

Providing Services to Combat Domestic Violence in New York City's Minority Communities

Guest Article by James B. Gwynne, MPA, JD

Closing the Gap, Violence Prevention - Who's Responsible? • January/February 2002

Domestic violence—an important policy issue in the United States since the 1970's—is also known as partner abuse, spouse abuse, or battering. It is one facet of the larger problem of family violence that occurs among persons within a family or other intimate relationships, and includes child and elder abuse, and affects everyone—women, men, children, and seniors. According to the American Medical Association, family violence usually results from the abuse of power or the domination and victimization of a physically less powerful person by a physically more powerful person.

The June 2001 *National Crime Victimization Survey* (NCVS), reports that in 2000, 53 percent of all victims of violent crime identified the offender(s) as an intimate, relative, friend, or acquaintance. Further data published in the October 11, 2001, issue of *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* concluded that from 1981-1998, women were 1.6 times more likely to die of an intimate partner homicide than were men. And, rates among African Americans were 4.6 times the rates of Whites—with rates the highest among females age 20-39 years.

The Many Faces of Abuse

While all races and ethnic groups are nearly equally at risk of domestic violence, racial and ethnic minorities tend to have fewer resources available and face unique legal, social, and economic challenges. For example, the NCVS suggests that 22 to 50 percent of homeless women and children became homeless after fleeing abuse.

Ethnic and immigrant survivors of domestic violence are further challenged by language barriers, lack of the necessary skills to navigate the health and social systems, or competing cultural practices that constrict choices in seeking safety from violence. One article, *With No Place to Turn: Improving Advocacy for Battered Immigrant Women*, Family Law Quarterly, Summer 1995, noted that a battered immigrant woman who attempts to flee may have no access to a bilingual shelter, financial assistance, or food. It is unlikely that she will have the assistance of a certified interpreter in court, when reporting complaints to police or a 911 operator, or even in acquiring information about her rights and the legal system.

Judith Kahan, executive director of the Center for the Elimination of Violence in the Family, concurs, and adds, "The most difficult families to re-house and start on their way to an independent life are undocumented immigrant families. Often, women have come to the U.S. to stay with or marry a citizen or green-card holding man. If that man is abusive, it is not unusual for the woman to become his virtual prisoner. When she breaks free, she has no way to support herself or her children. It is almost impossible for families like these to find affordable housing or feed themselves."

Further compounding matters is the fact that each cultural community faces unique and special challenges when dealing with the issue of domestic violence. For example, Census 2000 data demarcated 16 different Asian

ethnicities—where each community is distinct and separate—each with its own history and culture.

"Many Asian communities have devoted very few resources to helping the victims and stopping abusers of domestic violence—choosing to see it as simply an argument between husband and wife. Furthermore, many abused Asian women remain silent because they lack confidence in themselves and believe that they somehow deserve the abuse," said Tuhina De O'Connor of the New York Asian Women's Center.

"Many immigrant Asian battered women are afraid to seek help based on the perception that their sex, race, and immigration status will work against them. It's unfortunate, but Asian women are often murdered by their partners after long histories of abuse that no one ever knew about or was willing to acknowledge; still others commit suicide because they see no other escape from the physical and emotional torture," said De O'Connor.

A Closer Look: New York City Programs

State and city agencies have been working for nearly 30 years to combat domestic violence—and New York is no exception. The New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence has been on the frontline—enacting laws, developing system-wide protocols and policies to address the many issues faced by victims of domestic violence. New York City has also implemented numerous initiatives to combat domestic violence, based on a comprehensive approach that includes prevention, offender accountability, and intervention strategies. However, even the most progressive agencies face a plethora of issues among abused women that compound their ability to effectively deliver services. Culturally and linguistically appropriate services are often difficult to undertake due to poor self-esteem, low expectations, limited educational backgrounds and work histories, and impoverished social networks.

