Overview: Batterers Re-education Programs

Most advocacy and shelter programs are overwhelmed by efforts to women who have survived domestic and sexual violence, and their children, safe and help them reclaim their lives. Meeting the needs of male survivors, those of the LGBTQ2S communities and other disenfranchised groups pose additional challenges. However, it is necessary to strategize ways to hold offenders accountable and foster change to end the violence. This purpose of this brief article is to encourage domestic violence advocates to make the establishment of Batterers' Re-education program a part of their strategy and vision of program development and coordinated community response.

Note that intimate partner violence/ battering is a gender-based crime. The majority of offenders are male. This is not natural but a result of socialization, hence Batterers' Re-education programs are about unlearning unnatural, negative beliefs and behaviors, and learning natural, non-violent beliefs and behaviors. These programs are relatively few and far between for a variety of reasons. Programs can run anywhere from 4 to 56 weeks, usually dependent upon available funding. "Success rates" of existing programs are not very high. What "success" means in this context is also debatable, although there is general agreement, they are necessary to hold offenders accountable and offer a means to change their thinking and behavior. Batterers' Re-education programs give an opportunity for personal accountability, to examine their violent behavior and the impact it has on himself, his partner, children, family, community, and nation.

Culturally-based re-education programs examine the offender's use of power and control tactics, focus on personal accountability and unnatural beliefs about women, gender roles, etc. from a cultural perspective. Since violence against women and children, domestic violence in all its forms, rarely happened before colonization, the natural belief system and its values, beliefs and practices held by indigenous societies provide the path to change. Non-violence, spirituality, respect, compassion and personal responsibility are hallmarks of culturally-based programs. It is important to note that men, who participate in men's camps or cultural camps, have a much higher success rate and lower rate of recidivism. Culture, tradition and ceremony play a huge role in healing our men and protecting our women and children. No young boy says he wants to grow up and abuse women, just as no little girl wants to grow up to be abused.

Model re-education programs are part of a coordinated community response led by an advocacy program. Learning to be non-violent, respectful of intimate partners, honoring women, and behavior change are difficult and occurs over time with mechanisms for continued accountability and support. It is highly recommended that attendance in these programs is court-ordered, part of intensive, extended probation and compliance consistently monitored in coordination with an advocacy program. Survivors are the experts on their batterers and whether true change is happening. The survivor's voice in this process promotes to true accountability. Their involvement, usually through an advocate for safety reasons, is strictly voluntary. Their confidentiality must be guarded at all times, regardless of their involvement.

Batterers' re-education programs are not counseling or therapy groups. If participants have mental health issues, referrals to mental health professionals are appropriate; however, they do not replace criminal justice consequences for criminal behavior. Anger management programs are inappropriate and possibly dangerous if used to replace re-education classes or jail time. Violence is not caused by anger. Anger is an emotion. Violence is behavior and about power and control.

Alcohol/substance abuse is a major problem throughout Indian Country (as throughout the US) and many offenders attending re-education programs do abuse alcohol/other drugs. Alcohol/other drugs and violence are highly correlated - they increase the frequency, unpredictability and severity of physical and emotional battering. However, battering/ intimate partner violence is not caused by alcohol/other drug abuse. Offenders who are alcoholic, abusing or addicted to other drugs should be referred to treatment, ideally before beginning the re-education program.

There are women who are mandated to re-education classes, but it is best for them attend gender-specific classes that address issues specific to women. Advocates and class facilitators are also cautioned that it is not unusual for women to be wrongfully convicted of domestic violence/ Intimate Partner Violence. Too often, attempts at self-defense are wrongfully interpreted as IPV, commonly due to lack of law enforcement and/or criminal justice system training. Preferably, LGBTQ2S offenders should also have classes that address specific gender, social and cultural issues that impact their behavior.

Batterers' re-education programs are accountable to women/survivors who are battered. Best practices direct coordination of their activities through the advocacy program to ensure the safety of women/survivors. Recovering batterers co-facilitating with an advocate is the ideal. They can role-model respectful partnerships. Self-identifying as "recovering batterers," rather than "ex-batterer" indicates acknowledgement of the difficulty of remaining non-violent and respectful of women. This reflects the harsh reality of society's pressure to maintain male privilege and be disrespectful towards women. Because of this dynamic, it's best that a woman facilitator or advocate co-facilitate or monitor the classes to provide support and accountability.

Facilitation of men's re-education classes is difficult work. Again, success rates for re-education programs are very low; up to 90% will re-offend. This is not necessarily the fault of the facilitator or the program. These programs are fairly new and will continue to evolve and become more effective. The low success rates reflect the pervasiveness of beliefs and attitudes of American society that created battering to begin with. Indian Country has survived a couple hundred years of colonization; it will take generations to undo the oppression and reclaim nonviolent life ways.

Ending gender-based violence will not happen through a program alone. High re-offense rates also indicate that ending violence against women, holding batterers accountable for their violence and helping them to reclaim a natural, respectful life way requires the involvement of community members and relatives, in addition to programs and systems. When funding or other issues block attempts to establish a comprehensive re-education program, remember that traditionally, native peoples did not have "programs" to teach people how to behave or deal with violations of proper behavior or crime. With or without a re-education program, advocates can reinforce our roles and responsibilities as relatives through cultural community education and trainings, role-modelling, teaching by-stander interventions, and utilizing traditional means to protect and support survivors, and stop offenders' violence while promoting cultural values and life ways.

Additional Resources:

- *Current Research on Batterer Intervention Programs and Implications for Policy*
  The Battered Women's Justice Project; Kathleen J. Ferraro 2017

- *Re-Examining 'Battering': Are All Acts of Violence Against Intimate Partners the Same?*
  Praxis International, Inc.; Ellen Pence Shamita Das Dasgupta 2006

- *Returning Men to Honor: A Guidebook for Developing Intervention and Education Programs for Men Who Batter In Native Communities*
  Returning Men to Honor: Tribal Men's Program/ Batterer Intervention Program Development Workbook
  See Mending the Sacred Hoop; mshoop.org

- *Creating a Process of Change for Men who Batter training*
  Changing Men, Changing Lives curriculum
  Addressing Fatherhood with Men who Batter curriculum
  Safety and Accountability Audit
  See Duluth Abuse Intervention Programs; theduluthmodel.org

- Battering Intervention Services Coalition of Michigan
  biscmi.org