



WORKING WITH LOCAL TANF-RELATED AGENCIES

By Patricia R. Cole, Ph.D

Since welfare reform laws in Texas took effect, the Texas Department of Human Services (TDHS) and the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) have been involved in major overhauls of their policies and their client services systems. Local Workforce Development Boards have been created and required to set up new local policies and procedures and to put in place large service delivery systems. Because of participation rate requirements and the state legislature's establishment of the "work first" philosophy for the revamped welfare system, the state and local agencies responsible for TANF have focused almost exclusively on moving people off TANF and into work as quickly as possible. Now that TANF rolls have declined and the basic policies and operating systems are in place, agencies are turning an increasing amount of attention to the families that remain on or return to TANF. Research and practical experience have demonstrated that these families face many obstacles as they try to move from welfare to work. **However, the agencies responsible for TANF implementation continue to be expected to provide services based on a "work first" philosophy to the greatest extent possible. They still are held accountable for moving TANF recipients into work or work-related activities at a rapid enough rate to meet their federally required participation rates. Therefore their efforts to help the hardest-to-serve families will be done in the context of "work first" and participation rate requirements.**

State law and agency regulations have directed local TDHS and workforce agencies to identify, provide services, and, when necessary, provide good cause exemptions for TANF recipients when domestic violence is a barrier to employment or if meeting TANF requirements increases risks to their safety. The goal now is to get all local agencies to implement those laws and regulations in a manner that benefits and protects women who need special consideration or help because of domestic violence. **Domestic violence advocates and service providers have a very important role in promoting and facilitating implementation of TANF policies that protect and assist women in violent partnerships.**

TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

During the spring of 2000, TDHS will provide training to its entire local supervisory and direct services staff (Texas Works Advisors) so that they all are knowledgeable about TANF options available to applicants and recipients who are victims of partner violence. This training will focus primarily on explaining the option for a good cause exemption from child support enforcement if collecting child support would put the woman or her children in danger because of partner violence. The women will be given information about the child support collection process so that they can make an informed decision about whether they need an exemption from child support enforcement. **TDHS wants to involve domestic violence experts** in making the decision about whether a good cause domestic violence is needed, and they are aware that many women will not call a domestic violence service agency if given the telephone number and told to call and then come back to TDHS. In an effort to assure that women have contact with someone with expertise in domestic violence, **TDHS will attempt to set up a process through which they connect the woman**

by telephone with a domestic violence agency as soon as she requests the exemption and before she leaves the office. As verification of the need for a good cause exemption, TDHS will accept the recommendation of the domestic violence specialist who talks to the woman on the telephone. TDHS will supply forms for the specialist to complete after talking to the woman and will ask that the form be completed and mailed back to the local TDHS office immediately. They are setting up a procedure whereby the information sent will be directed to a specific person in the office to guard confidentiality.

Based on experience in TANF offices and in other states where good cause domestic violence exemptions have been emphasized, it is anticipated that a very small percentage of women applying for or receiving TANF will want good cause exemptions from child support enforcement. However, for those who want and need the exemption because child support enforcement would increase risk of additional domestic violence, having an effective process for explaining and granting such exemptions is extremely important.

TDHS will explain their new process for granting domestic violence good cause exemptions from child support enforcement to local domestic violence programs and ask for their participation and assistance. **The success of this effort will require the participation of a large number of domestic violence programs.**

LOCAL WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES

Since each local Workforce Development Board (WDB) has the authority and responsibility to set its own priorities, policies, and procedures, domestic violence advocates and service providers need to work with the local WDB and its staff. **TWC sent out a memo to all local WDBs, explaining the domestic violence good cause exemption from employment services and suggesting implementation strategies.** A copy of that memo is included at the end of this section. Reports from around the state indicate that most WDB's are not following the recommendations, although several are beginning to develop and implement procedures.

