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SERVICES FOR BATTERED WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Counseling, case management and advocacy services for battered women seeking legal aid broaden their resources and options for dealing with abuse. Findings from a demonstration project specify the range of needs and services mobilized to effectively aid these women with the major life adjustments they and their children face.

INTRODUCTION

Although there has been intensified interest in developing effective services for battered women, efforts to help are hampered by inadequate information about the needs of women and the best kind of services and resources to meet these needs. Moreover, battered women are likely to know very little about which services are actually available to them. This paper addresses the findings of a social service demonstration project which assessed the needs of battered women and

provided services to women seeking help from a legal service office.

Accurate data on the prevalence of wife battering are difficult to obtain in part because of the reluctance of women to report its occurrence (Fleming, 1979; Hofeller, 1983; Langley and Levy, 1977; Lystad, 1975; Roberts, 1984; Schecter, 1982). However, research by Gelles (1972, 1975, 1976), Steinmetz and Strauss (1973) and others indicate the widespread incidence of violence and abuse in the home. Estimates of the numbers of women battered in their homes range as high as 50 percent to 70 percent of the population (Litigation Coalition for Battered Women, 1977, Parnas, 1977).

Until recently, domestic battery was not labeled a social problem. Moreover, some argue that discretionary and discriminatory treatment of women by police, by district attorney offices, and judges is widespread. The Police Training Manual developed by the International Association of Chiefs of Police suggests stronger police action, but even states where there are specific statutes applying to wife beating, ". . . such incidents are still considered . . . as being extralegal 'family matters' in which the law should not interfere" (Police Management Operations Division, 1976). Such laws and the requirement of adequate proof or witnesses limit avenues of recourse for battered wives. As a result many women are reluctant to seek help from the police and courts (Colorado Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1977; Gellter, 1977; Nichols, 1976; Walker, 1979). Clearly, modification and reorganization are needed within the courts and other branches of the legal system.

Modifications are also needed in the delivery of social services. Many traditional social and health service providers are not

prepared to directly address the needs of battered women and consequently may redefine such problems in terms of the services offered by the agency. For example, in the hospital emergency room wife abuse is defined as a medical problem; at the welfare office the problem is a financial one; at the counseling center the problem is one of mental health functioning. For their part, police and lawyers are concerned with legal issues. Few traditional agencies have addressed the complexity of problems experienced by battered women and the services necessary for them to escape an abusive situation (Davidson, 1977).

Making her way through the social service system is a herculean task for the battered woman. She must have knowledge of the system and a great deal of energy (Martin, 1976). She must stand in long lines, repeating her story of abuse to strangers while completing endless forms. Even then, she may not qualify for an agency's services, ironically because of her status. For example, when she is the spouse of an employed husband whose income exceeds agency guidelines, she may be found ineligible for financial, legal, health, and social service.

What, then, are her alternatives? The battered woman can remain in the abusive relationship, try to effect change through counseling, or she can seek to end the relationship through separation or divorce. In Washington State as in many states, a woman must seek legal action usually involving the filing for divorce to obtain a temporary restraining order in order to protect herself and her children. Thus, for many women, the legal system is the initial entry point in their search for help. In some cases a battered woman may merely want a temporary restraining order for protection during periods when her husband is violent. She may not be aware that a temporary restraining

order cannot be issued without a dissolution petition initiating divorce proceedings. If she reconciles with her husband, divorce proceedings are usually dismissed. If she needs protection at a later date, she must reinitiate the divorce process. This practice is costly for the legal service system and inefficient for the woman. In one legal service agency, 70 percent of women who sought a restraining order in a crisis later dropped their divorce proceedings.

Since a battered woman who seeks legal help is usually experiencing multiple stresses, her needs frequently create considerable strain on the skills of a professional whose experience and training are primarily in law. It would appear some women's situations require a broader range of services than traditionally provided by social workers or psychologists knowledgeable in this area. Outreach services for battered women housed within the legal service office offer at least one possible solution. To this end a demonstration project was developed in which social service interns were placed in a legal service office to perform outreach services, crisis counseling, as well as to assess needs and to provide information and referral services to battered women.

