Background on

Oregon’s Domestic-Violence Intervention Plan

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Introduction

Since 1991, Oregon Adult & Family Services (AFS) has been moving from an eligibility focus to an emphasis on self-sufficiency for the families it serves. As part of that process, client needs were evaluated, to determine the services they need to become and remain employed.

It became evident that a large proportion of the families on welfare had domestic-violence issues that needed to be addressed. Working with our established JOBS partners as well as domestic violence advocates, AFS has been crafting and implementing a strategy to identify and assist victims of domestic violence. It is a collaborative, multi-faceted approach that is continually evolving in response to outcome measurements and ideas brought forward by AFS staff and partners.

Factors behind the AFS emphasis on domestic violence.

TANF

In 1996, the federal-welfare reform legislation setting up the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program was enacted, which included the Wellstone/Murray amendment (also known as the “Family Violence Option”). This allowed states to waive requirements that could make it more difficult for abused women to escape violent situations, or put them at risk of further abuse.

In light of this option, AFS looked carefully at whether the exemption would, in fact, be the advisable course to take. The agency determined it is in a family’s best interests to keep members engaged in as many self-sufficiency activities as possible. This allows AFS to help women and children leave their situation, and provide services that help women become self-supporting and able to live on their own.

Oregon’s domestic-violence advocacy community, however, felt strongly that Oregon should exempt all victims, and prepared a bill for the 1997 Legislature to require it. AFS, late in 1996, began a
dialogue with the groups to re-craft the bill in such a way that concerns about client safety could be addressed, while still allowing women and children the benefit of AFS self-sufficiency services.

**Client survey**

As case management and JOBS services expanded to include greater percentages of the TANF caseload, the nature of clients has changed significantly. To determine the kind of services needed by “harder-to-serve” clients, a survey of client characteristics was made in 1996. It showed half of the families AFS works with have a history of victimization by violence, ranging from abuse during childhood to current domestic violence. Because this is a significant barrier to client self-sufficiency and contributes to problems for children, a strategy was clearly needed to assist these families.

**Senate Bill 1117**

Passed by the Oregon Legislature in 1995, this law required AFS to provide training for staff in mental-health issues, drug and alcohol abuse, and domestic violence. This was the impetus for branches across the state to obtain training on domestic violence from their local domestic-violence service providers.

**The AFS philosophy and approach**

**The basis**

AFS believes it can best serve women in violent relationships by helping them access as wide a range of self-sufficiency services as possible. Since economic abuse is often part of the domestic-violence cycle, becoming self-supporting is the only way most victims will be able to afford to escape their situation. Maintaining a woman at 75 percent of the federal poverty level (as welfare does) helps little in improving her chances of leaving an abusive relationship.

In addition, without ongoing case-management services from AFS, it is much more difficult for the family to take advantage of mental-health counseling, work-preparation and job-search activities, or other services that lead to a better life.
Our aim

In working with victims, AFS strives, first, to create a safe environment for women to disclose an abusive situation. Secondly, we want to give our workers the ability to recognize signs that point to violence in the household.

An important AFS role is providing information and support to women, and working with domestic-violence service providers to help women build a “safety plan,” to protect them when they decide to leave the situation. AFS also connects women with needed resources such as mental-health counseling and alcohol-abuse treatment. And, along with community partners, AFS provides services that help these women build the skills to become employed and self-sufficient.

In addition, if it becomes clear that a victim cannot leave an abusive relationship, AFS can help her improve the situation as much as possible.

It is not the agency’s aim to force victims to disclose their abuse, nor to tell victims what they should do. Rather, we want to work with women to identify options, connect them to resources that can help, and support their need to be safe and to be employed.

Other very important aims are to provide staff with the necessary training to work effectively and non-judgmentally with these clients, and to raise community awareness of the problem of domestic violence.

Our approach

The AFS approach in this area is two-tiered, much like the model of its Oregon JOBS Program. Overall vision and policy are crafted on the state level; training is also developed and provided by the centralized training unit. The specifics around the type of services provided and who will provide them in each AFS district are decided by local planning groups, which are made up of agencies and community groups.

Partnerships on the local level are crucial to our approach; AFS cannot provide all the services needed by domestic-violence victims. Other agencies and groups work continuously with AFS to meet these needs.
Our emphasis on special help for abused women is repeatedly reinforced to all staff. We have found when making other shifts in agency focus that one or two mentions are inadequate...the new information needs to be repeatedly communicated in a number of different ways, over an extended period of time.

For example, domestic-violence initiatives are often highlighted in the administrator’s weekly E-mail “Updates.” Members of Executive staff discuss the topic in their field visits to branches, and domestic-violence information sessions are part of monthly leadership meetings. This is in addition to the newsletter and other publications discussed later in this paper.

