

# **BLUEPRINT to GUIDE DEVELOPMENT of DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROTOCOLS**

## ***Identifying and Responding to Domestic Violence Issues within Community Programs or Cross-System Initiatives***

This Blueprint is a tool to assist organizations involved in community programs or cross-system initiatives to develop domestic violence protocols. While some similarities will usually exist across communities or initiatives, there are also significant variations related to participant demographics, key project partners, referral and referring agencies, services provided, and current domestic violence policies and practices within the agencies involved in the collaborative. These variations affect how an agency or project might approach assessing for domestic violence and then respond when domestic violence is disclosed or detected. Therefore, the domestic violence protocol developed by each program or initiative should be site-specific and tailored to reflect the particular characteristics of the community and project.

A well-structured domestic violence protocol (DV Protocol) helps ensure that domestic violence issues are safely, routinely and consistently identified and appropriately addressed within the program or initiative and that adequate supports and safeguards are in place for individuals and families dealing with domestic violence. Each DV Protocol should serve as a resource for anyone involved in the implementation of the program or cross-system initiative, providing concrete guidance and reflecting day-to-day practice at the project level and reflecting the roles and responsibilities of different project partners.

This Blueprint identifies key components that sites might consider including in their DV Protocol and provides commentary in the form of critical questions and analysis to facilitate site-level discussion and decision-making. To be most effective, the DV Protocol should be developed collaboratively with local and/or state domestic violence programs and experts.

## **KEY COMPONENTS OF A COMPREHENSIVE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROTOCOL**

### **A. Name of Organization, Community Collaborative or Cross-System Initiative**

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### **B. List of Key Project Partners**

#### ***Discussion***

This area of the DV Protocol should not only list the key partners involved in the program or initiative and part of its domestic violence response, but also identify the lead person(s) from each partner agency and his/her contact information.

### **C. Program Description**

#### ***Discussion***

In this section of the DV Protocol, a concise description of the program or initiative should be included to provide a context for the domestic violence response. What are the characteristics of the individuals, families and communities being targeted by the program or project? What types of activities or services are being offered (duration, frequency, curricula used, settings)? These details will help identify when and how domestic violence issues might arise for program applicants or participants and opportunities to explore domestic violence issues with them.

### **D. Mission of Program or Initiative**

#### ***Discussion***

What is your program or initiative ultimately hoping to accomplish? For example: *“To help low-income families become more economically secure.”* Or: *“To promote the emotional and financial well-being of all families and children through the delivery and coordination of faith-based and community initiatives that support responsible fatherhood.”* Or: *“To strengthen community and systems response to men and women re-entering the community after a period of incarceration.”*

### **E. Scope and Purpose of Protocol**

#### ***Discussion***

What role is the protocol meant to play within the program or initiative? For example: *“This protocol is designed to ensure that domestic violence issues within families targeted by (name of program or initiative) are safely, routinely and consistently identified and appropriately addressed and that adequate supports and safeguards are in place for adults and children impacted by domestic violence. The protocol will be used to identify and inform staff/volunteer training needs, services design and delivery, domestic violence screening and assessment approaches, and responses to domestic violence issues that arise within program implementation.”*

## **F. Underlying Principles and Shared Values**

### ***Discussion***

This section of the protocol – and the discussion among the partners that it prompts – can be very helpful in identifying shared principles and values and building trust between agencies who do not have a history of working together. It asks a simple but important question: What are the shared values that will guide your work together? Some examples of value statements from other collaborative projects who developed DV Protocols together include:

- *We recognize that domestic violence is a complex problem and that physical and emotional abuse is a serious obstacle to stable and healthy relationships and families. An important message to convey in all aspects of this initiative is that violent, abusive, or coercive behavior will not be condoned, and that victims of such behavior will be provided support and assistance.*
- *All family reunification activities and programs will be provided in a manner that does not compromise the safety of any family member.*
- *In promoting program/initiative goals (of healthy families or responsible fatherhood), care will be taken not to disparage or compromise the efforts and successes of single parents.*
- *We recognize the diversity of the \_\_\_\_\_ community and the importance of providing culturally sensitive approaches to supporting the development of healthy relationships and economically secure families.*

## **G. Definition of Domestic Violence**

### ***Discussion***

It is important for each program or collaborative initiative to define how the term domestic violence is being understood and used within its DV Protocol. The term “domestic violence” and related terms such as “intimate partner violence,” are often defined in different ways. To be clear, a common understanding of what constitutes domestic violence should be built among the project partners and reflected in the DV Protocol.