A research component was added to the project to generate information about the needs of battered women as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of the social services provided to these women. This paper describes the research component of the project and the findings generated from the data gathering effort.

DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

The research was designed to measure the impact of social services provided by the

three interns implementing the demonstration project. Change was measured in terms of the alterations in needs reported by the women at intake and then three to four months later. This information might then be used to improve service delivery and to change policy.

The inventory of women's needs at intake again several months later was designed to generate information on the range of "non-legal" problems that accompanied their needs for legal assistance. Women were asked to give information about their needs regarding the extent to which they suffered financial, housing, child care, mental and physical health as well as employment problems.

Interviews were conducted with women seeking emergency divorce and restraining orders from a legal assistance office in a metropolitan community in the Pacific Northwest. The receptionist of the legal services office made referrals to a social service intern on behalf of women reporting verbal, emotional or physical abuse. The social service interns interviewed all cases referred, however almost 60 percent of the women were ineligible for legal services since eligibility required that women's resources not exceed lower socio-economic income brackets. Those ineligible were provided names of attorneys known to accept deferred payments from clients with limited incomes.

During the initial interview with the social service interns, a pre-tested interview schedule was administered. Each interview began with a brief description and explanation of the purpose of the services and the research project and consent for voluntary participation was sought.

Intake interviews were completed for 28 women. Information was gathered about the number of children each woman had living at

home, as well as other demographic information, her work history and prior involvement with community resources. An assessment was made of each woman's need for financial aid, employment, child care, food, shelter, clothing and other resources. Referrals were made to appropriate community resources and clients were provided with a resource list of agencies that offer services essential to persons experiencing housing dislocations, financial crisis as well as physical and emotional abuse.

The central referral source offered to these women was the YWCA's women's support shelter. As the largest shelter at that time in the western United States, it offered a variety of essential services for battered women. In addition to referrals, other counseling services were provided to women which included crisis intervention, and support during the transitional phase of separation from their spouses.

In some instances, social service interns provided transportation, arrangement of same-day appointments with other agencies and the delivery of food. These services were provided on an as-needed basis. The social service interns acted as case managers as they assessed and responded to the variety of needs of their women clients. Their work to support these women was facilitated not just by mobilizing resources to aid them but also by modeling how to locate and access necessary housing, financial assistance, food, transportation, clothing, child care and network support.

While addressing the multiple service needs of these women, they also provided counseling which helped these women to sort out their options and plan for major social, economic and lifestyle changes. Much time was spent preparing them for their dealings with

the welfare department, attorneys, the courts, as well as their husband's behavior. They were also assisted in their move to the women's shelter; fears about leaving their homes to move to the shelter were addressed as well as how they might best use the shelter services.

Despite the absence of a continuum of services for these women, these social services interns tried to coordinate, facilitate and monitor the search for help. Through their ongoing contacts with these women they provided continuity to this transitional crisis period in their lives.

When the follow-up interview was conducted three to four months later, 24 women were available for interviews. The reduced sample size resulted from the inability of researchers to locate women who had moved or were attempting to remain hidden from their husbands. The assessment of needs, conducted in the intake interview was repeated to assess current status; in addition, the extent to which the client had been able to use referral sources was evaluated. Needs expressed at pre and posttest were compared for 17 women for whom complete data were available. Dependent t tests were performed on the difference in scores in order to assess change.

Findings

The initial 28 women interviewed at intake ranged in age from 15-21; the mean age was 28 and the median age was 25. Twenty-three of the women felt they were in immediate danger when they sought help.

Along with these women there were many hidden high risk victims as well. These potential victims were their children who ranged in age from one month to 19 years. While 23

women reported "physical abuse" as a reason for seeking a temporary restraining order, 16 also reported their children to be in danger. Of these, 7 were fearful for the safety of their children's lives; others cited harassment, mental cruelty, and the desire for safety in their petition for legal services.

Several themes emerge from the initial questionnaire data. Foremost was the economic dependence of the women involved and their isolation from the economic decision making responsibilities for the family. Many women reported that they were unsure about their husband's income or the debts owed by the family. Moreover, because of insufficient education and work experience, they had few skills with which to support themselves and their children once they left the marriage.

