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Technical Assistance Guidance

# Serving Male-Identified Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence

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*“There are many effects of the abuse that are particular to males. Men are not supposed to be victims. Society tells us: men don’t get depressed, men don’t seek help, men don’t need therapy...”*

*– Male survivor*

Historically, domestic violence programs were born from the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s to address the needs of female survivors, who still represent the majority of victims seeking services today. Generally, the domestic violence movement has framed its work on a gender binary with men as perpetrators and women as victims. We have come to learn, however, that a woman-centered approach to advocacy only addresses the needs of a portion of survivors and largely fails to acknowledge and address male victimization. This Technical Assistance Guidance supports advocates seeking to build capacity to recognize and respond to survivors across the gender spectrum, while honoring the gender analysis that helps us understand the root causes of violence and oppression.



### VAWA Non-Discrimination Grant Condition

No person in the United States shall, on the basis of actual or perceived race, color, religion, national origin, sex, gender identity (as defined in paragraph 249(c) (4) of title 18, United States Code), sexual orientation, or disability, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity funded in whole or in part with funds made available under [VAWA], and any other program or activity funded in whole or in part with funds appropriated for grants, cooperative agreements, and other assistance administered by the Office on Violence Against Women. (42 U.S.C. 13925(b)(13))2014)

While data continues to show that girls and women are disproportionately impacted by intimate partner violence, boys and men are also victims and deserve survivor-centered and holistic services. One of the most reliable sources of information on the prevalence of the victimization of men in the United States is the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS). The CDC’s most recent NISVS data, as reported in Prevalence and Characteristics of Sexual Violence, Stalking, and Intimate Partner Violence Victimization- National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, United States, 2011 underscores that “any focus on differences between men and women should not obscure the fact that nearly 16 million men have experienced some form of severe physical violence by an intimate partner during their lifetimes and over 13 million men have experienced intimate partner violence during their lifetimes that resulted in a negative impact” (Breiding, 2014).



The Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013 amended the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994 by adding a grant condition that prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation (in addition to sex and other categories) by recipients of certain Department of Justice (DOJ) funds. [The Family Violence Prevention and Services Act \(FVPSA\) Final Rule](#) similarly indicates that all survivors must have access

to services and programs and must receive comparable services. More specifically, it states that “no person shall on the ground of actual or perceived sex, including gender identity, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination under, any program or activity funded in whole or in part through FVPSA” (Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).

Providing services to male-identified survivors is not only required by law, but is the ethical and right thing to do. Most domestic violence programs adhere to a survivor-centered approach when designing, developing and implementing programming. This approach ensures that survivors’ rights and needs are first and foremost – that each survivor’s experience of violence, culture, life circumstances, and identity (gender, age, race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, religion, HIV status or other self-identification) determines the direction and focus of advocacy and safety strategies. As advocates, if we want to effectively meet our mission to end domestic violence, we must be attentive to the unique needs of all survivors.

This paper offers guideposts for responding to the needs of male-identified victims of intimate partner violence. It is meant to be a resource to foster meaningful dialogue around supporting inclusive services for all victims and survivors seeking safety and healing.

### Challenges to Serving Males

Challenges to serving those who identify as male often stem from our lived experiences. It can be difficult to question what we have learned through education or daily practice. When it comes to serving male-identified survivors of domestic violence, the lack of

#### Exploring the following questions may offer useful reflections on our work:

1. How many stories of domestic violence have you heard in the last 6 months?
2. How many of these stories include a male aggressor and a female or child victim? In how many of those stories is the male described as the victim of domestic violence?
3. What is the gender identity make-up of the employees at your agency?
4. When you think about male victims of abuse, who comes to mind?
5. How many victim/survivors have you served over the last year that do not identify as female?
6. What inspired you to work to address and prevent domestic violence?

knowledge and experience creates a vacuum for many who have learned and practiced from a survivor-centered model that lacked attention to serving such victims.

As advocates we bear witness to stories of victimization throughout our careers where males are perpetrators and women and children are victims. Studies reflect the reality that intimate partner violence most often looks this way, and most research, education, resources, and tools have been created within this paradigm. But limiting our exposure to and understanding of the gender variations that can and do occur has a profound impact on our ability to meet the needs of all victim/survivors. We as a movement need to examine and expand beyond the one-size-fits-all model.

Additionally, advocates bring personal experiences to the work, which are often an important source of inspiration and passion. While our stories add value to this movement, we must always be mindful that each is unique and therefore not representative of all.

As a product of the feminist movement, it is not surprising to find that most community-based domestic violence programs are staffed primarily by female-identified advocates and volunteers. It is important to explore the gender composition of agency staff and its impact on organizational culture, including the voices of and roles available to and held by male-identified employees.

