



Victim Advocate Certification Position Statement

The Colorado Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV) is a statewide, grassroots nonprofit organization that has been coordinating services for battered women and their families since 1978. Founded by twelve domestic violence service agencies, today the Coalition has 56 organizational members, many of which started through Coalition support. CCADV's mission is to "prevent and eliminate domestic violence in all forms at all levels of society through comprehensive coordination of services, trainings and technical assistance, community education, advocacy, action and funding."

The founding agencies brought forth the need for an organization to provide a unified voice on issues of domestic violence. Therefore, CCADV was created to advocate for victims of domestic violence and agencies that provide domestic violence services. Today CCADV works to raise statewide community awareness, provide trainings and technical assistance, and most essentially, serve as a statewide network for service providers, offering support, updated resources, current information, and coordinated meeting times to share ideas, trainings, and collaborative problem solving.

Over the past few years and particularly in recent months, much conversation has taken place throughout the State of Colorado and the nation about victim advocate accountability and training. Many suggestions have been offered and terms used ranging from educational opportunities to required certification. Any action taken as result of these discussions will affect, perhaps dramatically, the quality, operations and survival of organizations serving battered women and their children. For that reason, the membership of the Colorado Coalition Against Domestic Violence has attempted here to capture and present for debate its beliefs on these vital issues. The position of CCADV and its member organizations on the instruction and credentialing of victim advocates is stated below.

ISSUES CLARIFICATION

In the experience of the Coalition membership the question of how to ensure quality service provision for victims of crime encompasses not one but three distinct issues. These issues are 1) Training; 2) Standardization; and 3) Certification. For the purposes of this document advocate Training is a means of achieving quality in program provision by generating readily available, effective educational opportunities for victim service workers. Standardization is a guideline, created through statewide conversation and consensus, which defines those elements that constitute quality in services to victims. Topic areas for standardization might include the education and experience of staff, approaches to the work, and the range and availability of services. Certification and/or licensure is a set of established requirements that must be met in order for a person to work within the victim advocacy field or for an advocacy program to continue providing services.

What we, as a community, believe about and are hoping to accomplish around each of these concerns must be clearly and separately articulated.

TRAINING

The membership of CCADV is committed to ensuring the best possible services to victims of crime. To that end, the Coalition believes strongly in the value of training. Training prepares individuals to respond appropriately to the unique dynamics of abusive relationships and understand violence against women and children in a social context, builds intervention skills, reduces the possibility of re-victimization, and increases advocate confidence in their abilities.

Current Status of Advocate Training

Domestic violence programs across the state provide formal training for their volunteers and staff. Depending on the size of the program and volunteer base, training is coordinated either by a volunteer coordinator or by other program staff. Because volunteers are vital to their survival, domestic violence programs regularly provide advocate training in their community.

The Colorado Domestic Violence Coalition surveyed each of its thirty-eight (38) voting member programs regarding how they equip individuals working within their agencies to provide victim advocacy services. The results of that inquiry are discussed below.

For many programs, especially in rural/remote areas, volunteers provide pivotal services to battered women and their children. These services include crisis line response; on scene response; group facilitation; individual and legal advocacy;

and community education. Upon being hired, paid staff also attends volunteer training as a means of preparing to perform the duties of their new position.

A set of basic, core issues is discussed in the training provided across the state. These issues are: domestic violence definitions and statistics; the effects of violence on adults and children; legal remedies; criminal justice response; basic helping/counseling skills; how to be an advocate; history of the battered women's movement; community resources and agency policy/procedures. Programs rely on experts in their area to assist with training—a process that gives new advocates an opportunity to meet and network with community members that they will be working with in the future. This aspect of local training gives the domestic violence program, as well as individual advocates time to build relationships within the community. Moreover, it allows advocates to learn how their community responds to domestic violence and discuss issues that directly affect their community with the very individuals who determine the responses or policies for their town or region. Initial training ranges from 18 – 85 hours. This does not include further advocate instruction provided by shadowing experienced advocates, on the job training or on-going training, such as monthly in-services. Depending on the size of the program, services offered, role of the advocate, and needs of the community, additional training topics are covered. For example an individual who wants to work on the crisis line might go through the basic training and additional crisis line training. A program may also respond to sexual assaults and therefore do rape exam, ER/Medical training.

