Tri County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes
December 11th, 2012

Attendance: Chris Huffine (Allies in Change), Natalie Houser (Choices DVIP), Katherine Stansbury (ChangePoing/Turning Points), Jennifer Hopkinson (Clackamas Women's Services), Samantha Naliboff (VOA Home Free), Emmy Ritter (Raphael House of Portland), Wendy Viola (Portland State University), Linda Castaneda (Manley Interventions), Regina Rosann (ARMS), Debbie Tomasovic (A Better Way Counseling), Charley Zimmerman (Allies in Change), Phil Broyles (Teras Intervention and Counseling), Mark Amoroso (MEPs Counseling), Amanda Briley (Bridges 2 Safety DVIP), Krystal Duff (Bridges 2 Safety DVIP), Tayler Stokes (Bridges 2 Safety DVIP), Jeff Hartnett (Allies in Change), Jennifer Warren (Seeds of Change/Allies in Change), Tim Logan (SoValTi)

Minutes by Wendy Viola, edited by Chris Huffine

Meeting Topic: The use of social media in the perpetration of abuse

As social media—texting, email, smart phones, and social networks such as Facebook become increasingly more common and widespread, new forms of abusive behavior and new wrinkles in abusive patterns are emerging. The newness of these developments—most within the past decade or so—mean that there is little written information or formal training on these areas, beyond how the internet is being used to stalk victims. The intent of today's discussion is to identify some of the trends and distinct abuses and abusive patterns folks are seeing with regards to social media use among abusers.

Examples of abuse

Failure to respond to communication via social media is often used as an excuse to perpetrate violence, as perpetrators often assume intentionality in their partners' lack of response. There is likely a strong correlation between the need for control and the need for immediate responses to messages. Multiple examples of partners not responding or responding quickly enough to texting or emails were given as a precipitant of abusive behavior. Group members have escalated quickly in role plays about a partner not answering a text message, assuming that the failure to respond was intentional.

The ambiguity of text messages and emails, due to the lack of non-verbal cues and autocorrect functions, often leads to the perception of malicious intent or combativeness where there is none. Abusers are quick to take things personally and to misperceive their partner as being against them as it is. The additional ambiguity present in texting and emailing can even further escalate these false assumptions and abusive responses.

Sending messages to the wrong person can also be problematic.

The internet has websites that are much more explicitly focused on abusive behavior. There are websites dedicated to complaining about and slandering victims, some of which firmly refuse to remove any material. Perpetrators may also use the internet to exchange strategic information about perpetrating abuse.

In spite of the problems listed above, there have also been some benefits to victims to the rise of social media. Historically most domestic violence is done in private, out of sight, with only the victim's report that anything happened. As a result it can become a "he said/she said" situation where the victim may be slow to be believed. When men repeatedly email, text, or use Facebook to contact their victims, they leave a documented trail. Emails may be especially revealing of victims' and perpetrators' own words to each other. If and when victims need to make a legal case, it's very helpful to have the documentation that emails provide.

Related to this, more accountable abusive men will bring emails to the group for help determining whether they've been abusive, or victims will respond to an email from their partner and cc the provider, asking that they discuss an email in group. This provides for additional accountability work as well as technological "role plays" about how to appropriately communicate and respond to partners without abuse.

A downside of the ability to forward email communication is that perpetrators may alter or fabricate emails that they "forward" to their partners or others.

Another consequence of social media are even more opportunities for abusive individuals to violate the boundaries of their victims. Violations of boundaries involving cell phones include answering each other's phones, reading each other's text messages, and looking through each other's call histories, behaviors which are especially common among men with more jealousy and mistrust.

Facebook has provided access to other people's friends, such that perpetrators can harass their victims' support systems, including their friends, families, and co-workers. However, this behavior can also be self-defeating: arguments that used to happen in private now occur on Facebook as well. Perpetrators may post information that they perceive as "normal" for them, but which may be inherently vilifying. Trashing victims via Facebook makes others more aware of controlling behavior and better able to pick up on patterns of abuse. As a result, abusers have been unwittingly "outing" themselves, especially via social media, more frequently than they used to. Because of social media a growing number of loved ones of the victim may be aware of the abuse occurring relative to pre-social media days.

On the other hand, more insidious forms of abusive communication may be used. Examples include using code specific to the couple or trashing partners in a way that

plays into cultural stereotypes or myths about women, such as expressing care or consideration to convey that a woman is "off of her meds" or has been "very emotional lately". These types of communication are less likely to draw negative attention than communication that's more blatantly inappropriate or abusive. Abusers may also use such language to organize unwitting others against their partner, subtly shaping their perceptions of her in a distorted manner. One common example is characterizing the victim has being psychologically distressed and the controlling behavior is being done for her own good. Another form of abuse is perpetrators may also use social media for the purpose of "radiating intensity". If they post information about being upset, their victims likely understand that they will be on the receiving end of the perpetrator's unhappiness, putting them on edge.

