

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes 4/25/00

Present: Chris Huffine, Men's Resource Center, Marc Hess, Multnomah Co. Adult Community Justice, DV Unit, Michael Davis, Change Point, Courtenay Silvergleid, PSU, Guruseva Mason, Transition Projects, Inc., Songcha Bowman, Annie Neal, Paula Manley

Facilitator: Chris Huffine

Note Taker: Courtenay Silvergleid (please accept my apology for any omissions or errors)

Topic for Meeting – Risk and Lethality Assessments

- Chris is in the process of working with Washington County Corrections to develop a risk/lethality assessment as recommended in the Oregon Protocol Handbook. There is an assessment tool in the handbook, but it blurs the boundaries between risk and lethality assessment in a way that makes Chris uncomfortable.
- Michael asked how providers are using risk assessments and whether it puts us at legal risk?
- Marc suggested that no one should be saying a person is not at risk, but there are assessments that can provide useful information regarding risk and lethality. One of the dominant characteristics of a risk/lethality assessment is that it requires information from a wide variety of sources and is very time consuming. Marc also pointed out that criminal justice wants this type of information in order to prioritize cases. It could assist supervision decisions.
- There are 3 different types of assessment: 1) general dangerousness, 2) risk for recidivism, and 3) lethality.
- The most dangerous perpetrators, in terms of potentially lethal violence are ones who are depressed and extremely obsessed with their "victim".
- Chris pointed out that the chances of correctly predicting lethality are extremely small primarily due to low base rates. In other words, the number of perpetrators who actually kill is very low which makes it that much more difficult to predict.
- Concern over labeling was mentioned. Risk/lethality assessments produce a lot of false positives. What are the ramifications for perpetrators who get labeled as lethal?
- The question of why do risk/lethality assessments kept surfacing. Possible reasons offered included taking comments made by perpetrators identified as lethal or at high risk for recidivism more seriously in terms of warning victims and possibly altering treatment decisions. Additionally, it might assist practitioners in deciding whether or not someone is suited for their program.
- Factors that have been identified as putting people at greater risk for recidivism/lethality include, most of which come from the SARA:
 1. Past assault of others
 2. Past P.O. violations or other community service violations
 3. Lack of steady employment
 4. Witnessed violence as a child
 5. Substance abuse (particularly alcohol and amphetamines)
 6. Suicidal and homicidal ideation
 7. Psychosis
 8. Separation from "victim"
 9. Extreme emotional dependence
 10. Access to firearms
 11. Stalking (associated with lethality)
 12. Social isolation
 13. Willful and malicious pet abuse
 14. Gang membership (including motorcycle and white supremacist)
- Some additional items that some providers have identified as relevant that are not covered by SARA include: criminal versatility, premeditated violence, lack of remorse, access to firearms, depression, current emotional crisis, stalking behavior, social isolation, and current substance abuse.

Even though Chris is working on creating a lethality assessment that would include SARA (an assessment tool) and related information, there was a lot of discussion over whether or not practitioners should even be doing risk/lethality assessments.

- Guruseva made the well received point that as a practitioner, outside of the criminal justice department, he doesn't have access to the type of information that he would need to begin to conduct an assessment.

Primarily, he doesn't have access to prior or future criminal records. In addition, to access all of the collateral information needed can be quite time-consuming, putting unrealistic demands on BIPs.

- It was suggested that risk and lethality assessments are more appropriately done by community justice since it is primarily their responsibility for public safety.
- It is especially difficult to predict "low risk" offenders. Research consistently proves this, according to Marc. It is much easier to flag "high risk" offenders than to accurately predict who is at a low risk to reoffend.

Questions were also raised about what does it really mean if someone is identified as a low, medium, or high risk? How would that information be used? How might a low risk perpetrator be treated differently than a high risk perpetrator?

Given that to do a thorough risk assessment, including utilizing collateral contacts, thorough review of information, etc, goes beyond what is possible for BIPs to do, it seems that any "risk assessment" we might do could be misperceived as an adequate addressing of risk rather than having a more thorough assessment done by another agency or party.

Courtenay shared a recent research article which noted that one of the best single predictors of risk of recidivism was the victim's own assessment. She also shared another article on the "Danger Assessment Scale" which is a recently developed risk assessment measure.

Given that an important element of doing a risk assessment is contacting the victim and soliciting information from her, who should contact the victim? Is it appropriate for BIPs to do this?

There is a strong press these days for a "quick and easy" risk assessment measure. However, there is no evidence that such a measure actually exists for accurately predicting recidivism among DV perpetrators. Typically when forensic psychologists or other specialists are asked to assess for risk, they utilize several hours that include utilizing interviews, collateral information, and testing to offer a prediction. It is questionable whether there is an easy or effective way of reducing the amount of time and energy necessary.

It was suggested that this might be a good issue to discuss further with professionals in community justice, who are most frequently the ones requesting risk/lethality assessments.

V Next Meeting will be on May 9th and the topic will be Coordinated Community Response and the role of Batterers' Intervention Providers.