An example from one DV Protocol includes: *“For the purposes of this initiative, the term “domestic violence” describes a pattern of abusive and coercive behaviors, including physical, sexual, and psychological abuse as well as economic coercion used against an intimate partner. Domestic violence typically involves the use of a combination of tactics aimed at establishing control of one partner over the other.”*

You might also want to include some indicators of the prevalence of domestic violence in the community targeted by the initiative and statements reflecting the community’s commitment to address it.

## **H. Providing Safe Opportunities to Disclose: Screening and Assessment for Domestic Violence**

### ***Discussion***

The decision to disclose domestic violence is a difficult one for many domestic violence victims). Survivors have identified a number of important factors that affect their decision to tell someone about the abuse they are experiencing (see *attached Tool #1 – Disclosing Domestic Violence*). Domestic violence victims are more likely to disclose abuse when they:

- Perceive that the individual asking is actively listening and truly concerned;
- Understand the reason that they are being asked about domestic violence; and
- Feel assured that the disclosure will not be reported back to the abuser or make their situation more complicated or dangerous.

***The following components of the Blueprint identify key areas for consideration by programs and initiatives as they describe how domestic violence issues will be identified and addressed when disclosed or detected.***

### **1) What information will be provided to all potential participants and how will it assist domestic violence victims decide whether the program will be helpful to them and whether it will be safe for them to participate?**

#### ***Discussion***

This section of the protocol will be particularly important in instances when services are being targeted for couples or families who self-refer themselves to programs or services offered by the project (i.e., there is no formal referral process that involves screening/assessment). To be most useful to a domestic violence victim, the information provided about the program or services offered, whether written or as part of a group orientation session prior to registration, should:

- Clearly describe the goals of the program, including whether individuals can apply and participate without their partner. If relationship skills training is being offered, the course content and its limitations in addressing violent and abusive relationships should be clear. The materials should also identify options that might be available at a particular site, such as a mothers-only class, that might be a safer option for a domestic violence victim.
- Provide information about alternative resources available to address domestic violence issues, both within the program/initiative (such as waivers of program requirements or special accommodations or protections) and in the community (such as the local domestic violence hotline or other appropriate helpline). Your domestic violence partners can help you craft the right language.

**2) What information will be provided to all referring partners about the program to ensure that appropriate referrals are made?**

***Discussion***

Many programs or cross-system initiatives rely on referrals from community-based organizations or institutions, including from religious leaders, and/ or from public agencies, such as child protective services or the welfare office. When this is the case, the DV Protocol should describe the steps that will be taken to inform referring partners about the program/initiative and what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate referrals.

When referring partners are actively engaged in screening/assessing potential participants for the program/initiative, some of the discussions below might also be relevant.

**3) How will screening and assessment for domestic violence be approached?**

***Discussion***

In addition to specific screening procedures, it might also be useful to reflect what are known to be “best practices” related to raising issues of domestic violence in various types of settings. Your domestic violence partners can help you craft the right language and approach. The following are particularly key and could be reframed as elements of a site’s approach to screening and assessment:

- Always raise the issue of domestic violence privately so that others, and particularly an abusive partner, will not overhear the conversation. Asking about domestic violence in the presence of the perpetrator, or in a way that alerts the perpetrator to the conversation, can put a victim at risk.
- Explain why you are exploring the issue of abuse and tell the individual being screened that they do not have to answer any of the questions being asked.
- Provide assurances of confidentiality, with the exception of information that requires mandatory reporting (such as child abuse).
- Pay attention to the language of the screening questions and make sure that the terms you are using will be easily understood.
- Avoid blaming or judgmental responses.
- Do not force an individual to say WHY they are not interested in participating.
- Regardless of whether a disclosure of domestic violence occurs, UNIVERSALLY provide information on domestic violence services and support available in the community.