They were also isolated from support networks outside the marriage. Ninety-five percent reported having very few friends or relatives to whom they could turn for help. In some cases the husband had forbidden the wife from engaging in relationships with others. The women thus reported feeling uncomfortable with and isolated from other adults.

The combination of economic insecurity and isolation contributed to make the women feel powerless for long periods of time prior to seeking help. Legal recourse appeared to these women to be the only immediate avenue for redressing their grievances and powerlessness. Even so, these women were able to pinpoint their needs and the steps they must take to become more self-sufficient. For example, job training was identified as the immediate primary need. All those who sought help had at least some potential temporary means of support, such as help from relatives or welfare, but over 80 percent described themselves as unemployed and all expressed

economic concerns. The need for transportation, reported by 57 percent, was related to job concerns since public transportation in the area was inadequate and many women did not know how to drive nor owned a car. Twenty-nine percent expressed a need for child care and another 39 percent were troubled by inadequate food, clothing, and medical attention.

Table 1: Needs Expressed at Intake (N = 28)

Needs	N	Percent
Shelter	12	(43)
Medical	7	(25)
Financial-welfare	17	(61)
Child Care	8	(29)
Job Training	22	(79)
Rap Group	16	(57)
Counseling for Family or Children	8	(29)
Transportation	16	(57)
Food	2	(7)
Clothes	2	(7)
Household Goods	4	(14)

These women's needs were defined as resource and skill deficits, not as mental health problems requiring counseling. As Table 1 shows, more women (57 percent) showed a preference for a rap group than for counseling (29 percent). Those who shied away from a rap group usually did so describing their discomfort with groups of people. Of the 29 percent who did declare an interest in counseling, several identified it as a need for their children rather than for themselves.

A few expressed a desire for counseling in the form of parenting skills. None of the women felt their husbands would voluntarily seek or accept any kind of counseling services.

While the city in which this study was conducted has a large military population, a disproportionate number of the cases (46 percent) involved military families. This is understandable since the armed services often isolate women from old friends and family.

Ninety percent of the respondents reported that violence has been accompanied by drinking or drug use on the part of at least one of the partners. But often the alcohol problems of the husband made it possible for the wife to explain away or excuse the abuse. For example, one woman excused her husband's behavior, saying he was not responsible for his actions because of his alcoholism and mental instability.

Most women interviewed at intake displayed a very limited knowledge of and ability to use community resources. Less than half had contacted the police. Of those who had, 80 percent reported dissatisfaction with their contact. About one-third knew of the existence of a women's shelter, but few knew of other community services available to them including a rap group for battered women, job bank, child care, free health clinics, and emergency services for low income families.

Despite the fact that 24 women responded to a followup questionnaire three to four months after initiating contact with the social service interns, comparative analysis of pretest and posttest needs was conducted with 17 women from whom complete information was available.

Table 2: Comparison of Clients' Needs
at Pretest and Posttest (N = 17)

Need	Pretest Needs		Posttest Needs		t-score*
	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Friends	12	5	1	16	6.19*
Relief from isolation	13	4	1	16	7.22*
Shelter	8	9	1	16	2.99*
Financial	13	4	1	16	6.19*
Child Care	8	9	1	16	2.99*
Job	14	3	5	12	4.24*
Counseling/rap group	12	5	4	13	3.91*
Transportation	13	4	9	8	2.10*

* p < .01

As Table 2 shows, clients reported significant changes in a number of areas. The need for shelter had decreased ($t = 2.99, p < .01$), as had needs for child care ($t = 2.99, p < .01$) and counseling ($t = 3.91, p < .01$). Eighty-six percent were financially independent of their spouse at the time of followup, and could count on income from jobs, training funds or welfare checks. There was a significant change in reported need for a job ($t = 4.24, p < .01$). This was due in part to job acquisition and increased access to job training. However, many women continued to have needs for transportation. In addition, the women had renewed contacts with friends ($t = 6.19, p < .01$) and reported feeling significantly less isolated ($t = 6.19, p < .01$). For some clients, the provision of a resource list during the initial contact allowed them to consider their options and make more effective choices on their own. Others needed the more intensive involvement provided by case management services of the

interns.

