

# Victim-Defined Advocacy Beyond Leaving: Safer through Strategies to Reduce Violent Behavior

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## Introduction

Our social justice, anti-violence movement and the family violence field are making important shifts in vision and practice. This evolution is driven by the lessons we've learned from listening to victims<sup>1</sup>, the adults and children, the ones we regularly serve and those who need something different from us. We're changing for the better because we're following our leaders of color, embracing the complexity of our mission and its connection to other movements, and staying true to our role as advocates. The work to create and build the next significant innovations is underway. The progress includes our advocacy with victims who remain in contact with a partner, ex-partner, or parent who is abusive. This paper explores one aspect of that advocacy, strategies to reduce violent behavior – both physical violence and all other forms of abuse – using a victim-defined approach. It recognizes that reducing violence is central to our mission, difficult, and long been a part of our advocacy to make victims safer.

**The reduction of violent behavior is central to our mission.** Victims define our advocacy. The violence they experience drives us and haunts us. There is no turning away from the harm and devastation of violent behavior. The visible injuries cannot be unseen – the bruises, blood, stitches, fingerprints left behind when a person tries to choke out the life of a partner, a child's mother. Neither can the less visible harm be forgotten – the financial ruin, the impact of fear, chaos, conflict, the isolation, trauma, and the profound betrayal of trust.

We advocates work with victims to get them away from this violence and to a place of rebuilding and healing. It is our "go to" safety strategy. Yet, we know the strategy of leaving and separation is not possible for every victim, that it makes life more difficult and dangerous for some, and that many adults and children remain in contact with a partner, ex-partner, or parent who uses violence. We also know that some victims want the violence to end, not the relationship. For all these victims to be safer, the violence and abuse must be reduced.

Survivors of violence may ask us to help a partner stop the violence, to be a better partner and parent. Since the abuse, tactics of coercion, and physical attacks are the problem, asking us to fix the problem makes sense. It is a rational and reasonable request.

Increasing safety is the focus our advocacy, yet, we can't limit ourselves to physical separation as the primary way to reduce the violence that victims experience. Leaving a

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<sup>1</sup> The terms "victim" or "survivor of violence" are used to speak the truth about the harm of violence, the injuries, and the lifelong effects of trauma. These terms are also gender and age inclusive. Those who experience violence may reject those terms in favor of ones that focus on healing and renewal, such as "survivor." When working with victims, use the terms they choose. When advocating more broadly, it is important to convey both the strength and resilience of victims and the damage done by those who use violence. The language used should not send a message that because victims are striving to overcome the harm that resources and effective responses are unnecessary or that violence is somehow less serious or even tolerable.

relationship is an essential safety strategy<sup>2</sup>, but leaving is not the answer to domestic violence. Reducing violent behavior is.

As a field we'll continue to move victims out of harm's way, but we also must find more and better ways to place responsibility on the abusive partner for ending violent behavior. We must also figure out effective ways to constructively support that change. As advocates, we can't accept helping a survivor to escape only to have the ex-partner move onto his next relationship, his next victim. Nor can we accept that the adult survivor is now safer but that same ex-partner continues behavior that is not good for their child. We've understandably focused on victim services but victims need more options for safety, more strategies that will reduce the violent behavior of a partner or parent. We need more progress toward our ultimate goal. We are an anti-violence movement. Improving safety, reducing violence is our mission.

**Reducing violent behavior is difficult.** Those who use violence are the only ones responsible for modifying their behavior. We know there is no simple solution, no formula, and no guarantees. Some who use violence will not change, others will only pretend to change. And, some will change for the better. The behavior of some abusive partners makes future violence a given. Yet, there are many more partners who use violence whose future behavior or commitment to change cannot be known with certainty. The unpredictability of human behavior makes it hard to know what to say to survivors of violence who want to know if a partner can change. As victims make life altering, high-stakes safety planning decisions, we advocates want to offer information and guidance that is as accurate as possible. This will likely require some shifts in what we need to learn and how we assess strategies when we work with victims to strengthen their safety plans.

Our world, our lives are saturated with violence. So much of the time violence is so close, intruding on us as we go through our day, reaching us through ever-present screens held in the palms of our hands. Each of us will view that violence differently, our understanding shaped by who we are, who we love, our gender identity, race/ethnicity, class, culture, abilities, and what we've experienced in our lives. Violence is well-resourced, readily delivered, and strongly supported. And so our strategies to reduce violence must similarly permeate and be far reaching. Our efforts must strive to be relevant to all, address inequality, and build on strengths and foster resilience. The bold vision to end violence must be executed with persistence, resilience, and innovation.

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<sup>2</sup> Without question, leaving a relationship makes some victims and their children safer. Advocates must continue to work with survivors of violence to determine if leaving will improve safety. More resources must be made available so that more victims have a reliable way to escape violence. No longer forced to remain because of no means to leave, victims would have a true choice regarding their relationship. Davies, J. (2017). [Victim-Defined Safety Planning: A Summary](#). Hartford, CT: Greater Hartford Legal Aid.

This may sound daunting. Take time to remember what has already been accomplished, to be inspired by the courage, perseverance and strength of survivors of violence, to feel the support of our ever-increasing allies, and to embrace the connection to other efforts to end violence that share our core principles.

Pragmatic and incremental change will make victims safer. Practically, there are unknowns and mistakes to be made and corrected. Risks need to be taken and done with careful thought and strategic action. If we listen to victims, to each other, to the community, to the evidence and research, and to any other relevant source of information, we will learn what we need to know. We're advocates. We will do what victims need us to do – continue to strengthen our advocacy for those who leave and for those who stay.

**The work to reduce violent behavior and abuse is not new.** Efforts to reduce violent and abusive behavior have been a part of the movement to end family violence and the field it generated. Advocates have understood that reducing violent behavior was a necessary safety strategy and some have engaged in that work. In particular, advocates of color have led innovation and have underscored the economic and other harm that punitive, criminal legal system responses to violence can have on victims, those who use violence, their children, and our communities. The work with individuals who use violence is longstanding. Many trusted individuals and organizations have contributed to the services, interventions, programs, research, and prevention approaches to ending violence.

### **This paper:**

While honoring this history and breadth of work, this paper pursues a narrow focus. It humbly offers ideas about victim-defined advocacy strategies to reduce violent behavior. The discussion focuses on victims in contact with partners/parents who use violence.

- **Section 1** explains the context of victim-defined advocacy beyond leaving.
- **Section 2** explores advocacy with individual survivors of violence that is focused on strategies to reduce violent behavior.
- **Section 3** explores systemic advocacy related to reducing violent behavior.

## **Section 1:**

### **Victim-Defined Advocacy Beyond Leaving Context**

Victim-defined advocacy is an approach that results in comprehensive plans to make victims safer. Victim perspectives and priorities determine the strategies, objectives, and direction of those victim-defined safety plans. The essential role of advocacy is to offer information, analysis, and resources – to work in partnership with victims to strengthen their plans. In addition to the work with individual victims and their families, this framework also calls for broader advocacy to improve systemic responses and increase safety options for all victims.

See Figure 1.

Figure 1.

