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**Integrating Anti-Poverty Work into Domestic  
Violence Advocacy: Iowa's Experience**

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# **Integrating Anti-Poverty Work Into Domestic Violence Advocacy: Iowa's Experience**

By Amy Correia and Katie Ciorba VonDeLinde

## **Introduction**

For many battered women, poverty - or the threat of poverty - creates significant barriers to their safety. Research into the lives of low-income women reveals high rates of past and current physical abuse. Nearly half of the women receiving welfare have experienced physical abuse at some point in their lives.<sup>1</sup> In one study, sixty-three percent of homeless and low-income housed mothers reported physical abuse by an intimate male partner.<sup>2</sup>

In Iowa – as in many parts of the country – the general domestic violence advocacy strategy to meet the economic needs of battered women was primarily to provide them with information and referrals. For example, when a battered woman sought safety at a shelter, an advocate might refer her to the welfare agency and subsidized housing programs (if she specifically requested that information).

Recent policy changes, however, have dramatically limited the amount and duration of welfare benefits and reduced housing resources, as well.<sup>3, 4</sup> Such sweeping changes to social support programs also increase the advocacy needs of battered women. As a result, domestic violence advocates in Iowa began to ask themselves new questions about their work. For example, how often are battered women forced to return to an abusive partner because they are unable to secure permanent housing? What happens to women who lose their welfare benefits because of time limits or because their abusive partner sabotages their efforts to comply with program rules? What role should domestic violence advocates play in helping battered women meet their families' basic human needs?

Recognizing that economic hardships can impede an abused woman's attempts to keep herself and her children safe, in 1997 the Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence (ICADV) began a long-term collaboration with the *Building Comprehensive Solutions to Domestic Violence Initiative* (BCS).<sup>\*</sup> In this collaboration, Iowa advocates studied the housing needs of battered women, developed a statewide task force about economic advocacy issues, and established pilot programs to provide skills training and economic development partnerships with anti-poverty groups. As a result, battered women's advocates in Iowa have achieved significant success over the past few years in developing new and expanded resources and responses.

This paper describes the key steps the Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence took to build its members' capacity to respond to the economic needs of battered women. Those steps included:

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<sup>\*</sup> *Building Comprehensive Solutions to Domestic Violence* is a multi-year initiative to help domestic violence organizations collaborate more effectively in their communities and build visions, policies, and practices that respond to the current realities facing battered women and their families, especially those living in poverty. BCS provided technical assistance and staff support to the Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence for this project.

1. Identifying and recognizing battered women's economic needs
2. Developing leadership and staff commitment to economic issues
3. Building the capacity of advocates to provide economic advocacy and collaborate with new partners
4. Providing economic advocacy and collaborating with new partners at several pilot sites
5. Securing necessary funding and technical support
6. Institutionalizing economic advocacy

## **Key steps to building economic advocacy capacity**

### **1. Identify and recognize battered women's economic needs**

The critical first step was to develop a more complete understanding of battered women's economic needs and how these resource issues affect their safety. ICADV began by examining housing issues. Advocates in Iowa knew that barriers to affordable housing limited the safety options of battered women. However, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the problem and ground the Coalition's work in the experiences of battered women, a more formal assessment was completed. A survey was sent to every domestic violence program in Iowa to identify:

- The most pressing housing barriers facing battered women,
- The housing services provided by domestic violence programs and federal funding received to support those services, and
- The frequency of community collaboration around housing.<sup>5</sup>

The findings supported what was intuitively known: that housing barriers are linked to economic needs, including a lack of jobs or inadequate income to pay market rate rent and security deposits. The assessment also found that all domestic violence programs responded to the emergency needs of battered women, but less than 10% of the programs provided transitional or permanent housing advocacy. Even fewer received federal housing funding, and less than half participated in local housing advocacy efforts.

