

Blue Shield of California Foundation Blue Shield Against Violence Partnerships in the Domestic Violence Field

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Introduction

Blue Shield of California Foundation's Blue Shield Against Violence (BSAV) program continues to ask itself how it can help its grantees navigate the challenges and opportunities they face, to strengthen their work and their ability to meet critical community needs. Now more than ever nonprofits must be able to draw on a range of strategies to maximize resources, deliver quality programming, and demonstrate real impact.

One tool that is important for organizations to have in their strategy toolbox is collaboration. Collaboration can take many forms, from casual cooperative relationships to more integrated partnerships.

For the past several years Blue Shield of California Foundation has been supporting research, education, and technical assistance to help its grantees explore collaborative strategies to advance their goals. This publication shares the results of some of this research, and lessons learned about the status of collaborative partnerships in the domestic violence field.

This report has two sections:

Survey Highlights: Current Collaborations

This three-page summary highlights key findings from a 2010 survey of BSAV's Core Support Initiative¹ grantees on their participation in partnerships and collaborations. With analysis conducted by Social Policy Research Associates, the survey represents self-reported information from 118 grantees. Survey results indicate that these organizations have been resourceful in identifying and reaching out to partners in their local areas who can provide coordinated supportive services and ensure that the needs of domestic violence survivors are met.

Lessons Learned: Observations from the Field

Based on La Piana Consulting's experience as a technical assistance provider to several BSAV grantees and other domestic violence organizations, and its qualitative research into the use of more formal collaborative structures in the field, this seven-page brief offers observations on key challenges, opportunities, and trends in collaboration among domestic violence organizations.

The hope is that these materials will help to spur more conversations about collaboration field-wide and lead to additional exploration of how innovative partnerships can help strengthen the work of domestic violence organizations in California.

¹ <http://www.blueshieldcafoundation.org/programs/sub-program/core-support-initiative>