Evaluation of the Project

Traditional community service agencies tend to see the needs of abused women in terms of the services that they are prepared to offer. Not surprisingly, many community agencies that conceptualize the problems of battered women as intrapsychic in origin thus provide treatment aimed at psychological change rather than environmental change. Women are often seen as passive victims who expect of even solicit their abuse. Thus, services may be aimed at increasing "psychological resources." As this study demonstrates, more request help with environmental rather than psychological problems; more women seek help with protection, temporary financial support, job training, transportation, child care and knowledge of other available community services. Many described the depression and sense of futility accompanying their situations, but found divorce proceedings to be the only recourse even though it may not have been their preference.

As suggested by the data, battered women are entrapped and isolated. When they take steps to protect themselves and their children the service provided should expand rather than constrict their options. Yet since access to protective services is contingent on filing for divorce, some women may feel unprepared to deal with the consequences of such extreme legal action. Thus, they may decline protective services and thus potentially heighten the risk to themselves and their children. Women should be able to ask for and receive protection without any contingencies. Moreover, since the women in this study were seeking solutions to their dependency and their lack of skills and resources, it is clear that they are seeking more than could be

provided with the legal system. Thus, while access to legal services, including restraining orders may important avenues for service, legal aid should be complemented by a range of essential supports made accessible at this entry point into the helping services.

The interns' services were provided to women at the juncture in which they filed for separation. Therefore, it is not possible to determine whether others who had found other ways to escape the abusive situation had similar needs.

Since the legal service environment reinforces the message that abuse should not be tolerated, these women were clearly supported in their attempts to escape from their situation. It is not known whether women seeking help from traditional psychiatric or mental health counseling services are given the same support.

The benefit clients attained from the demonstration project was the availability of a social service intern who could provide case management services involving emotional support during the first weeks of separation, coordination and monitoring of referrals to agencies providing concrete services. The social service interns also helped women negotiate the legal service system. The benefit to the legal service office was that clients could be screened, and followup provided to reduce the number of clients who initiated and then dropped divorce proceedings. According to estimates of the legal service agency where the demonstration project was conducted, 10-15 percent of the women seeking divorces in non-crisis situations dropped out within the first month of initiating action, while 70 percent of crisis intakes dropped proceedings after receiving a temporary restraining order. In our demonstration project, two-thirds of those women

considered eligible for services continued with proceedings and received divorces within one year. Thus the service helped them with this difficult choice and at the same time reduced costs and inefficient utilization of the legal agency services.

The implications of this study are weakened by the small number of subjects. Attrition among subjects, a common occurrence for this population in research, is due to the nature of their situation. Some attempted to stay hidden and a number had moved away from the area.

Implication of Findings

A variety of service innovations in non-clinical settings are needed for abused women. Findings from this demonstration project support the need for case managers who as advocates could provide emotional support and transportation on an emergency basis, and who model more assertive behavior while they enable women to seek services. The specific tasks of the case management role and duration of services must be shaped by the needs of the clients. Because of service specialization few traditional social service providers are equipped to address the variety of needs and concrete resources these women require. The most evident conclusion is that the complexity of the problem calls for careful coordination and integration of services. Moreover, the data call for a review of the policies regarding service eligibility, such as access to restraining orders, so that women's choices are expanded enabling access to critical services.

The problems the women endured because of inadequate income, housing, transportation, and access to jobs represent more than individualized obstacles to their gaining permanent

independence from a battering spouse. These inadequacies afflict substantial numbers of women and children who are trying to escape from a life-threatening home environment. The feminist movement so essential to the development of shelters and the politicization of violence against women, may be intensified by systematic documentation about the short and long-term service and resource deficits of battered women.

As battered women and their children fall prey to long-standing feminization of poverty and to the absence of entitlements that contribute to such impoverishment, their stresses may intensify. It will take the full force of the feminist movement to begin to rectify such conditions.

Rather than being left to personalize their problems in locating critical resources and means for independence, recognition of their mutually shared problems may help to empower battered women to intensify collective action and that of the feminist movement. Clearly, until such long-term service, resource needs and entitlements are collectively addressed, some women and children may forever struggle to choose between a battering, life-threatening home environment or a "hand-to-mouth" existence.

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