This study contributed to an increased awareness of economic issues for battered women in Iowa and cemented the Coalition's resolve to respond to their financial needs. A written report of the findings helped create partnerships with anti-poverty organizations, including the Iowa Coalition on Housing and the Homeless and the Iowa Finance Authority.

### **2. Develop leadership and staff commitment to economic issues**

Strong leadership, along with a commitment of time and resources, is necessary for new advocacy strategies to be effective and sustained. Motivated by the results of the housing needs assessment, ICADV formed a state-level Housing and Economic Security Task Force to provide leadership and direction to the coalition and its member programs. The task force received technical assistance and support from BCS. The BCS technical assistance provider facilitated the task force and interacted with ICADV staff through regular reporting methods established by the ICADV Board of Directors. Task force members included the executive director of a local

domestic violence program who had also served on the Board of Directors of the Iowa Coalition for Housing and the Homeless, and two battered women's advocates.

The initial emphasis of the task force was to increase the knowledge base of domestic violence advocates on housing programs and policies, as well as to develop collaborative partnerships with state agencies and advocacy organizations. Initial activities of the task force included:

- a panel presentation for the ICADV membership, featuring housing providers and experts;
- a domestic violence workshop at the yearly conference of the Iowa Coalition for Housing and the Homeless;
- meeting with a Community Builder from the Iowa Department of Housing and Urban Development to learn more about public housing programs and policies; and
- development of articles for an issue of the ICADV monthly newsletter – *Empower* – which was devoted to housing and economic issues.

In Iowa, the process of developing economic advocacy responses benefited from a significant staff commitment. The task force made economic issues more public and encouraged Coalition staff to get more involved. The staff responded to the challenge, which was essential to expanding the work. For example, staff allocated ICADV Board Meeting time for the panel presentation on housing, assisted in putting together and distributing the newsletter devoted to housing and economic issues, and financially supported subsequent training and grant-writing efforts. At the same time, members of the national Building Comprehensive Solutions to Domestic Violence Initiative team provided staffing and technical assistance to Iowa's efforts.

### **3. Build the capacity of advocates to provide economic advocacy and collaborate with new partners**

Capacity building began in Iowa with the Coalition's commitment to create a model of economic advocacy to share with its members.<sup>6</sup> To support development of the model, ICADV secured funding from the Iowa Women's Foundation and the Ms. Foundation for Women to establish a pilot project at three local domestic violence programs. Historically, domestic violence advocates in Iowa rarely received any economic advocacy-related training.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, a goal of the project was to help advocates develop the skills and knowledge necessary to carry out economic advocacy well and to sustain it over time. Advocates identified that training was needed in the following two areas:

#### **1) Training in how to provide economic advocacy to individual battered women**

There are a variety of approaches to economic advocacy and a number of training curricula on the subject.<sup>8</sup> Iowa selected the Personal Economic Planning (PEP) curriculum to frame its individual economic advocacy. PEP is an economic education curriculum written by the Elizabeth Stone House staff in Boston. It was developed cooperatively with the help of battered women who asked Stone House staff for help to resolve the financial barriers they commonly faced.

To prepare advocates to implement this curriculum, a three-day PEP “Training of the Trainers” was offered in the Spring of 2000, facilitated by Laurie Holmes, trainer and co-author of the curriculum.<sup>9</sup>

The first day of PEP training covered “Women’s Economic Development Basics,” including:

- Examining the economic barriers experienced by battered women,
- Considering the challenges and strategies battered women employ to increase their economic independence,
- Practicing skills to use in individual economic advocacy, and
- Exploring the PEP model to support battered women.

The second and third days included intensive facilitation skills training. Advocates learned and practiced the tenets of “popular education,” a teaching theory created by Paolo Freire, which emphasizes the skills needed to provide empowering adult education. By the end of the third day, each participant had practiced the teaching style by presenting one of the learning tasks of the curriculum. When the training was completed, the three pilot projects were ready to facilitate PEP groups in their communities and implement individual economic advocacy strategies.