Agency based training serves many functions. It is valuable, not only because of the knowledge gained by advocates, but because of the opportunity it provides for the programs to get to know potential staff and volunteers. Because of the intense and emotional nature of the work, programs need to understand “where the advocate is at”. They must make sure that an individual can work effectively with (not re-victimize) victims. Through an extensive training program, agencies can evaluate a candidate's skills, strengths and weakness. The agency may help individuals to process their feelings and issues regarding past experiences. In addition, the training is a time for the advocates to come together as a group and form a support system with other new domestic violence workers.

Because many of the people who work in domestic violence programs are part-time or volunteer, they often have other job, school and family commitments. In order to train volunteers, programs provide the training at night and on weekends. Programs will meet with advocates to provide individual training for missed sessions. Meeting the needs of volunteers through flexible training times is an important factor in attracting and maintaining a strong team of individuals willing to donate their time and expertise.

Additional Training Needs

It is the belief of the CCADV Membership that the basic needs for training of advocates throughout the state are being met. The Coalition would not support a move to substitute the training now being provided in local communities with what would potentially be a broader, shorter, less accessible training program provided and certified by the state.

There is, however, a strong interest in greater access to intermediate and advanced level training, particularly information on ways of utilizing technology and current research and trends in program development.

In order for training to be accessible to both large and small domestic violence programs statewide it must be held at a location that is realistic to travel to and from. Many programs cannot afford (money or time) to send one or two persons out of the office for long periods. The difficulty in covering shifts may mean that services are not provided to victims. Travel time and distance may also be prohibitive, (i.e. getting over three mountain passes in winter to get to the training site).

The Colorado Coalition Against Domestic Violence plays a significant role in assisting member agencies to address the need for advanced training. Coalition organized and sponsored events have proven to be a successful means of increasing the availability of educational opportunities for advocates. Currently, CCADV rotates the Coalition's three statewide meetings to various locations in Colorado. The costs for registration and mileage for members is covered by the Coalition. Training sessions are offered at each Statewide Meeting. CCADV also provides an all-expense paid, two-day training for new workers and executive directors (food, training, lodging, and travel) once each year. Staff/trainers may travel to programs to provide technical assistance instead of having programs travel to Denver. In preparation, staff/trainers may meet with representatives of the local community in order to better understand the unique needs and issues of that town or region. The Coalition continues to look at ways to enhance their support of member organizations through training.

STANDARDIZATION

The Coalition does see and support the need for a level of continuity in quality and range of services offered to survivors of domestic violence statewide. The process of establishing standards for domestic violence service agencies in Colorado began in 1984 with the passage of the Domestic Abuse Assistance Program state income tax check off. The service providers of the Colorado Domestic Violence Coalition assisted in the development of standards for programs still used today to assess an organization's qualifications for receipt of funds. Increased awareness of and discussion among agencies regarding these standards, as well as enhancements to the standards based on advancements in the domestic violence field would, in the opinion of the CCADV membership, be a helpful and fruitful process.

CERTIFICATION

CCADV strongly opposes the development of formal certification for domestic violence advocates. While in the short run certification may appear as no more than an opportunity to increase advocate skill and knowledge through training we must, as a community, look down the road to its potential long term consequences.

Social Change Implications

Both the Battered Women's Movement and the Sexual Assault Movement grew out of the efforts of advocates and survivors who challenged communities and systems to change. Because of the efforts of these advocates, systems that before responded to battered women and rape victims with indifference or disregard were forced to reexamine policies, challenge institutional beliefs, and institute practices to protect and validate victims. This type of systems change occurred, and continues to occur today, because of the particular ability and position of non-system advocates to critique, challenge, and monitor various systems' responses to victims. Certainly, both system and non-system advocates are concerned about the experience and treatment of victims. However, non-system advocates, because they are not employed, trained or evaluated by the particular system impacting the victim (i.e., law enforcement, prosecution) are better positioned to issue critical challenges to that system's victim response.

