

Domestic Violence and Child Maltreatment Advisory Board Final Report

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Background

In June of 2002, the Domestic Violence and Child Maltreatment Advisory Board was convened to assist the Department for Children and Families (DCF) in the development of best practice and policy for domestic violence and child maltreatment. The Advisory board is multi-disciplinary with members participating from domestic violence advocacy, children's advocacy, child protection, and batterers intervention fields as well as members from the Office of the Defender General and Office of the Attorney General. (For Membership List please see Appendix A). The charge of this group follows:

- Assist the Department with the determination and implementation of best practices and policies as they relate to domestic violence and child maltreatment;
- Provide a community-based, multi-disciplinary perspective to the development of domestic violence/child maltreatment practice; and
- Enhance the capacity for an effective and differential community response to children who witness domestic violence.

The following report provides a summary of Advisory Board accomplishments and recommendations for DCF to further its work in the area of domestic violence and child maltreatment.

Recommendation #1

Adopt Summary Policy Statement

There are three central tenets that must guide the development of any DCF policy related to domestic violence. For purposes of determining and implementing further and ongoing policy development and best practice standards it is recommended that DCF adopt the following policy statement:

It is critical to the safety and well being of children that the DCF actively work towards achieving safety for all family members. Given this, DCF will adopt practices and policies that:

- Removes blame for domestic violence from victims;
- Examine and implement strategies to support victims of domestic violence in providing safety and well-being for their children;
- Hold offenders responsible for the violence and the corresponding risk that violence poses to children.

Policies that do not incorporate these principles risk endangering the safety, well-being and permanency needs of those children at risk of and experiencing the effects of child abuse and neglect.

Recommendation #2

Provide leadership to the Council on Domestic Violence Subcommittee on Children and Domestic Violence in order to enhance the statewide capacity for an effective and differential response to children affected by domestic violence.

The development of a differential response (“continuums of care that range from community-based services and support to child protective services intervention” p. 6 National Guidelines) to children affected by domestic violence contains several components of interest to DCF and highlighted by the Advisory Board.

A. Risk of Harm Policy: The current policy (No. 55, 5/20/03) includes specific guidelines for determining the acceptance of cases where children are at risk due to the presence of domestic violence in the home. This policy serves three purposes:

It clarifies that the department does not investigate situations where the only allegation is that the child has witnessed or been exposed to domestic violence; and

It provides for a DCF response when children who witness or are exposed to domestic violence are placed at significant risk of harm.

It suggests that the DCF role in a differential response is most effective when used only when necessary in a protective capacity.

B. Specification of DCF policy does not accomplish the overarching task of responding to children who are affected by domestic violence. These children should be offered voluntary, community based-services and assessments that address the safety and well-being of all family members. – a task suited for the entire community. The Advisory Board recommended and the Council on Domestic Violence agreed to situate a multi-disciplinary subcommittee within its structure to address and develop a community-wide differential response to children who are affected by domestic violence. (See Appendix B: Proposal to Vermont Council on Domestic Violence).

Recommendation #3

Integrate the role of the Juvenile Court into current domestic violence initiatives aimed at improving the response to domestic violence and child maltreatment.

The work of Juvenile Court is central to the achievement and sustainability of any significant and meaningful policy and practice change internal to DCF. Juvenile Court Judges and staff must be informed of and prepared to address the complex issues presented in families experiencing domestic violence and child maltreatment. Given that the impact of domestic violence on child safety, permanency and well-being is significant when it exists in a child protection case, the role of the judge in such cases can be the determining factor in the establishment of safe and viable solutions for abused women and their children.

With the assistance of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, large federal initiatives have identified specific strategies for court improvement in the area of domestic violence and child maltreatment. With the support of DCF and the Court, utilization of these strategies, tailored to Vermont’s specific needs, would greatly improve chances for long term positive outcomes for children and families. (See Appendix C for a Summary of Court Recommendations)

Recommendation #4

Support initiatives directed at improving batterer accountability as a strategy to enhance safety, stability and well-being for adult and child victims.

- Dedicating resources and ensuring that policy and practice incorporate the principles and ideals of batterer accountability is central to creating safety, improves case specific outcomes and shifts cultural ideals toward support and responsibility. Two specific areas to focus DCF attention in the coming years are:
- Improve partnerships with Corrections Intensive Domestic Abuse Program (IDAP), independent Batterers Intervention Programs (BIPS) and others to incorporate batterer accountability strategies into casework practice and policy. (See Appendix E DRAFT DAEP/DCF Protocol)
- Provide consultation and training to batterers intervention programs on incorporating the needs and interests of children into policy and practice decisions.
- Dedicate resources to the development of prevention programming for young men at risk of becoming domestic violence offenders. Utilize the Relationship Abuse Prevention Program (RAPP) as a model.

Recommendation #5

Integrate the work of the Domestic Violence Unit into DCF planning, priorities and development.

- Institutionalization of domestic violence advocacy and batterer accountability principles into the framework of a child protection agency requires many years and much dedication and diligence. For the past seven years, the Domestic Violence Unit has implemented program services and structures that have consistently albeit slowly improved DCF response to victims of domestic violence and their children. The recent creation of Policy 51A – Utilization of the Domestic Violence Unit – (See Appendix D for details) illustrates the Department's support for the Unit's expertise. There are several issues, four of which are identified here, which require the resources and support of the Department to ensure the Unit's continued success.
- Development of Data Collection System and Case Tracking Forms. This will serve the purposes of ongoing statistical analysis and program evaluation.
- Continued policy review. Specifically in relation to ongoing casework practice.
- Resources for the development of a comprehensive training plan as a strategy to enhance local capacity for responding to domestic violence. Currently, a very small percentage of staff, including management and supervisory staff have participated in training on domestic violence. Training on domestic violence should be integral to the development and implementation of safe and effective child protection strategies.
- Support the work of the Unit on a national level by encouraging and allowing for participation at national meetings, trainings and initiatives designed to promote and enhance resource and program development in the domestic violence and child maltreatment field.
- Identify and assist with the integration of Domestic Violence Unit expertise into the Department's childcare services programming and initiatives including training, consultation on investigations and licensing regulations.

Next Steps

Members of the Domestic Violence and Child Maltreatment Advisory Board will continue as such for periodic feedback, advice and leadership to DCF on the continued implementation of domestic violence into child protection policy and practice.

Thank you to all community partners who participated in making this report and process a successful and well accomplished endeavor.

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