Sue Prochazka, director of a domestic violence program in Keokuk characterized the training as,

*“probably [the] most dynamic training I have been to in a long time. It really helped me to focus on economic justice issues for low-income women. My head kept clicking throughout the whole presentation [about] how this could be a very important tool for trying to give women information about the economic process, the tools and resources they need to develop something long-term.”*

Introduction to the PEP curriculum gave Iowa advocates a forum to talk about battered women’s economic needs and the tools to respond to the financial circumstances of individual women.

## **2) Skill training for collaborative community economic advocacy**

Raising awareness of individual economic issues generated many conversations in which advocates identified “larger” community and systemic economic roadblocks that impact battered women. Additional training is required if advocates are to develop economic advocacy skills at the larger community level.

Three curricula developed by the *Building Comprehensive Solutions to Domestic Violence* initiative were chosen to increase critical community advocacy skills, specifically,

1. *Introduction to Policy Advocacy and Analysis*
2. *Outreach to Underserved Communities*
3. *Skills for Successful Collaborations*<sup>10</sup>

*Introduction to Policy Advocacy and Analysis* teaches advocates how to integrate policy analysis into everyday work with battered women. The curriculum focuses on three principal themes:

- Policy advocacy should be defined by battered women’s needs,
- Effective systemic policy responses to domestic violence must address the diverse needs of battered women, and
- Policy advocacy requires preparation and a collaborative approach.

Attendees from around the state said that as a result of the training, they will, “*Look more closely at policies—and think about ways to improve them,*” and “*Be more systematic and thoughtful in preparation, map out strategies and get input from women before acting.*”

Advocates also attended training on *Outreach to Underserved Communities*, which is based on the following premises:

- Outreach is the morally right thing to do;
- Outreach is necessary for effective community collaboration; and,
- Outreach helps domestic violence programs design and provide quality advocacy, support and services.

During this training, participants are asked to complete a series of in-depth analytical worksheets exploring aspects of outreach and planning for future efforts. In their evaluations, advocates reported that the training, “*methods were clear, thoughtful and organized. [It was useful] getting to know how to approach certain communities and how to be prepared.*” This training helped advocates plan inclusive collaborations with diverse communities.

Finally, advocates were presented material about *Skills for Successful Collaborations*. Training skills included creating and maintaining a collaborative mindset, negotiation techniques, strategic thinking, and meeting facilitation.

#### **4. Provide economic advocacy and collaborate with new partners at several sites**

The combination of these training sessions formed a multi-dimensional foundation of skills for advocates in the three pilot projects to implement a comprehensive economic advocacy strategy. The strategy included advocacy with individual women and efforts to build community alliances to increase economic opportunities for all low-income battered women. The primary activities that defined this new economic focus were offering Personal Economic Planning classes and working with local anti-poverty groups.

##### **Personal Economic Planning Classes**

Since March 2000, PEP classes have been offered to women in domestic violence shelters, transitional housing programs, and to those receiving services through other community agencies, including a public housing authority, a substance abuse treatment facility, and a

community college. Group leaders report that facilitating PEP groups is a powerful experience. PEP groups are a forum for battered women to think about the larger economic, social and political issues that impede their success, including harsh aspects of welfare reform and a proliferation of low-wage jobs. Additionally, PEP encourages women to think about work in new ways and challenges participants to translate their skills and interests into new and meaningful employment ideas. As one participant stated during a class, *"I didn't know I could be anything other than a waitress."* By the end of the course, each participant has a one-year and five-year "vision" for herself, and the group facilitator offers information and resources to help participants move successfully toward economic stability.