When we consider our previous histories of trauma, the stories that we take in, and gender-specific composition of the field, we find an environment that may stifle our growth as advocates in working with those who identify as male, and can foster mistrust of males in general. We are charged as advocates to take stock of these experiences and to adjust in how we meet the needs of others. This self-awareness is a key aspect of responsible and ethical practice, and requires ongoing reflection, both internally and in conversation with others, to promote continued growth.

### Defining Male Identity

Gender identity and expression exists on a spectrum. In this document, we will use the term male to describe both those who identify as male and those who have never had to think about their gender identity as being anything other than male. Male identity includes a vast group of individuals spanning every age, race, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, religion, ability and socio-economic status,

**Self-awareness** is a cornerstone of competent practice that requires deliberate and ongoing effort. As part of this work, seeking counseling/supervision related to your own history of trauma is important when working with males or any other population. For more, see the [Guidebook on Vicarious Trauma](#) from the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children (2001).



each of whom have their own needs based on their unique experiences. When you examine or reflect on your agency practices or inside yourself and think about male victims of abuse, who comes to mind? What are the characteristics of these males?



Who have you missed? You may not have considered male-identified veterans or active service members as victims of domestic violence, those who are incarcerated, teen boys who have experienced abuse in dating relationships, men in later life, men in same sex relationships, or individuals who identify as transmen. These are just a few examples. Write down your answers and share them with your peers/coworkers to help identify capacity building opportunities to address services to male-identified victims.

### Men's Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence

The statements below illustrate some of the impacts of males' experiences of victimization and challenges in seeking assistance.

*“It's hard, people don't believe you. I told one doctor my partner was beating me up and he immediately thought that I was gay. Society can't believe that a heterosexual man can be a victim of abuse.”*

*“An officer said to me, 'She must be a really big woman, and stronger than you.' Society doesn't believe men like me that go through things like these.”*

*“What has happened to me is not the same as what happens to a woman.”*

*“The police told me that if they received another phone call about us they would arrest us both.”*

*“When I started to talk about this with my friends they just make jokes.”*

*“It is not like what I watched my mom go through.”*

*“I must have done something wrong. I know that he will change, he was the only one who was there for me when I came out.”*

*“Where do I even go for help? I am not a woman.”*

Males face unique barriers to accessing services that are mostly rooted in the lack or perceived lack of male-serving organizations or tailored services for men in their local community. In addition, many male victims do not recognize or define their experience as domestic violence. While many of the ways in which domestic violence affects males may be similar to female experiences, they may be expressed, received, or labeled differently for men.

**Diminished self-worth.** This can be entangled with feelings about what society says it means to be a man. Typically men are expected to be able to protect themselves, and to be abused challenges this belief that is reinforced by many different cultures.

**Fear.** This can be expressed in a wide emotional range, from a flat affect to one filled with rage. It may not even be expressed at all.

**Shame.** This is different than guilt, which is a healthy response to having done something one considers wrong. Guilt can inspire behavior change. Shame, on the other hand, is a static feeling about one's core self-image ("I am bad"). Shame is often a reflection of messages imposed by family, friends, culture or social norms. It may surface as a male's overwhelming refusal to share what happened and to defend their offender.



### Review Your Awareness Materials

The images and messages you share in both traditional and social media make an impact. Create a focus group of male-identified volunteers, staff, board members, community partners, and former clients. Ask them to review the images and messages that you put out in the community. Inform them of the intended audience and use of each image or message and ask them to consider the following questions.

1. What are your initial thoughts?
2. What do you feel when seeing the image/message?
3. Do you think it reaches the intended audience?
4. How might an individual who identifies as a male victim/survivor react to this image/message?
5. Do the images reflect diversity in both sexual orientation and gender presentation?
6. What images or messages are lacking in what you have seen?
7. What message would you like an individual who identifies as a male victim/survivor to receive from this agency?
8. What would be effective strategies or venues for sharing this image/message with male-identified audiences?

**Minimizing the violence perpetrated against them.** This may surface as qualifying the pain or severity of the abuse as not as "bad" as others.

**Using substances to cope.** Those around the male may perceive him as "damaged" or not worthy of support because of substance use to numb, escape, or forget the pain they have experienced.

**Risk of physical harm or death.** Abused men may describe their partner as angry, and either understate or omit their own fear unless asked directly. They can often minimize the impacts of these risks by blaming themselves to be at fault for creating anger in their partner or by minimizing the previous physical and/or emotional trauma they have experienced from their partner.