New York City has several programs designed for and working with specific minority communities. Some examples that are notable for their multiple efforts to incorporate racial, ethnic, and culturally appropriate services into their programs in support of abused women and their children include:

➤ **The Center for Elimination of Violence in the Family (CEVF)** in Brooklyn was started in 1976, when its founders, the Brooklyn YWCA, National Congress of Neighborhood Women, and the New York City Mayors Task Force on Rape, recognized the need for a public shelter for battered women. In 1977, the first publicly funded domestic violence shelter in New York State opened.

The Center's resident community includes African-American residents of Bedford Stuyvesant, Caribbean residents of Flatbush, and the predominantly Latino and Chinese residents of Sunset Park, which are among the City's top ten precincts reporting domestic incidents.

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Shelter is provided to 132 survivors of domestic abuse at a time, sheltering between 350 and 450 women and children annually. The mostly immigrant families are usually headed by women with an average of two children. The Center provides workshops like *Mom's Survival Skills*, and those that deal with the issues of empowerment and economic literacy to help formerly abused women take control of their lives.

The Center also offers programs like *Children's Growing Place* and *Children's Club House* that aim to stop the cycle of domestic abuse by focusing on the children of battered women. In addition, multicultural teams of educators and social service workers reach out to Brooklyn's largely immigrant neighborhoods, and social workers counsel teens in more than a dozen high schools to prevent relationship abuse before it becomes deadly. Multilingual staff offers counseling and referrals to more than 7,000 callers each year via a 24-hour hotline.

- **The New York Asian Women's Center (NYAWC)** in Manhattan's Chinatown was launched in 1982 by a small group of Asian women who wanted to address battering in their community. Today, NYAWC has the only licensed shelter in New York State that specifically serves Asian women. Each year the Center receives over 3,000 hotline calls and offers intensive counseling and advocacy assistance to over 250 Asian immigrant women and their children.
- **The Urban Women's Retreat (UWR)** was founded in 1984, in central Harlem. The majority of residents are from the five boroughs, predominantly African American and Hispanic, who are young mothers in their twenties with children residing with them. The shelter is also open to single women, and provides services to a few women in their senior years. Placement into the facility is made largely through the Retreat's telephone hotline that provides counseling and referrals on a 24-hour basis.

The staff works with the individuals to address the entire domestic violence syndrome—feelings of fear, helplessness, and low self-esteem. They also assist with establishing realistic life goals and concrete plans to achieve them.

- **The Violence Intervention Program, Inc., (VIP)** was established in 1984 in East Harlem, in recognition of the lack of bilingual/bicultural non-residential and residential services available to battered Latinas. VIP operates eight safe dwellings with a total bed night capacity of 46. The sites provide residents with crisis intervention, individual counseling, support groups, advocacy services, accompaniment, and assistance with identifying and securing safe, affordable, permanent housing.

In 1997, VIP expanded its non-residential services by opening a branch in the Bronx. In both offices, VIP provides crisis intervention, individual counseling, support groups, and advocacy services to battered women. Both programs also provide individual counseling and support group services to the children/adolescents of the battered women receiving services. In addition, since late 1995, VIP has operated the New York State Spanish Domestic Violence Hotline program (1-800-942-6908). This 24-hour Spanish domestic violence statewide hotline, the only one of its kind in the US, receives an average of 3,000 calls a year.

While this country has experienced a dramatic decrease in all kinds of domestic violence since the early 1990s, the struggle for those caught in the cycle of violence continues. Programs like these, at the forefront of the battle to end domestic violence, have recognized the need to deliver culturally competent care and services.

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For more information, go to the National Coalition on Domestic Violence Web site at <http://www.ncadv.org>

Domestic Violence Resources

Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community • <http://www.dvinstitute.org>

National Latino Alliance for the Elimination of Domestic Violence • <http://www.dvalianza.com/>

National Lawyers Guild, National Immigration Project • <http://www.nlg.org/nip/domestic-violence/domvioindex.htm>

The New York Asian Women's Center • <http://nyawc.org>

NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund Immigrant Women Program • <http://www.nowldef.org/html/issues/imm/index.shtml>

