo (Change Point), Chris Huffine (Men's Resource Center), Marc Hess (Multnomah County Adult Community Justice), Stan Brown (Clackamas County Mental Health)

Minutes by: Chris Huffine

Topic: Special Issues in Working with African American Men

-Unfortunately, the scheduled speaker for today, Berje Barrow, of the African American Providers Network, did not show up. The group decided to proceed with a discussion of this topic anyway. There were no African Americans involved in the following discussion, although there were people from other non-mainstream cultures present.

-Carolyn West, Ph.D. recently spoke in Portland on improving the DV response to African American victims. She started off by discussing the reasons why typically studies find a higher incidence of DV in the African American community. She cited a number of factors that may contribute to this including the younger mean age in the community (with DV typically being more prevalent among younger people across the board), lower economic class (which typically produces higher rates of reporting DV) and higher levels of unemployment (which has also been shown to contribute to DV rates). She also speculated that individuals within the African American community who are less acculturated may be more prone to violence and that there may be a higher incidence of alcohol abuse.

-West also spoke of how the mental health consequences of DV tend to be exacerbated because of the co-existing racism and other oppression issues (e.g., economic). Research has found that African American women are more likely than other women to be more severely abused. She speculated that there also may be a higher level of denial of battering among African American women due to there being even less support in the community to leave, overestimating their ability to cope (based, in part, on their strong abilities to cope with racism and economic oppression) and a greater level of protectiveness of African American men for those same reasons. African American women are also more likely to fight back when they are assaulted.

-From here the group shifted to a discussion of our experiences in working with African American men. The number of African American men who are being served by our agencies seems fairly low, although the percentage in groups appears consistent with the percentage in the Portland metro population.

-Two groups of men who may be mistaken for being African American are first generation African immigrants as well as some Latino men, particularly from the Caribbean. While they obviously are affected by racism, their cultural backgrounds are quite different.

-Another factor to consider in working with African American men is their level of acculturation. It can vary widely among men. For example, some may have grown up in primarily African American communities (although there is a great diversity there as well (e.g., Southern rural, urban)), have primarily African American friends, and primarily socialize in African American venues. Others may have grown up in predominantly Caucasian neighborhoods and have predominantly Caucasian friends. While all are African American, their sense of culture and identity may be quite different. It may be that those who are more acculturated to the mainstream culture will do better in a mixed group, whereas those who more strongly identify with African American culture would do better in an African American group. The point is that different African American men may respond best to different types of group composition. Therefore, enrollment in a culturally specific group for African American men should be offered as an option, not a requirement.

-Faith, particularly the Christian and Baptist faiths, play a very important role within the African American community. Addressing the role their religious community plays in their life is important.

-It was speculated that the more there's a feeling of "justified violence" (e.g., retaliating for a racist comment), the more prone they may be to doing violence in general. Related to this is challenging the sense of victimization that men may have that leads to an increased sense of entitlement to be abusive and controlling. On the other hand, as the consequences for any violence increases (e.g., deportation, lynching) the amount of violence perpetrated may decline.

-One obvious advantage to running a group oriented towards African American men is that it can be more culturally specific. However, another advantage is that the facilitators may be able to more effectively label and challenge the specific cultural biases that may support DV. In a general group that is more likely to be missed or to go unaddressed.

-One common response when the cultural biases are challenged (based on working with Latino men) is that the facilitator (or other challengers) are labeled and dismissed as being a traitor to that particular culture.

-The role of the police is different as well. African Americans are more wary of the police and are less likely to call on them for assistance.

-Training needs. Obviously it continues to be important to provide training to everyone on working with the African American community to increase sensitivity to their specific cultural needs. But that should not be a substitute for creating culturally specific groups. Part of accomplishing that goal is to provide BIP training to members of the African American community. They can then adapt and modify that information into a format that is more culturally appropriate. Work like that is already being done in the Asian community. Songcha Bowman, for example, has received on-going training in the Men's Resource Center curriculum which she is adapting, along with the "Ray of Hope" curriculum into a culturally specific group for Korean men. Cross education—educating each other—is important.

-There was some discussion around how culturally specific groups should be developed. One method would be to receive training in mainstream batterer intervention which is then modified. Another would be to just observe such groups and develop a separate curriculum on their own. A third possibility would be to engage in a dialogue from the very beginning where a curriculum and format are developed from scratch, with equal involvement from the beginning.

-While many of the men in groups are initially wary and suspicious of the facilitators and programs, there may be an even higher level of wariness and suspicion among African American men because of the racial differences.

-What is the common ground, that is universal, regardless of race? One point where there is presumably agreement is that violence in the family isn't okay. But even that is debatable. What constitutes violence may differ between cultures. There may be times when it is seen as justice rather than violence.

-Violence may be a more tempting option among oppressed groups. Being non-violent may be an easier option for more privileged groups. This doesn't appear to hold true, at least not for all groups, since women, who are clearly oppressed, are significantly less violent than men.

-We also need to be addressing the institutional violence that African American men are experiencing which reinforces White male privilege. This can also lead to poverty and other forms of oppression which may increase the temptation to be violent. If one is disenfranchised, there may be less at stake with regards to staying nonabusive.