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Programs for Batterers Changing Their Focus

By Suzanne Batchelor, WeNews correspondent

AUSTIN, Texas (WOMENSENEWS) – A new prison-and-probation program for domestic batterers at the Travis County Sheriff's Department here is the latest sign of a shift in the treatment of offenders.

In the past, an offender's treatment program was likely to entail a handful of weekly classes on either anger management or the use of violence to maintain control and power. But increasingly, criminal justice experts are saying the time span of such courses is too limited. Anger-management lessons don't seem to stick and the other classes don't seem to be achieving their goal of breaching an offender's denials of abuse in the limited time available.

Instead, while jailed, the batterer is increasingly being asked to confront something fundamental: his own sense of superiority over women and his choice to use violence against them. The programs are intensive and go for months. And the offender is often led through that self-examination by a man who has been a batterer himself.

"Lots of people experience violence and do not choose it," said Charyl Naron, director of the new Resolve to Abolish Violence Everywhere program that began in January. For example, she said out of two children in a batterer's family one might later become violent, the other not. Likewise, an angry batterer won't choose violence with a boss, but will with his wife.

While offender programs have typically looked at how batterers use violence to control their victims – or counseled them on how to manage "out of control" anger – staffers at Travis say this program assumes that violence arises from a decision based on deeply-held beliefs of male dominance, not a flash of "uncontrollable" emotion.

Leaders of the new programs say batterer counseling also demands a sustained effort over time and needs victim and community participation.

George Jurand, coordinator of the San Francisco sheriff's department's Resolve to Stop the Violence Project, on which Travis County's program is based, says that in group meetings, male offenders are led step by step to recall and re-enact what they felt, thought and did as domestic conflicts escalated and turned violent. Often, Jurand said, the offenders can be expected to voice the idea that, as men, they should be dominant. This "male-role belief system" is then linked to its destructive consequences: arrest, imprisonment or loss of family.

Counselors offer new choices for responding to conflicts that embody respect, communication and working with their partners. Practical alternatives are offered for each step of an incident.

Efforts to rehabilitate batterers began during the 1970s, when battered women's shelters began spreading across the country. By the late 1990s, program leaders had begun to identify clues to what works: intensive counseling that is long-term, mandatory and led by social or cultural "peers," along with a unified effort from law enforcement, courts, victims and the community.

Offenders Become Counselors

In the San Francisco program upon which the Travis program is based, counselors and facilitators are mainly former batterers, trained in a rehabilitation curriculum called "Manalive." The program was developed by Hamish Sinclair, a former batterer who devised the program after a Marin County, Calif., women's shelter asked for it in 1980.

When men hear from other men who have abandoned violence and now project responsibility and inspire respect, it has great impact, Jurand said.

San Francisco Sheriff Michael Hennessey agrees. "In my experience, you can't beat the credibility of an ex-offender when trying to show offenders how their lives can be different," Hennessey said recently at a criminal-justice conference in New York.

Evaluating the San Francisco program--which was started in 1997 and is known as RSVP – psychiatrist James Gilligan, head of the University of Pennsylvania's Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, reported in 2002 that, compared with offenders who did not participate, RSVP participants showed an 80-percent steeper decline in repeat violence after 16 weeks. Those spending 12 weeks in the program showed a 51-percent steeper decline and those in the program for four weeks had a 42-percent steeper decline in repeat violence.

Following an Example

"One of the biggest features is that the staff has been in that position," former batterer Eddie Moore told Women's eNews. "You can come in with book knowledge about how to stop violence but I can share from a personal level how I've overcome it."

Moore, who recently joined the staff of an Oakland, Calif., domestic-violence shelter, participated as a counselor in the RSVP program.

National figures comparing batterer-intervention programs are hard to come by. A 2003 U.S. Justice Department report by Shelly Jackson reviewed 35 such studies – but not Gilligan's – and found them hard to compare due to varying size, design and other research limitations. "The field of batterer intervention is still in its infancy," Jackson concluded, "and much remains to be learned."

The new Travis program lasts 14 weeks in jail and then a year after release, Naron said, and is based on the theory of "restorative justice," meaning "the offender needs to be responsible for

restoring peace to the community and the community needs to be a part of sentencing, of rehabilitation.”

Naron adds the alternative “state versus John Doe” process, which involves only the offender and the criminal-justice system, fails to rehabilitate the abuser.

Avoiding Future Violence

Researchers say anger management, which implies that the batterer loses control of his actions, is ineffective and that ‘power and control’ classes have some success when reinforced by swift legal penalties, but the classes’ brief duration seems to limit their effectiveness.

The Manalive curriculum rejects both the notion of losing control and the power goal, focusing instead on helping a batterer confront his decision to use violence. The time-intensive peer-led process, say proponents, opens a path to a higher degree of personal responsibility and increases an offender’s chances of avoiding violence in the future.

Naron said an integral aspect of the program is to introduce offenders repeatedly to survivors of violence, who are trained to tell their stories to offenders, teaching them the impact of such acts. The program is careful not to match victims to their own offenders.

Naron said it was “very powerful” for an offender to listen to a woman relate her terror and pain and that of her children, and then to describe how she’s recovering and building a new life.

The program also connects offenders with community mentors who assist program graduates with housing and employment, offer support and reinforce the community’s message that violence will not be tolerated.

“The whole community has a shot working together to hold him accountable,” says Tony Switzer, coordinator of the men’s nonviolence project at Austin’s Texas Council on Family Violence, who has worked with batterers for 15 years. “Every element of the system needs to give him the same message: ‘Your violent behavior, assaulting your wife, is not acceptable and you will be held accountable.’”

Suzanne Batchelor is a Texas-based independent journalist.

For more information:

Information about RSVP San Francisco Sheriff’s Department E-mail George Jurand at jur@znet.com

Domestic Abuse Intervention Project: <http://www.duluth-model.org/daipoverview.html>

Manalive International: <http://www.manaliveinternational.org>

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