The lack of separation between people and the technology that they use contributes to the persistence of abuse after the relationship has ended. Using Facebook, perpetrators can make contact with prior victims and re-engage them by adding their friends, commenting on their pictures, etc. They can also stay engaged longer with partners who have left them. With social media now not only does she need to physically leave, but electronically leave him as well. The latter may be even more difficult to do.

An annual Clackamas County child abuse conference held in the spring has a strong track on the use of technology to abuse and stalk victims. Some of the training around sex-offenders' use of technology (e.g., hiding cameras in their victims' rooms) would be relevant for BIP providers.

There's probably even more abusive communication occurring on Facebook than what's readily visible, through private messaging. It's easy to manipulate privacy settings on Facebook to enable everyone but the victim to see certain information, shaping how other people interact with the victim. Similarly, a client at one agency made an entire website for a fake business, to trick her into believing that she had certain business prospects.

Social media may also be used as a means of controlling victims by gaining access to their co-workers and employers, by leaving reviews of relevant establishments (including providers), and to blackmail victims with the potential release of information, images, or videos over social media. Perpetrators have been known to use their victims' passwords for social media sites in order to post information and send messages as the victim.

There have also been cases where men have also used craigslist to recruit people to take victims' possessions from an "estate sale," or to show up at her house expecting to have sex with her. BIP participants, particularly those with paranoid personality types, have also been known to covertly record conversations and group sessions, and to call their partners during group so that they can listen to the whole session.

Playing on-line games may also be used to terrorize families. The comments that perpetrators yell at the screen, and at the other people whom they play remotely, probably have a negative impact on others in the home. While it may not be entirely inappropriate for someone to yell at a game while they are alone or in the company of other adults who are comfortable with the game, it may be traumatizing for children or for others who perceive that the comments may actually be directed towards them. This can be particularly true for abusers since their family already knows all too well their capability of being abusive. It may be useful to have conversations with groups about when they play violent video games, and who is around them when they do.

In the recent murder-suicide in Newburg, the perpetrator created a new on-line identity which he used to befriend his victim. Not realizing that this new online friend was actually her estranged husband, she started revealing information she otherwise wouldn't have shared with him. Ultimately it was a disclosure to this new online friend that prompted the abuser to kill her. In this same case, a friend saw the perpetrator's Facebook post at 2:00 AM and was troubled enough by the content to call the police, who arrived at the house to find that the murders had already occurred. However, it is promising that the police responded to a friend's call about a Facebook post. There have likely been other circumstances where a similar sort of posting and response might have saved lives.

Another concern raised is when the victim and perpetrator have differing levels of knowledge about social media. Abusers are quick to distort any power differentials they have, so if they are more knowledgeable about the internet, social networks, texting, etc., they can use their partner's ignorance to their advantage. This can include, but is not limited to, a variety of stalking behaviors. On the other hand, if the victim is more knowledgeable the perpetrator may become more controlling and abusive to limit her access to these forms of social media. Victim empowerment (e.g., economically, vocationally, etc.) is widely agreed to be a key to helping her stay/become safe from his abuse, this could include empowering her knowledge and ability with social media.

<u>Unwitting collusion by social media providers</u>
Not all organizations involved in social media have an understanding of, or an eye towards, domestic violence. In order to turn off the GPS on a phone, Verizon previously required that the account owner ask to have it changed. A victim of IPV, whose GPS Verizon had refused to shut off, started a petition and got Verizon to change its policy. Products created for parents to use with children are often used to monitor and control victims. Victims' resistance to using that technology, after it's provided to them, is often used to justify perpetrating abuse.

Among many phone companies, account owners can see all of the ingoing and outgoing calls and text messages exchanged on any phone on the account. Many arresting

incidents involve struggles over a cell phone to gain immediate access to this information, in addition to any images that may have been exchanged, calendars, etc. When victims say that "he knows where I am all the time," it is indicative of the perpetrators' technological savvies. It's no longer necessary to screen for perpetrators who are particularly technologically savvy, as almost anyone with access to current technology likely has the knowledge and tools that they'll need to access sensitive information about victims.

Victims and victim advocates

It is important that victims (and their advocates) are technologically savvy and incorporate the use of social media into their safety planning. For example, it would be important to know not to accept friend requests from people that they don't know. Victims' friends may also use social media to enhance their safety planning (e.g., by maintaining connections to the perpetrator to watch for signs of escalation and increased risk).

From the perspective of working with DV victims/survivors, there are additional factors to consider. One concern is that fears of abuse and access via social media will encourage victims to avoid social networks such as Facebook which could lead to even more social isolation. Of course, this is the same dilemma that women who are abused face when fleeing to shelter—to what extent do they cut themselves off from their support systems (e.g., church, extended family, etc.) to stay safe but simultaneously isolating themselves.

