

Systems Advocacy: Creating Safe, Respectful & Effective Responses

"I spent 4 days in jail for an unpaid traffic ticket. My boyfriend beat me up and I called the cops. He was gone by the time they got to my house. But they ran my name and arrested me..."

"It was such a struggle - I needed to get a protection order against my husband. Took time off from work, got a ride from a friend... embarrassing, depressing. I wanted me and my kids to be safe, sleep good at night... I asked the clerk of courts for the protection order form. The clerk looked exasperated, didn't even say hello. She started to hand me the papers. I reached for them and she pulled the papers back, saying "Are you serious about this? You're not going to come in here tomorrow and drop it, are you? You all just make a lot of work for me when you do that!"

Advocacy for women who have been battered and/or raped is a continuum of relationships, actions and strategies that begin and end with the women who are victimized by violence. The relationship between the woman who is battered and the advocate includes: validation of the voice, expertise and leadership of women who are battered; modeling respect, compassion and non-violence; personal accountability for our internalized oppression and behavior; belief in and non-judgmental support of women as whole human beings and women's right to sovereignty.

On a daily basis most advocates are overwhelmed by immediate crisis of individual women and their children. However, the over-arching goal of advocacy is to create social change that ends violence against all women, upholding women's integrity and prioritizing comprehensive safety and accountability everywhere in women's lives.

In all initiatives, it's important to remember and validate the reality that violence against women is not traditional in indigenous communities. The "solution" lies in reclaiming our traditional beliefs and life ways founded on values of respect, generosity, fortitude, humility and compassion. When the understanding that we are all related is infused into every aspect of our lives and work, the response to women who are battered/raped, and other victims of violence will be transformed in powerful ways – everyone becomes an "advocate." In many ways, being an advocate is being a good relative.

Systems advocacy is a key element within the continuum of advocacy.

The goal of systems advocacy is to ensure women will receive consistent, effective and easily accessible responses and resources in a respectful and safe manner from every agency, organization and institution. Ideally, what is needed and helpful, how resources or services are provided, is defined by those receiving the services and resources. This is one aspect of social change that focuses on change of policies, rules, procedures, or laws that determine how and what services are delivered to victims of domestic and sexual violence. Systems change is a part of coordinated community response, which is modelled in many ways upon the traditional practice of what has come to be called community policing.

The experiences and voices of women who are battered and/or raped inform all parts of advocacy, including systems advocacy.

"It was about six months after my children and I finally got a house in tribal housing. I was struggling to get to work, take care of the kids and keep the car working. I needed my ex to watch the children a couple days a week so I could work. I trusted him to take good care of them for that amount of time. One day I drove to town, about 18 miles away, to get my paperwork up-dated for food stamps. I handed my papers to the worker. She gave me a mean look, grabbing the papers from me, she said "Your husband is at your house all the time! If he's living with you, you can't get food stamps!" There were other people there and she was loud and angry. I was so embarrassed, but mostly I honestly wanted to jump over the desk...! But I knew if I did or said anything, she could "loose" my paperwork – How did she know he was at my house? Who was watching me? She said other stuff to me...I just had to take it..."

"He was screaming "I'll kill you!" while he was pounding on me. Somehow I escaped and ran to the neighbors. The woman said she heard him yelling but didn't know if she should get involved! Found out later I had a concussion, a cracked rib and 25 bruises and welts. Shirt was torn. Finally, the cops arrived. I'm sitting there holding my shirt together, just stunned, shocked. The cop says, with his one hand on his gun, the other on his hip, "So what's your problem?" He told me I had to stand out on the street and watch when they went into my house to get my batterer.... A few days later the

sheriff says "Well, I'm surprised you didn't drop this yet. Most do."

"I knew I had to leave. Everybody said I should "just" leave him. But the lease was in his name. Closest shelter is 50 miles away – my job? Kids' school? No car and 3 children. I call the county housing authority about low-income housing. They say I have to bring all kinds of paperwork and show up on Monday morning at 7:30 in person. That's the only time they take applications. How do I do that? Especially with getting kids to school? And there's a two year waiting list!"

