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## Looking at Culture, Identity, and Community to Reshape how we Address & Prevent Domestic Violence

Historically, domestic violence agencies were considered “inclusive” if they had wheelchair ramps built for their offices or offered paperwork and educational materials translated into more than one language.

These initial efforts, while good first steps, still didn’t enable these organizations to fully understand or effectively meet the needs of survivors from diverse communities with unique social and cultural experiences.

In California, a colossal place with ever-changing demographics, domestic violence agencies and leaders are becoming increasingly aware that different solutions are needed to reach and help different people and populations.

“We need to be grounded in the unique social realities of domestic violence survivors and their families,” said Mercedes Tune, capacity building project specialist for the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence (“the partnership”). “We need to understand the power differentials of the different groups so we can address the needs.”

With support from Blue Shield of California Foundation, the partnership developed an online Cultural Responsiveness Organizational Self-Assessment Tool that some in the field are calling a “game changer.”

The tool provides agencies with a rare opportunity to promote organizational change by looking at how well their leadership, staff, community engagement models, policies, and practices reflect cultural responsiveness and are tailored to improve services for their clients. The tool could one day be used nationwide, said the partnership’s director, Kathy Moore.

“It’s hard doing work that is so underfunded and stopping and starting new initiatives,” Moore said. “When we can embed the progress into the organizations, not just as a program or service, we have more buy-in and more ownership. When it’s part of the regular way of doing business and not just a special add on, it has the potential to change the organizations and change the nature of our work.”



With Foundation funding, representatives from 11 domestic violence service organizations across the state came together for monthly peer learning meetings where they shared knowledge, experiences, and collective challenges in providing culturally responsive support for the people and families who rely on them. They also attended a two-day retreat to connect with one another and hear from inspiring speakers in the field.

During the retreat, a man wearing scruffy clothes and carrying a trash bag walked around the back of the room as the audience awaited the opening keynote speech. To the audience's surprise, the man with the trash bag walked up to the podium and turned out to be the speaker, illustrating the tendency of people to prejudge someone based on how the person looks, sounds, dresses, or acts.

Erin Smith, executive director of the Oakland-based Family Violence Appellate Project, which offers legal services to domestic violence survivors, said that the lesson would stay with her forever.

"I didn't think bias was a big issue for me," Smith said "No matter how much you think you have mastered it, to have a moment like that, it's a reality check and it's humbling." No matter how self-aware and sophisticated an organization may be, "Cultural responsiveness is a journey and not a destination," said Tune. Organizations may have translators but still not understand if clients are made to feel welcome or if their whole needs are being met.

"Translation is important and helpful, but not without the interpersonal reflection," Tune said. "Not without examining our own bias, and looking deeply into our strategies, and doing a constant evaluation of how we show up."

Listening to the needs and preferences of marginalized populations has begun shifting the field to re-think how best to help survivors from all walks of life.

"Cultural responsiveness is a journey and not a destination"

"Our field originally did a lot of work around encouraging victims to leave the home with children, to separate from the abuser, to go to shelters," Moore said. "More and more survivors have been telling us they don't want the relationship to end, they just want the violence to end."

For various demographics, traditional solutions to address domestic violence are not always wanted or effective, Moore said. Many prefer not to engage the legal system and don't trust that authorities will treat them fairly if they seek help.

"We as a field are looking at what are some alternatives to the criminal-legal system," Moore said. "There is more receptivity to exploring that. One size doesn't fit all."

Understanding cultural norms and differences also helps social services recognize that domestic violence can take many forms. For example, it may be more common in some cultures where multigenerational families live together with different household power dynamics, Moore said.



"I worked with the Asian Pacific Islander community, and I needed to understand domestic violence looks different," Moore said. "There was a daughter being abused by her mother-in-law and the forms of abuse had weighty cultural meaning like the daughter-in-law was spit on, which was so hurtful to her and offensive. You have to understand what it means for those families as part of that cultural community."

Learning about and seeking input from community members themselves can help organizations develop services and therapies that have a better chance at succeeding and helping more survivors.

"Something that is important in cultural responsiveness is not only understanding the challenges communities face, but also looking at the strengths and assets of a community and lifting up those strengths," Tune said.

After taking the assessment, a national organization that offers art therapy for trauma survivors realized that its workshops were being written entirely by white women. The organization then decided to re-design their workshops to include input from a variety of minority voices.