### Reaching Out to Males

*“It’s been a great investment. Now we’re seeing a lot more men call, particularly gay men. The need is out there, men don’t think [shelter] is available to them. Word of mouth is getting out, and I’ve consistently seen at least 1-2 men all*

*of the time in shelter. It's a worthwhile step. Since we've done it, no one thinks we should go back to how it was. ””*

*- Gender-integrated domestic violence agency (FORGE, 2016, p.17)*

This section offers strategies for creating an agency that feels welcoming to male-identified survivors and raising awareness in your community about the services you offer to male populations by exploring a few key marketing elements.

**Know your intended audience.** This is key whether you are seeking to address a group of professionals, community members, or victims/survivors. There are many socio-economic, religious, and cultural variables that need to be considered to effectively market your message and your agency. This includes previous history with another agency or community. Most organizations experience periods where they may be helpful or harmful to individuals, systems, or other agencies. This may be due to a variety of factors such as lack of understanding your audience, lack of realistic or common goals or previous directives from leadership. Consider that each internal or external meeting with new stakeholders is an opportunity to create strategic partnerships, and mistakes are part of the process. It takes time and intentional efforts to build trust and authentic relationships. In any setting, always remember that many families have been impacted by domestic violence and be aware that victims, including males, are likely part of your audience.

**Create inclusive awareness materials.** Be attentive to the images and messages used in your agency's posters, brochures, and campaigns so that male victims can see reflections of their experiences, faces, and voices. Be mindful of the language you use when speaking to traditional media or engaging with social media audiences. These are places to express your

### Engaging Male Victims in Crisis

For many advocates/hotline volunteers it is difficult to determine what the caller's needs are based on the few details they are given over the phone. The [Respect Toolkit: Work with male victims of domestic violence](#) (January 2013) suggests asking the following questions to help advocates/hotline volunteers identify male victims/survivors (see page 23).

- Can you tell me about the last time something violent or frightening happened?
- Can you tell me about the worst time there has been?
- Can you tell me what you usually do when this happens?
- Do you ever feel afraid to make certain decisions or do certain things because of what you think your partner/abuser might do?
- Have you ever been injured by your partner/family member – tell me more about that?
- Has your partner/family member ever been injured during an incident? Can you tell me more?
- Are you frightened of your partner/abuser? Are you frightened of what they might do to the children?
- What are you frightened of in relation to your situation?
- Do you think your partner is frightened of you? Have they ever said that they are frightened of you?
- What do you want to happen now?



genuine desire to meet the needs of male-identified survivors in your community.

**Think about the name of your organization.** Is it focused solely on women? If so, begin conversations with your staff, board, volunteers and outside trusted partners on how they think your name may be received by male victims/survivors. Names have power and send a clear message about who and what your agency stands for. Is the name of your organization reflective of the mission and welcoming for all survivors?

**Host focus groups.** Invite agency partners to do a walk through of your program, and engage them in a focus group around how the populations they work with might experience your agency. Talk to male survivors who accessed your services in the past and ask them what they found most useful or challenging. Work with partner agencies to organize listening sessions with males at conferences or other settings. Ask other male-serving agencies to invite clients to engage with you around their needs for trauma-informed domestic violence services.

## Gender Inclusive Service Provision

“It has always been our philosophy to help men. They are abused, neglected, and need help.”

– Gender-integrated domestic violence agency (FORGE, 2016, p. 12)

With limited resources, this section leans on ways in which we can provide support through a trauma-informed, victim-centered approach focused on meeting the survivor where they are.

Shifting to embrace trauma-informed approaches requires a critical look at your organization’s service delivery model. Historically, many victim service providers have adopted a reactive approach to service delivery where we wait for victims to reach out to us for services that are centered around the provision of safe spaces for women and children. This model has served many people well for many years, however it does not serve all members of the communities in which we live. Trainings, awareness initiatives, and outreach materials are generally built on a

### 8 Reasons to Integrate Shelter Services for All Genders

In 2015, FORGE interviewed 135 gender-integrated shelters and allied agencies who identified their reasons for doing so:

1. It aligns with the values of the domestic violence field.
2. It creates new access for survivors with nowhere to turn.
3. It’s rewarding.
4. It helps dispel gendered stereotypes about perpetrators and survivors.
5. It leads to learning opportunities for residents and staff alike.
6. It avoids revictimization of trans people.
7. It’s the law.
8. It saves money.

Read more in [Why Include People of All Genders in Shelters](#) (2016).

male/offender, female/victim gender paradigm. The names of our agencies are women-centered. And media and popular culture reflect this limited understanding of who victims of domestic violence are. This narrow perspective limits males' ability to see themselves as victims and find their way to service providers.

