

Domestic violence coordination is beginning to improve service

By Norma Ellington-Twitty

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Lara, a wife, mother, administrative assistant and Sunday school teacher finds herself and her 7-year-old son Mark in a battered women's shelter at midnight. A neighbor called police about loud noises and screams she heard next door. Despite Lara's protests, the responding police officer indicates he must "hotline" the father who "accidentally" hit their son with a shoe when Mark attempted to protect his mother.

The officer suggests that she and Mark go to a shelter "to get your life back together." As she lies in a strange bed in a room with another "battered woman" and her children, Lara wonders how to go about putting the pieces of her life back together.

The answer to Lara's question involves a complex web of people and agencies that might intervene in her life. The domestic violence shelter can provide support and advocacy for Lara and her son. The Division of Family Services will investigate the "hotline" abuse call from the police. The Family Court may become involved if law enforcement or DFS raise questions about Mark's long-term safety in the home. The criminal court could file assault charges against the husband for his attack on Lara. If these agencies communicate and collaborate, the likelihood will increase that the family will receive the help it needs.

The St. Louis County Greenbook Initiative on Domestic Violence and Child Maltreatment has brought together more than 100 representatives from the domestic violence community, the courts, DFS and community-based service providers to build a collaborative to provide a coordinated response to help women like Lara. The initiative is funded by the Violence Against Women Office of the U.S. Justice Department.

While women can be abusers, research shows that men are the overwhelming percent of abusers. In fact, it is estimated that more than 3 million women are victims of domestic violence nationally. As high as 50 percent of the men who frequently assault their wives also abuse their children. The Greenbook team members have committed to overcoming historic divisions to provide a coordinated response to the co-occurrence of domestic violence and child maltreatment. They are working together so child and adult victims are not re-victimized by a fragmented and sometimes inconsistent response from agencies. They want to help victims achieve safety, stability and well-being, while holding perpetrators of abuse accountable for stopping their violence.

This initiative, a three-year pilot project, began a year and a half ago. What is the progress? A strong collaboration has been established and a Steering and Implementation Committee guide the changes. Those who work with victims of domestic violence have provided cross training that informs key partners about resources and practices that can help child and adult victims of family violence. The Family Court has preliminary plans for a batterer accountability compliance program to be established as a part of the adult abuse proceedings. Education and outreach will challenge the general community to play a role in the intervention and prevention of family violence, including the identification of new laws and increased funding for services and programs to fully implement change.

The initiative is one of six demonstration sites in the country. This area has a unique opportunity to coordinate our efforts in helping victims of family violence. We will continue to need the support of the courts, agencies and the community to sustain our efforts to provide safety for women and children.

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