

# Portland Press Herald (Maine)

October 10, 2004 Sunday

## **Is anger management a remedy for batterers? A federal ban on using domestic violence grants to fund the programs raises some questions.**

**By David Hench, Staff Writer**

Most of the 940 people now on probation for domestic violence in Maine were compelled to enroll in anger management programs. But victims' advocates question whether those programs are effective at reducing abusive behavior – and say they may actually increase the danger to victims.

Underscoring their concern, the federal Office of Violence Against Women now forbids using domestic violence grant money to place offenders in anger management programs, favoring more extensive programs specifically developed for domestic abuse.

While such requirements are likely to tip the balance in favor of state-certified batterers intervention programs, some advocates worry that discouraging an entire category of counseling could stifle innovation without conclusive research into what works.

At stake is roughly \$750,000 in fees paid annually in Maine by offenders for different court-ordered programs and the future safety of thousands of domestic violence victims.

“I think it’s remiss to put a man in a program that’s not going to help them and then we blame the man for that,” said Janet Hagberg, executive director of the Minnesota-based Silent Witness National Initiative, which promotes domestic violence reduction efforts. “The whole field is ripe for evaluation. People’s lives are on the line.”

Statewide, 13,558 domestic violence victims sought emergency services last year and domestic violence, in its most extreme form, is the leading cause of murder in the state.

When a domestic violence offender is convicted, usually the sentence involves probation and enrollment in some program aimed at changing his behavior and improving the safety of his victim.

Of the 940 people now on probation, 534 had enrolled in anger management and 406 in batterers intervention. About 5 percent of domestic violence offenders in the state are women and there

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are currently no programs approved for their enrollment, though the issue is being studied by the Maine Coalition to End Domestic Violence.

Batterers intervention programs are state-certified courses that last 48 weeks and stress educating an offender about the reasons for abusive behavior. They often involve oversight by a domestic violence agency and prosecutors and the curriculum, designed solely for domestic violence perpetrators, must be based on one of three nationally recognized models.

They cost an offender \$20 to \$40 a week and are not covered by insurance. In some cases, if an offender misses a certain number of classes, he must start over and be sent to jail.

Anger management programs by comparison last between eight and 15 weeks with costs ranging from \$30 to \$70 a week, costs that are sometimes covered by insurance. The classes cover techniques for reducing stress and controlling anger impulses.

## **DIFFERENT PROGRAMS**

More offenders are enrolled in anger management programs because judges and prosecutors are sometimes naive about the difference between the two, say some advocates. Too often, they say, authorities conclude that someone who beats up a domestic partner was angry, and therefore needs to control that anger to prevent a similar episode in the future. At the same time, offenders tend to prefer anger management because it is less expensive and less of a commitment, and thus they often seek such programs during plea negotiations.

Prosecutors sometimes settle for such conditions to make sure they at least get a conviction on the person's record, observers say.

Critics of anger management say the new federal rules will help steer offenders into more appropriate programming.

“In a well-done batterers intervention program, men are taught that abuse is a choice and they can choose not to engage in that behavior,” said Lois Galgay Reckitt, director of Family Crisis Services, which served 4,400 women and 105 men in Cumberland and Sagadahoc counties this year. “In anger management, they teach them little techniques – how to relax, how to cope with stress, how to have a time out. You’re still leaving the power in this whole mess in the hands of the perpetrator.”

The facilitators for batterers intervention programs meet regularly with domestic abuse advocates, but she said there is no interaction with anger management programs and no requirements for how they are conducted.

“I could hang up an anger management sign on my front lawn and start making money,” she said.

Anger management classes can be counterproductive, by focusing on why an abuser is angry, said Denise Donnelly a domestic violence researcher at Georgia State University.

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“It can allow the guy to come up with another reason with why it’s her fault,” Donnelly said. “Saying he couldn’t help himself, then you’re taking the blame off of him. He’s the one who made the choice to hit or hurt someone else in some way.”

## **TREATING THE PROBLEM**

Anger management techniques can lead to lower levels of violence in a relationship but the emotional abuse and other means of control can escalate, said Shawn LaGrega, a case manager with Maine Pretrial Services who also teaches a batterers intervention class.

George Anderson, founder of the world’s largest provider of anger management counseling, Anderson & Anderson, said characterizing anger management as dangerous is an exaggeration.

“They don’t want counseling or psychotherapy done in lieu of domestic violence education. I agree with that, but do I think it places victims at risk? No. I think that’s stretching it. That’s a political thing.

“There’s no evidence it has occurred,” he said.

Anderson does believe the training for an abusive partner should be different from the person who has occasional episodes of road rage.

“The issue regarding domestic violence is power and control. The offender is likely to beat or abuse the victim whether or not he or she is angry,” he said.

Anger management classes are appropriate for some offenders and efforts to interfere with their availability is counterproductive, says Clifford Strike, an attorney who has represented people charged with domestic violence crimes.

“Domestic violence is case-specific and should be treated as case-specific,” said Strike.

“Certainly there are cases where batterers intervention is more than appropriate because there are certainly cases where it is a control issue. I would say there is an equal number where it is far more anger that results in a spillover into the marriage than it is a control issue,” Strike said.

Marty Burgess, director of Violence No More, teaches both anger management and batterers intervention. He believes most people referred to anger management should not be.

“All of us are angry at some point during our day. Violence on the other hand is very different. It’s an action,” he said. “We don’t sentence sex offenders to lust management.”

## LEARNING WHAT WORKS

Anger management can be a useful part of a comprehensive batterers program, but not as a substitute, say advocates. But that doesn't mean everything described as anger management should be abandoned.

"If it means a program that just gives people techniques for trying not to be mad, I don't think that is very successful," said Hagberg of Silent Witness. "But if it means it cuts off an opportunity to explore some of the programs that have been shown to be successful based on the latest brain research, that's really shortsighted," she said, referring to pilot programs elsewhere in the country that show promise.

Knowing what works is difficult. The field is still relatively young and there is not an abundance of research.

Bates professor Robert Moyer conducted a study of available research on batterers intervention programs for District Court Judge Joyce Wheeler, who sits on the domestic violence court in York County. He found conflicting evidence on whether the programs were effective, though he did conclude that men who completed a batterers intervention program were less likely to re-offend than men who dropped out.

The new prohibition on using grant funds from the Justice Department's Office of Violence Against Women to support anger management took effect Oct. 1 and affects about \$2 million in grants. But the change shouldn't have an immediate widespread affect on sentencing. Because offender programs tend to be paid for by the offender, little grant money is involved in executing the sentences.

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