Survey Highlights: Current Collaborations

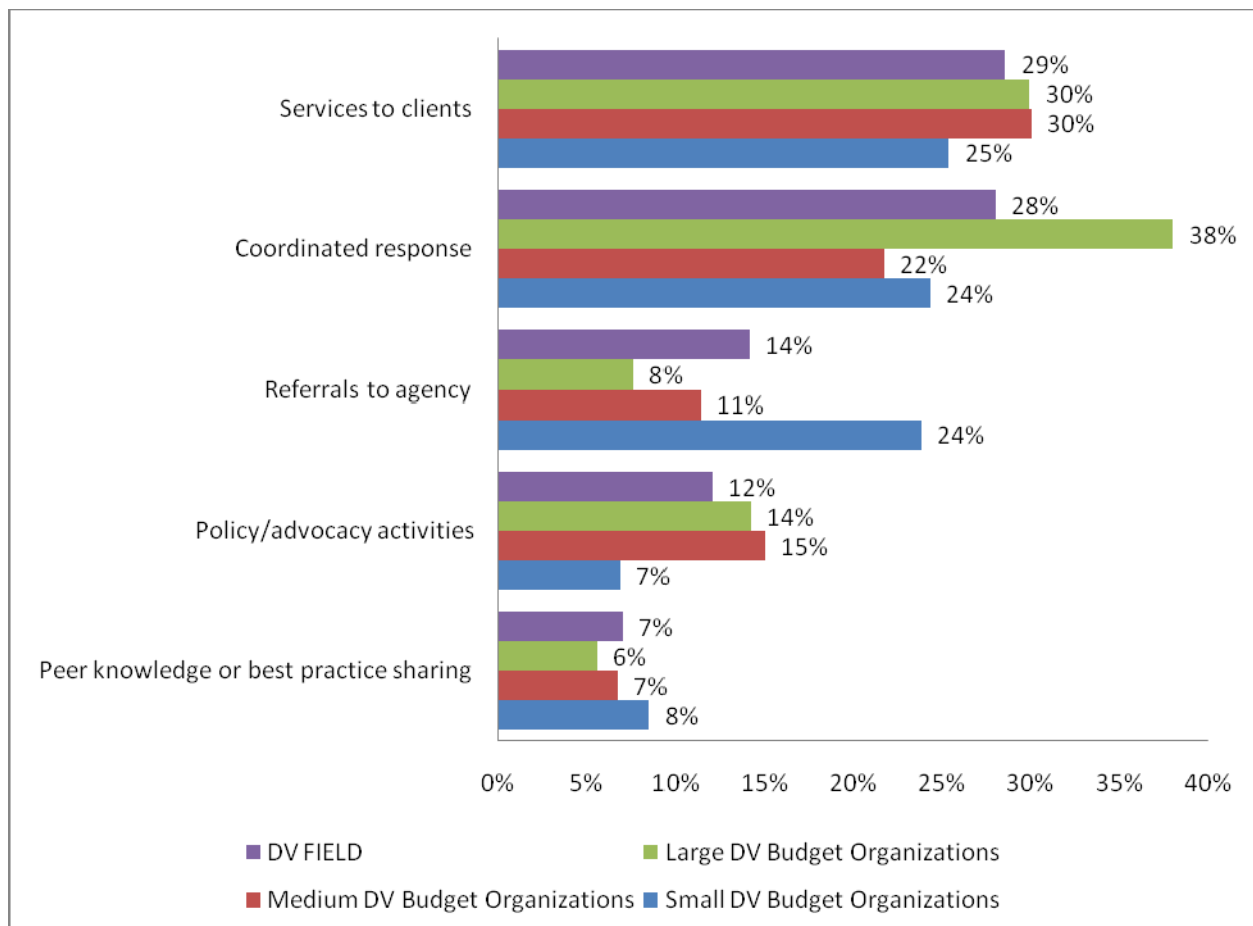
Introduction

In 2010, Blue Shield of California Foundation's Blue Shield Against Violence (BSAV) program area engaged Social Policy Research Associates to analyze survey results from its 2010-2012 BSAV Core Support Initiative grantees about the status of their current partnerships and collaborations. Information was self-reported by 118 grantees from across California.

Key Findings

As shown below, based on respondents' self-reported information on partnerships, reasons for networking and collaborating with partners most frequently centers around direct services (29%), followed by coordinated response (28%) and referrals to the domestic violence organization (14%). It is also notable that potential field-level activities, such as policy advocacy (12%) and peer knowledge or best practice sharing (7%) are also common with partners.

Top Five Reasons for Collaboration or Partnership



There were differences in the nature of domestic violence organizations' partnership activities depending on the size of their domestic violence budgets.² Larger organizations were most likely to engage in coordinated response activities with partners (38%), while medium-sized organizations engaged most heavily in client services partnerships (30%), and small organizations engaged almost equally among activities related to client services, coordinated response, and referrals to their agency (24-25%). More large and medium-sized organizations reported engaging in partnership activities focused on policy/advocacy (14% and 15%, respectively) compared to small organizations (7%).

The 118 BSAV grantees responding to the survey listed a total of over 550 unique partners and collaborating organizations, reflecting the tendency of these relationships to be local and/or specific to the region. The most frequently cited partners of domestic violence organizations are collaborative structures focused on domestic violence intervention and prevention, such as coalitions and task forces (21%), followed by law enforcement (14%), and health/mental health services (11%).

Type of organization/agency	Percentage of partner organizations in this category³
DV coalitions/collaborations/task forces	21%
- State level (8%)	
- Regional level (5%)	
- City level (3%)	
Law enforcement	14%
Health/mental health services	11%
Law/legal services	8%
Ethnic-specific ⁴	8%
Child welfare/child abuse	7%
Housing/homeless services	7%
Other DV organizations/shelters	7%
Employment, human and social services	6%

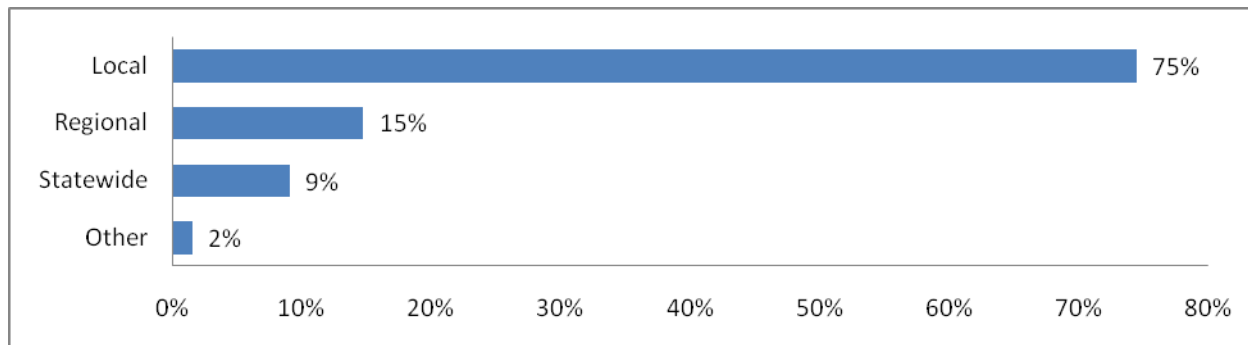
² Size of DV organizations is defined as follows: 1) large DV budget: \$9,539,343-\$986,348; 2) medium DV budget: \$980,500-\$444,600; and 3) small DV budget: \$16,166-\$435,544.