Suggestions for Working With Local WDB's

Local domestic violence advocates should meet with members of their area's WDB or with executive staff of the local workforce agency to discuss what specifically is being done to identify, offer good cause exemptions when needed, and provide or assist in finding services for women going through their programs who are in violent partnerships. (A list of the WDB's and possible contact people are provided as resource materials in Section 5 of this notebook). If there are several domestic violence service programs in a workforce area, their going together to this meeting might be most effective.

It is important to remember that the primary philosophy underlying these programs is "work first" and that the WDB's are responsible for meeting certain participation rates, meaning they have to get a certain percentage of TANF clients into work or work-related activities very quickly. Additionally, it is important to remember that **WDB's also are supposed to focus on job retention and advancement.** They are supposed to identify barriers to employment and provide services that are necessary to help women overcome these barriers so they can go to work and leave TANF rolls and not return. **While they have a great deal of local autonomy, WDB's also must abide by state laws and TWC regulations, which includes providing information to women about domestic violence options and providing good cause exemptions when needed.**

Suggestions for Talking with WDB's

It is important that WDB's understand that identifying and assisting TANF or Welfare-to-Work recipients who are victims of domestic violence not only protects women's safety but also **helps them meet the WDB's goals of TANF recipients being able to maintain employment and get off and stay off TANF rolls.** Facts that may be useful in talking with WDB's include:

- Women in violent partnerships are most likely to cycle on and off welfare, usually because the abusive partner makes it impossible for them to hold a job and support themselves and their children.
- Women in violent partnerships have a longer cumulative time on welfare and are more likely to exceed TANF time limits without having sustained employment (same reason as for prior point).
- Research consistently shows that between 20% and 30% of women on TANF rolls are in violent partnerships (or have recently left the violent partner and continue to be victimized by his threats, etc).
- In TANF offices where extensive efforts have been made to identify women in violent relationships and offer them exemptions, **a very small percentage reveal the violence and ask for a good cause exemption.** (Less than 10% acknowledge domestic violence; less than 5% of those who do acknowledge domestic violence want good cause exemptions. Thus you can assure the WDB that they will not have a large number of women asking for exemptions, no matter how much effort they put into informing women and granting exemptions)
- Experience in TANF offices where they have attempted to identify women in violent relationships shows clearly that women are more likely to reveal domestic violence if there is a person with expertise in domestic violence at the office and can talk to the women there. Efforts will be more effective if they employ or contract with a domestic violence agency to have a trained person at their office at least certain hours each week.
- Experience has shown that staff (Choices workers) are not comfortable raising the issue of domestic violence and do not know what to say to women who reveal domestic violence. Some amount of training is needed for all staff that has direct contact with women. However, a little training will not prepare staff sufficiently to act as a domestic violence specialist.
- A domestic violence specialist who sees women through the Choices program can help staff (a) make determinations about the need for good cause exemptions, (b) assist in writing a reasonable service plan for the woman, and (c) assist the woman in following the service plan.
- **State law and policies say that agencies implementing TANF are supposed to screen for domestic violence, grant good cause exemptions when necessary to protect a woman or if domestic violence keeps her from working, and assist her in getting services.** (You can

show them the memo TWC sent to all WDB's.)

- Point out that women in violent relationships, especially those living in poverty, are at high risk for losing jobs and moving onto welfare rolls if they do not receive appropriate services. This point can be used to emphasize the need for appropriate services, **including job training and education that lead to marketable skills**, for women who may not now be on TANF but are at risk for requiring TANF benefits in the future if they do not have the skills to support themselves and their families.

In deciding what people to contact first, **it is important to remember how most local workforce agencies are set up.** In most local workforce programs, the WDB sets policy, hires executive staff, and contracts with a private agency (Lockheed, SER, etc.) to operate the program. The private contractor hires the employees who work in local workforce centers and actually work with TANF recipients. It may be best to start by talking to someone on the Board or the Board's executive staff to find out what policies are in place about domestic violence and what is actually being done to identify and assist women in violent partnerships.

