

Vermont's Partnership Between Domestic Violence Programs and Child Protective Services

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A collaboration of the Vermont Network Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, the Vermont Department for Children and Families, and the Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services.

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Coordinated
Approach to
Increase Safety
for Women,
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and Youth
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How has Vermont supported collaboration between its domestic violence programs and child protection agency?

In October, 1996 the Vermont Network Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, the Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services and the Office of the Attorney General jointly applied for and received one of the first Rural Domestic Violence and Child Victimization Grants offered by the U.S. Department of Justice through funding provided by the first Violence Against Women Act. This Grant established a formal collaborative effort between Vermont's domestic violence programs and child protection agency. The goal of this collaboration has been to increase options for Vermont women and children affected by domestic violence so they may enhance their own safety and security. The partners in this collaboration are committed to ensuring the collaborations' continuing success beyond the life of the grant.

What do Vermont's systems of domestic violence programs and child protective services look like?

Vermont has 16 local community based, independent, private non-profit domestic violence and sexual violence programs including eight shelter programs. Together with the Network Office they form the statewide coalition known as the Vermont Network Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (The Network). Within the Network, the statewide Rural Grant has funded the development of five children's programs in the most rural domestic violence programs of Northeastern Vermont (known as the Northeast Kingdom) and bordering Franklin and Lamoille Counties. Children's Program Coordinators provide direct services to children affected by domestic violence through individual services, on-site and school based educational/support groups and through school and community education and training. In addition, the Rural Grant funds the Network Office Child Advocacy Coordinator. She offers technical assistance to Network Children's Programs across the state and facilitates the statewide Youth Advocacy Task Force in its efforts to coordinate the needs of these local children's programs. Not only have these efforts addressed the needs of the most rural children and youth who have

experienced violence and who have not had services available to them before, but also they have changed the community conversation about how domestic violence impacts children, youth and their abused mothers and the best way to support them both in their desire to be safe within their homes.

In the same Vermont communities, there are 12 primarily county-based offices of the state's child protection and juvenile justice agency, previously known as the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services (SRS) and renamed in 2004 to the Department of Children and Families (DCF), Division of Child Welfare. Within the Department, the Rural Grant established a statewide Domestic Violence Unit. Staffed with a Unit Coordinator and three Domestic Violence Specialists, the Unit provides case consultation, technical assistance, education and training to Department social workers, domestic violence advocates and other community providers across the state. The Domestic Violence Unit is continually developing program and policy initiatives designed to effectively address and respond to the overlap between domestic violence and child abuse and issues pertaining to children and youth who witness domestic violence. Much of this important work centers on the day-to-day delivery of consultations services to those social workers and community service providers who work daily with women and children impacted by both domestic violence and child abuse. In addition, a system-wide impact has also been accomplished through the Unit's assistance in revision of major departmental policies in the investigation and substantiation of child abuse, with specific attention to the impact on families where domestic violence and child abuse coexist.

How has the Vermont's collaboration through the Rural Grant impacted those systems and their responses to battered women and their children?

Since 1997, the Network Children's Programs funded through the Rural Grant have provided services to over 7000 children, and the DCF Domestic Violence Unit has provided over 5000 case consultations. Additional accomplishments include the revitalization of a statewide Network Youth Advocacy Task Force, instituting a two-day mandatory domestic violence training for all SRS social workers, the development of DCF recommendations on their response to domestic violence and several model policy changes within DCF.

Perhaps the most challenging, yet one of the most important accomplishments of the Rural Grant has been relationship building between systems. Prior to the receipt of the first Rural Grant in 1996, relationships between domestic violence programs and local child protection offices varied across the state, however, in general the two systems were disconnected or at odds. In 2004, the relationships still vary from place to place, however, most regions have developed formal and informal memorandums of understanding

(MOU) to help actively guide their work on behalf of battered women and their children. Several regions continue to develop and deepen their understanding of each other's work. For example, one Vermont County focused its efforts on teen dating violence. They brought together teens in a focus group to determine how they could better address the issue of teen dating violence, held a week-long awareness event in the high school and developed a booklet for teens in their community. Each year, our Grant Project encourages other local regions to reconnect and review their Memorandums. On a statewide level, our Project partners developed and deepened the level of commitment to working together via creation of a more meaningful statewide memorandum of understanding. It more clearly defines a statement of intent and our philosophy of collaboration including its practical application in our "coordinated approach".