***NOTE:*** A negative response to screening may only indicate that the victim is not comfortable disclosing abuse at this time.

**4) Screening and Assessment for Domestic Violence -- How will domestic violence issues be explored with potential program/initiative participants?**

**Discussion**

Community program and cross-system initiatives use a variety of intake procedures. This important area of the DV Protocol should describe key procedures related to identifying domestic violence issues in those intake procedures:

**a) Who will be screened for domestic violence and at what point of contact with potential participants?** For example: *“All potential participants in program/initiative activities will be routinely screened for domestic violence, whether signs, symptoms, or behaviors suggesting abuse are present or not, prior to referral to any program/initiative services.”*

**b) Who is responsible for screening and assessment for domestic violence within each partner agency or a central intake site?** For example: *“Individuals within partner agencies and organizations responsible for identifying and referring potential participants in program activities will explore domestic violence issues prior to referring any participant to the program. All those involved in screening activities will receive training on domestic violence and the purpose, goals, and programs of (name of project).”*

In projects with multiple partners and more than one referral point, the protocol might include a specific list (either in the body of the protocol or as an attachment) of those who will play this initial screening role within each of the partnering agencies. The role of each partnering agency should be spelled out in terms of initial and secondary screening that will occur within the agency. The protocol should also identify how and when domestic violence advocates will be involved in the screening and assessment process.

**c) What screening procedures will be used?** If a screening/assessment instrument is being used to explore domestic violence issues, a copy of the instrument should be attached to the DV Protocol. Alternatively, an actual screening script can be included in the body of the protocol.

Consider this sample script as an example only, to be fine-tuned to ensure community and cultural sensitivity. Such a script would be most appropriate at a site in which there is not an in-depth intake and intrusive questions about domestic violence would not be appropriate:

- *“(Name of project) is coordinating a broad array of services and activities designed to provide support to families and to strengthen relationships. These include: (specific description of the services offered so that the individual understands the context for the domestic violence questions that follow).*
- *In order to figure out which programs might be most helpful and because we care about your safety, we are asking everyone these questions about some of the dynamics of your relationship.*
- *Most couples argue from time to time. When you and your partner/spouse argue, do you ever feel afraid?*

- *When your partner is angry, how does he/she act? Does he/she ever get physical and push, grab or hit you? If yes, when was the last time this happened?*
- *Does your partner ever try to control you in a way that makes you uncomfortable, such as controlling who you see or talk to, how you spend your money, what you wear, whether or not you work or go to school?*
- *Is there any reason that you would be uncomfortable participating in this program with or your partner (or with the father of your child)? (NOTE: If it is possible for an individual to participate in your program without their partner, explore this option as well.)*

## **I. Responding to disclosures of abuse**

### ***Discussion***

When disclosures of domestic violence occur as a result of screening or at any point during participation in the program or activity, an appropriate response must follow. The purpose of screening for domestic violence is two-fold: to ensure that referrals to and participation in the program/initiative are appropriate, and to identify and provide assistance to abuse victims. This section of the DV Protocol should describe both how decisions related to participation in program/initiative activities will be made when domestic violence has been disclosed or detected, and how referrals to domestic violence services will be made.

### **1. CRISIS RESPONSE: What procedures will be used to assess for immediate danger?**

#### ***Discussion***

With your domestic violence program partners, identify the specific steps to be followed to respond to an individual who is in immediate danger. What options should be presented and what steps should be taken to assist the victim to access those options? Include specific contact information necessary for a crisis response (including providing assistance making a call to the emergency domestic violence hotline or the police, arranging for the victim to meet with an advocate, where a victim can most easily receive assistance obtaining a restraining order, etc.).