**Victim-Defined Advocacy Components****Individual**

Understand the victim's perspective and priorities.  
Work with the victim to strengthen her comprehensive safety plan.

**Systemic**

Provide victim-defined systemic advocacy.

Advocacy beyond leaving is focused on working with "victims in contact." Victims in contact include the following:

- A person in a relationship with an abusive partner
- A person who interacts with an abusive former partner
- Children in the care of adult victims
- Children who interact with an abusive parent

There are many, many reasons for a victim to be in contact with an abusive partner, ex-partner, or parent. Victims remain in a relationship because they do not have the money to leave. A victim-parent might remain because leaving would mean her<sup>3</sup> children will go without basic needs being met, or that they might be in the care of an abusive parent without her being there to do what she can to minimize the harm. For some victims, even with the pain and suffering of violence, leaving will make their lives more uncertain and difficult. Contact may be driven by deeply held values, or as a safety strategy. For some victims, adults and children, there is no choice, because the contact is forced by a person continuing to be violent or is mandated by a court or other system. Even when the relationship ends, familial connections and parenting can mean a person subjected to violence will be in continued contact with a person who has hurt them.

A victim-defined perspective results in a definition of safety and success that is both broader and more feasible. Safety is more than an end to physical violence and control. It also means meeting basic needs and having emotional and social well-being. Advocates want all victims to be safe. We also know that not all have that chance.

Victim-defined advocates focus on the practical and the possible, working in partnership with victims to make them safer – less violence, increased economic stability, and strengthened well-being. See [Appendix 1](#).

**Safety**

- No violence
- Basic human needs met
- Social and emotional well-being

**Safer**

- Less violence
- Economic stability increased
- Well-being strengthened

<sup>3</sup>Survivors of intimate partner battering are most often women abused by male partners so that is the gender language used here. All victims, including LGBTQ persons, men with a female partner, and children affected by battering deserve advocacy that makes them safer.

Children, like all victims, deserve comprehensive safety while likely experiencing something less. Ideally, children never experience any form of violence, have every basic need met, and receive the opportunities and parenting they need to thrive and grow up to be healthy, successful adults. Many children do not have access to this ideal of safety, even with our help. Realistically, advocacy and safety planning may make children safer. Small improvements may not be sufficient. Children must have adequate levels of safety. If that standard is not met action must be taken to increase safety. See [Appendix 1](#).

When safety is understood to be more than the elimination of violence and control, the pros and cons of leaving can be assessed more completely. For example, separating from a violent partner may or may not reduce physical violence and can also mean homelessness, inadequate food and health care, insecure immigration status, the loss of social networks and support, or no way for a victim to provide for herself and her children.

Victims in contact cannot rely on leaving a relationship or physical separation to end the violence, abuse, or control. For them to be safer, the violent behavior must be reduced, and they'll need options to meet basic needs and be well.

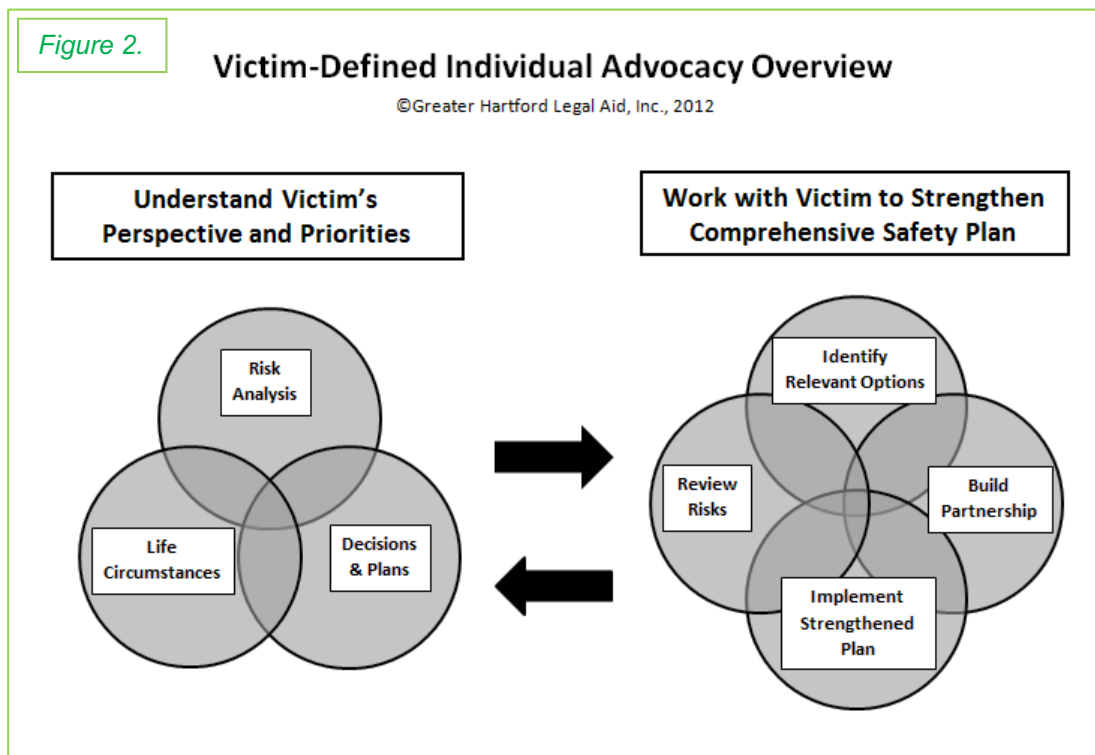
**Note regarding Section 1:** This is a brief summary of complex issues and concepts. Please also see the resources listed at the end of this paper.

## Section 2: Strategies to Reduce Violent Behavior: Victim-Defined Advocacy with Individual Survivors of Violence

There are two components of victim-defined advocacy with individual victims: 1) Understand each victim's perspective and priorities; and 2) Work with each victim to strengthen her comprehensive safety plan. To understand each victim's perspective and priorities, advocates listen and learn about her analysis of the partner-generated and life-generated risks<sup>4</sup> she faces, her life circumstances, and her decisions and plans. Advocates work in partnership with each victim to review risks, identify and analyze relevant options, and implement the strengthened comprehensive safety plan. See [Figure 2](#).

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<sup>4</sup> "Life-generated risks are risks any of us might face. These might include poor health, challenges associated with caring for a disabled child or elderly parent, or being laid off. Many victims and their children must deal with the harm, scarce options, and uncertainty of living in poverty. Victims deal with ineffective institutions and services. They may also face bias and discrimination because of their race/ethnicity, who they love, how they speak, their abilities, their gender identity, their immigration status, or even the neighborhood they live in. Life-generated risks are a powerful factor for safety. Partners who batter may manipulate life-generated risks to further their control. For example, a gay man abusing his partner might reinforce anti-gay attitudes held by some in the legal system to keep his partner from seeking legal help. Life-generated risks often reduce a victim's options and safety strategies. Multiple intersecting risks and limited alternatives make safety planning difficult and complicated for many victims." From - Davies, J. (2017). [Victim-Defined Safety Planning: A Summary](#). Hartford, CT: Greater Hartford Legal Aid. See Also [Appendix 2](#).



