

Domestic Violence: Policy Recommendations for Prevention, Intervention, and Response

Statement of the Problem:

Domestic violence is a serious public health issue that exists in epidemic proportions. It is considered to be a leading cause of injury to U.S. women, and is the leading cause of homicide for pregnant and postpartum women. Domestic violence is a pattern of coercive behavior that one person uses to gain and maintain power and control over an intimate partner or ex-partner. This behavior includes sexual abuse, physical abuse, and emotional abuse, as well as economic coercion. Batterers and their victims can be found in every ethnic group, social class, geographical region, community of faith, and family arrangement.



Victims of domestic violence face considerable obstacles when they are struggling to leave an abusive relationship, specifically affordable housing and transportation. Because of the lack of affordable housing and long waiting lists for assisted housing, victims are often forced to choose between staying in the relationship or living on the street. Furthermore, the victims' credit may have been ruined by their abusers. Victims also may have a history of being evicted because of the abusers' actions; thus, future landlords are hesitant about renting to these individuals. Victims often lack a personal mode of transportation; thus, they must rely on public transportation. Hours of operation and route locations can be impediments to victims as they attempt to secure employment and access other services. The cost of other transportation services, such as taxicabs, can be an added hindrance as well.

In summary, domestic violence victims encounter significant challenges when they are trying to transition themselves and their children into a safe environment. While significant national and local efforts have been made in the past two decades to

address domestic violence, it is evident that more attention must be focused on the prevention of domestic violence as well as on removing the systemic barriers that keep victims and their children from being safe and healthy.

Justification:

- Domestic violence was selected as a priority health problem for Forsyth County in the 2003 Community Health Assessment.
- Forsyth County law enforcement officers wrote over 5,200 domestic violence related reports in 2004; there were 4 domestic violence homicides during that same year.
- Without appropriate intervention, the abuse increases both in frequency and severity and in some cases leads to death. On average, more than three women are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends in

the United States every day. According to the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 81 individuals were murdered in North Carolina as a result of domestic violence in 2004 and 42 people have been murdered in 2005.

- Around the world, at least one in every three women has been beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused during her lifetime.
- Nearly one-third of American women (31 percent) report being physically or sexually abused by a husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives.
- Studies suggest that between 3.3 and 10 million children are exposed to domestic violence annually. Children who witness domestic violence are more likely to exhibit behavioral and physical health problems including depression, anxiety, and violence towards peers. They are also more likely to attempt suicide, abuse drugs and alcohol, run away from home, engage in teenage prostitution, and commit sexual assault crimes.
- Not only is domestic violence present in adult relationships; adolescents are often engaged in violent relationships as well. Studies suggest that 1 in 5 high school girls has been physically or sexually assaulted by a dating partner.
- In a 2002 report by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, 44 percent of the cities surveyed identified domestic violence as the primary cause of homelessness.
- The costs of intimate partner violence exceed \$5.8 billion each year, \$4.1 billion of which is for direct medical and mental health care services.



Coordinated Community Response

The Domestic Violence Community Council (DVCC) was created in Forsyth County to develop and nurture a coordinated community response to the issue and to identify gaps in services for victims. Over its six-year history, the DVCC has been successful in creating stronger relationships between community agencies, law enforcement, healthcare providers, judicial and legal representatives, faith community leaders, educators, and other community members dealing with domestic violence issues. The DVCC meets bi-monthly to provide an opportunity for its members to come together and evaluate how specific systems are addressing the issue of domestic violence through prevention, intervention, and appropriate response. Several action teams meet monthly and target issues such as the criminal justice system's response, training for healthcare professionals and local clergy, and raising awareness in the wider community about domestic violence. Through these committees, the DVCC has been able to identify gaps in service and work to increase the communication and collaboration among various agencies. Members of the DVCC are made aware of local, state, and federal policy issues that affect victims of domestic violence through the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence and the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Prevention and Intervention Through Education

Family Services, Inc. has been the lead local agency addressing domestic violence/sexual assault, offering services including shelter, crisis response, forensic intervention, court-based advocacy, survivor support groups, treatment groups for batterers, as well as youth and professional education. Moreover, the agency facilitates three different community collaborative efforts addressing violence: domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse.

