

LGBT Communities and Domestic Violence

Information & Resources

KEY ISSUE

Intervention/Prevention Services



prepared by

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KEY ISSUE

Intervention/Prevention Services

It is impossible to discuss intervention/prevention services for LGBT people without first acknowledging the increased acceptance of anti-LGBT bias in national discourse and the concurrent rise in number and viciousness of hate crimes in the United States. Trans people, because they often more visibly transgress accepted social gender stereotypes, are more frequent victims of the most overt and brutal hate crimes. The dominant culture is often unwilling to recognize either the existence or real impact of hate crimes and, consequently, law enforcement, emergency services and other social services often refuse to respond or do not respond appropriately. People who identify as LGBT frequently approach shelters, social service agencies, domestic violence service providers, police and the courts with great caution, fearing re-victimization from institutions that have a history of exclusion, hostility and violence toward them. For example, “since police officers were perpetrators in almost half (48%) of the incidents of anti-transgender violence in San Francisco last year [2000], transgender people are not likely to seek police protection from an abusive partner” (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Projects, 2001).

It is also worth noting that many acts of domestic violence against LGBT people may not be committed by an individual in a same-gender/gender-variant relationship at all, for example, a male relative may batter a woman after discovering she is involved in a lesbian relationship, feeling it somehow reflects on his family honor.

As stated earlier in this collection, “domestic violence in LGBT communities exists within the framework of heterosexism and homophobia and other oppressive belief systems” (for more information, see the information packet *The Intersection of Sexism and Homophobia*). The same can be said for intervention/prevention services. Over the past 30 years a large portion of the work of eliminating domestic violence has been focused on the legislative and legal systems. While the changes in the law have been extremely important, it is significant to note that access to the legal system is not the same as justice in the legal system. In the overtly hierarchical structure of the legal system, for instance, survivors of violence in same-gender/gender-variant relationships are not routinely afforded the same protections as those employed to protect privileged heterosexual victims of domestic violence (Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women, 1992). The Violence Against Women Act of 2005 does not specifically include nor exclude same-gender/ gender-variant couples in its definition of intimate partner violence. However, in some states the intent of the Act to protect anyone in a dating or domestic setting from violence is being challenged

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in court. The challenge is based on defense of marriage legislation or constitutional amendments that prohibit not only the recognition of the marriages of same-gender/gender-variant couples but also the recognition of a legal status for any unmarried couple “that intends to approximate the design, qualities, significance or effect of marriage” (Marriage Protection Amendment, Section 11, Article XV, Ohio Constitution, 2004).

State statutes determine what constitutes an incident of domestic violence. Many states do not recognize same-gender/gender-variant unions and exclude them from statute language and, in fact, there is no legal or universal “definition” for what constitutes a same-gender/gender-variant relationship. If they are not legally defined and included in the language of the law, rights afforded by that law to heterosexual victims often do not apply. Some states have even used legal definitions of marriage to deny access to safety and support for persons who live together and identify as LGBT. Add to these legal barriers the discretionary nature of arrest policies, and the presence of other prejudices such as racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, and the rights of the LGBT survivor are at serious risk.

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These discussions historically focus on the rights and protections of adults and adult relationships, assumed to be heterosexual. So although teen dating violence is currently a focus of many intervention and prevention programs and services, little of this attention is directed towards the needs of LGBT teens. In addition, it may be that homelessness and violent physical assault when coming out is as or even more of a pressing issue for LGBT youth than “dating violence.” According to a report from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the National Coalition for the Homeless (2007), “available research suggests that between 20 percent and 40 percent of all homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT)” and one study found that “more than one-third of youth who are homeless or in the care of social services experienced a violent physical assault when they came out, which can lead to youth leaving a shelter or foster home because they actually feel safer on the streets.”