Suggestions for Staff Training

If given the opportunity to train Choices workers who actually see clients, based on experiences in other places, the following suggestions are made:

- Focus the training not only on domestic violence and its dangers, but also stress why domestic violence services are important as a component of efforts to get people off welfare and into work. Emphasize the relationship between domestic violence and success in employment or training, the woman's ability to keep appointments, etc. Remember that the staff's job, and the performance on which they are evaluated, is to move people off the rolls and into employment as quickly as possible. They will be more responsive to your suggestions if they understand why this helps them achieve their goals as a staff member.
- Stress privacy and confidentiality. They cannot talk to women about domestic violence where others can overhear the conversation. They must be especially careful not to discuss this issue where the children or a person who may have come with the woman may hear what is said.
- Talk about why women are usually so reluctant to admit domestic violence (fear that the abuser will find out; fear that the person she is talking to will not believe her or will not take what she says seriously; shame; fear that she will be penalized or sanctioned if they know about her situation; fear that the information will not be kept confidential; fear that if Choices staff know, they will try to stop her from going to work or getting training - if the woman wants to do these things).
- Explain that other obstacles or problems often accompany domestic violence and that these problems cannot be solved quickly (forewarn them that more than 3 months may be necessary).
- Point out that women may not be reliable in meeting appointments, going to training, or maintaining a job because of domestic violence. Suggest that they ask about domestic violence (using the kinds of questions suggested in a previous section of this notebook) if a woman is not complying with participation requirements and before they recommend that she be sanctioned.

- Give them very clear examples of how they should respond - what they should say and do - if a woman tells them she is afraid or in danger because of partner violence.
- Give them examples of indicators that a woman may be in a violent relationship - things they may observe or overhear. Suggest ways the staff might raise the issue if this occurs.

Staff in workforce offices have expressed reservations about talking to women about domestic violence for several reasons. They are uncomfortable bringing up the subject and do not know what to say if the woman is in a violent relationship. They may care about her safety, but they do not see how domestic violence relates to their job of moving her into work or work-related activities. They are not clear about what their responsibilities are related to domestic violence. Based on the information gathered from Choices staff, staff training should include the issues cited above.

BUILDING LOCAL SERVICE COLLABORATIVES

In most local workforce areas that are addressing domestic violence and other areas with which current or former TANF clients need special assistance, the Boards contract with several different service providers, each working in a specific area of specialization. These include GED or adult education programs, services for mental health or drug and alcohol addiction, mentoring programs, and community college or technical training programs. It is extremely helpful to the women involved in these services if the various providers communicate with each other and try to arrange some prioritization or coordination of services. In some workforce offices, a specific case manager is assigned to work with designated women. It may be important for that case manager to be involved in the collaborative efforts among various service agencies.

Since many women in violent relationships are reluctant to acknowledge domestic violence and also have other hardships or problems, they may be involved in a GED program or in drug and alcohol services without having previously acknowledged domestic violence. Cross training, at least on a basic level, is important so that service providers who have contact with women recognize indicators of domestic violence, know what questions to ask the women and how to respond if she acknowledges domestic violence, and what suggestions to make to her. They can refer her to a domestic violence agency, but if she will not go, perhaps they can talk with her and give her guidance about safety for herself and her children.

In many regions, volunteer agencies or mentoring programs are working with women trying to move from welfare to work. Pathfinders is one such program in many parts of the state. Volunteers often have frequent contact with the women and try to assist them in resolving problems. Sometimes they have more ongoing contact with women than Choices staff or other service agencies will have. Training volunteers about domestic violence, what to say to women in violent relationships, and how to assist them may be a route for identifying and assisting women who have not otherwise sought help.

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Summary Comments

Because the Texas system for TANF places so much authority and responsibility in the hands of local workforce agencies, local level action from domestic violence advocates is essential in order to get domestic violence addressed appropriately with women currently or previously enrolled in TANF. It probably will take patience, perseverance, diplomacy, and creativity to make progress. However, the safety and well-being of thousands of women at stake, so it is worth whatever effort is necessary.

The staff of the National Training Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence will be glad to help in any way we can. Feel free to call us if we can assist you as you work to improve services to women in the welfare system. We will continue working both in Texas and nationally to improve policies and implementation strategies that benefit impoverished women and their families.