Preparation for doing advocacy work, including systems advocacy in Indian Country is empowered by having a clear vision of what we want our communities to become. Very often, this vision is based upon what our nations were like before colonization. We know colonization is at the root of violence in our tribal nations. We know that the kind of violence we confront is not traditional. And, we know that our survival as indigenous peoples is tied to sovereignty and reclamation of our natural, non-violent belief systems. It's about reconnection and renewing our relationships. What is our vision for peaceful, kind and generous communities? How do we bring our traditional beliefs & values to all aspects of what we do?

The next step in doing systems advocacy is to listen to women. Creating relationships with women is the beginning place for advocacy. Trusting relationships are imperative for healing from trauma and allows for getting integral information to provide individual advocacy and institute systems change. First assuring that immediate needs are met, intake or contact paperwork is an opportunity to ask about who they have sought help from in the past, with focus on the response by the program or agency, not on the woman's choices. It's about what happened, not what they did. Who did they ask for help? What was the response? How did it impact them? Were there difficulties accessing the resource/program/agency? What worked? What didn't? How do they want things to change? What are their suggestions?

Gather and analyze that information to paint a picture of the issues needing to be addressed. Is it an individual staff person needing training? A policy or procedure issue? Does the situation point to a need for system-wide training/cross-training? Addressing myths about violence and providing accurate information has the potential to transform responses of individuals, systems and communities.

"The prosecutor said if I didn't testify against my husband for assaulting me, I'd go to jail. He didn't ask why I didn't want to...his family has beaten me up before when I left. I was so scared that even if he got convicted, he'd just be pissed off and beat me more when he got out..."

Next, do some research about the programs or agencies involved. What codes, policies and procedures exist? Are they written or informal? Who are the decision-makers? Are job descriptions clear? Are they limited in how they can respond? What do they know about violence against women and its impact? Get to know the culture, struggles and strengths within those systems. It's important to identify common ground. Often, we can relate to each other's challenges like lack of resources and staff, etc. We also all have need for allies and in some way have shared goals around helping others. Native people also share in wanting to protect and enrich tribal sovereignty and culture. This is key to strengthening our connections as community members and systems change initiatives. These can make up the foundation of effective working relationships. This common ground is the touch stone when conflict arises.

Step back and **create a strategy** based upon the information gathered and the goals of your organization. A strong strategy identifies goals and objectives, and existing resources and clear expected outcomes. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. There is a plethora of national, state and tribal expertise, model policy, procedure and protocols available. Mending the Sacred Hoop, National Indigenous Women's Resource Center, Tribal Law and Policy Institute, Red Wind Consulting and the National Domestic Violence Resource Network are some of organizations that provide materials, training and technical assistance.

I was so tired I could hardly think. Petrified about going to court. The prosecutor was an angel. Kind, patient. He actually said he was sorry I got beaten up, I didn't deserve it no matter what. Then he said he would do the prosecution without me if I wanted. The cops did a great job investigating, documenting, and the doctor did a detailed report, so it was possible for him to go ahead without me!

"I was a new advocate in a new domestic violence program on a reservation of about 5,500 people. Went to the police station to find out why a protection order hadn't been served in over a week when the guy was out and about going to work, partying and stalking the woman I was trying to help. The officer checked the file and said "We'd serve it, but it hasn't come over from the court." I go to the clerk of courts, who looks through mounds of paper stacked on her desk. She

says, "I'll try to get to it by the end of the week." Found out that she was the only staff person handling all kinds of court documents, there was no policy for prioritizing protection orders, no computer software to track anything...papers got stacked up and added to everyday and she just started from the top and tried to work her way down."

Getting to know individuals within other agencies is key. **Relationships are integral to ending violence in every aspect of advocacy and social change.** Take the time to connect as human beings, as relatives. Tillie Black Bear once said, "Sometimes we need to do some "subversive" activity. Drop in and visit. Invite them for coffee or lunch. Visit, ask about their work and how it's going. Share some information about yourself. Make a relationship. Then drop some information on them. Maybe later bring up your concerns." This helps get past assumptions and stereotypes, makes us human to each other and allows us to create rapport and collaborate with the shared goal of helping our relatives.