Access to Services

Many parallels can be drawn between intimate partner violence in same-gender/gender-variant relationships and violence in heterosexual relationships. The same, however, cannot be said for services and support. Disparities are obvious in both service provision and community action (advocacy and activism) for many reasons. Homophobia, lack of awareness of the need, lack of funding and or simple ignorance of how to go about providing services has prevented many well-intentioned mainstream domestic violence programs from developing supportive and effective LGBT services. Homophobia in the culture at large makes it difficult for LGBT communities to acknowledge domestic violence in their midst, and it has been easier for LGBT programs to mobilize communities and create programming around issues like hate crimes and HIV/AIDS. In addition, LGBT programs also have always suffered from lack of funding.

As discussed in the information packet *The Intersection of Sexism and Homophobia*, mainstream domestic violence programs were started in opposition, as the founders understood it, to sexism in the dominant culture. They believed male domination and the second-class status of women were root causes of domestic

violence. With this analysis it was easy to see men as aggressor and women as victims, especially when men perpetrate a large percentage of domestic violence against women. Programs, which are referred to in this information packet series as “mainstream,” were founded based on this analysis and much emphasis was placed on changing laws and educating law enforcement. But there have always been internal tensions in the battered women’s movement around who should be served; wives battered by husbands, women who are battered by intimate partners who are male, women and men who are battered by other family members, or people in same-gender/gender-variant relationships battered by an intimate partner. It also begged the question of who qualifies as a woman. Activist and author Leslie Feinberg (1996) asks, “Can we really fix a policy that’s so clear about who was born ‘woman’? ... If we were going to decide who is a ‘real’ woman, who would we empower to decide, and how could the checkpoints be established?” Discussions among advocates reveals that, upon examination, the male/female binary limits and becomes its own means of power and control, and forces questions about whether or not programs can honestly claim to respectfully serve and fully support all victims and survivors of domestic violence (Domestic Violence Awareness Project, 2005).

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Funding sources, the hierarchical nature of social institutions and the fact that most advocates were raised in a culture based on power over rather than egalitarian values has over time changed the structure and even the initial focus of many mainstream programs. Lesbians working in those same mainstream programs, however, recognized violence in their own relationships and those of other LGBT friends and realized early on that the causes of domestic violence were more complex. Some of the first work on battering in lesbian relationships was undertaken by staff of mainstream domestic violence programs; consider the articles in *Naming the Violence*, edited by Kerry Lobel (1986), the analysis by Suzanne Pharr in *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* (1988) and the work done on lesbian battering by the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women in *Confronting Lesbian Battering* (1990). This work was problematic for some programs because it called to question women’s use of violence, and seemed to many to refute the early analysis of the cause of domestic violence.

LGBT communities were also reluctant to acknowledge domestic violence in same-gender/gender-variant relationships because for women it challenged the ideals of women’s nonviolence, or that of the mythological Amazon woman admired for her independence and self-sufficiency. For men it was difficult to admit domestic or sexual victimization, as it seemed to challenge the notion of what was manly. As programs began to be developed in LGBT communities there were also questions of who would be served: would all LGBT victims be served, or only lesbian and bisexual women? What about trans women, were they to be considered women? Should the program focus be to provide services, create social change or a combination of both, and what should be done about abusers?

Even if legal protections are equitable, law enforcement response is appropriate and information about services is provided, victims who identify as LGBT are still presented with a scarcity of intervention services designed to meet their needs. Most mainstream domestic violence programs began with a focus on serving

young, middleclass white women with children. Programs that began by serving mainstream communities often try to reach out to members of LGBT communities, but struggle with understanding the particular needs of most marginalized groups. Mainstream programs often attempt to do outreach in LGBT communities by placing ads in community publications, distributing brochures and/or hanging posters depicting couples who appear to be same-sex/gender variant in shelters and public spaces. These are important things to do, but if the mainstream program does not actively engage with the LGBT communities they wish to serve about the nature of their needs, the efforts of the program often prove ineffective. In an effort to avoid inappropriate approaches, programs sometimes rely on staff and/or volunteers who identify as LGBT to be the resident “experts” on the experiences of all LGBT people. The assumption that an individual can represent and speak for all people from a diverse set of communities is often a set-up for failure for both the identified staff person/volunteer and for the program attempting outreach. In the process, the people seeking services are often not served well.

