

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

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Dual or Multiple
Relationships:

Guidelines for
Rural Domestic
Violence and
Child Protection
Collaborations

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I. Introduction

Rural community service providers, be they advocates, community organizers, child protection workers or educators, often encounter situations that pose actual

The framework reflected in this document is a result of ongoing meetings between Vermont domestic violence advocates and the Vermont Department for Children and Families, Family Services Division (child protective services agency) Domestic Violence Unit around issues of information sharing, confidentiality and service provider role in rural areas in cases where domestic violence and child maltreatment co-exist. These discussions took place from July 2001 until October 2003 as a working group of the Vermont collaboration established through the statewide Rural Domestic Violence and Child Abuse Project.

This document is one in a series that explores issues of confidentiality and information sharing, poses some guiding questions, and makes recommendations for programs and for multi-disciplinary teams who work with affected families. Each document is the culmination of a collaborative effort and identifies the lead author who captured the rich discussions. Thus while there may be one or two lead authors, the work is truly a reflection of the collaborative efforts of many people involved in the discussions over the years. For more information about the documents' content and development or how to reach the lead authors, you may contact The Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, 802-223-1302 or The Vermont DCF Domestic Violence Unit, 802-241-1206.

or perceived conflicts of interest. These conflicts may arise when service providers engage with service users in more than one relationship or role. In the context of domestic violence and child protection collaborations, there are two overarching dilemmas/questions to consider when service providers in rural communities act in dual or sequential roles.

1. When and how can a dual role diminish access to domestic violence advocacy programs by service users in rural areas?
2. How does having domestic violence or child protection staff acting in dual roles compromise the integrity of each program?

Due to the reality of service providers acting in dual roles in rural areas like Vermont, ongoing discussions and some guidelines may be helpful in maintaining safety and confidentiality for adult and child victims of domestic violence. Some of the issues that have been identified are listed below:

- Conflict of interest situations may cause problems (for service users, agencies and individual service providers).
- Conflict of interest may diminish access to service users.
- Conflict of interest may compromise the integrity of the program or compromise crisis worker privilege.
- Dual relationships may blur boundaries and role expectations of both service provider and the service user.

- Recognition of the type of information (and the power attached to the information) a staff person might have access to in all of their roles. (i.e. court/legal, mental health history, abuse history, etc.).

Some examples of these dual/sequential roles:

- A battered women’s advocate who volunteers as a foster parent.
- A child protection worker or attorney who volunteers as a hotline advocate or as a board member for a domestic violence program.
- A former Child Protective Services (CPS) worker who is now an advocate.
- A former advocate who is now a CPS investigator.
- An advocate who volunteers as a Guardian Ad Litem (GAL).

II. Guiding Questions

- Under what circumstances can an employee volunteer for other agencies?
- How does this other role have the potential to impact on client confidentiality?
- Does having this staff person in a volunteer role have the potential to create a future barrier for client accessing services from your agency?
- If there is a conflict of interest in my agency, is there another local agency that can provide the same services? If not, what is the alternative?
- Whose responsibility is it to bring up other roles? The employer or employee?
- Are we creating problems or solutions for women and children exposed to domestic violence?

III. Recommendations

- Create a general policy on conflicts of interest and review with all new staff.¹

Many professions have written guidelines on conflict of interest and dual roles. Here is an example of one such standard from the National Association of Social Workers. (2000). *Code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers*. Washington, D.C.: NASW Press.

Social workers should be alert to and avoid conflict of interest that interferes with the exercise of professional discretion and impartial judgment. Social workers should inform clients when a real or potential conflict of interest arises and take reasonable steps to resolve the issue in a manner that makes the clients’ interest primary and protects clients’ interest to the greatest extent possible. In some cases protecting clients’ interests may require termination of the professional relationship with proper referral of the client. (Standard 1.06[a]).

Social workers should not engage in dual or multiple relationships with clients or former clients in which there is a risk of exploitation or potential harm to the client. (Standard 1.06 [c]).

- Identify potential situations/problems specific to dual roles.
- Pay attention to the type of confidential information you have access to and how either of your roles may influence the service user in a negative or unintended way.
- Identify any “bottom line” conflicts your agency may have (i.e. no personal relationships with service users).
- Specifically review conflicts of interest that involve the link between domestic violence and child abuse (advocate, GAL, foster parent, hotline volunteer etc.).
- Take into consideration employee privacy about what they do or don’t do outside the office.