

Domestic Violence

The Hidden Secret of the LGBT Community

By Kerrita McClaughly

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

Domestic violence is a problem in American society that cuts across all socioeconomic, gender, racial, and ethnic lines. Although the problem is readily discussed in society at large, the focus is often on heterosexual relationships. This often obscures the fact that same-sex domestic violence occurs at a similar rate as heterosexual relationships.

The problem of domestic violence in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community is highlighted in the 2001 preliminary report by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP). NCAVP is a network of 27 community-based organizations responding to violence affecting LGBT and HIV-affected individuals.

Closing the Gap spoke with Rachel Baum, MSW, national program coordinator for NCAVP and the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, about the report, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Domestic Violence in 2000*, and the problems affecting the LGBT community.

CTG: How prevalent is domestic violence in the LGBT community?

BAUM: It is estimated that the incidence of domestic violence (DV) in the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people parallels that in the lives of straight people (25-33 percent). However, reporting is assumed to be even lower than among straight women. The academic studies on this topic are so few at this point, we cannot update the estimated prevalence with scientific certainty, but we can use information from the few studies that have been done, as well as from the reports and anecdotal experiences of providers who serve LGBT survivors of violence.

CTG: What are some of the barriers preventing the community from discussing the problem?

BAUM: Shame and denial are very powerful barriers. As is true with so many other marginalized groups there is a sense of not wanting to air “dirty laundry”. In the case of LGBT people there is defensiveness about our relationships. Since there are so many people who would already pathologize our relationships, condemn our families, and deny our right to be, there is a strong opposition to offering more “ammunition” to the “antis” to bolster their arguments. Not wanting to taint our image, as we fight for civil rights and recognition, is a strong silencer for those who may be suffering from DV.

CTG: How prevalent is domestic violence in minority communities and what are the barriers they face?

BAUM: As I mentioned earlier, the prevalence of DV is believed to cut across demographic lines as well as sexual orientation and gender lines. Given our data and experiences as providers, there is no reason to believe that more or fewer LGBT people of color experience or perpetrate DV than non-minorities. Of course this goes against many people's stereotypes about people of color being more violent or “passionate”, but these stereotypes are not exclusive to LGBT people but they do cross over.

Additionally, there is the issue of access to resources. Many of the programs that have been developed to ad-

dress violence within and against the LGBT community are not sensitively and appropriately meeting the needs of people of color. This includes outreach. Most of these programs exist within the larger mainstream LGBT community.

Many men who have sex with men, women who have sex with women and gender variant people do not relate to the larger community or even define under the terms we use, like “gay” or “queer”. This is particularly true in communities of color and immigrant groups. Therefore, we face a barrier on the front end to getting services to people who aren't out or don't connect with the larger mainstream community and won't come out for services.

CTG: How is the problem of domestic violence in the LGBT community being addressed?

BAUM: LGBT-specific anti-violence projects only exist in a smattering of places around the country. There are LGBT people and allies currently working at women's shelters and other DV programs around the country who have taken on reaching out to LGBT victims. Unfortunately, this is all very limited.

There is also a critical need to educate DV and mental health service providers, law enforcement, medical professionals, and other service providers on issues specific to the LGBT community—to ensure that all services are sensitive, appropriate, and accessible. For example, we've found that when straight DV agencies expand their services to specifically meet the needs of the LGBT community, these services are usually geared toward lesbian and bisexual women and sometimes to transgender women, but rarely to men of any sexual orientation or gender identity. Even these services are usually limited and are still sometimes inappropriate due to insufficient staff training.

CTG: Where can the LGBT community turn for help?

BAUM: It is important to look at the laws in an area. In some states LGBT people can actually access an order of protection and order to vacate through civil court, and victims should be made aware of that option. In other states LGBT people must go through criminal court, which means a greater offense must occur

continued on page 2>>>>



Domestic Violence

The Hidden Secret of the LGBT Community

By Kerrita McClaughly

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

(potentially a more dangerous threat or more serious injury) and the person must have the abuser arrested. We know most victims of DV already don't want to have their partner arrested, and with the history of LGBT people's relationship with the police and prison system this aversion is often exacerbated. If the LGBT person is an immigrant or a person of color, it is likely that their fear of using law enforcement will be even greater.

A third legal possibility is that the state does offer orders of protection to LGBT people through civil or criminal court. However, this could deter a person from coming forward to seek protection if there could potentially be criminal prosecution for violation of other laws. Still, other states do not offer protection to LGBT people from intimate partner violence at all. It is important that local providers and law enforcement are aware of local statutes and make victims aware of their options.

Not everyone, however, will choose to address DV through use of the criminal justice system and it is important that we have resources available for each person to make choices about the best approach for their own situation.

CTG: What other resources are needed to help eradicate or limit the problem in the community?

BAUM: We need laws changed for better access to DV shelters (equal access ordinances like the one in San Francisco for example), increased access to the legal system, education for law enforcement and service providers, research to better construct programs and to better identify the problem, and money for outreach and response programs for both victims and perpetrators.

CTG: Is there anything that you would like to add that I did not ask, that you think is missing, or that you think is relevant to the issue?

BAUM: When I do trainings for mainstream (straight) DV agencies and providers one of the first things I tell them they can do to make their services more accessible and welcoming for LGBT people is not to make assumptions about any client who walks through the door. So often if advocates see a man coming they run in and lock the doors. There is a need for us to use our instincts to

be safe, but also a need to ask questions before making assumptions. When doing client intakes or taking hotline calls, try not to use gender-specific pronouns to refer to the client's abuser until the client has identified the appropriate pronouns. This will allow one less obstacle to a person trying to come forward for help, but afraid of facing homophobia or transphobia.

If you think it is too difficult to have a conversation without using gender-specific pronouns, go back and read this interview again, you'll find none. Anti-Violence Project (AVP) staff often train and seek to collaborate with other providers in their areas in hopes of reaching and serving more LGBT victims of DV but not all providers are open to this kind of training or collaborations or to doing this work. There are still huge gaps in service.

For more information on the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs and the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, go to <http://www.avp.org> or call 212-714-1184. ❖

Special Issues in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Domestic Violence

1. "Outing" or threatening to out a partner to friends, family, employers, police, or others.
2. Reinforcing fears that no one will help a partner because s/he is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, or that for this reason, the partner "deserves" the abuse.
3. Alternatively, justifying abuse with the notion that a partner is not "really" lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender; i.e., s/he may once have had or may still have relationships with other people, or express a gender identity, inconsistent with the abuser's definitions of these terms.
4. Telling the partner that abusive behavior is a normal part of LGBT relationships, or that it cannot be domestic violence because it is occurring between LGBT individuals.
5. Portraying the violence as mutual and even consensual, especially if the partner attempts to defend against it, or has an expression of masculinity or some other "desirable" trait.