The first step to gender inclusiveness is to take a proactive approach to providing services to males, characterized by community outreach to meet the populations that you seek to serve. Consider providing community-based services in settings other than your own agency. We must be creative in our approaches to meet the needs of all members of our communities.



**Crisis/helpline services** are usually based within a shelter in response to the caller's immediate needs, which may not allow for the unique needs of males. When greeted by a male voice, a hotline advocate may be on alert to see if the caller is a perpetrator who has abused someone already receiving their services. While this is a protective step in assisting the females that reside in shelter or utilize services, it fails to consider abuse in same sex relationships, females who offend against their male partners, or individuals who may have had experiences as both a victim and offender of domestic violence, perhaps at different points in their lives.

Advocates/hotline volunteers should be trained on the diverse experiences and needs of male-identified victims and strategies for receiving and processing men's crisis calls. Additionally, agencies should regularly revisit their screening process for callers, with careful attention to men's unique barriers and challenges when reaching out and accessing services.

*“There was a cisman [non-transgender man] who was eternally grateful for all of the resources that we provided to him. He was an educated man who had little power in the community whose partner kept him as a stay-at-home father and sort of locked him away and he was able to get validated there and be successful.”*

*- Gender-integrated domestic violence agency (FORGE, 2016, p.13)*

**Residential services** may include a shelter operated by the domestic violence program, one that is in partnership with the agency, rapid rehousing, or an off-site location such as a local hotel. Shelter programs have been historically gender specific, and in some areas may still be segregated by gender identity in an effort to protect the safety and security of women and girls. Males are typically accommodated at an off-site hotel or partner shelter (homeless shelter). These options may worsen the victim's feelings of isolation, expose them to further harm, or limit their access to additional supportive services. Hotel stays are short term and lack the constant staff presence and support needed to help victims fully process their experiences. This may leave the victim to feel alone and vulnerable

to being found by their offender, especially in communities that don't value or understand the experiences of male-identified survivors. Additionally, homeless shelters may not have the capacity to manage trauma reactions or safety and privacy concerns in the context of domestic violence, and often pose a new threat or perceived threat of violence from other individuals in the shelter. This can be especially true for those from marginalized groups such as the gay/bisexual and transgender communities, who experience harmful expressions of homophobia and transphobia. Other populations such as those with physical disabilities, mental illness, cognitive challenges, language barriers, or immigration status may also face unsafe conditions often in homeless shelters.

Agencies can explore ways to reasonably meet the safe housing needs of males on site, and enhance staff capacity to provide true parity in services. This can be done through candid dialogue within the agency board, staff, volunteers, and those they serve in conjunction with outside partners. There is currently not a one-size-fits-all model for providing supportive residential services for male-identified victims, although FORGE offers helpful guidance in *Gender-Integrated Shelters: Experience and Advice* (2016). As a starting point, see the *Tipsheet How Shelters Prepare for Gender Integration* (FORGE, 2016).

*“One man, who I assume was trans or gender non-conforming, had a lot of concerns about coming into shelter. He expressed a lot of relief about how welcoming the space was and how safe he was there. He sent pictures of the space to his mom and his family felt good about where he was at. His anxiety level was so high! And he was able to breathe and feel good about where he was at.”*  
– *Gender-integrated domestic violence agency (FORGE, 2016, p.13)*

**Counseling services** help meet the needs of individuals as they cope with and heal from the abuse they have suffered and plan for the next stage of their life. Males from diverse backgrounds and cultures may struggle with the concept of accepting counseling because it may challenge their ideal of masculinity, making them feel as though they are weak or worthless as a man.

Agencies can seek training on alternative counseling styles and approaches that may be more effective with males. Advocates can explore other ways of providing similar support in a different setting, like playing basketball, talking at a kitchen table over coffee, or in a setting where the counseling may be folded into another activity.

“Almost every man who comes through we consider a success. It's nice for them to have people who understand what they've been going through, and talking about their situation is new and good for them. They recognize they're not alone and they're not the only man who goes through this.” – *Gender-integrated domestic violence agency (FORGE, 2016, p. 15)*

**Support groups** offer facilitated peer support, usually with an educational component, over a period of several months to a year. Groups are typically gender-specific in an effort to create a safe space for sharing. However, groups for males

are very rare, if they exist at all. This reinforces a sense of isolation and further promotes the invisibility of male experiences of victimization.

Agencies can implement male support groups, even on a short-term basis. Alternatively, advocates can seek out training on how to integrate gender-specific groups together at times to work on similar concerns or create a new sense of trust. Expressive arts may be one unifying avenue to explore.