This section offers key considerations for advocates as they seek to understand victim perspectives and priorities about a partner's violent behavior. It then discusses ways to strengthen safety plans when reducing violent behavior is one of the strategies. The section concludes with ideas to help us strengthen our advocacy to reduce violent behavior.

### Understanding Victim in Contact Perspectives and Priorities about Violent Behavior

Victim-defined advocacy always begins with listening. The following are some of the perspectives advocates might hear about a partner's violent behavior.

**Victims in contact want a partner or parent to stop being violent.** They want their partner or ex-partner to stop the threats, demeaning put downs, coercion, physical attacks, abuse. For victims experiencing battering,<sup>5</sup> it means a partner stops the tactics of domination and control. Children want an abusive person or parent to stop any violence against them and for that person to stop hurting their non-violent parent. For victims in contact, the

<sup>5</sup>Partner-generated risks include battering and violence that is not battering. Battering occurs when a partner uses violence along with other tactics to dominate and control. Non-battering is violence without the domination and control. A victim with a partner who batters might experience physical violence, sexual violence, threats to intimidate, extortion around money, control over what she can say or do, and a relentless barrage of insults and emotional harm. Victims raising children must also cope with additional tactics from a battering partner that raise risks for the children, make parenting more difficult, and use children as pawns in a never-ending effort to show her "who's the boss." An example of non-battering violence is a slap, shove, or other violent act that does not intimidate the person harmed or lead to diminished autonomy. The categories of battering and non-battering are used to inform advocacy. Some violent behavior may be difficult to identify as battering or non-battering. From - Davies, J. (2017). [Victim-Defined Safety Planning: A Summary](#). Hartford, CT: Greater Hartford Legal Aid.



relationship and/or contact will continue, therefore stopping the violence means the person using violence must change her/his violent behavior.

**A victim may prioritize one aspect of the violence.** Victims want all the violence and abuse to stop, and at the same time, may also identify one aspect of the violence as the primary or first concern. It might be her partner's relentless verbal shaming of her children, the type of sex he demands, or perhaps her needing his permission to socialize with friends, spend money, or change jobs. Priorities are shaped by many factors, including the type and severity of violence and how each victim experiences that harm. Children will have age and developmentally-specific perspectives. A victim identifying a priority for violent behavior change is not in any way saying the other violence is tolerable.

**Violent behavior is only one part of the relationship with a partner or parent.** Adult victims are in an intimate partner relationship with a partner who uses violence. Children are in a familial relationship with a parent who is violent. These relationships include more than violence. For most victims, there are likely positive as well as negative aspects. A partner might be violent and also be thoughtful about holidays and anniversaries, take responsibility for bringing in most of the household's income, or be the family's primary cook. A parent might use violence and also read bedtime stories, coach his child's team, or ask about a child's day at school. The feelings, interactions, and day-to-day life events become intertwined. Of course for some victims, there are partners and parents whose behavior is only violent and negative, who only act out of self-interest, manipulation, and the need to control.

To understand a victim's perspective we must see the whole partner, the whole parent as each adult or child victim sees him. The feelings of adults and children can be complex and contradictory. An adult victim can be mad, afraid, and want to seek help for a partner all at the same time. A child can love an abusive parent and be afraid of him and angry about what he is doing to the child's mother. Victim-defined advocates expect and accept such conflicting emotions, and understand they are a starting point for advocacy, not a barrier.

It can be challenging to see anything but the violence if we frequently work with victims who've recently been harmed, some with injuries that are severe or even life-threatening. If our work focuses on leaving strategies, or our practices or policies prohibit interaction with partners who are abusive, we may hold a narrow view of those who use violence.

Yet, as victim-defined advocates, we know that a complete and accurate view of an abusive partner/parent will help us connect with victims, assess the violence and the possibility of change, and identify strategies to increase victim safety. Through our interactions with victims, we need to get a sense of the positives and negatives of a partner's or parent's behavior and his role in the relationship and family. These factors will impact a victim's view of risks, decisions about her relationship, options, and plans for safety. Information about him is valuable.



As victim-defined advocates, we share values of non-violence, respect, and social justice. A powerful and precise demand for an end to a person's violent behavior while valuing her/his humanity puts those values into practice.

**A victim may have tried to change a partner's behavior.** Victims' safety planning begins with the violence. To strengthen a victim's plan, we'll need to understand what she's tried and what happened. Did a talk from his mother change how he treated her family, but not her? Did going to shelter and telling him she was going to leave him make a positive or negative difference? Did he stop talking to her for a week after she told him he needed help? Did the police and court intervention reduce the physical violence, but not the control? Did she convince him their children were suffering because of what they saw him do to her and that he didn't need to "be like his father"? Did couples counseling from her faith community make him more attentive, yet more convinced than ever that she should obey him? Did his AA sponsor help him take responsibility for the harm he'd done and commit to change? Or, maybe her safety strategy was to give in, to try to make everything just as he wanted it – perfect home, perfect kids.

Knowing what, if any, impact her strategies had on a partner's behavior will inform what options might make sense, and how best to pursue them safely. Understanding what she's tried will also show us each victim's strength and resources and guide us on how best to support her autonomy and safety.

### **Working With Victims In Contact To Strengthen Comprehensive Safety Plans**

This section briefly discusses key advocacy considerations regarding building partnerships, risk review, identifying relevant options, and plan implementation with victims in contact when reducing violent and abusive behavior is a part of a victim's safety plan.

Advocates know what to ask, what to say, and what to offer when leaving and physical separation are the primary safety strategy in a victim's safety plan. The inventory of harm and risks caused by violence and exploration of options to leave a relationship are well-worn paths for most advocates.

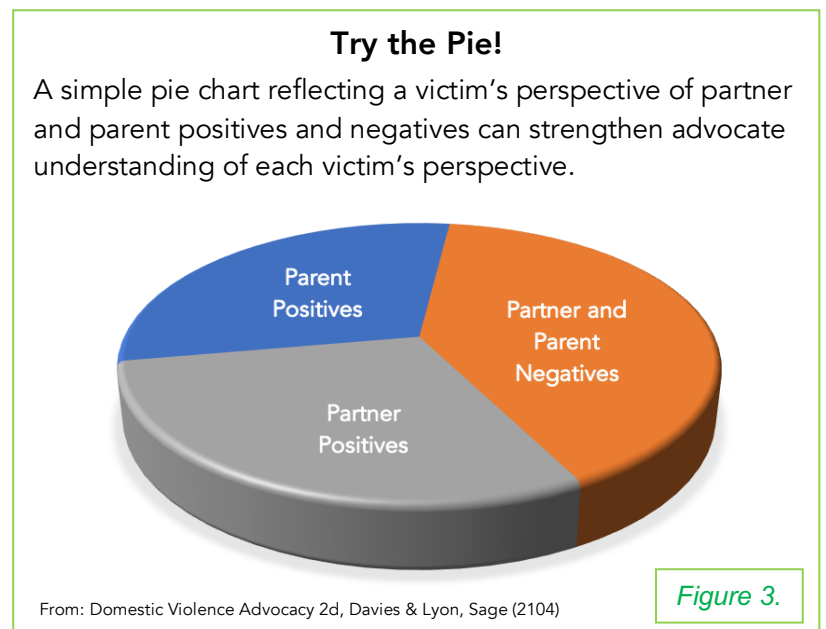
The focus of advocacy shifts when reducing violent behavior is the priority in a victim's plan to be safer. Risks continue to be explored yet are done so along with assessing the possibility of changed behavior. To identify strategies for change, a complete picture of a person using violence must be gathered. Options will necessarily include services, interventions, resources, and expectations focused on the person using violence. Advocates will partner with victims who remain in the relationship to strengthen their resilience and independence, and to try to equalize power between partners. Advocacy for children must respond to parents who are together – one violent, one victimized. It will also assess for adequate levels of safety for children and identify ways to support resilience. There will continue to be the familiar themes of our work – transformative outcomes for victims, and

coping with uncertainty, inadequate resources, and the unrealistic expectation that every victim can and should leave.

