

Pilot Project Report: *Choosing Teammates: The Reality of Implementing a Welfare-To-Work Program for Domestic Violence Victims and Survivors in Collaboration with the Welfare Department*

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MODEL

Program Design/Implementation

Options/Opciones is a pilot program serving domestic violence victims and survivors. It started in July 1997, and is located in a Chicago welfare office that serves primarily African Americans and Hispanics. The project also has an office at another location in the community. Three full-time domestic violence advocates staff the project.

Recruitment

In addition to their efforts to recruit participants directly, the Options/Opciones program has worked to increase referrals to the program from welfare department staff, partly as a result of lack of referrals from welfare workers. Women are referred to the Options/Opciones program through four avenues. All female applicants for any assistance program are automatically referred to the Options/Opciones advocates for domestic violence screening. This “automatic” referral process began in February 1999, to address the previously erratic nature of referrals from workers. Advocates also conduct regular presentations on domestic violence to groups of welfare participants attending weekly ‘job club’ activities, an approach that began in February 1998. Occasionally, a casemanager or intake worker will refer a client for services when domestic violence appears to be a barrier. Finally, a few referrals have come from a nearby legal assistance program.

Conversations and focus groups revealed that many administrators and welfare workers felt that time demands, changing roles from “benefit police” to social service providers under welfare reform, and biases against welfare recipients, created obstacles to the project's implementation. Poor communication between the pilot project staff and welfare workers also interfered with collaboration. To address this, a special form was created so that project staff could update welfare workers on their clients’ progress.

Services

After the initial screening process, women who choose to participate in the program attend follow-up appointments with Options/Opciones advocates, and continue talking about how domestic violence has affected them. The advocates provide counseling and case management to women both on-site at the welfare office and at the off-site community location. They make referrals to other community resources as needed. Participants attend both individual counseling sessions and groups that include modules covering abuse, participants’ capabilities, increasing self-esteem, assessing readiness for work or training, and setting short and long-term goals. The group modules were initially designed to be addressed over 10 weeks. Some women do not want to commit to participating in a group for that length of time, or they are unable to do so due to work schedules, childcare responsibilities, or limitations on their activities set by their abusers. Therefore, the advocates tailor the groups to the women’s situations and needs, addressing the range of topics approximately every four months.

Research Process

Options/Opciones was developed to test three questions:

- 1) Can local welfare offices serve as an effective access point for large numbers of domestic violence victims and survivors who need specialized services to help them address their domestic violence and employment-related needs?
- 2) Can services for domestic violence survivors be provided effectively using existing agencies within the community that have received specialized training in working with this population, case managed by domestic violence advocates?
- 3) Can pre-employment training be designed to work with domestic violence survivors effectively, regardless of the current level of domestic violence with which they are living?

The pilot program has a detailed research protocol. Project staff collect data on participants via a multi-part intake form, completed over several interviews, which includes sections for eligibility, employment, health care, legal issues/needs, and a brief "abuser profile." A six-month follow-up form briefly reviews the above areas to assess whether any change has occurred. Data will continue to be collected over a five-year period.

KEY FINDINGS FOR FVO IMPLEMENTATION

A. Referrals to Domestic Violence Specialists

- Between July 1997 and December 31, 1999, 2287 women were referred to Options/Opciones for services. Most referrals came through the intake screening process (N=1856, 81%), and 19% (431) came to the project through some other referral.
- A majority of the women who were not referred through the intake screening process (N=357, 83%) said they wanted to participate in the program after hearing more about it. Only 4% (83) of the women referred via the intake screening process wanted to participate.

A. Impact of Domestic Violence Services

- Of the 2287 women who were referred for services, 19% (440) said that they wanted to participate in the program. One-third (33%) of those interested in participating actually followed through with services (145), meaning that they came to at least one session with an advocate.
- Among the women who came for at least one follow-up session, 57% (83) were placed in work activities, including 37% (53) who entered paid employment, 11% (16) who entered school, and 10% (14) who were placed in vocational training programs.

B. Findings from the Demonstration Project

Interim Referral Methods Needed to Increase Recruitment for Domestic Violence Services

The author observes that the effort needed to change the work culture within a large, inner-city welfare office may not be realistic in the short period of time current welfare recipients have remaining on their benefit clocks. Therefore, the author recommends that additional interim referral methods be used, which are not dependent on caseworkers' and intake workers' skill and comfort levels, until welfare staff more routinely refer clients in need of domestic violence services.

Specialized Pre-employment Training for Domestic Violence Victims is Effective

The data show that when pre-employment training, sensitive to the constraints and particular problems encountered by domestic violence victims entering school or work, is integrated with traditional domestic violence services, abuse victims' and survivors' ability to enter work activities is increased dramatically.