**Legal services** include obtaining protection from abuse/restraining orders, legal accompaniment in the courtroom, assistance with name changes, divorce, custody matters, immigration services, and others. Agencies can explore their own processes for supporting males' legal needs as well as the capacity and readiness of partner agencies to do so.

**Peer support** offers opportunities for male-identified survivors to network and build community. Develop and promote informal opportunities and social activities for survivors to network and include them in the planning stages for these activities.

**Speaking out** and sharing one's story of survival can be a helpful part of the healing journey, offering personal empowerment and fostering resilience. Agencies should support male survivors who wish to build their capacity to speak publicly or tell their story through various creative outlets.

To further explore concrete strategies for service provision, see [Guidelines & Best Practices to Address the Service Needs of Male Victims of Domestic Violence: A Training Manual](#) from the New York City Human Resources Administration.

## Building Collaborations to Improve Services to Males

Building new partnerships is an essential step in effectively meeting the needs of male-identified victims of domestic violence. You may consider looking for possible partnerships within these common community programs/institutions:

- Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous groups
- Colleges and university-based centers
- Cultural community centers
- Drug and alcohol treatment facilities
- Faith-based organizations
- Foster/group homes
- Homeless Shelters
- Hospitals or health clinics
- LGBT community centers
- Reentry programs for those who have been incarcerated
- Sports leagues
- Teen residential treatment facilities
- Veteran's assistance programs

### Consider Individuals' Personal Experiences of Abuse

Always approach new individuals being mindful that you may be talking with male victims/survivors of domestic violence. This assists you in calibrating your interactions, and avoiding messages that may trigger feelings of shame and helplessness.

When meeting with new partners, find out about their structure. What is their organizational culture regarding male-identified victims of abuse? Do they have the capacity to work with all survivors of domestic violence, including male-identified victims? How do they interact with male victim/survivors of domestic violence? How do they assess males for victimization? What do they identify as supports or barriers to males sharing their stories freely? Find out what your agency can do to support their work. Can you assist them in training efforts? Can you assist them in facilitating joint group sessions?

Schedule time throughout the year to follow up with these organizations. Send staff, volunteers, and board members to their events. Invite them to share their expertise through training. Offer seats at the table to meetings where they may not have been invited in the past. Create brave spaces to talk about current and historical relationships, and find ways of correcting past missteps. Provide opportunities to jointly create awareness materials and resources for survivors and the community. Find ways to otherwise support their work and demonstrate your genuine commitment to building a strong relationship.



Effective and sustainable efforts to build and maintain strong relationships between agencies will involve more than one person, and will occur on multiple levels. Encourage direct lines of communication between leadership and agency staff.

### Enhancing Organizational Policies

This checklist offers a starting point for reviewing and enhancing your agency's policies toward inclusive services. Be sure to seek out guidance, and engage all levels of staff, throughout the change process.

1. How often do you engage in policy review to ensure non-discrimination standards are met? Does this include reviewing policies about serving male-identified victims/survivors specifically?
2. Who can review and provide input to policies, procedures, or organizational messaging about serving specific cultural groups or populations? Is all staff, including direct services staff, included in this process? Is there a process in place for partners/focus group to do this work?
3. What is your policy on inviting/hiring male-identified employees/board members/volunteers? Are there any positions that they cannot hold? Where are these positions advertised? How are they recruited?
4. Are there questions on initial and/or exit interviews for staff about how they perceive the work environment for males colleagues?

5. Do interview questions explore capacity to work with individuals from specific cultural groups or populations?
6. What is your policy on providing shelter to those who identify as male?
7. What are your policies on training board, staff, and volunteers about working with males?
8. How does your agency track and report the number of males seeking and receiving services? Are service denials and referrals recorded as well?
9. What are your policies about serving males in all service areas? Do they align with VAWA and FVPSA guidance?
10. What are your policies, processes, or goals around mending/creating new partnerships in the community? Is this part of your agency's workplan?

For sample anti-discrimination policies for domestic violence agencies, see Appendix D in *Gender-Integrated Shelters: Experience and Advice* (FORGE, 2016).

## Conclusion

By reading this document you are opening the door to enhancing your capacity to meet the needs of male-identified victims of domestic violence. While this may feel daunting at times, we have a solid foundation of trauma-informed, victim-centered advocacy efforts to build from, and there are growing resources out there to support this process. Remember that we are part of a movement, which requires growth and progress in its very definition. Shifting to allow space for inclusivity can only make our movement stronger. Just as we empower survivors to learn a new way of life on their path to healing from abuse, we must feel empowered to examine long-held approaches and be brave enough to change course when necessary. Take a few breaths and reach out for help.

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