

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting April 10, 2001

Present: Songcha Bowman (Private Practice), Marc Hess (Multnomah County Community Justice and Sage), Devarshi Bajpai (ASAP), Chris Huffine (Men's Resource Center), Margaret Langslet (PSU), Christine Crowe (Choices DVIP), Michael Davis (Changepoint), Gustavo Picazo (Changepoint), Stacey Womack (ARMS- Abuse Recovery Ministry Services), Jerry Womack (ARMS)

Minutes by Margaret Langslet and Chris Huffine

Topic: Partner contact—when should we have contact and what sort of contact should we have?

-There are at least three types of partner contacts that may be initiated: 1) Asking for background information/history to do a more thorough assessment (i.e., evaluative); 2) Sharing with her information about resources available for abused women (i.e., informational); 3) Asking her for a report on her observations of any changes or lack of changes she has observed since his enrollment in a program (i.e., treatment planning).

-One concern about attempting to elicit information from partners is that they may not be honest for a number of reasons. First, there may be risk issues—fear of retaliation if she tells the truth. Second, she may want a reconciliation and therefore may minimize or underreport past (or current) abuse. She also may not trust the caller and won't be fully candid. For all these reasons, any information garnered from the victim may not be reliable.

-It has been suggested that it is important to contact partners to provide them with information about services available as well as general outreach. Agencies initiate this contact a variety of ways. Some send letters to victims. Others contract with a separate victim advocate or victim advocacy agency to make those phone calls. Still others won't initiate any contact at all out of victim safety concerns.

-To do an effective assessment for risk and dangerousness, partner contact is essential. Information from the partner significantly improves the ability to accurately assess these things, provided the partner is being honest. There was a study done that found that a well-informed victim can be very high in predicting future abuse. Providers should have a framework of risk factors for the victims and can use SARA as an educational tool.

-Another time when partner contact, for information gathering purposes, can be important is near the end of the perpetrator's enrollment, if he is cohabitating with her. Feedback from her can help assess whether the man needs to remain in the group longer and what areas he needs to further focus on.

-It is essential that partner contact be done by an informed person, who knows how to appropriately make such a call (e.g., inquiring immediately whether it's a good time to talk, being sensitive in any questions asked or information provided, making sure not to confront the perpetrator with information which may increase the victim's risk).

-Contact, even the awareness of possible contact, may increase the risk to the victim because the perpetrator knows that she has been/could have been contacted. By contacting a partner, aren't we putting her in the position of having to continue to lie/collude with the perpetrator's own denial?

-One provider observed that partners he had contacted typically fell into one of three categories:

those who appear to be colluding with the perpetrator; those who want him gone; and those who want the provider to make him better.

-In order to do victim contacts, the person should know about the victim's experience.

-Providers should contact the victim about safety planning and have a group for the victim to attend.

-Sometimes it makes a difference for a victim to hear from a provider or from a man.

A male provider has found that information he shared with certain victims was more likely to be accepted and believed than when they heard the same information from a victim advocate. In other words, for some women, there is a greater openness to information when it is coming from a man or from the provider.

-Providers should leave it open to victims to call them and educate the victim by referring them to things such as books (e.g., The Verbally Abusive Relationship) as well as providing them numbers to call. The provider should also work at deflating false hope that enrollment in a batterer intervention program will guarantee change/improvement. The provider should also encourage the victim to trust their own experiences, contrary to what they have typically been told by their abusive partner. Someone else observed that the "gut feeling" can be wrong if a woman suffers from a disorder, like post traumatic stress disorder.

-Providers can also use a lethality assessment with the victim. Many times this makes the victim realize it's worse than they thought.

-A couple questions to ask immediately when initiating contact: "Is it a safe time to talk?" and "Do you want this to be a confidential conversation?"

-It's important that any kind of contact is characterized by a feeling of working with the partner. She should feel acknowledged and validated by any contacts that occur. It should be a collaborative contact.

-When is it safe to initiate contact with the partner? One provider said that, after the man has been enrolled in the program for a period of time, is cohabitating with the partner, denies any recent abusive behavior, and they reportedly appear to be doing fairly well, then it is likely to be safe to have contact with the victim. However, even then, it is important to check-in with the victim to make sure she is comfortable talking with the provider (under the above conditions they are almost always willing and even wanting to talk about how things are going).

-It is important that any information gathered from the partner be used very carefully and discretely. A poorly handled confrontation of the perpetrator with information provided by the partner can significantly increase her risk of experiencing further abuse.

-Cultural factors may also play a role in the wisdom of having partner contact. Some cultures may be more conducive to a positive outcome with partner contact. On the other hand, if there has been more extreme violence or greater denial by the perpetrator, partner contact becomes more risky.

-Another reason for partner contact is not information gathering, but information sharing with regards to the program the man is involved in. For example, the provider can help clarify misperceptions about the group or willful distortions the perpetrator may have made about the program. For example, clarifying that the group never gives advice on how she should change or what she needs to do differently (contrary to what her partner had told her "the group said she should do"). Another example would be a man who is incorrectly using time-outs to silence his partner by not returning after he has taken one, contrary to what has been made clear in the

partner by not returning after he has taken one, contrary to what has been made clear in the group.

-Partner contact can reduce the man's paranoia and shame. If he knows that contact is occurring, yet it is not causing him problems, he may be more willing to be forthcoming and to be less worried about information getting out. This is similar to the philosophy Emerge follows by having on-going regular contact with the partners.

-Contact can also be a way of validating the partner's experience. Sometimes partners find it particularly validating for the group leader, who is working with their abusive partner, to hear their story.

-Sometimes there is a small window of opportunity to do outreach with a partner. The contact initiated by the provider may be the only contact she gets. Doing some quick basic education on abusive behavior (e.g., that it includes psychological abuse, that it's not about anger but about control) as well as sharing some local resources may have a significant positive impact.

-Another way of assessing the man's level of honesty and accountability is to hear from the partner and assess the level of consistency between the two reports. Often the two reports are very consistent, which provides further support for the man being accountable. On the other hand, significant inconsistencies between stories, particularly when the man has been attending for a while is particularly alarming and throws into question much of what he has been saying in the group.

-There may be significant trust issues among the partners towards the system. They may not trust the system and therefore be immediately suspicious and paranoid of any contact initiated by the provider.

-Some providers feel that there should be no contact with partners, period. All contact should be done by victim advocates. It is our job to work with the perpetrator, only. Therefore, having a strong working relationship with a local victim advocacy agency is important so that they can assist with the partner contact piece. On the other hand, for providers to refuse to talk with victims can feel quite dismissive.

-How should distorted or false information from the partner be dealt with?

-Keep in mind that we don't ever know, for sure, what the level of safety is. Therefore, we never know if it is truly safe to be contacting the partner.

-Why not contact a victim at her greatest level of risk? When she's leaving? Such a contact could be designed to inform her of risks. No, that is victim advocacy work and should be left to victim advocates. Having a good working relationship with a victim advocacy organization can help address that concern.

-Keep in mind that we are often working with the assumption of the worse case scenario. In truth, many of the partners of the men we are working with, if they are cohabitating, are experiencing little physical abuse. Much of the time men are fine with contact occurring and are not nearly as paranoid as the worst case scenarios present.