³ Note that partner organizations could be categorized in more than one category. Therefore, the total percentages add up to more than 100%.

⁴ As implied by their names, these organizations focus on specific racial/ethnic groups, but also often serve clients from other races/ethnicities.

The majority of domestic violence organizations' partnerships exist at the local level (75%), while 15% are at the regional level, and 9% are at the state level (primarily with the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence).

DV Field Levels of Engagement with Partners



Regional Differences

Domestic violence organizations' levels of engagement – whether local, regional, or statewide – vary slightly according to whether they serve primarily urban, rural, or a combination of urban and rural populations. Rural-serving organizations have fewer regional-level partnerships (7%) than urban (16%) and urban/rural-serving (18%).

At the local and regional levels, several domestic violence consortia serve as conduits for collaboration. Respondents mentioned the following regional domestic violence coalitions as one of their top five partners. Los Angeles County Domestic Violence Council (7%), San Francisco Domestic Violence Consortium (4%), San Bernardino Coalition of Domestic Violence Shelters (3%).⁵ Also mentioned were the Santa Clara Domestic Violence Consortium and the Domestic Violence Association of Rural Northern California.

Conclusions

Accustomed to operating in an environment of limited resources and high need, domestic violence practitioners are resourceful at identifying and reaching out to partners in their local areas who can provide coordinated supportive services to their clients. Particularly in urban areas, formal systems such as coalitions or advisory councils are in place to coordinate services that address the critical needs of domestic violence survivors. Domestic violence service organizations over time have developed partnerships with local law enforcement, safe houses, food banks, and employment services, among others, to ensure that the needs of their clients are met.

⁵ Percentages in parentheses indicate proportion of all respondents listing these coalitions as one of their top five partners.

Lessons Learned: Observations from the Field

Introduction

La Piana Consulting has been working with Blue Shield of California Foundation's Blue Shield Against Violence (BSAV) program area to understand the collaborative strategies being used by domestic violence organizations in California. This work has included research to identify existing collaborative structures, direct assistance to a number of domestic violence organizations in considering a variety of partnership opportunities, and analysis of what is needed to support, expand, and enhance collaborative efforts and improve their outcomes. In the course of our field research and work with BSAV grantees, as well as with domestic violence and other women's services organizations across the United States, we have learned a variety of lessons and made observations about the overall environment in which they are working. This brief is intended to describe what we have learned and to suggest areas that could be considered for further research.

To better understand the current status of collaboration in the state, we conducted a limited number of confidential interviews with key domestic violence leaders across California. These conversations, augmented by online research, provided a snapshot of existing collaborative structures, described below.

Collaborative Structures in California

There is an array of structures in use across the state supporting partnerships among domestic violence organizations. These have developed in different ways in different communities, resulting in a diverse yet somewhat fragmented landscape of collaboration. Based on our findings, formal collaborative structures include:

- Consortia (formalized local/regional collaborations among domestic violence agencies)
- County Councils (originally sponsored by government bodies, multi-disciplinary)
- Other Structures (multi-disciplinary task forces addressing community violence)
- The California Partnership to End Domestic Violence (and its seven regions)

In addition, Memoranda of Understanding are widely used in the field to define cooperative agreements. Informal collaborations have also been developed based on individual relationships rather than strictly institutional ones. These, too, are described further below.

Consortia

Consortia are formalized and ongoing partnerships among domestic violence organizations convened for the purpose of addressing policy, funding, and practice issues specific to member agencies. Examples include the San Francisco Domestic Violence Consortium, the Santa Clara Domestic Violence Consortium, and the Domestic Violence Association of Rural Northern

California. Generally, consortia (or similar DV-only partnerships) are not as prevalent as multidisciplinary collaborations, such as county councils or other committees.