If abuse is disclosed, there are several key follow-up questions that help assess for immediate danger:

- *Are in danger right now? Are you afraid that your partner will hurt you today? Are you afraid to go home? Does the abuse seem to be getting worse?*
- *IF YES, do you have somewhere safe to go right now or do you need help finding a safe place?*
- *IF NO, do you want to talk to someone about all this and help you figure out ways to keep you and your kids safe?*

## **2. Responding to disclosures of past abuse or current abuse that the victim does not identify as posing an immediate or ongoing risk**

### ***Discussion***

With your domestic violence program partners, identify the specific steps that will be taken to:

- Refer a domestic violence victim for support in dealing with domestic violence, whether past or current, including victim support services and batterers' intervention services.
- Provide a more in-depth assessment for a domestic violence victim who, after receiving a description of the program/initiative services, remains interested in participating. The goals of this assessment are to ensure informed decision-making and safe participation and should include a full safety assessment and full exploration of options.

This section of the protocol should also identify any services provided by the program/initiative that might be of assistance to domestic violence victims looking to improve the quality of future relationships or to support healthy co-parenting (such as gender-specific informational sessions, or relationship skills buildings sessions that do not require attendance with a partner, etc.).

## **3. When will referral to the program/initiative services NOT occur?**

### ***Discussion***

Some community programs or cross-system initiatives have elected to specifically identify in their protocol when a referral to the program/initiative would NOT be appropriate and should NOT occur, so that it is very clear to all parties.

Two examples of such an approach include:

Example 1 (which involves a highly competent set of referral and assessment agencies, well trained by the local domestic violence agency):

- *“Referral to the \_\_\_\_ will NOT occur under the following circumstances: there is a current restraining order against one of the parties; there is a pending court case related to either domestic violence or related family matters; one or both parties express fear of the other party; one party indicates that they are not interested in such a referral to our services; or any other indications of present abusive or controlling behavior in the relationship (such as jumpiness or nervousness around a partner, signs of controlling or abusive behavior by one of the parties, or indications of distress or injury).*
- *In instances in which past abuse is disclosed and the victim remains interested in participating in our services to improve the quality of a co-parenting relationship or an intact relationship, a more in-depth assessment, including a full safety assessment and full exploration of options, will be conducted. Such assessments shall include consideration of the recentness of the abuse, whether it occurred in a present or past relationship, the types of intervention services provided to both the victim and the abusive partner, the abusive partner's successful completion of a batterer's intervention program or other appropriate response, and other intervening variables.*



*The goal of this assessment will be to ensure informed decision-making and safe participation should a referral be made.”*

Example 2:

- *“Due to the pilot nature of the project, no individuals disclosing current or past domestic violence will be referred to \_\_\_\_\_. Instead, they will be provided the following options....”*

## **J. Maintaining Confidentiality**

### ***Discussion***

Perpetrators who discover that a victim has told someone about their abuse may retaliate with further threats and violence. For this and other ethical reasons, it is important that information related to disclosures of domestic violence is handled with utmost care and that the privacy and confidentiality of victims receive the highest priority.

This section of the protocol should clearly describe the confidentiality standards (some of which are defined by law or professional standards) that bind information sharing by those who will be involved in domestic violence screening, including governmental agencies, domestic violence programs, health agencies, clergy, and other community-based organizations. To clarify roles and avoid misunderstandings, expectations related to what information will and will not be shared related to domestic violence disclosures should then be described.

## **K. Cross Training On Domestic Violence Issues and other Program/Initiative Issues**

### ***Discussion***

In order to effectively implement this protocol, it will be necessary to ensure that those involved in identifying and responding to domestic violence issues and those providing support to domestic violence victims within the context of the program/initiative receive the necessary training.

This section of the protocol could identify the key partner groups (state/county agencies, domestic violence organizations, health care providers, clergy, and others) and, for each:

- the training they will receive to fulfill their roles under these protocols; and
- the training they will provide to assist others in fulfilling their roles.