Another challenge specific to working with domestic violence in same-gender/gender-variant relationships faced by advocates working in mainstream programs is screening to determine who is the abuser. The historical focus on intimate partner violence as a function of sexism rather than a function of hierarchical power systems gets in the way when the incident involves male-on-male, female-on-female or trans intimate partner violence. Determining what services are most appropriate for each person requires a paradigm shift away from the traditional heterosexual model of male as aggressor and female as victim. It also calls into question the historical approach of law enforcement as the only solution to the abuse. For many programs it has been easier to refuse services to both people than to try to determine the needs of each person. Advocates within LGBT communities are working to promote more community-centered approaches. Conversations between program advocates and people seeking services integrate a more complete analysis of the violence into the intake process to determine what services are appropriate for each partner. For more information, see the enclosed articles *Screening* and *Think, Re-think: Domestic Violence in Lesbian, Bisexual and Trans Relationships*.

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Providing shelter to same-gender/gender-variant survivors has been another problematic area for mainstream programs. Shelters have long been the domains of heterosexual female victim/survivors. Intake forms or hotline volunteers/staff often refer to the abuser as he and assume the victim is a woman. Homophobia often prevents the victim/survivor of same-gender/gender-variant domestic violence from seeking or receiving shelter and other services. Due to a broader understanding of the interconnection of oppressions and an increased awareness of the need for safe space for LGBT victim/survivors, however, an increasing number of mainstream programs are offering space in safe homes, rooms in existing shelters, or accommodations at hotel/motels for male and bisexual victims. Safety for members of the trans community is also beginning to be addressed. Yet in many regions of the United States, safe shelter options are severely limited or nonexistent for gender-variant victim/survivors. While it has been somewhat easier for lesbian and bisexual women to seek and receive shelter or other supports, they often feel the need to conceal their own sexual orientation or gender identity or that of their abuser in order to assure admittance.

In response to the needs of victim/survivors and the people who abuse them, members of many LGBT communities have begun to raise awareness of these needs, both within their own communities and in mainstream society. LGBT advocates have begun to create and implement services that move away from traditional models relying on criminal justice and shelter services that are separate from the community in which the victim/survivor lives. Within some LGBT communities, attention is turning to harm-reduction models and finding safer spaces within the community. Survivors are encouraged to act as their own agents by identifying ways to be safe, for example, changing locks to the home, getting rid of weapons and ammunition, or fitting a room with a secure lock and a working phone to serve as a more secure temporary refuge. Realizing that no place is guaranteed safe, however, survivors often go to friends for help. Advocates working within LGBT communities are using social gatherings to educate people on the dynamics of domestic violence and how to provide refuge for a friend (for further discussion of this strategy, see the enclosed articles *Raising Our Voices: Queer Asian Women's Response to Relationship Violence* and *Oppressor and Oppressed: Rethinking the Binary*). The core belief for many doing intervention and prevention work within LGBT communities today is that safety comes with self-determination for victim/survivors, community accountability for batterers and consciousness raising for all community members. When victim/survivors have community support and resources, they are more able to make choices about ways to be safe without relying upon unfriendly institutions.

Advocates working within LGBT communities emphasize developing and maintaining supportive, loving and equitable relationships. The goal is to help couples create strategies for building positive relationships. Advocates are also working to assure that there is an expectation and responsibility within each community for the community to respond to intimate partner violence among its members and to honor its obligation to stop it.