Because violence against women involves issues related to gender, sexism, power and control, and because these issues are frequently present but rarely addressed within the criminal justice system, the role of the victim advocate is unique. The advocate will likely be in the position of not only providing supportive services to the victim, but also challenging system beliefs and biases that are re-victimizing. The type of skills necessary to effectively work toward systems change are most

often learned through the social change and advocacy work taking place in grassroots victim service organizations.

Without a social change component to victim advocacy, the systems that most impact victim's lives will remain unchallenged and ineffective in their responses to victims. While the role of advocates within those systems is clearly a valuable one, they are neither trained nor encouraged to challenge the system that employs them. The unique value and role of non-system advocates, and the specific training needs they have should not be lost in an enthusiastic attempt to "teach advocacy." Non-system victim advocacy ensures that communities are able to unconditionally challenge government programs created to respond to crime.

Establishing a state regulated certification program for victim advocates would forge a bureaucracy that placed control regarding the direction of the movement, our understanding of domestic violence and who may or may not be served in the hands of government, academicians and funders. In this type of training and evaluation, only those who adhere to the state's/university's definition of and response to the issue will be approved to do the work. Only those organizations who adhere to the state's/university's beliefs will receive sufficient financial support to continue their efforts. In essence, critical debate on the causes and ramifications of violence against women would be severely curtailed if not shut down. Effective victim advocacy requires an ability to rock the boat—a skill not readily taught by those who own the boat.

Diversity and Access to Services

Statewide certification of victim advocates will categorically drive women who have not had access to, or are not able to afford the time or expense associated with, a formal educational program from work with battered women. From its inception, the domestic violence movement has been rooted in, and derived its strength from, victims—victims who gathered together to demand social change and advocate on one another's behalf. Historically, it is survivors that have brought their knowledge of domestic violence, its impact on women and children and effective advocacy strategies for victims to public attention. It is survivors who are our strongest source for insight and learning yet today.

Many advocates (paid and volunteer) working in the domestic violence field are survivors of victimization. They bring with them their own intimate knowledge of battering relationships and a burning commitment to end violence against women and children. Before working within a domestic violence agency, they have had benefit of the training provided locally for all advocates. In many cases, these individuals would not have the financial resources or, because of class, race or cultural barriers, would not choose to attend a certification training program.

Workers in the domestic violence field have, oftentimes, come from backgrounds where they were marginalized due to poverty, race, education, and gender. Working as advocates has allowed these women to be valued for their experience and wisdom, to gain self-esteem and confidence. The level of formal education they have been able to acquire has not limited their worth to the movement, as participants and as leaders. Training fees and time away from children, home and work to complete a certification program would not be feasible for many of these individuals. Were certification required in the State of Colorado, these women and the unique insight and ability they bring to the domestic violence field, would be lost.

The true measure of quality in advocacy cannot be determined by a particular course taken or how well a person may have passed a test but, rather, how effectively they serve victims of crime.

Sandra is one example of a person for whom the requirement of formal certification would, more than likely, have presented an insurmountable barrier to participation in victim services work:

Sandra was a victim of domestic abuse who took her children, left her spouse and soon found herself living in poverty. She supported herself and her children with a job that paid minimum wage. Sandra became a volunteer for a domestic violence organization. She was trained by them to provide advocacy for victims. When a paid position opened at her agency she applied and was hired. Sandra is a woman of color.

The scenario presented by Sandra's experiences is not uncommon. A majority of paid staff members in domestic violence agencies were at one time, volunteers who received training from their agencies or from organizations such as CCADV. Domestic violence and sexual assault organizations may lose a tremendous number of qualified advocates as volunteers should certification become required or the norm. One or two paid persons along with volunteers operate many rural agencies. Changing times (e.g. fewer "stay at home" moms) have increased the difficulty of volunteer recruitment significantly in recent years. Certification would add yet one more barrier to volunteer involvement. If sufficient numbers of volunteers cannot be certified, these agencies may be forced to close their doors.