Although advocates regularly work with victims in contact, we know less about these paths to safer lives. This is the hard, essential work of ending violence – person by person, family by family. When reducing violent behavior is more robustly added to the strategy of leaving and physical separation, all victims will have more options for safety. Advocacy that supports victims' strategies for leaving and/or pursues ways to reduce violent behavior will require shifts in what we say, offer, and do. We can be confident. We have trailblazers to follow and survivors of violence to tell us if we've lost our way.

**Victims in contact may need us to demonstrate that we'll help.** Many of the messages about what advocates and domestic violence programs do are about safely leaving a relationship, shelter, protective orders, and law enforcement. These are important resources, and these messages offer hope and help to many. Yet, for victims in contact, these resources may sound irrelevant, the messages discouraging. To overcome this barrier, we'll need to explain how we'll help them. In our words and in our actions we'll need to show each victim in contact that we believe she deserves our advocacy, we understand leaving is not always an option, and that we do not judge her for staying. We will have to work hard to soften the harsh reactions of those in other systems – the shame and blame placed on victims for not leaving rather than on violent partners for not stopping the violent and abusive behavior.

Trust and connection improve our chance to help. What we say or do can foster or degrade our working relationship with each victim. Our language, attitude, and actions regarding her partner can be determinative factors. Building trust requires a careful balance of her view of him and the truth about violence. We'll need to see him as she sees him and reflect that back while validating for her that violence is not love or respect, it is harmful and wrong, and that stopping the violence is her partner's responsibility. For some survivors of violence, the most important way to demonstrate our commitment is how we show our concern for their children. Take the time to understand each child's life, how the child is doing, and the child's relationship with each parent and others in the household. See [Figure 3](#).



**Risk review will include a discussion of efforts to reduce violent behavior.** Risk review is a respectful exploration of partner-generated risks and life-generated risks, including a review for life-threatening violence or serious risks to children. When the reduction of violent behavior is part of a safety plan, there will also be a review of risks related to those strategies. Advocates have some knowledge and experience about violent partners and efforts to intervene. A victim knows him as a partner and as a parent. Together, advocates and victims have more complete information.

Some victims try hard to figure out why the violence is happening and what makes him do the things he does. An advocate might hear about a partner's traumatic childhood, how his father hit him and his mother, time spent in foster care, the tour of duty in the army and how he was different when he got back, his drinking or addiction to prescription meds, or maybe how he's "just not right." For advocates, it can be helpful to hear these as explanations, not excuses. A victim's perspective provides important information. It might offer guidance about what strategies may help him change as a partner and as a parent. It will also likely offer insight into ways to keep victims and their children safer while efforts to change behavior are happening. There will be uncertainty in any risk review exchange, and the limitations on predicting future behavior or behavior change will be part of what advocates explain to each victim. It is also OK to say we don't know if a partner will be violent or if he won't. Decisions about a victim's life and safety plan are hers to make.

**Safety options offered and analyzed will include strategies to reduce violent behavior.** To strengthen safety plans, advocates offer resources, options and strategies that are relevant to each victim's risks and priorities. For adult and child victims in contact, relevant options will likely include strategies to reduce violent behavior and improve a person's behavior as a partner and parent. Knowing that any strategy will be carefully considered and analyzed with each victim, advocates can be inventive and resourceful. There are the established options such as batterer intervention programs, law enforcement, court orders, therapy, and clinical treatment. There are services and interventions that may not be domestic violence reduction focused, but might support behavior change, such as substance abuse treatment, parenting programs, job training, and many types of counseling or groups run by a wide range of organizations and facilitators. Those who use violence may interact with programs trying to offer mental or physical health care, respond to neighborhood or other violence, or provide basic needs, such as food or shelter. Victim and community specific strategies might include her family, faith community, or other source of influence over his behavior. Ask her, be open-minded, and listen attentively to each victim's ideas. If the survivor of violence thinks it might help, then talk it through. Share your concerns, be honest about how much we don't know, and, in partnership with her, explore how it might make things better or worse for her and for the children.

Particularly when victims are in contact, consequences for an abusive partner will likely impact the victim and the family. These considerations must be included when analyzing a strategy. For example, the cost of attending a program will mean less money for the family,

and many families can't afford services or counseling. Similarly, some interventions and the resulting lack of privacy, will mean an abusive partner loses his job, that a victim loses her job, or that the family's housing is jeopardized.

Strategies to reduce violent behavior will be explored in addition to all the other strategies, options, and resources and advocate would offer. Discussions with a victim about a partner's behavior change will be realistic. The range of risks, availability of relevant options, and the level of violence will guide, and victim decisions will define, the direction of our advocacy.

**Work with victims to safely implement strategies she chooses.** Plan how and who will engage with the abusive partner about change. Who will he listen to? Some strategies will be totally voluntary, and some may not. For example, an abusive partner may be required to attend an intervention program by the criminal legal system, a court ordered parenting plan, an employer, or by a commanding officer if he is in the military. Also develop plans to keep the adult and any children safer during implementation of both voluntary and involuntary interventions. Offer information about the strategy and how it works. Discuss with each victim how she'll decide whether the strategy is making things better, and what she and the children can do if it is making no change or making things worse. Talk with victim-parents about their children's well-being and ways to build resilience. Plan what to do if the children are not OK.

**Some victims will want advocates to engage with partners.**

Advocate to victim: *"You don't deserve this. What he's doing is wrong. It's hurting you and your children."*

Victim to advocate: *Yes, I know. Will you tell him that?"*

There are advocates and programs that work with partners who use violence, often through an intervention or supervised visitation program. Many court-based advocates regularly interact with partners who use violence. And, there are programs, many of which are culturally specific, that work with everyone in the family. Examples include [The ASHA Project](#), [Caminar Latino](#), and [The NW Network of Bi, Trans, Lesbian and Gay Survivors of Abuse](#).

As advocates work with victims in contact, there will be victim-defined opportunities for us to be engaged with partners who use violence. Minimally, and with victim permission, advocates might act as a liaison with intervention services staff working with a violent partner or parent. We might support a victim pursuing a safety strategy by offering information and access to interventions, services or resources for her partner, and this could mean we interact with him in some way. Some of us will work directly with abusive partners to support changes in violent behavior, improve parenting, or fulfill some other role.

