

Report to
Snohomish County Domestic Violence Coalition

Domestic Violence Response System: The Communities' Perspective



August 2005

Introduction

On July 28, 2003, Snohomish County convened the Snohomish County Domestic Violence Coalition. The initial purpose of the coalition was to assess the domestic violence system's response to incidents of domestic violence and to victims of domestic violence. Recent high profile incidents of domestic violence, locally and in other parts of the state, raised questions about the readiness and responsiveness on the part of law enforcement and the courts, accessibility and delivery of services for victims, established policies that may help or hinder law enforcement, the courts, and victims' advocates and the perception of the public about the domestic violence response network in Snohomish County. The Snohomish County Domestic Violence Coalition created the Community Meetings Committee to explore the perceptions of local communities on various aspects of the response system. The community meetings were attended by local leaders, residents of the community, law enforcement, and previous victims of domestic violence and were to hear first hand their perspectives on the domestic violence system's response in their communities and solicit recommendations on how the Coalition can better address these needs. This report will be submitted to the Snohomish County Domestic Violence Coalition for its consideration and further planning.

Community Meetings

Five community meetings were held in fall of 2004 and spring of 2005 to obtain feedback from local communities on the domestic violence response network. The communities were: Stanwood, Mountlake Terrace, Lake Stevens, Monroe and Everett. The meetings were facilitated by the Community Action Partnership Division of the Snohomish County Human Services Department. A protocol of questions was developed and served as a framework for the meetings. In each meeting community members were asked to consider three main topics during their discussion:

- Identify the strengths or what is working in the response network;
- Identify the weaknesses or what is not working in the response network in their community; and
- What changes would improve the response network.

The goals of these meetings were to:

- Inform the coalition about the needs and challenges facing victims of domestic violence.
- Get input from the communities about improving the domestic violence response system.
- Identify how the Coalition can help empower and improve the capacity of local communities to address needs of domestic violence victims.

In each of the community meetings, participants were asked to "think outside the box" and give their honest and direct input.

This report presents the major points made by those individuals participating in the communities meetings held from September 20, 2004 through May 26, 2005. To facilitate a frank discussion of issues, participants' comments were summarized and not attributed to any individual. An attempt was made to prioritize participants' responses based on frequency and degree of

emphasis. The report also includes recommendations for improving the domestic violence response system.

Key Findings

While there are unique differences between the communities, participants identified core needs and strengths about the domestic violence response system.

Strengths

- There is a growing awareness of domestic violence and its impact on individuals, families, and the community.
- There is better integration of services between agencies involved in the domestic violence response including law enforcement and victims' advocate groups.
- The mandatory arrest law in domestic violence incidences provides an increased opportunity to allow the victim to obtain victim services and resources.
- Protection orders provide the conditions that must be met to prevent further intimidation and violence. There are consequences to violating the protection order.
- The Full, Faith & Credit Act that provides that the Protection Order is valid regardless of where it is filed. It follows the victims should the victim leave the jurisdiction it was initially filed.
- Victims' advocates are present in the Prosecuting Attorney's Office and the Courts, as well as through community based organizations.
- There is a growing awareness that multi-cultural, limited English speaking residents have unique challenges when interacting with law enforcement, the courts, and victims' advocates.

Weaknesses

- There are not a sufficient number of victims' advocates to meet the demand.
- Efforts to educate the public on what is "abuse" are lacking. Adolescents and teenagers, in particular, do not recognize abuse when it occurs to themselves or others.
- Services, victims' services and community services are not available in the outlying areas of the county. The lack of community services such as family counseling, parenting classes, drug and alcohol abuse treatment, assistance with transportation, that could forestall or help prevent domestic violence.
- Interpretation of the laws on domestic violence vary between judicial and court personnel, specifically, protection order requirements and enforcement. This results in inconsistencies in how domestic violence is dealt with initially.
- Policies and requirements that put domestic violence victims at risk of being victimized again. This occurs in the following situations/events:
 - Who is to pay the filing fee for the Anti-Harassment Order.
 - If the victim flees her/his home, generally, access to resources become limited. Because resources exist but are not accessible to the victim and because there is no legally established separation or divorce, the Department of Social and Health Services cannot assist victims. This increases the likelihood of homelessness and loss of custody of children.
 - Victims who flee home are frequently unable to retain custody of their children because they are "homeless".

- The duplication of effort between the law enforcement investigation and the Prosecuting Attorney investigation extends the trauma to the victim.
- Delays in charging decisions and court hearing continuances extend the trauma to victim.
- Cultural competency around domestic violence is lacking in the judicial system, law enforcement, and with mainstream community based organizations.
- There is a critical shortage of civil legal services and representation for domestic violence victims. This lack of legal representation can result in the loss of custody of children, income, and housing.
- Generally, schools do not have a curriculum to address domestic violence at an early age: what is abuse, how it is recognized, and what should one do if they experience it or encounter it. Young people are unaware of domestic violence and advocates have difficulty in gaining access to schools to provide the information
- There is a lack of shelter for men with children who are victims of domestic violence and only one women’s domestic violence shelter.
- Geographically and economically Snohomish County is diverse, with a combination of urban communities and rural communities. The result of this is to concentrate services in the urban communities including Everett and, to some degree, communities along the Interstate 5 corridor. The outlying areas do not have ready access to services.

