Family Violence Councils to the Rescue to Coordinate Your Resources

by Sarah M. Buel, Clinical Professor, University of Texas School of Law Domestic Violence Clinic, Austin

Frequently both prosecutors and advocates lament the lack of interagency cooperation. The lack of interagency cooperation can hinder effective interventions with domestic violence and sexual assault victims. However, establishing a family and sexual violence council can be the answer.

Across Texas and the country, family and sexual violence councils have proven to be a superb mechanism to effect reforms, if they are action-oriented and inclusive. A key in some communities to dramatically reducing the incidence of domestic violence assaults and homicides has been a family violence council. For example:

A well-coordinated, multi-agency partnership in San Diego has helped to decrease the domestic homicide rate in the area by 59 percent over the last two years.

Sgt. Mark Wynn, founder and head of the Metro Nashville Police Department’s Domestic Violence Unit, reports that through a well-orchestrated, multi-disciplinary family violence task force, their domestic homicide rate has plunged 71 percent during the past 18 months.

In 1994, there were 32 domestic violence homicides in Hillsborough County, Florida. An outraged group of Tampa area professionals, including Deputy Sheriff Rod Reeder, shelter director Mabel Bexley, Dr. Ron Chez, and scores of volunteers, worked closely to put together a remarkable campaign, “Zero Tolerance: Stop Domestic Violence.” A local advertising agency developed posters, buttons and PSAs, while the committee sponsored two large, combined community education and fundraising events. They not only raised $300,000, but also decreased their domestic homicide rate by 68 percent in the process! As a result, the local shelter, The Spring of Tampa Bay, was able to expand its K-12 school and start a multi-unit transitional housing program.

The successful councils share some common strategies, summarized in the following seven recommendations:

1. The council must be multi-disciplinary, diverse and inclusive. Not only does the council need the court-related personnel (prosecutors, advocates, law enforcement, probation/parole, clerks, and judges), but also defense and family law attorneys, child protective services, CASAs, clergy, educators, legal aid, corrections, public housing staff, survivors, medical and mental health providers, business representatives, and other interested citizens. It is essential that the racial and cultural diversity of your community be reflected within the council membership. Additionally, within each profession invited to attend, make an effort to ensure that the top decision-makers also bring their frontline staff. We want
the police chief, but also the officers who respond to victim calls.

CASE STUDY: In San Angelo, through the efforts of County Attorney Tom Goff and Victim Assistance Coordinator Jane Parker, a multi-disciplinary council has been convened to improve the services provided to domestic and sexual assault victims. In less than a year, the council has sponsored trainings for law enforcement and an additional community-wide conference on domestic violence assistance with immigrants, refugees, and victims of color. They are also in the process of procuring cameras for law enforcement officers to enable them to photograph victim’s injuries and crime scenes, greatly facilitating the prosecution of such cases. “The bottom line is, if anything’s going to be done about domestic violence and sexual assault in the community, you have to have optimum cooperation between the agencies,” says Jane Parker.

- The council often engenders a greater sense of ownership if there are rotating co-chairs. In this way, the sheriff can have a turn co-chairing with a child protection worker, or a prosecutor can co-chair with a physician. We then get exposed to differing styles of leadership, agendas and personalities.

- Work can most effectively be done in the committees to avert any one issue consuming the agenda. Instead, each committee can set its priorities, have in-depth discussions, and report its progress to the larger group at the monthly meetings.

- Meet monthly at an easily accessible location. Often the courthouse works well.

- Minimal as it may seem, refreshments are key to creating a positive association with the council meetings. If participants take turns providing interesting options, snacks can be a source of humor and enjoyment.

- Use positive media attention to garner initial interest or rekindle waning appeal for council members. While having media representatives present at every meeting can have a chilling effect, using them to celebrate and publicize the successes of the council can be very beneficial.

CASE STUDY: One council decided its first priority would be obtaining cameras and film for the law enforcement officers to better document the domestic violence crime scenes and victims’ injuries. After emulating Jefferson County Assistant District Attorney Kathleen Morgan’s procurement of cameras by small business donations, the prosecutor won a succession of cases based on those photographs. The council then called a press conferences to share the good news with the public, allowing the prosecutor, police and council to garner well-deserved publicity for their joint effort. As a result, the council enjoyed higher levels of participation since attendees knew the council was serious about addressing problems, and not simply complaining about them.

- Adopt an action-oriented agenda based on a three-prong approach to problem solving. The first prong involves the council participants honestly identifying the challenges and problems their community faces. Second, they need to name who is responsible for ensuring the needed changes happen. Finally, the council must devise an action plan, utilizing their members, for bringing about the reforms. For example, let’s say the situation is that prosecutors dismiss all cases in which the victim will not testify and will not proceed to trial without the victim, even when they have hearsay exceptions and other corroborating evidence. The council would identify the elected district or county attorney as the person responsible for this policy change. They would then work with the elected prosecutor to fully discuss why it is important to take such cases to trial whenever possible, how the prosecutor can achieve this task, and what the council members are willing to do to assist the prosecutor in achieving the goals. Ideally, each committee — law enforcement, judges/courts, shelters, medical providers, clergy, mental health services, etc. — must be willing to take a hard look at its own practices and hear what other council members think can be done to improve our interventions with these cases.

Regardless of whether the locale is urban, rural or suburban, family violence councils bring together — often for the first time — agencies that are serving the same victim constituencies, yet are not collaborating in their efforts. We must be willing to identify the weak links in each community, then design an action plan to bring about the necessary reforms. In your community is the problem that medical providers do not employ universal screening? Do the police fail to arrest in most cases? Are the clergy telling victims it is their responsibility to keep the marriage together? Have your judges refused to fully apply the laws regarding protection orders and abuse? Do your prosecutors routinely plead these cases out and fail to hold the perpetrators responsible?

As Jane Parker summarizes, “We’re all here to help solve any problems that anyone else might have.”

ENDNOTES

1 A packet on family violence coordinating councils can be ordered by calling 1-800-52-PEACE.

2 For a copy of the “Zero Tolerance” campaign, call Lisa Landers at 813/247-5433, ext. 307.

3 See my column in the Mar/Apr. ‘97 issue of The Texas Prosecutor.