If an advocate's program is not already interacting or working with those who use violence, discussion and preparation is necessary. There are concerns for victim safety and advocate

safety, and decisions to make about how to assess effectiveness. Some may see this as beyond their mission or not the priority for limited resources. These are good discussions to have. Make sure that victim perspectives guide those conversations, and keep in mind that money spent reducing violence is money spent to increase safety. We can all learn from advocates who are already engaged with those who use violence in order to increase safety for victims. The breadth of current work pulls our understaffed organizations and leaders in many directions. It will not be easy to take the time to think and plan. Yet if we do, we can develop protocols that guide when we might engage with an abusive partner, who should engage, and how best to support victim and advocate safety throughout.

### Strengthening Advocacy

Advocacy must continue to evolve. Stagnant, siloed, dogmatic approaches, no matter how well-intentioned, do not rise to meet the safety needs of survivors of violence, and they hold back the advocate spirit. Victim-defined advocacy requires movement in belief and action.

Our work to reduce violent behavior comes in many forms. Our prevention efforts might include media campaigns, anti-violence programs in schools or the community, or initiatives with youth. Intervention may include services such as batterer intervention, parenting skill building, psychoeducational classes, or a clinical approach to behavior change. There might also be faith or community-based initiatives, or approaches that involve family members. The level of commitment and resources varies greatly and directly affects our advocacy with victims in contact.

We understand the rational reasons why a victim wants a partner to change and that those in contact need partner change to be safer. We know that violent behavior must be reduced in order to end family violence. These reasons compel us to act, while important considerations erode our resolve. For one, we're unsure that strategies to reduce violent behavior will work and we don't want victims to be hurt. We may also doubt that violence reduction should be our priority. The attention, the resources to get a violent partner to go through life in a better, more constructive way might seem beyond our role.

Our work has always been about human behavior. There is uncertainty in all our safety strategies. Leaving and no contact does not guarantee safety and sometimes increases risks, so too will strategies to reduce violent behavior. Whether pursued through physical separation or behavior change, we do know that reducing violence makes victims safer. This is our central role. Victims will benefit if we learn, think and advocate more to reduce violent behavior. Victim-defined advocacy pushes us to assess and shift our work to align with victim needs and priorities. All victims, and particularly victims in contact, need the violence to stop. How will we strengthen our advocacy? How will we change?

### E.K.

You meet E.K. in court. Her partner and children's father, J.T., was arrested last night. The family was at a community celebration. J.T. was drunk. He got angry when E.K. wanted to leave early with the children. He shoved E.K. away when she tried to get the car keys from him. As she fell backwards one of the children was also knocked down.

E.K. is clear about what she wants: for J.T. to be out of jail and back home, for there to be no court action that will make J.T. lose his job, and for J.T. to get help.

How can we be prepared to advocate for E.K. and her children? How will we inform her decisions about the help she wants for J.T.? How will we find the strategies or interventions most likely to help J.T. change? What if the available options are not responsive to J.T.'s life experience and culture? How will we guide E.K.'s assessment of J.T.'s willingness to take the responsibility to change? What will be the most effective approach to advocating for court action that supports E.K.'s priorities and safety plan, i.e., no protective order, no conviction?

The following are some key areas for learning, thinking, and cautious, victim-defined innovation:

**Explain our role.** Many believe that it is an advocate's job to help victims leave a relationship. This view comes, in part, because escape assistance is an important part of what advocates do and reflects the narratives we most often tell about our work. And in part, advocates are seen as having this narrow role because leaving is perceived to be the best response to domestic violence. This belief persists even though leaving is an extremely difficult path for many victims, and one that is unrealistic and ineffective for others.

Defined by the victims we serve; an advocates' role is to work with victims to make them safer. For many victims, this will not include leaving or physical separation as a safety strategy. It will strengthen our advocacy if our role is accurately described, limitations and expectations about leaving removed, and the value of advocacy more fully understood.

**Offer victim-specific guidance rather than generalizations.** We generalize because human behavior is unpredictable, to err on the side of caution, and to ensure that we are not fooled by those abusive partners who manipulate and relentlessly scheme to shift responsibility to the victim. It may seem prudent to use broad statements. For example, to say "abusive partners don't change," "interventions don't work," "violence gets worse," "we work with victims, abusive partners are not our job or our priority," and then to talk about leaving and separation. We must consider the impact when a generalization does not fit a victim's circumstances or safety plan.



If we improve our ability to apply general knowledge to specific situations and people, we can offer more relevant information and guidance. To strengthen our advocacy, we'll need to listen carefully to how victims talk about their partners, what they tell us, and what they think might help a partner take the responsibility to change. If we simply catalogue the violence, label him a batterer or abuser – defined solely by the violence – we may miss an opportunity to connect with the victim, to learn what makes an abusive partner tick, and to identify ways to make victims and their children safer.

**Learn about violence.** We know about how a partner uses violence, how to assess lethality, and the impact of violence on victims – adults and children. There is still so much to learn about *why* a person uses violence. What do we say to E.K. when she asks, "Why does J.T. do that?" We do not need to pick only one cause, nor do we need to dismiss a cause because an abusive partner uses it to justify or excuse his behavior. Witnessing violence as a child, substance abuse, mental health, an underlying disrespect of women, others – all possible causes should be considered. Issues might be inter-related. For example, a trauma-related mental health condition and misogyny are not mutually exclusive. And, we must understand how people and communities are affected by racism, persecution, violence, deprivation, and poverty. For some, an overpowering hopelessness and righteous anger generated by injustice begins in childhood and does not end. We must acknowledge and comprehend this reality not because it is a justification for violent behavior against a partner or child, but because it can be a gateway to engagement and transformation. There is much to learn.

**Learn about what has supported change.** Some partners/parents have changed for the better. How? Was it seeing the look of fear in his young son's face? Did a batter intervention programs make a difference? For some it may have been a family intervention or a personal revelation. For others, it might have been counseling, parenting education, substance use treatment, or having the effects of trauma identified and treated. Perhaps the change was motivated by a concern about the consequences of arrest or by fear of losing the relationship. Maybe a faith community played a role, or it was the interaction with a respected community leader. Perhaps it was a job that provided economic stability, pride and structure, or some combination of factors.

We need to understand the key to change for partners from diverse cultural and life experiences who use different levels of violence and/or tactics of control. And we need to know if it might work for the partner of the victim we're working with right now. We need to know what might work for J.T. When an abusive partner's behavior makes it clear there will be no change, no successful intervention, and if leaving is not an option, then we'll work with his partner to plan for building her resilience, protecting herself during an assault, and exercising as much autonomy as she can safely assert. We will also assess and respond to the children's safety. Once again, there is much to learn.



**Connect to those who work to reduce violent behavior.** These individuals and organizations are our allies. Those who share our values are advocates for victims. We might find these allies providing clinical treatment related to trauma, substance use, mental health issues, or leading psychoeducational groups, offering faith-based counseling, leading community efforts, working with veterans, or in programs related to children, parenting, restorative justice, or sports. They are also in all kinds of community settings. We can also find them engaged in violence reduction work in batterer intervention, court, probation, and correction programs. Whatever the setting, we can discern allies from those whose motives and methods do not support victim safety, and then advocate accordingly.