A Window Between Worlds, based in Venice, CA used a grant from Blue Shield of California Foundation to create new projects such as "Up Sister," which helps participants reflect upon their experience with abuse by first decorating a face-shaped template that reflects their identity. The workshop uses a poem called "Up Sister," plus a worksheet that asks questions like "What does it mean to be a woman of color? What are the characteristics of a woman of color? What were you taught as a child about women of color? What were some of the messages you received? Who were they from? Now that you are an adult, do they hold true? How will you emerge to become your genuine, authentic self?"

"This workshop invites women of color to consider the art process in the context of being a woman of color, explicitly naming it and calling out the experience, rather than letting it be implicit, which creates room for it to be ignored or forgotten," said AWBW executive director Audrey Salzburg. "Other workshops do not exclude such an experience but do not explicitly call it out."

A domestic violence agency in Butte County also used the assessment tool to uncover how it could improve their support for smaller community organizations that serve specific ethnic and cultural populations.

Catalyst Domestic Violence Services, which has operated for 40 years, reached out to a local African American Family and Cultural Center that opened seven years ago to figure out how they could collaborate. The groups met to learn more about one another and plan to cross-refer clients.

“We were not helping leverage the power and privilege as a mainstream organization to lift up a new organization,” said Jackie Kent, associate director for Catalyst. “We learned that different communities might view what a healthy relationship looks like differently,” Kent said. “We had a learning session that said not yelling at your partner was a healthy way to communicate. But if someone comes from a family or culture where it’s normal to yell, that message did not ring true. Yelling doesn’t always mean communication is unhealthy. So we’ve thought about how we can shift the ways we communicate what is healthy or abusive.”

Kent said the group continues to reflect on how to be culturally responsive down to the last detail in their office. She said the group wants to display visual elements that are welcoming, like the rainbow flag for the LGBTQ community or displaying art in different styles that reflect many different cultures.

“We have a genuine desire to make people feel welcome, and It’s so easy to overlook certain things,” Kent said. “We looked at the toys in the office to make sure the baby dolls are in different colors of skin tone. These micro aggressions, all of these messages to the survivor, haven’t been thought through and need a little more intention.”

Domestic violence occurs in every community. But in California, there is a multitude of cultures, many different languages, and many underserved communities that experience multiple forms of oppression and face greater barriers to seeking help.

One group, the Family Violence Appellate Project, which offers legal assistance for domestic violence survivors, specializing in appeals cases, took the assessment and then applied for a grant to work on identifying which populations need their help most, how to build trust within them, and how to measure their impact.

“We always considered ourselves culturally aware and progressive,” said Smith, an attorney and the group’s executive director. “We recognize there is always room to grow. Serving so many people in California requires the most cultural responsiveness we can possibly bring.”



The assessment tool showed the group that it could improve how it collects and examines client data, including the demographics of who they’re reaching and how well they were served. Understanding the unique needs of their clients and the impact of their work has huge consequences for domestic violence survivors around the state.



“Our work is legal appeals cases,” Smith said. “When we win, there is binding precedent in the state, so it’s a huge opportunity to have a large impact with a focused strategy. When a single case can change the law, it’s extremely important we understand how our cases will impact as many people as we can get a handle on. We don’t want unintended consequences.”

Varying viewpoints of survivors from different cultures about their own experience and the type of support they need and want is helping the project more accurately gauge whether legal cases will work.

“Abusers tend to be manipulative and turn things around against a survivor,” Smith said. “Abusers can use a court system to continue to abuse their victim, drag out cases so the victim runs out of money and manipulate the system.”

For example, the project could push to have the definition of non-physical abuse expanded to include electronic communications, such as hacking into a partner’s email account, sending messages on his or her behalf, or manipulation and exploitation via social media.



These forms of abuse only add to the complexity of the issue and the variegated challenges to addressing it. Sometimes, as the group has learned, a lawsuit is not the best way to help a client.

“Having an open relationship with clients will enable us to identify other strategies short of a one or two year appellate court process,” Smith said. “We’ve been opening up the tool kit deeper to find creative legal solutions like mediation, or sending letters in a housing situation to landlords or city council members.”

The project is coming up with additional ways to reach new clients and developing a survey to send to former clients to learn more about what works - and what still needs some work - so that they can improve their services for all survivors.

“We want to ask if they could communicate in their preferred language,” Smith said. “Did they feel heard and not rushed? If we represent you in a case, we know if you won or lost, but what happens after that? How are you doing? Are you safe? That allows us to assess if our work has long-term effects.”

By viewing cultural responsiveness as an ongoing learning process and a key part of their work, the group is more and more equipped to improve the lives of the people and families who look to them for help, Smith said.

“To do our work well and help people most at the margins, they have to feel comfortable working with us, and feel like we understand what they’re going through to tell us their story,” Smith said. “You can’t represent them if you don’t understand them.” ■