Participants of PEP have evaluated it as a beneficial experience, both in the information shared and the connections established among group members. Past participants of PEP offered the following comments when asked about its value in their lives:

- "PEP taught me how to deal with things when you feel like you don't have power."
- "It was helpful to talk about what was good/bad with jobs and to learn about other jobs."
- "I learned about my own good qualities."
- "I know now there is help available and that when women work together to achieve common goals, a lot can be done."
- "I took the most value from the support we gave one another. It was a great experience that allowed me to share my situation and to evaluate my intentions for the future."
- "I'm not alone, feeling depressed or worried about [my] financial future. I can find the job I'd like to have because [of what] I learned today."

In addition to helping women think about their economic situations in new ways, PEP groups were critical to the success of community advocacy efforts. During groups, facilitators listened to women explore their financial hardships and barriers. This information proved valuable in building collaborations with anti-poverty partners.

### **New Collaborative Partners**

Advocates at the three pilot sites used their enhanced individual and community economic advocacy skills to plan community-wide economic summits. The summits were working meetings to develop community plans for increasing economic options for low-income battered women. In order for the summits to be successful, advocates at each pilot site developed strategies to involve other partners (i.e. anti-poverty organizations, job-training centers, welfare offices, housing agencies, etc.) and form ongoing collaborations.

To build support in the Iowa City community, domestic violence advocates organized a steering committee to identify priorities and create a "buy-in" for key stakeholders. This committee included members of a local Homeless Coordinating Board, battered women, social services staff, and a city housing planner. After several planning meetings, committee members agreed that the summit should focus on the need for more affordable permanent housing for low-income families.

Over 30 people from a cross-section of the Iowa City community attended the April 2001 meeting, “From Vision to Action: An Economic Summit,” including a non-profit housing developer, the director of the state housing finance agency, several formerly homeless persons and housing advocates, and domestic violence advocates.

The energy and enthusiasm generated during this summit spurred the Local Homeless Coordinating Board to concentrate its energies on public policy strategies to increase affordable housing. Domestic violence advocates continue to be involved on a Public Policy Task Force, which has developed an affordable housing agenda to improve community attitudes about low-income residents, remove public policy barriers to affordable housing, and provide supportive services to families.

Because of this collaborative effort, the local domestic violence advocates are now more familiar with community resources, have relationships with social services staff and are better equipped to serve low-income women who need help.<sup>11</sup>

## **5. Secure necessary funding and technical support**

Technical assistance and funding were essential to Iowa’s implementation of new economic advocacy strategies.

The *Building Comprehensive Solutions to Domestic Violence* initiative provided technical assistance to the three domestic violence pilot programs as they implemented their plans. To help the programs develop sustainable strategies, BCS staff provided assistance in three critical areas: challenging current domestic violence advocacy priorities, gathering information, and providing support and guidance. Advocates from the pilot programs reported that the combination of acquiring new skills, forging relationships with domestic violence advocates in other community agencies, and the availability of individualized technical assistance were critical to their success.

BCS staff encouraged advocates to consider expanding their community partnerships to include advocates and agencies that could help create positive economic change for battered women. New partners contacted by the advocates included anti-poverty groups, for-profit housing developers, Chambers of Commerce, and local government officials. BCS staff also worked with advocates to create a plan for their economic collaboration that included vision, action, and goal statements.

BCS staff collected data regarding current employment needs, living wage standards, and housing issues in each community. Advocates used this information to plan the economic summits. BCS staff also provided support and encouragement to advocates who were doing work that was new to them. For example, one advocate was nervous about contacting other agencies to ask for their involvement in the community collaboration. She was worried that the other agencies might be hostile, unwilling, or uninterested. Working together, the advocate and BCS staff developed a plan for contacting the other agencies that identified common interests in assisting low-income battered women. After talking with this advocate, several new agencies enthusiastically joined the collaborative project.

Addressing economic issues through the combination of seed funding and agency commitment was critical to the success of this project. In total, the pilot project received \$30,000 over two years – \$5,000 from the Iowa Women’s Foundation and \$25,000 from the Ms. Foundation for Women. These funds covered the costs of offering the PEP and BCSDV curricula trainings, as well as materials for PEP groups and community-wide collaborative meetings. Additionally, domestic violence programs matched these funds by devoting a portion of their staff time to respond specifically to the economic concerns of low-income battered women.