If victims are in contact or if the family is together, then an advocacy connection to those engaged with partners/parents who use violence offers opportunities to strengthen safety strategies. They know the facts, patterns, and information about abusive partners, violence, and behavior change that only experience can provide; and those of us working solely with victims do not know. Their knowledge and experience can strengthen our advocacy.

**Include violence reduction strategies and skills in advocate orientation, training, supervision and support.** Each time we talk with survivors of violence, we want to convey the range of our advocacy, the depth of our understanding, and the strength of our partnership to reduce violent behavior. We also want to offer relevant strategies and explore each with the victim, and then provide assistance to implement those strategies as safely as possible. This requires knowledge and skill building, along with access to mentoring from experienced advocates and supervisors. The lives, risks, and safety needs of victims are unique and diverse. Relevant safety strategies involve community, government, social service, and legal systems, each with its own rules, personnel, complexity and idiosyncrasies. It is not realistic to think any one of us could hold this range of knowledge. We'll know and offer more if we take a team approach and have strong working relationships with those outside our organizations.

Confidentiality and privacy are bedrocks of our advocacy, intended to encourage victims to speak freely and to keep abusive partners from using information to inflict further harm. These important goals must be balanced with the need to share information in order for victims to get the services, resources, and protections they need and for us to advocate effectively. For victim-defined advocates, confidentiality is a victim-controlled protection not a broadly applied barrier to our advocacy. We wouldn't for example say, "We can't work with this system/agency/community group because of confidentiality." Rather, we would offer each victim the opportunity to decide whether her confidential information might be shared as part of our advocacy.

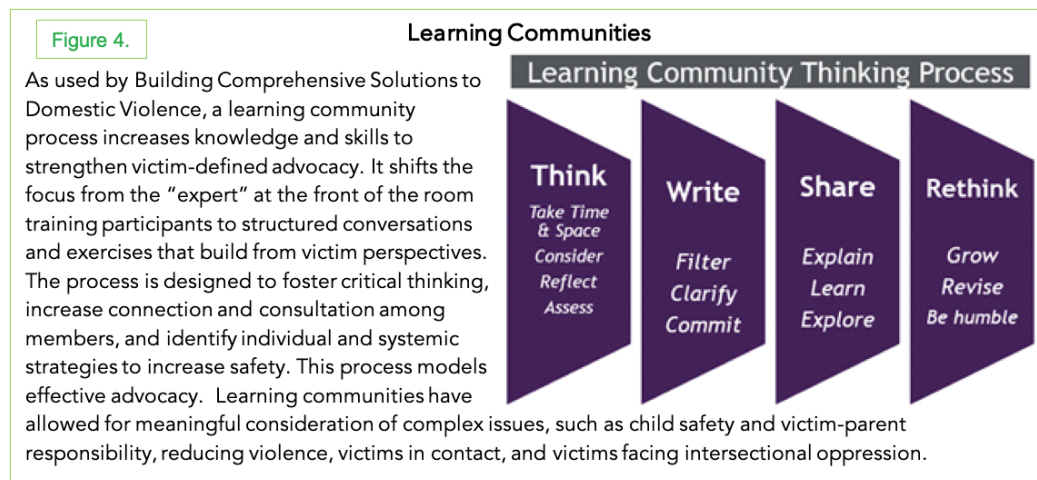
Advocacy is strengthened if we make the space to have conversations and discuss strategies to explore and evolve strategies to reduce violent behavior. Along with leaving strategies, violence reduction should be a regular topic at staff meetings, case discussions, supervision,

training, orientation, and strategic planning sessions. [Figure 4](#) describes a learning community approach and [Appendix 3](#) discusses how to start a learning community.

### Take the next step:

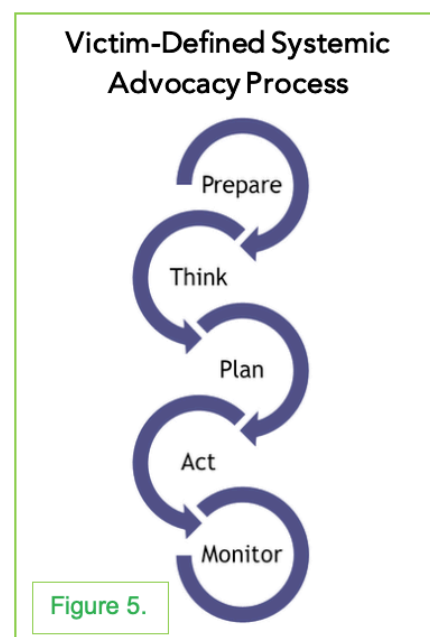
Organizations and individual advocates are in different stages in the pursuit to end violent behavior. For some, this shift may seem too big or too filled

with uncertainty. Think and talk about what incremental next step is feasible, and then take that step. It could begin with the creation of a learning community, described in [Appendix 3](#).



### Section 3: Strategies to Reduce Violence: Victim-Defined Systemic Advocacy

Victim-defined systemic advocacy improves and increases options necessary to strengthen comprehensive safety plans and seeks to make all victims safer. As with individual advocacy, it is driven by victim perspectives and includes analysis, planning, and action. See [Figure 5](#). This section offers a brief discussion of systemic advocacy related to victims in contact and reducing violent behavior. It begins with an overview of two key policy objectives, and then discusses considerations regarding our messaging about domestic violence, safety, and advocacy



### Two Policy Objectives Related to Reduction of Violent Behavior

#### 1. Include reduction of violent behavior in policy analysis and advocacy.

In current policy advocacy and analysis, there is an understandable focus on victim safety. Advocates have been meticulous in analyzing how policies, laws, and practices impact safety. On a local, state, and national level, they have changed thousands of policies to increase options and reduce risks for adult and child victims. Every aspect of systems have been impacted, including law and procedures, staffing, forms and computer systems, intake/screening, resources, programs, and training. For example, in many locations every

step in the police response process has been analyzed and shifted to improve victim safety, within the basic role of law enforcement, including dispatch, securing the scene, probable cause assessment, report writing, and the handoff to the court system for prosecution.

With a similarly relentless and strategic approach, advocates could improve policy to reduce violent behavior. Currently, policy advocates ask the essential question, “How does a policy increase or decrease victim safety?” If they don’t already, advocates could add the question, “How does a policy increase or decrease the likelihood that an abusive person will reduce violent and abusive behavior?” Answering that question would require analysis of how the policy meets victim priorities and perspectives regarding the reduction of violence, coercion, and other abuse. It is important to consider how policy, procedure, protocols and laws, forms, staffing, intake/screening, and training might change if in addition to safety, a systemic response focused on the cause of the problem, the person using violent behavior. There are many factors to include in this analysis, including the range and severity of violence used, cultural considerations, and the role of the system being analyzed.

Even if a system identifies victim safety and violence reduction as part of its role, it may not have the structure, authority, skills, or resources to effectively protect victims or support violence reduction for a range of abusive partners/parents. Structural inequities and negative institutional consequences, such as those arising from racial or gender bias, for both survivors and those who use violence must also be considered. Of course, any consideration or policy shift must also analyze the impact on the safety of adult and child victims. Leaving and physical separation will continue to be essential safety options for some victims and these responses must be maintained and strengthened.