The protocol should also clarify how the trainings will be coordinated and the timetable for the training and how often it is scheduled. *See also attached Tool #2 – Where to Start? Developing and Implementing a Domestic Violence Protocol.*

## **L. Review of Protocol**

Given the demonstration nature of many of the programs/initiatives, it is also recommended that a 6-month protocol review be built in to allow the project partners to assess implementation strengths and weaknesses and make modifications as necessary. *See attached Tool #3 – How Are You Doing? Reviewing Your Domestic Violence Protocol.*

## DISCLOSING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The decision to disclose domestic violence is a difficult one for many domestic violence victims. There are many reasons why someone would choose not to talk about abuse they are experiencing.

- **The victim is afraid for their own or their children’s safety.** An abuser has made serious threats such as, “If you ever tell anyone, I’ll hurt you and the kids.” or “I’ll make sure you never see the kids again” and has made good on threats in the past.
- **They do not feel safe in your office.** There may be many reasons for this. There may not be enough privacy to talk about the abuse. The process of applying for benefits or services through your office might feel overwhelming. A victim may have had an experience with other systems that were abusive, making them very cautious.
- **A relative or friend of the abuser may work in your office.** The victim may feel that it is too dangerous to reveal the abuse they are experiencing. This is especially true in small rural offices or if the victim has to use a translator who is part of a close-knit immigrant community.
- **They may be afraid of losing their benefits or services if they tell your office staff.** If the process of getting benefits or services is confusing, they may need some time to understand their rights and responsibilities.
- **A victim may have many reasons to believe that talking about the abuse can only make their situation worse.** They may have told a neighbor or friend who didn’t believe them or made them feel that the abuse was their fault. They may have confided in a family member who then told the abuser, resulting in a serious injury.

### WHAT SUPPORTS DISCLOSURE?

- **Messages that say this is an informed, safe place to disclose.** What does your office/waiting rooms/materials communicate to domestic violence victims about whether this is a safe place to disclose domestic violence?
- **Messages that say that you are an informed, safe person to tell.**
- **A clear understanding of how the information will be used.** This includes understanding how and if the domestic violence information the victim provides will be shared with others in your office or within the community, which is particularly important in rural communities where privacy is harder to maintain.
- **A clear understanding of how the information might affect any decisions you make about their case.** How will the fact that she is or has been victimized by intimate partner affect eligibility for or access to services and supports in which they might be interested? Are there protections that you can offer that will allow them to participate safely? All of this should be explored in the context of their particular circumstances, concerns, interests, needs and resources.
- **Meaningful assurances of confidentiality and privacy.**

## Developing and Implementing Domestic Violence Protocols

### *WHERE TO START?*

This short checklist identifies key steps in the process of developing and implementing an effective domestic violence protocol for your collaborative project.

#### ***Important first steps***

- ❑ **Identify domestic violence experts at the local or state level with whom you can partner.** If you do not have a pre-existing relationship with a domestic violence program, contact your state domestic violence coalition for information about local programs in your area or check community resource directories. (For a listing of state coalitions, see: <http://new.vawnet.org/specialdocs/StateMap.php>).
- ❑ **Spend time sharing information about your program and the services or activities you plan to provide (or are providing).** Do not assume that domestic violence programs in your area are familiar with your project. Take time to answer questions about your plans and to respond to questions and concerns they might have.
- ❑ **Spend time learning more about the services provided by the domestic violence program(s) with whom you hope to partner.**
- ❑ **Define the types of guidance and support you hope to receive from the domestic violence agencies you are partnering with.** For example, domestic violence experts can be helpful in any and all of the following areas:
  - ◆ Reviewing and enhancing current responses to domestic violence within your agency or system, including policies, procedures and written materials designed to identify and respond to the needs of domestic violence victims and address confidentiality issues;
  - ◆ Reviewing the services and activities you are providing (or plan to provide) to ensure that safety and confidentiality issues are addressed for domestic violence victims and those at risk;
  - ◆ Identifying appropriate responses when past or current domestic violence is disclosed during recruitment or intake, or by program participants; and
  - ◆ Providing training of program staff on domestic and sexual violence issues.

All of these can be incorporated into the protocol development process or handled as discrete activities.

