

Strategies for TANF Agencies to Identify and Address Domestic Violence

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Why invest state and local resources in domestic violence programs for the TANF-eligible population?

First, domestic violence is a significant problem for many TANF recipients. Women from all socioeconomic levels are victims of domestic violence, but poor women are more likely than women in general to experience domestic violence and the odds are even higher for women who receive welfare. Among welfare recipients, it is estimated that 50 percent to 60 percent have experienced domestic violence over their lifetimes, and 20 percent to 30 percent of welfare recipients report being recent or current victims of abuse (Tolman and Raphael, 2000). These rates of domestic violence are three times higher than those reported for all low-income women (Johnson and Meckstroth, 1998).

Second, victims of domestic violence are more likely to be long-term welfare recipients (i.e., receiving welfare for more than five years) and are more likely to cycle on and off welfare (Lyon, 2000). The ways in which domestic violence acts as a barrier to women's employment are numerous and well documented. Victims of domestic violence are more likely to have physical or mental health concerns—broken bones, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder—that make it difficult to find and keep a job. Abusers often undermine their partners' advances toward employment and self-sufficiency. Abusers may prevent their partners from completing education and training, threaten or attack them at their workplace, keep them up the night before a test or job interview, and intimidate them in ways that undermine their self-esteem and their own and their children's safety. Unless these issues are addressed, some domestic violence victims may reach their time limit on the receipt of welfare benefits without having achieved self-sufficiency, and will need extensions or face the loss of benefits.

Third, many women who experience abuse want to find jobs, and may even have extensive work experience. However, without assistance, these women may have a harder time keeping a job and, as a result, experience periods of unemployment and high job turnover. A spotty employment record makes "good jobs" that pay well that much less attainable for victims of domestic violence.

Finally, domestic violence has costs for employers, too. One estimate places the annual cost of family violence to employers at \$13 billion, including time abused women spend arranging for legal, medical, and personal support (National Governors Association, 2000). This clearly suggests that employers have a stake in working with TANF agencies to develop strategies to help women address barriers that result from abuse. Some states, such as New York, have identified employers as important partners in addressing domestic violence.

What challenges do TANF agencies face in addressing domestic violence?

Domestic violence has been an "invisible" barrier, not unlike mental illness, substance abuse, or learning disabilities, that may not be immediately obvious and may cause victims shame or embarrassment if they are pressed to disclose the abuse. State TANF agencies estimate that between 5 percent and 10 percent of their caseload is victimized by domestic violence, far below the 20 percent to 30 percent that researchers estimate (Tolman and Raphael, 2000). Several factors help explain this discrepancy. Researchers may have more training and demonstrate more sensitivity in asking TANF clients about domestic violence than do caseworkers. TANF recipients may be reluctant to disclose domestic violence to their caseworkers because they feel ashamed, they fear the information will not be kept confidential, or they do not feel a need to disclose the abuse (Tolman and Raphael, 2000).

Creating an environment in which clients feel comfortable disclosing domestic violence is a challenge for TANF agencies and requires considerable sensitivity on the part of caseworkers. In addition to clients' reluctance to disclose abuse, caseworkers may not be comfortable discussing domestic violence with their clients because they do not understand the abuse, they have unresolved domestic violence issues of their own, or they have not received sufficient training (Burt, Zweig, and Schlicter, 2000). However, it is important that caseworkers know how to offer services to women who are victims of domestic violence to better ensure these women's safety and help them make the transition from welfare to work.

What strategies can states and localities use to address domestic violence?

Once clients with domestic violence issues have been identified, states and localities utilize a number of strategies to provide them services. All but seven states report that they offer intensive services targeted to address domestic violence issues (State Plan Database, 2001). States and localities with strong systems to respond to the needs of low-income abused women often combine strategies.

Collaboration with domestic violence service providers is a key strategy for TANF agencies. Clients are more likely to reveal domestic violence to a domestic violence advocate than to a TANF caseworker. Other effective strategies are collocation of services, service coordination, and cross-agency training. DV service providers can provide specialized services that are beyond the scope of most human service agencies, such as shelter for women who are leaving their abusers, group and individual counseling, and advanced safety planning.

Measures to preserve client confidentiality can facilitate a client's efforts to become self-sufficient. For example, in the New Beginnings program in Seattle, Washington, survivors of domestic violence who cannot for safety reasons disclose their address can list the program's address as their own when seeking employment. In South Carolina, the social services department will relocate a woman as many times as are necessary to ensure her safety.

Enhanced case management can include intensive service teams, peer support groups, the organization of specialized caseloads, and the collocation of domestic violence advocates or counselors in welfare offices.

Coordination, collaboration, or contracting with other systems or service providers helps ensure that victims of domestic violence can access a wide range of support services. Agencies and organizations that TANF agencies should consider as partners include law enforcement, child welfare, and child support enforcement agencies; health care providers; schools; child care providers; education and training providers; substance abuse counselors and treatment providers; legal services organizations; and the courts.

Specialized training to TANF caseworkers on the use of screening and assessment instruments is necessary for these instruments to be used effectively. This training can help caseworkers better recognize the various forms abuse can take, such as economic coercion as well as verbal, physical, sexual, and psychological threats and abuse. The training can also help caseworkers understand the decisions that domestic violence victims make about leaving and staying in violent relationships. Finally, the training can increase caseworkers' comfort in asking clients sensitive questions related to domestic violence.

Burt, Zweig, and Schlicter (2000) visited seven counties to assess strategies for addressing the needs of domestic violence victims in the TANF program. They note that the programs deemed best at identifying domestic violence focus more on identifying barriers to self-sufficiency and use a "carrot" approach rather than a "stick" approach to case management. The researchers identify several tools that are helpful in identifying and addressing domestic violence issues. One tool is communicating that the TANF office is a "safe place" in which to disclose domestic violence through office ambience, the use of antiviolence posters, and the posting of information about services. Another tool is using clearly phrased screening questions that are followed up by more extensive assessments, when appropriate. Yet another tool is telling clients how the information they provide will be used and ensuring confidentiality. Still another tool is counting domestic violence activities as "allowable" work activities. Perhaps the most important tool is giving caseworkers sufficient training so they are comfortable asking clients about domestic violence and understand the responses.