## **6. Institutionalize Economic Advocacy**

In 2001, the Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence institutionalized its commitment to economic advocacy by creating a new staff position, Housing and Economic Justice Coordinator. The Coordinator supports economic advocacy strategies across the state and works directly with the Housing and Economic Advocacy Task Force. In January 2002, the task force created a long-range plan to strengthen, expand, and encourage the sustainability of economic advocacy efforts statewide. The Coordinator continues to build advocacy capacity by offering regional and statewide training and provides technical assistance to advocates implementing PEP groups or developing community anti-poverty strategies. Since October, 2001, 70 domestic violence advocates from 22 local programs have attended the training “Economic Advocacy: Immediate and Long-Range Solutions.”

In order to sustain the effort, the Coordinator also works with advocates to identify possible funding sources and assists with grant applications. By March 2002, the Coordinator had assisted two domestic violence programs in the design of new transitional housing projects and the successful application for state funding.

Additionally, the Coordinator participates in both state and national advocacy efforts to increase economic opportunities for low-income battered women and collaborates with anti-poverty advocates statewide on policy issues such as welfare, welfare-to-work, and housing.

## **Conclusion**

Financial constraints create extreme hardship for battered women as they weigh their options for keeping themselves and their children safe. For many battered women, safety is illusive unless their long-term economic and housing needs are met. Domestic violence advocates must respond to these economic needs as part of helping women find safety. Iowa advocates learned that the battered women’s movement can forge many alliances and work with women in new ways to increase their options.

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> Lyon, E. (2000) [Welfare, Poverty and Abused Women: New Research and Its Implications. Building Comprehensive Solutions to Domestic Violence \(Publication #10\)](#). Harrisburg, PA: National Resource Center on Domestic Violence.
- <sup>2</sup> Bassuk, E., Weinreb, L., Buckner, J., Browne, A., Salomon, A., & Bassuk, S. (1996) "The characteristics and needs of sheltered homeless and low-income housed mothers." *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 276(8), 640-646.
- <sup>3</sup> In 1996, federal welfare reform abolished the social safety net of public assistance grants for all United States citizens and imposed stringent work requirements and time limits.
- <sup>4</sup> While in 1970 there were 300,000 *more* low-cost rental units than low-income renters, by 1995 that figure had reversed, and 10.5 million low-income renters were competing for 6.1 million low-cost units. Daskal, J. (1995) *In Search of Shelter: The Growing Shortage of Affordable Rental Housing*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Budget and Policy Priorities.
- <sup>5</sup> Correia, A. (1999) [Housing and Battered Women: A Case Study of Domestic Violence Programs in Iowa](#). Harrisburg, PA: National Resource Center on Domestic Violence.
- <sup>6</sup> ICADV includes 32 domestic violence programs serving Iowa's 99 counties.
- <sup>7</sup> See VonDeLinde, Katie M. [How Are Domestic Violence Programs Meeting the Economic Needs of Battered Women in Iowa? An Assessment and Recommendations](#). BCSDV Publication #16, March, 2002.
- <sup>8</sup> See Correia, Amy. [Strategies to Expand Battered Women's Economic Opportunities](#). BCSDV Publication #9, January, 2000; and, [Increasing Economic Opportunity for Battered Women 2\(1\)](#), BCSDV Newsletter, National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, April 2001.
- <sup>9</sup> Copies of the curriculum can be obtained by contacting Laurie Holmes, HarborCOV, P.O. Box 505754, Chelsea, MA 02150.
- <sup>10</sup> For more information about BCSDV training curricula, contact the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence at (800) 537-2238.
- <sup>11</sup> Similar efforts occurred in two other communities, although the issues addressed at the summits and the strategies employed in planning the summits, were specific to each community.