Recommendations

Presented below are major recommendations provided by community members regarding ways of addressing the most pressing needs in the domestic violence response network.

Statutory and Regulatory Issues

1. Federal, State, and local funding should be set aside or prioritized to address the various domestic violence system response needs.
2. Funding should be kept as flexible as possible.
3. Congress should pass a universal Protection Order form to set forth the requirements and criteria to issue Protection Orders and appropriate funding to assure fruition.

Coordination and Collaboration

1. Barriers to services experienced by domestic violence victims should be removed through the coordination of community and judicial services. Unmet needs that obstruct access to services include lack of funds and service delivery structure for: transportation, child care, mental health counseling, and medical care. Also, the lack of interpreters and translation for the limited English speaking residents and the hearing impaired, lack of affordable housing, lack of basic needs, and the lack of knowledge of the judicial system as it deals with domestic violence.

2. Legislation should be passed that establishes universal standards and guidelines for determining acceptable proof of domestic violence that can be used to issue a Protection Order. This would ensure uniform understanding and approach for cause, issuance, and enforcement of Protection Orders. Further, it would create consistency with the intent of the Protection Order statute.
3. Law enforcement and the prosecuting attorneys should coordinate their investigations of domestic violence incidents to minimize the impact of answering the same types of questions multiple times to different parties.

Capacity Building

1. Federal, State, and local entities should provide funds to expand the number of confidential shelters in order to meet the increasing demands.
2. Federal, State and local entities should provide/expand dedicated funding for legal services for domestic violence victims.
3. The domestic violence response network should seek successful service delivery models and best practices to replicate in Snohomish County.
4. Federal, State, and local entities should provide funding to expand the capacity for cultural competency training for law enforcement, Superior Court, District Court, and domestic violence victims' advocates, translation of relevant written material, and interpreters.

Infrastructure

1. *Courts/Law Enforcement/Prosecution*
Increased collaboration and communication between the agencies and courts. This would increase offender accountability and increase victim safety.
2. *Public Education & Awareness*
Increased public awareness campaign that supports the community norm that violence is not acceptable nor will it be tolerated. Subjects it should address are:
 - what is domestic violence;
 - domestic violence will not be tolerated in a civil society;
 - what services are there for victims of domestic violence including children and senior citizens;
 - what it costs the victims and communities in resources and quality of life; and
 - what the consequences are for abusers and those who aid and abet domestic violence.

3. *Multicultural Needs*

Many communities are affected by changing demographics and require more flexible resources and other assistance to address multicultural issues (e.g., bicultural staff must be hired to serve persons of different cultures).

4. *Transportation*

The courts and prosecutors should provide more flexible resources and alternatives to meet the transportation needs of domestic violence victims and witnesses.

5. *Housing and Homelessness*

The courts and prosecutors should work with other agencies and programs to target more housing resources for domestic violence victims.

6. *Child Care*

The courts and prosecutors should work with other agencies and programs to secure resources and appropriate child care for children who have been exposed to domestic violence.

7. *Health Care*

The courts, prosecutors, law enforcement and domestic violence advocates should work with health care providers and agencies to secure resources and medical assistance for domestic violence victims.

8. *Mental Health / Substance Abuse Treatment*

Additional options for mental health and substance abuse treatment need to be identified and engaged to address the needs of domestic violence victims and their children.

Conclusion

It is apparent from the information received at the community meetings that the response to domestic violence is that vast improvements can be made to protect potential victims and the communities in which they live. To accomplish this one cannot rely on the criminal justice system alone. It is imperative that community support and accountability be established. These recommendations address legislative as well as issues in the criminal/civil justice system and the community.

For more information

For more information about the Snohomish County Domestic Violence Coalition or this report contact Lori Hartelius with the Snohomish County Human Services Department at (425) 388-7390 or lori.hartelius@co.snohomish.wa.us

This report was compiled and written by Renee Peare, Community Action Partnership Division, Snohomish County Human Services.

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Community Meeting Planning Committee and Panelists:

Annette Tupper, Prosecutor's Office, Snohomish County
Julie Rattray, Snohomish County Legal Services
Lisa Aquilar, Snohomish County Center for Battered Women
Marva Marcus, Victims' Advocate
Miriam Kastle, Snohomish County Legal Services
Monette Mennie, Victims' Advocate
Renee Peare, Snohomish County Human Services Department
Sonya Kraski, Snohomish County Clerk's Office
Tammy McElyea, Mountlake Terrace Police Department
Teresa Cox, Prosecutor's Office, City of Everett
Theresa Milligan, Snohomish County Legal Services
Theresa Wilson, Snohomish County Center for Battered Women
Tom Davis, Stanwood Police Department

Community Meeting Facilitator:

Michele Rastovich, Snohomish County Human Services

Community Meeting Staff Support:

Julie Petersen, Snohomish County Human Services

Hosting Agencies:

Stanwood Camano Family Support Center
Darrington Family Support & Resource Center
Lake Stevens Family Center
South County Family Support Center
Snohomish County Human Services