What is the "Coordinated Approach"?

In a state where both individual independence and community responsibility are equally valued (Vermont's state motto is Freedom and Unity) we have created an approach that we believe honors each system's mission and philosophy while working together on a shared goal of safety and support for battered women and their children. Clear missions serve as mechanisms to maintain the protections and supports that battered women and their children need to achieve safety and security. Philosophically, we believe it is both important and necessary that the roles of domestic violence advocates and child protection workers remain distinct and clearly defined. We believe collaboration is not a process of compromise on belief systems/foundational principles but rather the development of understanding of each other's roles and purposes. For example, our collaboration recognizes and respects each other's language. Words such as "empowerment and self-determination" used in domestic violence programs and "assessment and compliance" used in child protection agencies powerfully represent individual systemic identities and reflect inherent philosophical conflicts between the systems. Even though we share common words (like safety and support) in our approach, we do not try to create a new language (i.e. integrate) but instead better try to learn each other's language, sometimes through use of interpreters (often people who have worked in both systems). We learn each other's language, not to adopt it for use within our own system, but rather in an effort to understand each system.

We believe that a coordinated approach is preferable to an integrated or "one stop shopping" model for a number of reasons. We have found that, unless there is commitment and attention to maintaining the purpose and role of each system, well-intentioned staff in both agencies could compromise important safety protections for the sake of "collaboration." "Integration" of systems could also cause a shift from a woman-centered advocacy model to a model that

individualizes violence removing it from the social context of the community. In addition, we are concerned that boundaries may become so blurry that important confidentiality protections can become compromised, distinctions between domestic violence advocates and child protection workers may become cloudy and survivors ultimately will not know who is who and who does what. This confusion may prevent her from seeking the resources she needs to increase her and her children's safety. We agree that such a situation would be counterproductive to our goal of increasing a woman's options for safety and security.

Finally, our definition of collaboration embraces change, and recognizes that to improve our individual and collective response to women who have been battered and their children, our systems *must* change. Our approach, however, seeks to not blend or integrate the systems or their services but to coordinate our internal systemic responses to both services and policies so that we are working toward our common goal of safety and support for battered women and abused children.

What does a "Coordinated Approach" look like?

To put our philosophy into practice we have implemented a model for domestic violence and child protection practice that bridges gaps, both locally and statewide, and provides linkages critical to families affected by domestic violence and child maltreatment. This "coordination model" has several distinct components, some of which are listed below:

- Child protection workers will not be expected to be domestic violence advocates, and domestic violence advocates will not be expected to be child protection workers. Each worker will know where and how to access the expertise and resources within and across systems in order to most effectively intervene in situations involving both domestic violence and child abuse.
- A coordination model maintains the integrity and framework of domestic violence advocacy and child maltreatment practice, while simultaneously bridging these areas of expertise to improve the response to children and families.
- Operating within this model requires each participating program and agency to engage in an ongoing relationship-building process that places the needs of abused women and children at the forefront of the discussion.

For example, locally, one community, working with their Memorandum of Understanding as a guide, has organized fundraising events, joint trainings, and focus groups for teens and has reviewed child abuse reporting

policies. Their work has not been in an effort to come up with one integrated system of services but rather to each enhance their own non-duplicated services and work together to share the limited resources available in our rural communities. An example of how this coordination model has worked on a statewide level is best exemplified in how our collaboration has approached the issue of how to respond to children who are affected by domestic violence. Using our experience as child advocates in both domestic violence programs and child protection offices, our collaboration believes that children are affected by domestic violence in many ways. Each child/youth experiences the violence individually, and even siblings may be affected differently by the same exposure. Thus we believe a continuum of responses to child witnesses (exposed to domestic violence) ranging from prevention to protection is necessary. The more preventive services are geared toward those children affected but perhaps not harmed to those children who have been severely traumatized and may need protection via DCF. Based on this belief, both the Network and DCF have agreed to work together to better serve all battered women and children exposed to domestic violence in 3 primary areas.