Courts

In sentencing perpetrators, courts need to have conversations about how Facebook is also a form of contact, such that having contact via Facebook would still be a violation of a no-contact order. This is often not addressed in court or in no contact or restraining orders. It may be helpful for courts to specify that perpetrators may not contact victims or victims' families through email or other social media such as Facebook, or post information about victims if they have a no-contact order against them. Some judges and some counties are savvier than others.

There was some confusion within the group about whether posting information that conveys something to or about victims on perpetrators' own pages, without contacting the victim directly, is a form of third party contact or otherwise a violation of a no contact order. Some thought that this would be considered 3rd party contact. Others pointed out, though, that the prohibition is not whether he can communicate *about* her but whether he tries to communicate *with* her. For example, perpetrators can stand on a street corner and scream about their victim without violating no contact/restraining orders as long as they are not within proximity, so the Facebook equivalent might be legally defensible. Probably the best guideline for third party contact is when perpetrators are willfully using others to contact their partners, basically serving as the perpetrator's agent. This is

different from the perpetrator posting things on his Facebook page which the victim can choose to read or ignore. A more clear violation would be someone else posting on a victim's Facebook page on the perpetrator's behalf (e.g., "John asked me to tell you that he's sorry . . . "). That pretty clearly would be third party contact.

Provider responses

Some providers incorporate the use of social media into all of their other topics, while others discuss appropriate communication via Facebook as its own portion of the curriculum on respectful communication. Some are not explicitly addressing it at all at this time because it's a relatively new issue with no training offered about it.

Where will we take this work? About a year ago, one provider created a module about on-line stalking, and also incorporates discussions of the use of social media into each weekly topic. Conversations about on-line stalking usually begin by asking participants how they define stalking and how it compares to what they do electronically. Since the provider started asking groups whether they "monitor people electronically," they haven't encountered a single participant who hasn't admitted to doing so. Other providers reported significantly less frequencies of this behavior. Conversations usually involve explaining that electronic monitoring is a version of power and control and an abusive tactic. Another program has a module on stalking more broadly, which includes any unwanted behavior of any kind. Participants are often surprised by the range of behaviors that constitute stalking, including the use of technology and social media.

In educating abusive men about what constitutes abusive behavior there is a continuing concern that some may use new information to become more abusive. For example, there is a concern that addressing the use of Facebook in groups will teach men how to be "better" at it. For example, discussing the fact that abusive communication on Facebook is documented, may force abusive communication underground, or encourage perpetrators to think of new ways to cover their trails. The alternative, though, is to not address more subtle or less discussed forms of abuse which increases the likelihood that such abuse will continue. The sub-group of abusive men most likely to use the abusive behavior they learn about in groups to become more abusive are more psychopathic and criminally oriented abusers. Those individuals should be referred to specialized groups such as those offered by Allies in Change where there is relatively little discussion of subtle forms of abuse for that very reason.

Because of the quickness of the communication, some providers are focusing more heavily on the specific skill of response delay. Some providers suggest that participants avoid posting information too quickly. The instantaneousness of email allows them to be sent more impulsively, so emails may be more abusive than written letters, which take longer to write and send. The most common technique that men use to stop abusive behavior is interruption, and may therefore benefit from learning to interrupt themselves before acting abusively online. It might also help them pause to consider who might be

reading their posts and whether others would want the content of the post to be known. Concern for who might be reading posts is especially valid for couples who are Facebook friends with their children. Recalling other people's inappropriate posts and the reactions they elicited can also help perpetrators stop themselves from posting inappropriate information.

Another challenge in addressing abuse and social media is that technology is continuing to evolve and change at an incredible rate. As a result it can be hard to stay savvy about its capabilities and the ways that perpetrators use it. For example, there is a new "limited time" feature for text and picture messages, which sends encrypted messages that then disappear after 5 minutes. This is problematic for documenting abuse, as well as for tracing pornography or other transgressions. As providers, we may always be a couple of steps behind the most current technology. Our experience has been that group members, particularly the youngest group members, are the experts who often teach us about technology and ways it can be used abusively. By definition, there can't be a piece of published research that will be current enough.

In some ways, this highlights and further reinforces where the focus of providers primarily needs to be—focusing on changing the underlying pro-abuse belief systems that drive the abusive behavior. Until those belief systems change, abuse will continue to occur. Once those belief systems change, even though he could be abusive, he will choose not to be. That doesn't mean we should also address specific abusive behaviors, but it shouldn't be the primary focus of the work. Instead of trying to stay aware of all new forms of technology and how they may be used to perpetrate abuse as they emerge, it would be more effective, and more aligned with providers' intentions, to try to change participants' core belief systems so that they no longer act abusively, regardless of the technology that they may have available to do so. However, it still behooves us to inform ourselves about new technology and its uses in DV perpetration.