- ❑ **Identify the types of financial or other resources needed and available to support the involvement of domestic violence experts in your program design and implementation.**

## ***Laying the Groundwork for Domestic Violence Protocol Development***

- ❑ **With your domestic violence partners, describe how your program will work -- how will individuals and couples find out about, enter, and move through the program? Begin to identify where domestic violence issues will arise.**

The following questions will help get these discussions started:

- ◆ How will potential participants for your program be identified? Are these families you already know a lot about (because you are already working with them) or are they new to you? How will couples hear about the programs you are offering?
- ◆ Are you relying on referrals from other community agencies?
- ◆ How and by whom will the services or activities be introduced to individual clients?
- ◆ How do individuals and couple “get into” the program? Can they just show up, or is there a formal intake process? If intake into your program will be conducted by partner agencies, what is their current experience identifying and addressing domestic violence issues among clients?
- ◆ What happens when disclosures of domestic violence occur? How are you defining “domestic violence”?
- ◆ What types of domestic violence training will staff need to respond to disclosures, whenever they occur?
- ◆ How will domestic violence disclosure information be shared among the project partners? How will the confidentiality and privacy of domestic violence victims be maintained?
- ◆ If there are educational or training offered as part of your services, is there content that might increase risks for someone in an abusive relationship (such as scenes/scenarios involving emotionally or physically abusive couples)?

## ***Developing and Implementing Your Domestic Violence Protocol***

- ❑ **Working with your partners, and using the DV Protocol “Blueprint” as a guide, describe in detail how you will identify and respond to domestic violence issues within your project.** The domestic violence protocol should be *site-specific* and tailored to reflect the particular characteristics of the community and project. Develop a draft for review and comment by all project partners.
- ❑ **Clarify the role(s) that domestic violence experts will play in the design and implementation of services and activities, as well as in any evaluation activities.**

- ❑ **Critique your protocol for how well it answers these two questions:**
  - ◆ How will domestic violence issues be identified?
  - ◆ What steps will be taken to ensure that domestic violence issues are appropriately addressed by well-trained personnel.
  
- ❑ **Finalize the protocol and distribute it to program partners and staff.**
  
- ❑ **Ensure that all staff and volunteers (including those at partner agencies) who have a role in implementing the protocol receive adequate training on domestic violence issues and the domestic violence protocol itself.**
  
- ❑ **Use staff or project meetings to support implementation of the protocol and identify implementation issues.**
  
- ❑ **Review the protocol at 6 months (and annually thereafter) to identify areas in which the protocol might need to be modified or enhanced.** Key partners should be included. The protocol should also be reviewed and modified as necessary if new program components are added or the program is significantly changed.

## How Are You Doing?

### ***REVIEWING YOUR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROTOCOL***

We are still learning how to best address domestic violence issues within new collaborative efforts, including ways to structure and use domestic violence protocols most effectively. A periodic review of your program's domestic violence protocol will provide you and your project partners an opportunity to assess the strengths and weaknesses of your protocol and its implementation and make modifications as necessary based on your experiences.

The following questions can help guide such a protocol review:

#### **What is your overall assessment of how your domestic violence protocol is being implemented?**

- How knowledgeable are staff, volunteers, consultants, and community partners of the protocol and their role in implementing it?
- How consistently is the protocol being implemented?

#### **What domestic violence training have you provided to those responsible for implementing the protocol related to domestic violence and the protocol itself?**

- As new staff, volunteers and partners join the project, do they receive the necessary domestic violence training?
- Does the training cover both domestic violence issues and the specific elements and requirements of the domestic violence protocol?
- How successful do you feel the training is in ensuring that those responsible for implementing the training are familiar with the protocol and confident using it?

#### **Have there been disclosures of domestic violence at any point in the process?**

- If no, does this surprise you? Why or why not?
- If yes, when and where have disclosures occurred -- prior to referral, during intake/screening, from participants involved in your services or activities, other -- and were your staff, volunteers or consultants prepared to respond?

#### **Knowing what you know now, is there anything you would do differently related to identifying and responding to domestic violence issues?**

**Given your experiences to date, are there any aspects of your protocol that you think should be strengthened, expanded, or modified?**

**What are your next steps? And who needs to be included or consulted in each of these steps?**