- a. **Services:** The Network has committed to the development of its children's programs and to strengthening its statewide Youth Advocacy Task Force to help guide its efforts. DCF has committed to identifying cases where women and children/youth have been affected by domestic violence and referring to the Domestic Violence Unit for case consultation. We are currently looking for ways to identify and create the continuum of services needed to adequately respond to the multiple and varied needs of children/youth affected by domestic violence and are hoping to expand our partnership to include mental health practitioners, child care and substance abuse treatment providers, health care providers as well as the courts.
- b. **Training:** The Network and DCF often partner on requests for training on witnesses/children/youth exposed to domestic violence and other issues related to the coexistence of child abuse and domestic violence. Aside from continuing to develop training for staff in both systems, we are currently working with the Vermont Criminal Justice Training Council to develop a curriculum that will offer some specific training for law enforcement response to child witnesses. We also respond jointly to many requests from mental health, childcare providers and other community service providers for training.
- c. **Policy:** DCF has after much discussion and careful deliberation taken the position that child witnessing of domestic violence is not child abuse. Network programs are reviewing and revising their child abuse reporting policies. Together we have reviewed confidentiality policies

and processes as well as criminal justice and legislative efforts to enhance penalties for domestic assault in the presence of children and have developed policy papers and documents to reflect that work.

By all accounts the coordinated model of the Vermont collaboration has proven successful in its ability to effect both individual change at the family level, cross-agency change at the community level and systemic change at the agency level. The remarkable accomplishments of this cutting edge collaboration have been experienced across Vermont and the collaborative effort continues to grow and thrive, not only our own efforts, but through our sharing our learning with other states working on their own collaboration.

What has Vermont learned that may be important for others to consider when they are entering into this very important and very challenging collaborative work?

We offer this learning for anyone working with collaboration between domestic violence programs and child protection services. We encourage you to identify what will and will not work in your own systems and to review any and all efforts through the lens of “How might this (service, training or policy) impact the lives of battered women and their children? Is this (service, training or policy) benefiting them?”

- **Commitment:** Both systems need to be committed to working together over time, and through the inevitable struggles that will occur. Realize that part of any relationship is disagreement and divergence. Honor this diversity of approach and work toward common understanding rather than agreement. Honestly identify issues as they arise and recognize that if the tension entirely disappears it could be a sign that you are going in the wrong direction. Commit to the time and energy of relationship building. Without the relationship, there is no foundation to ground and support collaborative efforts.
- **Common Goal:** Both systems need to develop a common vision or lens that all efforts can be viewed through, such as, increasing options for battered women and their children to access safety and security.
- **Communication:** The primary communication consideration needs to be based on respectful dialogue. Use neutral yet informed facilitators to conduct meetings, act as interpreters, minimize defensiveness and misunderstandings and stimulate the development of creative new ideas for improving access to safety and support for battered women and children. Opportunities for dialogue must be built in at regular intervals (6 weeks is a good starting point).
- **Coordination:** Commit to coordinate, not integrate, services, training and policy between domestic violence programs and child protection agencies

first. Then reach out to others in the community who are also involved in the coordinated community response to end domestic violence.

- **Create new opportunities to work together:** Continue to work together to identify new and energizing projects/issues to work on so that the work evolves, is timely, accesses available resources and uses the passion of individual group members to accomplish objectives.
- **Celebrate accomplishments:** To celebrate accomplishments you must know how and when you are achieving your goals. Create a simple evaluation plan to identify outcomes and measurable indicators and review annually or whenever there are any major changes in direction.