County Councils

In the early 1990s, Santa Clara County Superior Court Justice Leonard P. Edwards led the call for the creation of multidisciplinary councils to help foster a coordinated response to domestic violence on behalf of the justice system, and to more effectively address its prevention. This idea spread nationwide, and in California it was recommended and agreed that every county would form such a council. For many communities, this was the first time domestic violence was approached systemically, rather than as individual cases.

While councils are still going strong in some counties, bringing together the criminal justice system and domestic violence agencies to coordinate efforts, they have since fallen out of use or been disbanded in others.

Factors limiting the success of county councils may include lack of a clear mandate, lack of dedicated resources or consistent leadership, and lack of political will. Another related challenge may be that as the scope of activities changed in some communities to go beyond “policies, practices, and procedures” into more advocacy-oriented work, some courts determined that they could not continue their involvement.⁶

Other Structures

Various other committees, commissions, collaborations, and task forces are formed at the local level (usually under the aegis of a city or county government) to address cross-sector challenges such as family violence, child abuse, etc. Domestic violence agencies are often key participants. For example: in some counties, Children’s Services Councils (or other equivalents) bring community members and professionals together around prevention and intervention programs for children, youth, and families – all of which are part of the larger tapestry of social programs of which domestic violence services are a part. In other communities, especially those grappling with high rates of gang-related activity, task forces have been created to address community violence, engaging domestic violence organizations as important partners. Other cross-issue partnerships bring together professionals and community members who work with either abused or neglected children, domestic violence victims or perpetrators, and their families, providing a forum on a range of issues including child abuse, domestic violence, elder abuse, and sexual assault.

Such multidisciplinary efforts can fulfill some of the same needs as county councils, in terms of taking a systemic view toward more coordinated services and interventions. These can be important opportunities to establish relationships and build understanding that support domestic violence organizations in serving their communities and helps non-DV organizations provide appropriate services to women and families affected by domestic violence.

⁶ “Administration of Justice in Domestic Violence Cases,” by Hon. Laurence D. Kay (Ret.), *Journal of the Center for Families, Children, and the Courts*, 2005.

Participating in such diverse collaboratives sometimes poses challenges to domestic violence organizations because their role as advocates may challenge the interests or cultures of other participating organizations. As multidisciplinary partnerships become increasingly common it raises the question of how domestic violence organizations can best navigate the space between their obligations to their clients and the sometimes differing mandates of institutional partners. It is increasingly important for domestic violence organizations to maintain politically astute, as well as effective, relationships with their community partners.

California Partnership to End Domestic Violence (Regional Structure)

The Partnership is broadly recognized as an asset to the field, which provides a valued structure for collaboration among the state's domestic violence organizations. Its membership regions (Far North, North, Bay Area, Central Coast, Central Valley, Los Angeles, South) help to foster peer learning and reduce isolation – particularly among providers in more rural communities. Although each region is different in its level of activity, this regional structure provides a foundation on which to build deeper engagement and forge new partnerships.

Memoranda of Understanding

Memoranda of Understanding (or MOUs) play a critical role in how domestic violence organizations do business. These formal agreements are required for certain funding and demonstrate agencies' mutual commitment to cross-referrals and/or other strategies for coordination of services. It is largely because of these MOU agreements that most, if not all, domestic violence organizations can name multiple collaborative partners and community ties when asked, as was observed in the results of BSAV's 2010 Core Support grantee survey. However, relatively few of these relationships extend more deeply to entail joint efforts in policy/advocacy, pooling resources, or sharing best practices. That said, it is important to note that the Family Justice Center model provides an example of how MOUs are being used to develop a more integrated approach to not only service delivery, but also policy development and resource sharing (such as co-location).

Informal Collaboration

Informal connections and collaborations among individuals play an important role in creating communities of support and peer learning in the domestic violence field, particularly among executive/management level leaders. This may be something as simple as two or three agency leaders meeting for lunch or coffee on a monthly basis. As such, these relationships are difficult to identify in order to nurture or otherwise encourage and are thus left to evolve on their own.