Keep in mind that advocates are the experts on violence against women. That's 100% of our work, unlike other programs and systems which have other competing interests and concerns. That means **advocates must provide the leadership** for any initiative involving violence against women. It's not unusual for advocates to feel uncomfortable with that role. Requesting technical assistance, training and consultations is an ongoing part of being an advocate. Ask for help and support when you need it!

Be aware that for systems change, advocates must strike a balance between aggressively pushing agencies to change and being co-opted by the agencies. Mistakes and conflicts are teachable moments – look for the lessons and try to see these occurrences as potentially powerful! Be clear about your goals, remembering that at the end of the day, advocates are **accountable to the women** we work with.

Advocacy models differ across the country, so how system change gets done will vary. Systems advocacy is never "one and done." It is a **continuous process** involving a great deal of dialogue and interaction between advocates and criminal justice agencies, law enforcement, social services and other agencies women regularly use.

In the Victims Advocacy Manual (1995, Section Two, Advocacy), Ellen Pence and Anne Marshall describe four aspects of advocacy, including the personal relationship with the woman who's been battered, decision-making and:

Clearing the path. Of all the people involved in the response to domestic violence, the advocate is the most likely person to have an overall picture of what a battered woman faces. It is the advocate's responsibility to advise and, if need be, educate the service providers and agencies of all the obstacles that are in a woman's way before she can gain some control over her life: taking care of her children, finding a home that is affordable and safe for her and her children, having reliable transportation, reconnecting with family and friends from whom she has been isolated. Many times rules, regulations, long-standing practices or attitudes of people who control resources prevent women following a course of action. The advocate's role is to use her influence, her knowledge and her pervasive powers to help women overcome those obstacles. Certainly stopping the abuse is paramount, but the other very real obstacles cannot be ignored and often prevent women from making what an onlooker may see as her only choice.

Changing the system. The best tool an advocate can have to make any changes in the system is documentation of instances when cases of domestic assault are mishandled, trivialized or neglected. Laws or procedures that are being circumvented can be challenged with dispassionate memos, stating dates, times, names, etc. While each case will have its own set of circumstances, an advocate can watch for consistent practices that are not in the interest of the victims of domestic assault. It is the advocate's responsibility to know the system she is working in and to be able to determine when the only recourse is to change policy or practices that will ensure victims will be protected.

Knowing the system also refers to knowing what boundaries are constricting an advocate. While good advocacy may typically mean arguing a victim's position at every level of decision making, the justice system is not an environment conducive to challenging decisions. The advocate who walks into a judge's office to tell him or her that they "blew it on the Steven's case" may compromise her effectiveness. Yet an advocate who is afraid to raise objections will also fail to be effective. Those within the system must recognize the obligation of the advocate to question all decisions on behalf of the victim's safety and integrity.

The success or **effectiveness of systems advocacy** is measured by women who are battered and/or raped. Has she been made safer? Has she gotten what she needs? In a good way? Are offenders and also those responsible for providing her resources, protection etc. been held accountable? Evaluate your strategy and initiatives and projects based upon their

experiences and opinions. This means building in ways, formally and informally, to ensure women who are battered/raped are a part of the process all along the way.

*I'll always remember that clerk of courts...She smiled at me. Called me by my name and looked **me**. She said she'd be glad to help me fill the papers out if I wanted and to take my time. She said she knew it could be difficult and there's some women, advocates who'd be glad to help me- and did I want their number? She made me feel like I wasn't invisible, a "problem." Her small kindness meant the world to me.*

The systemic oppression of people through racism, sexism, classism, able-bodyism, and heterosexism is a result of hierarchy. Native women are impacted by multiple forms of oppression, diminishing their ability live safely and autonomously. From this perspective, advocacy, safety and accountability are framed as civil and human rights issues. Identifying the root cause of violence against women as culturally-based expands our work to pro-active social change with the aim of sovereignty of women throughout society.

Excerpt from Sharing Our Stories of Survival-Sarah Deer, B. Clairmont, C. Martell, M. White Eagle – Chapter 12 by Brenda Hill “The Role of Advocates in the Tribal Legal System”

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