Should certification become a requirement, it is very possible that victim service agencies would face a loss in advocates, a loss in future advocates, and a significant increase in the cost of operations. The pool of trained, experienced and diverse advocates to choose from for paid positions would be considerably reduced. Certification for smaller organizations could mean an agency's services would be suspended while staff is away obtaining certification. Larger agencies would have to find and pay replacements to cover for paid staff. As is true with most professions,

increasing the level of education required to perform victim services work will, more than likely, result in higher salary expectations and demand. Certification or "licensure," even if were not required but offered for those who could participate, would eventually set a norm or standard for workers in the field. Evidence of this movement toward a required level of education is already evident in the state. The Victim's Compensation Board in the 20th Judicial District recently decided to refuse reimbursements to anyone but licensed counselors. For many years the battered women's organizations in the 20th Judicial have relied upon fee compensation through the Board for shelter stays and outreach counseling services provided to battered women without financial means. When question by the local victim service providers as to why their policy had changed, they were told that the state soon would be certifying workers in the field and that the issue then would be moot.

This action on the part of the Board gives victims of crime the clear message that their needs cannot be appropriately met by a community based, grassroots organization, only by a licensed mental health professional. How is a battered woman to understand this message? She may interpret the message to mean that she is mentally ill or perhaps that it is her flaw or illness that caused the violence in her relationship to occur.

Assurance that victims will receive quality care is a goal shared by advocates across the state. The question becomes how that assurance can best be achieved? Certification or licensure of providers in other fields has not guaranteed quality in services. Does it make sense then to pursue a system that qualifies individuals to do victim services work in accordance with their ability to successfully complete a series of educational courses particularly when, through the current system, organizations with a history of successful victim services train, supervise and monitor the work of advocates?

Hypocrisy

In conversations about the issue of certification that have taken place over the past few months, many have accused victim service providers opposed to the "licensure" concept of hypocrisy. Advocates working to end violence against women and children have fought hard and long for many years to establish and maintain standards for therapists working with domestic violence and sexual assault offenders. How can workers in the movement justify certification as a method to assure quality in treatment for offenders and not for victims? It is important that this concern be addressed directly.

There are some critical differences that must be recognized between victims and offenders and consequently the systems of service designed to best address their needs.

- Offenders present a personal and public safety risk; victims do not.
- Victims have the freedom to voluntarily choose whether or not to seek assistance and from whom. Treatment for offenders is ordered by the court. The justice system has some obligation, then, to define what treatment and quality in treatment for offenders must entail.
- Services for victims are most often provided within the context of a governmental or non-profit organization. Both types of agency have elaborate systems of accountability in place—supervisors, clinical supervisors, directors, Boards, consultants and advisors.
- The vast majority of offender programs are for-profit corporations where accountability measures may be limited and decisions regarding what is best for the client and what is best for the therapist or the therapist's finances may come into conflict.
- Though many victim service organizations charge some fee, the dollars collected far from sustain the agency. Victims' programs rely upon support from the community, and private and public funders. Those programs that develop a reputation for poor quality in services lose the financial backing of funders and eventually must improve or close their doors.
- Complaints about quality in victim services in Colorado have been minimal. Preparation of advocates, while there is always room for improvement, appears adequate. The same is not true for those working with offenders. Before the offender treatment standards were in place, thousands of women reported tremendously damaging experiences with therapists who lacked knowledge or understanding regarding the dynamics of abusive relationships.

IN CONCLUSION

The membership of CCADV believes strongly in increased training opportunities for victim advocates. It is critical, however, that our efforts to provide that training are designed in a way that will contribute to our goal of quality service provision. It is the belief of the Coalition that a state regulated bureaucracy created to certify victim advocates will result in a less effective training program than those currently being provided by local agencies and run the risk of financially disabling victim service organizations throughout the state.