Nonprofit executive directors often report a sense of isolation in their work, and for fields like domestic violence, the nature of the work itself takes an additional toll, making these sustaining personal/professional connections important.⁷ In some communities, particularly in rural

⁷ Mid-level and line staff tend to have fewer opportunities for this type of collegial support than their executive-level counterparts. Recognizing this, the Partnership is now beginning to convene peer networks by functional area, such as shelter directors and prevention advocates.

locations that tend to be more isolated, simply being able to reach out to a colleague to share common challenges and concerns is of great value, with little more expected or sought out. Among organizations that are spread over a large geographic region, other forms of collaboration may not be feasible. At the same time, these informal networks build trust that could create future opportunities for more organizational (rather than individual) alliances.

Collaboration: Obstacles and Assets

Based on our research and experience, we have observed some obstacles to collaboration as well as assets upon which new partnerships might be built and/or existing ones strengthened.

Assets	Areas for Further Attention
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Clarity of Purpose: The field’s greatest asset is the strength of its commitment to those affected by DV. This shared passion can be leveraged as a common foundation to enable meaningful collaboration. Particularly in a climate of declining resources, more DV practitioners are recognizing the importance and potential benefits of collaboration. ▪ Statewide Coalition: Statewide infrastructure (the Partnership and its regional coalitions) exists to facilitate networking and collaboration both across the DV field and with other related fields. In addition to consortia, councils, and committees, the Partnership’s regional convenings provide another forum for DV agencies to gather and communicate based on geographic characteristics. Overall, the Partnership is considered an important partner and plays a central role in supporting local/regional efforts, especially in rural areas. The Partnership offers an existing structure that can continue to be capitalized upon to achieve shared goals. ▪ Sector Trends: Shifting economic and accompanying political developments affecting the nonprofit sector at large have created what some observers are calling a “new normal” that could usher in unprecedented shifts in how nonprofits need to do business in order to survive. Collaboration is one of the key trends likely to be part of this future. ▪ Established Relationships: Several established relationships already exist at the state level with key partners in public health, sexual assault, immigrant rights, and other related fields. There are also strong local-level partnerships in place to coordinate services to clients. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Isolation: The sometimes decentralized and isolated nature of the field can serve as a deterrent to partnership creation. That said, the DV field is warming to the idea of working together across organizations. Efforts to embrace DV’s connectedness to related issue areas (such as health care, education, economic justice, and community violence) can also open up new partnership opportunities. ▪ Too Busy: Direct service organizations must focus inwards in their efforts to meet day-to-day needs. In an environment of critical client demands and shrinking resources, collaboration can feel like a luxury rather than a strategic necessity. It is important for leaders to have access to information and resources (including case studies and stories direct from their peers) that demonstrate that partnerships can make their jobs easier and more productive. ▪ Infrastructure: Many DV organizations are small, community-based nonprofits. Focused on client services, investments in infrastructure may not have kept pace with organizational needs. Outdated or limited technology may not even support internal communications needs, much less efforts to build relationships externally. Infrastructure support and resources are needed for increased communications, knowledge sharing, and relationship brokering at local, regional, and state levels. ▪ Funders: Too often, funders talk about the need to collaborate without articulating the “why” of collaboration or supporting organizations in exploring the right partnership strategies for them. Funders must also understand that it takes time for collaboration to take hold and yield desired results. However, more funders are beginning to expand their knowledge and support in this area.

Developing Trends

La Piana Consulting has had the opportunity to work with a number of BSAV grantees and other domestic violence organizations to explore nascent and emerging collaborative opportunities. These experiences have provided us with a closer perspective on the dynamics of collaboration in the domestic violence field, which in turn speak to broader trends.

Changes in Perspective Regarding Collaborative Relationships

During our work with domestic violence organizations in recent years, we have observed a significant shift in attitude among organizational leaders toward a more open and collaborative environment. This has shown itself in greater openness of communications, a significant lessening of resistance toward working more closely together, and an emerging emphasis on the development of collaborative relationships. There appears to be a growing recognition that deeper and more formal partnerships, a networked approach, and even the merging of organizations can increase the power and effectiveness of organizations engaged in domestic violence work. Domestic violence organizations are increasingly utilizing formal collaboration as a way to both improve client services and advocate for increased public resources.

Although our observations are anecdotal and based only on a small sample of organizations, we believe we are seeing a change in perspective regarding the building of these collaborative relationships – a change which may accelerate the potential for more organizations to explore collaboration and seek opportunities for increased partnership development in such areas as program services, administration, fund development, and even corporate integration.