Programs that typically serve mainstream populations and that want to be involved in work with people who identify as LGBT are encouraged to get involved with the LGBT communities as they work to address issues that most affect them, civil rights work in particular. Mainstream advocates are encouraged to bring with them an awareness of the dynamics of intimate partner violence and to help community members provide education about the connections between domestic violence and civil/human rights violations. As discussed in the information packet *The Intersection of Sexism and Homophobia* all forms of civil/human rights violations, including domestic violence, are based in the belief system that the unequal distribution of power, wealth, privilege and access in society is inevitable and use of force by the group or individual in power to maintain its position is "natural." Attempting to work on domestic violence without working on other oppressions is like attempting to move a rug one is standing on. Mainstream advocates can also support the work of LGBT advocates by networking them with allies in government, and joining voices with LGBT community members in speaking out for racial justice, economic justice and other issues challenging all communities.

Additional information on lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people and domestic violence is available through the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (telephone 212-714-1184, TTY 212-714-1134).

Domestic violence interventions may develop differently in ally organizations than in LBTG-specific organizations. By centering our communities and our experiences (instead of contrasting our experiences against those of people in the dominant culture), we have developed interventions, priorities and approaches that uniquely meet the needs of our communities while bringing fresh insight about domestic violence to the wider movement to end violence.

An important example is our Assessment Tool. Our work in LBTG communities has led us to develop unique assessments to identify who is a survivor and who is a batterer in order to determine what support will be most relevant to a given caller. Advocates assess whether the person seeking services is establishing a pattern of power, control and exploitation (battering) or surviving a pattern of power, control and exploitation. Such assessment is a baseline for most LBTG-specific programs.

People who batter may contact survivor support services for a number of reasons: they may want to cut their partner off from access to those services, they may try to locate their partner who they believe is utilizing those services and they may believe that they themselves are a victim of abuse. Further, people who batter often feel very entitled to their abusive actions and often feel victimized by their partner's attempts to take back authentic control of their own lives. Finally, people who batter may contact a program because they are concerned about their own behavior and are searching for help to change.

Meanwhile, survivors may have internalized the blaming and minimizing from the abuser and may underreport abuse, or they may believe that they are responsible for the abuse. Survivors may feel very ashamed about the choices they have made in the course of resisting violence. While some survivors are very clear about the abuse they have experienced and their abuser's responsibility for that abuse, others may come to believe that they are the abuser or seek some kind of accountability for the violence in hopes of making it stop. We find that virtually any behavior can be used by a person either to survive abuse or to establish power over another.

As a result, advocates cannot rely solely on a person's own assertions or on a checklist of behaviors to determine who should be brought into confidential survivor advocacy services and who should work with a batterers' treatment program. "Believing survivors" requires us to be able to use discernment to ensure we are talking to a survivor. "Batterer accountability" requires us to use discernment to ensure we are talking to a batterer.

We have, consequently, developed deep analysis around the issue of survivors' use of violence to survive an abusive pattern of power and control. We have incorporated an unqualified commitment to compassion for everyone with whom we have contact, whether a survivor or batterer, as a foundation of ethical advocacy. We have developed strategies for working with survivors' friends and families to increase and repair survivors' support networks in the aftermath of isolation from homophobia and abuse. We have expanded a critique of the criminalization of domestic violence and developed alternative safety and accountability strategies for many survivors for whom calling the police or involving the criminal legal system is not an option.

While many of these issues are touched upon in this collection, it is difficult to demonstrate how central and informing these strategies are to our work, and what a difference they make to how services are provided, how survivors are engaged in change and how communities understand a positive vision for our future. It is difficult also to know we are articulating, sharing and utilizing our own

knowledge and power responsibly. On one hand, we are concerned that people who are not fully trained and supported to implement this information may utilize it in a way that could further endanger our communities or contribute to the minimization of intimate partner violence in LBTG relationships. On the other hand, we do not want to become gatekeepers of information that has proven critical to the self-determination of survivors and accountability of batterers. We are convinced that this tension can be successfully resolved and to this end we at The Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian & Gay Survivors of Abuse are committed to working with others in the anti-violence movement to dismantle the unnecessary conflict of interests between information as power and information as control.

Connie Burk, Director
The Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian and Gay Survivors of Abuse

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