For the last two decades, community educators from Family Services, Inc. have been making presentations about dating and sexual violence in the local high schools upon requests by teachers. Since the inception of the Winston-Salem Police Department's SuperKids program in 1998, Family Services has taught a lesson about family violence as a part of the fifth grade series. Typically, these educational programs focus on raising awareness among students about domestic and sexual violence and how students can protect themselves and/or get help. Specific content about dating violence and sexual assault is not included in the middle school health curriculum currently.

Housing and Transportation

Family Services, Inc. provides emergency shelter for domestic violence victims and their children up to 90 days. Advocates work with individual clients to attain employment, permanent housing, transportation, child care, and other assistance that promotes their independence and self-sufficiency. Long waiting lists for transitional and permanent housing continue to be barriers for victims attempting to move forward with their lives.

Statement of the desired action(s) to be taken:

The Forsyth County Healthy Community Coalition joins with DVCC to recommend the following actions:

- **Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools should:**
 - ✓ Integrate relationship violence education into the middle school health curriculum.
 - ✓ Continue and expand current dating violence prevention and intervention programs in all Winston-Salem/Forsyth County high schools through LifeSkills classes.
- **Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Council on Services for the Homeless should:**
 - ✓ Increase affordable and available permanent and transitional housing in Winston-Salem and Forsyth County.
- **Winston-Salem Transit Authority should:**
 - ✓ Perform an assessment to determine need for expanded coverage (routes and hours) to outlying areas in the county.

Public Health Impact:

Through the integration and expansion of relationship violence education in the local middle schools and high schools, we will increase healthy, respectful relationships by strengthening the following abilities of students:

- Recognition of abusive behaviors, causes of relationship violence, and attitudes that perpetuate violent relationships
- Boundary setting



- Constructive communication and critical thinking skills
- Knowledge of local resources and help-seeking behaviors

By increasing domestic violence victims' access to affordable housing and expanding transportation options, we will strengthen their ability to become independent and self-sufficient. We will enhance the capacity of victims to secure and sustain employment, maintain healthy lifestyle behaviors, and provide safe homes for themselves and their children.

Related Work: Relationship Violence Prevention Education

Studies of relationship violence prevention curriculum, such as BRIGHT-Building Relationships in Greater Harmony Together (Avery-Leaf, Cascardi, O'Leary, & Cano, 1997) and Safe Dates (Foshee et al., 1998), have shown efficacy in increasing knowledge and changing attitudes about dating violence in middle and high school students. The North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research recommends the incorporation of such curriculum in public schools statewide in order to reach every student before the eighth grade. Anti-violence materials are being used effectively by some county school systems in North Carolina.



Examples of Successful Program Implementation:

- ***In Touch With Teens: A Relationship Violence Prevention Curriculum for Youth Ages 12-19*** (Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women) covers topics that range from the cycle of violence to building blocks for healthy relationships. *In Touch With Teens* has been implemented with thousands of students in Los Angeles schools and around California and has been named a model program for domestic violence prevention education for youth by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- **SafePlace**, a domestic violence center in Austin, Texas, runs a dating and sexual violence prevention program in the local middle and high schools. The program has four components: (1) classroom presentations to youth, (2) training for parents and school staff, (3) counseling and support groups, and (4) a teen volunteer program in which 7th to 12th graders raise awareness in their communities and schools.

Housing

The North Carolina Housing Coalition is a private, nonprofit membership organization working for decent, safe and affordable housing for low-income North Carolinians. Through *The Campaign for Housing Carolina*, the Coalition is working to build public support for a \$50 million annual appropriation to the North Carolina Housing Trust Fund. The North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence is working with the Housing Coalition and The Interagency Council for Coordinating Homeless Programs to ensure access to affordable housing for domestic violence victims and their children.

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