New Opportunities in Service Integration

Historically, many domestic violence programs have provided services exclusively related to the clients' needs in working through domestic violence event(s). This has meant that many domestic violence services were created as stand-alone organizations and may not be fully integrated with other service providers. In general, client needs are met through referrals or informal agreements with other organizations.

Women and families experiencing domestic violence often present with a variety of needs that cut across service type. As domestic violence organizations are well aware, other services that are essential for clients include: mental health, substance abuse treatment, parent education, job skills development and employment search support, legal aid, and others.

As a significant point of entry into the social service network, domestic violence agencies are an ideal place to expand the services provided within their organization and/or to act in a coordination role to help ensure that clients obtain the full range of services and support they may need. One example of a specific service need that may be effectively met through a collaborative effort is that of language capacity, such as through joint recruitment and training of bilingual/bicultural volunteers or shared technology-based translation solutions.

Domestic violence agencies continue to expand their role in providing a holistic service menu and coordinating with other service agencies to provide services by staff trained in working with

victims of domestic violence. Research on successful coordinated service efforts in the sector will encourage others to better understand the challenges and opportunities of enhanced collaboration.

The Role of Cultural Integration in Strategic Restructuring

Our experience has revealed the critical importance of a thoughtful and deliberate integration process when organizations make the decision to consolidate their programs or merge corporate structures. Specifically, we have learned that when a smaller domestic violence organization is merged into a larger, multi-service agency, it is critically important to take the time to understand the nature of the smaller organization, including its history, culture, organizational norms, and deployment of staff skills. By taking care to listen to the staff, spending time gathering their thoughts and opinions on what matters, it is possible to design integration activities that will enhance the development of the day-to-day relationships within the merged organization. Entering into a collaboration with an attitude of mutual respect and learning will greatly enhance the sense of inclusion and cultural integration within the organization. Spending time on integrative activities at staff retreats and bringing together programs with similar or overlapping interests and clients to share best practices, successes, and shared challenges also enhances the development of organizational cohesion.

Organizations that consolidate their domestic violence services through the development of partnerships have the opportunity to reach more clients, improve services, and increase operating efficiencies – but it takes an intentional integration process to maximize this potential. Organizations need funder support to provide the resources necessary to successfully integrate these functions. With adequate resources and commitment, these organizations can successfully integrate their programs with the ultimate result of more efficient services for the clients they serve.

Key Takeaways

- An apparent shift has occurred in the sector to a more open, collaborative working environment among domestic violence service organizations. Today's uncertain economy and the negative political and economic climate for public funding may accelerate this shift, particularly for nonprofits and programs dependent on government contracts.
- As *structural* integration among domestic violence service providers takes place, organizations will need to pay special attention to the *cultural* integration to enhance the working relationships among program and administrative staff. Careful design of integration activities is critical for bringing organizations together to enhance service provision and administrative efficiencies.
- Organizations that have provided services related exclusively to the experience of domestic violence are exploring the expansion (through partnerships) of the seamless provision of other services that are critical to positive client outcomes. Such services include: substance abuse treatment, mental health services, job skill training and employment services, parenting education, legal services, and access to culturally and linguistically appropriate services.

The observations outlined here are based on a limited number of engagements. The field deserves a wider and more systematic exploration of the experiences of domestic violence organizations to document the prevalence of these trends. The expansion of collaboration within the nonprofit sector and the current economic climate may indeed accelerate these trends. Tracking these practices in the future will help to educate the domestic violence service sector to the potential of alternatives available.

Conclusions

The purpose of our research into existing collaborative structures and analysis of our experiences with partnerships in the domestic violence field was to help determine what supports may be needed to improve the effectiveness of current efforts and encourage new partnerships. Based on what we have learned, it appears that the greatest challenge is about how to support and foster collaborations that can move the field towards greater impact: by providing a deeper or more comprehensive service to domestic violence survivors; by involving new and nontraditional service providers in efforts to address domestic violence; and/or by reaching women in need who are not accessing current support structures.

Having heard in our research interviews that domestic violence organizations may need to see more examples of what partnerships can do for them – rather than simply being something their funders want them to do – we believe that sharing stories of collaboration and highlighting the most engaging and exciting examples of creative partnerships will help to educate and inspire the field. To this end, we look forward to working with BSAV to develop case studies to share with the field in the coming year. Our hope is that this briefing paper – and the planned case studies – will help to spur more conversations about collaboration field-wide and lead to additional exploration of how innovative partnerships can help strengthen the work of domestic violence organizations in California.