## **2. Strengthen and expand options to reduce violent behavior.**

Strategies and interventions to reduce violent behavior are a work in progress. There are not enough options. With careful integration of victim perspectives, we must make room for thoughtful innovation and fresh ideas. Evidence, research and evaluation are important to this process; particularly if the questions, measures, and analysis include the perspectives of adult and child victims. Information from those who choose to use violence will also further the analysis and process.

We know that those who use violence are diverse individuals whose life experience, race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and culture affects what they do, how they do it, and what will make them change. When a victim correctly states “he needs help,” we want to have more to say than, “Call the police.” Although some who use violence will only respond to the intervention that arrest, prosecution, and court oversight can provide, some will respond to less intrusive and less punitive approaches. The criminal legal system can be effective for some victims, yet given its narrow role and potential for negative consequences, it is essential that community based options grow. In addition, policy analysis of the benefits and the risks that can come from criminal legal system interventions will better inform advocates as they work with victims to strengthen their safety plans. This

analysis must include the perspectives of women of color and others disparately impacted by criminal legal system responses, and be guided by those critiques as we work with survivors who need and want a police response, prosecution, and/or court intervention.

Victims need a range of differential and culturally-responsive interventions and strategies to reduce violent behavior, and advocates need to know when and for whom they might work. Options must be accessible, affordable, and constructed in ways that engage abusive partners and parents to take responsibility for their behavior. For example, it is currently viewed as best practice for victims to work in partnership with advocates to strengthen their comprehensive safety plan. How might the field change if abusive partners had the responsibility to have a plan to reduce their violent behavior? Current policy analysis of this example would include the ways in which such plans might not work. It would identify how some partners would use such plans to their advantage and to the detriment of their partner and maybe even their children. That's an important but incomplete analysis. We must push on to think through when violence reduction plans might work to change behavior, for who, and how. And then continue with the process of analyzing implementation questions, consequences for victims with particular circumstances or interests, and other strategic considerations.

As we work to strengthen and expand options, it will be important to analyze current policies, standards, and funder conditions related to those who use violence. For example, many states have batterer intervention standards to promote best practices and lessen the chance for ineffective or even harmful programming. Funders may prohibit work with "offenders." Some programs may prohibit abusive partners/parents from having physical access to buildings where victims are receiving advocacy and services. Analysis of the goals, outcomes, and consequences of these policies related to abusive partners will ensure we keep essential protections in place while removing unnecessary barriers to innovation or options that will make victims in contact safer.

### Communication Considerations

What we say and teach about safety, domestic violence, and violent and abusive behavior change is important. We convey that information in our advocacy, outreach, media campaigns, training, funding proposals, systemic advocacy, websites, and writing. Review and revision of current communications could strengthen our advocacy. The following are a few of the topics we might want to consider:

**Domestic violence:** Do we convey the range of violence? Violence differs in frequency and severity from minor verbal putdowns to life-threatening attacks, from the occasional immature and inept interaction to relentless mind-controlling stalking, and all the behavior in between. Individuals have different motivations for using violence. Some violence between intimate partners includes domination and control and is what we have historically

called battering; some does not. The effect of the violence on a victim will differ for each adult or child victim. Some are terrified, others less so.

**Leaving:** Do we convey that leaving and physical separation are essential safety strategies for some but not all victims? Do we explain that some victims don't have the option to leave and that leaving makes things worse for some victims and their children? Do we include the difficult reality that some victims come to the rational conclusion that remaining in the relationship, despite the violence, is the least harmful alternative for them and their children?

Harsh judgments and blame for not leaving reduces safety options and can increase a battering partner's control. Leaving strategies are not relevant for victims in contact. To be safer, adult and child victims in contact need effective strategies to reduce violent behavior so they *are safer*. Leaving is too often viewed as the answer to domestic violence, virtually eliminating any responsibility from the person using the violence.

**Safety:** Do we convey that safety is a broad concept? Do we consistently explain that to be safe, victims need to meet basic needs, experience well-being, and be free from violence? It is realistic and feasible for victims to be *safer*, which means their lives are better, that there is less violence, increased economic stability, and strengthened well-being. Children require adequate levels of safety and a competent parent or caretaker. See also [Appendix 1](#).

**Children:** Do we convey children's needs and perspectives? Children are typically in contact with an abusive parent even if the victim-parent has left the relationship. Children need the victim-parent to be supported and the abusive parent to be less harmful and more helpful, including the reduction of violent behavior. Do we explain the power of resilience and how to strengthen it?

**Responsibility for the harm:** Do we convey that the person using violence is responsible for the harm he/she causes? Too often victims are held responsible for not stopping the violence because they are in a relationship or in contact with the person using violence. Violence is the problem. Reducing violent behavior is the solution. The person using violence is responsible for stopping the violence, not a victim who remains in a relationship or in contact.

**Reducing violent behavior:** Do we convey that some who use violence change for the better and that some do not? There is uncertainty, and most of the time it is hard to know whether a particular person will change. There is a lot we have yet to learn. Survivors in contact need violent behavior reduced in order to be safer. Strategies to reduce violent behavior need to be strengthened and expanded.

**Persons who use violence:** Do we convey the whole of who they are? Violence may be most, or only a small part, of how a person interacts with his partner and children. An abusive person may be a manipulative batterer, charming to all but his partner, who he frightens and

controls without hesitation or remorse. There are other narratives to be told. Stories of privilege and of poverty, injustice, immaturity, shame, or trauma. The reality and harm of the violent behavior can be clearly told along with other aspects of the person's humanity. It may also be helpful to unpack commonly held views of what it means to be a man. There are some partners who know it is not right to storm through life bringing fear and anger to their home and family. Some of them want to be better partners, better parents. There is hope in that message, perhaps a way to build momentum for more to change. Narratives that respect the person and call out the violence may resonate more broadly, increasing allies and strengthening the movement to end violence.

**Offender Accountability:** Is this the phrase we want to use to convey the change in behavior that victims need to be safer? "Offender" is the language of the criminal legal system, a narrow label for those convicted of a crime. There may not be agreement or even a common understanding of what accountability means. If accountability is the goal, a clear and concise definition is essential. How would survivors of violence define it?

## Conclusion

Advocacy to reduce violent behavior is an essential safety strategy for victims in contact. We will pivot the focus from blaming victims for not leaving to placing responsibility on the abusive partner for ending violent behavior.

We will listen to survivors of violence, adults and children, who remain in contact. The lessons they share from their lives, cultures, knowledge and from their hearts will teach us how to proceed. We will embrace the complexity of human behavior and family relationships. We will hold fear and courage. We will hold anger about the harm caused along with forgiveness and healing. We will hold uncertainty about behavior change with a steel-forged resolve that the violence never happen again. We will build many ways to reduce violent behavior and, with survivors, walk many paths to safety.

### Resources about Victim-Defined Advocacy:

- *Domestic Violence Advocacy 2d: Complex Lives, Difficult Choices*, by Jill Davies and Eleanor Lyon, Sage, 2014.
- *Advocacy Beyond Leaving: Helping Battered Women in Contact with Current or Former Partners*, by Jill Davies, Futures Without Violence, 2009. Available at: [www.vawnet.org](http://www.vawnet.org).
- *Victim-Defined Safety Planning: A Summary*, by Jill Davies, Greater Hartford Legal Aid, 2017. Available at: [www.vawnet.org](http://www.vawnet.org).

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of her work is the conception and continued development of the *victim-defined* approach to advocacy. She has written and consulted extensively on issues of importance to family violence victims, including advocacy and safety planning, poverty, and legal issues. The author of numerous articles and materials regarding violence against women, sexual violence, and family violence, her writing encourages critical thinking and supports improved practice.

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## Appendix 1

Victim-Defined Perspectives on Safety  
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### Safety



For victims, safety is a broad concept, not one limited to reducing physical violence or a partner's controlling behavior. Like all of us, victims and their children also need food, shelter, and other essential resources to live. The spiritual, social, and emotional aspects of our humanity are also necessary for security.

- **No Violence**
- **Basic Human Needs Met**
- **Social and Emotional Well-Being**

### Safer



Every victim deserves to be safe. Some victims do not have that chance. When total safety is not possible, working with victims to make them safer is a practical goal. Such safety plans will include feasible strategies and incremental improvements. While never abandoning the ultimate goal of safety for all, this approach creates many ways to help. This pragmatism co-exists with a relentless commitment to end violence, respect for each victim's unique experience of violence and path to safer, and demand to those who use violence to change. Systemic advocacy to increase options is necessary.

- **Less Violence**
  - Reduced level
  - Less frequent
  - Less control
- **Economic Stability Increased**
  - Fewer gaps in meeting basic needs
  - More financial resources
- **Well-Being Strengthened**
  - More resilience to effects of violence
  - Emotional healing
  - Increased social supports
  - Reinforced cultural strengths

### Children are Safer Enough



Children deserve comprehensive safety. Some do not have access to that ideal. As advocacy toward the vision of safety for all continues, making children safer is a practical goal—if there is a standard. Do children have adequate levels of safety? Are they “safer enough”? This phrase reflects that even with children, the day-to-day advocacy goal is not perfection (safety) but improvement (safer), although a standard must be met (safer enough). Davies, J. & Lyon, E. (2014). *Domestic Violence Advocacy 2d*. Sage. p. 171.

- **Adequate Levels of Safety**
  - No Violence - no physical, emotional, sexual violence against children; limited/less exposure to violence against others
  - Basic Needs - food, shelter, health care, educational opportunity
  - Social and Emotional Well-Being - healing, resilience, development
- **Capable Parent/s or Other Caretaker/s**

## Appendix 2

### Life Generated Risks<sup>1</sup>

#### Effects and Partner's Use of Life-Generated Risks © SAGE

Effects of Risks	Partner's Possible Use of Risks
Poverty/Financial Limitations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Limited transportation and mobility</li><li>• Limited job opportunities</li><li>• Less access to technology, more isolation</li><li>• Less access to health care</li><li>• Limited housing options</li><li>• Less access to credit</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reinforce she can't afford to live without him</li><li>• Use financial constraints to limit her independence and further her isolation</li></ul>
Home Location: Where Victims Live	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Resources may be unavailable</li><li>• Lack of transportation may limit options</li><li>• Social/cultural supports less accessible</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Further control and isolation</li></ul>
Physical Health Issues	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Services or resources may be inaccessible</li><li>• Inaccurate assumptions made about victim's ability</li><li>• May face discrimination and bias</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use the disability to keep her isolated, e.g. remove mobility devices</li><li>• Use her disability as topic to humiliate</li><li>• Threaten or remove access to caretaker</li></ul>
Mental Health Issues	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Services or resources may be inaccessible</li><li>• Inaccurate assumptions made about victim's ability</li><li>• May face discrimination and bias</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use disability or label as topic to humiliate</li><li>• Threaten or use her issues to have her hospitalized, medicated, labeled</li><li>• Threaten or use her perceived or actual disability to keep her from getting custody/access to her children</li></ul>

<sup>1</sup> Domestic Violence Advocacy 2d: Complex Lives, Difficult Choices, by Jill Davies and Eleanor Lyon, Sage, 2014.

### Inadequate Responses by Major Social Institutions

- Victims don't get help
- Response makes things worse
- Victims don't seek help
- Failure to help her may reinforce his control
- If she doesn't believe system will help she has fewer options for safety

### Discrimination Based on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Gender Identity, Immigration Status, or Sexual Orientation

- Victims not seen as credible leading to ineffective or harmful responses
- Lessens job opportunity or advancement, educational opportunities
- Limits choice of residence, relocation
- Barriers to credit, loans, mortgages
- Barriers to services
- Victims afraid to defend themselves or call police for fear they are more likely to be arrested and incarcerated or lose their children (may also fear that partner will be mistreated)
- Barriers to physical & mental health care
- Use the victim's perception of discrimination to reinforce a belief that she has no options
- Violent partner benefits from the reality of discrimination which limits victim's options
- Use possibility that he will be discriminated against to convince victim not to seek help, particularly from law enforcement
- Lesbian or gay partner uses the threat of "outing" partner
- Use negative messages of bias and discrimination to reinforce emotional abuse

## Appendix 3

### Victim-Defined Advocacy Beyond Leaving: Safer through Strategies to Reduce Violent Behavior Learning Community

As used by Building Comprehensive Solutions to Domestic Violence (BCS), a learning community (LC) process increases knowledge and skills to strengthen victim-defined advocacy. It shifts the focus from the “expert” at the front of the room training participants to structured conversations and exercises that build from victim perspectives. The process is designed to foster critical thinking, increase connection and consultation among members, and identify individual and systemic strategies to increase safety. This process models effective advocacy and facilitates meaningful consideration of complex issues.

There is no particular structure or format for a learning community, although thinking and advance planning are necessary. Here are a few ideas about how to get started:

- Identify the topic/s to explore. For example, the community might learn together about advocacy that is victim-defined, the concepts of safety/safer, adult and child victims in contact, theories regarding the causes of domestic violence, or strategies to reduce violent behavior, including the cultural contexts.

- Identify who will be part of the learning community and how it will be organized. Learning and a sense of community are supported through sharing diverse perspectives, a structured but flexible process, and the opportunity to come together multiple times. Sharing information or knowledge, using the BCS



Learning Community Thinking Process (see graphic), and scheduling generous time for discussion encourages LC members to have constructive and authentic exchanges. The structure might include one or more knowledgeable leaders to guide the process and facilitate as necessary.

- Determine how diverse victim perspectives and priorities will be integrated throughout the process. What range of ideas and thoughts would adult and child victims in contact share? What does the learning community need to learn from victims in contact?
- Determine how diverse advocate perspectives will be integrated throughout the process. What range of ideas and thoughts would advocates share? What can the learning community learn from advocates?
- Build a constructive process that fosters connection, innovation, a call to Mission, and hope. Learning community can be a place to grow, take risks, and have fun. One measure is that participants look forward to the sessions and want to continue to learn together. People who come together in community and learn are a force for change.