As with its JOBS Program, the AFS domestic-violence philosophy, vision and services exist in an atmosphere of continuous learning and constant evaluation. In JOBS, AFS has repeatedly demonstrated the ability to change its focus and methods as information about the effectiveness of current efforts is obtained.

The first phases

**Service appraisal**

In beginning its work in the area of domestic violence, AFS conducted an appraisal of existing services across the state in December 1996. We found that specialized services were available in about 50 percent of our districts.

District managers were then assigned to meet with local domestic-violence shelters and service providers to look at what was being done in their district, and how it could be improved and expanded.

**State-level meetings**

Starting in the fall of 1996, AFS Field Services Manager Shirley Iverson met with the primary domestic-violence-advocacy group, the Oregon Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. Coalition members brought examples of problems in the agency’s work with victims.

These meetings, as well as local-and state-level meetings and conferences, provided forums for AFS to explain its philosophy and build a collaborative strategy to serve families.
In addition, information about local issues gained at such meetings was passed along to AFS district and local offices.

**Statewide Initiatives**

**Policy paper**
The AFS policy unit, working with a group of partners, drafted a policy paper on services for victims of domestic violence. Like all AFS policy, it is built around principle-based decision making. The paper describes the intent of the policy and the principles upon which it is based; it then lists guidelines for staff to use when applying the policy.

The policy on domestic violence is an evolving document that will be revised as needed, in response to feedback from field staff and partners, and the evaluation of outcomes.

**State legislation**
As mentioned earlier, domestic-violence advocates prepared a bill for the 1997 state legislature that would put into state law the exemptions in the federal TANF legislation. AFS met with the advocacy groups over a four-month period to reach agreement on a bill that would be acceptable to both. House Bill 3112 was passed by the legislature, and signed into law by the Governor in June 1997.

The bill requires AFS to identify past, current and potential victims of domestic violence, to prepare family self-sufficiency plans for those families, and to hold cooperative “staffings” with other agencies to discuss a family’s situation and progress. In addition, AFS must regularly report to the Legislature on the status and effectiveness of its identification processes, the use of the Emergency Assistance Program by domestic-violence victims, and the agency’s staff-training and evaluation efforts.

**New program**
In 1999 it was decided that, though AFS could offer higher Emergency Assistance benefits to domestic-violence victims, the program did not serve their special needs. A new program was implemented on July 1, 1999, called Temporary Assistance for Domestic Violence Survivors (TA-DVS). The program was developed
in collaboration with domestic-violence service providers and Legal-Aid staff.

TA-DVS is a 90-day program under which survivors can receive as much as $1,200 to flee or stay free from abuse. Funds can be used for such things as paying moving costs or travel expenses to another state; help with rent, house payments or utilities; obtaining emergency food and medical coverage; help replacing household and personal items left behind when fleeing abuse; and obtaining safety items such as new locks or telephone service.

**Client assessment**

AFS branches are required by House Bill 3112 (now ORS 411.117) to have in place a method of determining if a woman is a victim of abuse. To aid branches, a prototype “assessment tool” was developed in cooperation with the Oregon Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. It contains a list of questions that can be used during initial client screening or at later times in the case-management process.

The questions are designed to trigger a response that indicates current or past abuse. This helps staff identify victims quickly, so they can be referred to services as early as possible. Branches have also been encouraged to develop their own assessment methods and tools in collaboration with their local partners.

**Training**

A wide-ranging, multi-faceted, training program has been developed by the AFS Staff Development Unit (SDU). It is not built around a single course offering, but rather the addition of modules to many existing training courses.

A deliberate decision was made not to package an entire training course around the topic of domestic violence. It was felt that there is no quick way to get all the important information across; instead, we need to give people information in different ways in different settings.

Information about domestic violence is now included in the AFS “Mission, Values and Principles” training that all new staff attend; it is also part of training courses on case planning and TANF.
A course called “Domestic Violence 101” is offered to AFS staff by local domestic-violence service providers in each district. Staff also attend special conferences around the state on domestic violence.

Long-distance training by computer is also being used. “Netcast” training sessions, beamed to remote offices and seen on personal computers, are being regularly scheduled. AFS also puts on annual Prevention Intervention workshops, open to staff and partners, which cover issues related to domestic violence as well as teen pregnancy and juvenile crime.

Videos are available to branches, and books have been purchased that can be borrowed by staff. SDU is asking staff members who view videos or read books to write a short review of them. This allows SDU to gauge the quality of the materials.

Recognizing that working with domestic-violence victims has an effect on staff members, AFS offers regular training sessions by an outside expert in “vicarious traumatization.” These address the emotional ramifications of hearing about another person’s victimization, which can cause symptoms similar to post-traumatic-stress syndrome.

**Grant for training**

In collaboration with domestic violence service providers, the Oregon Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence and other community partners, AFS obtained a grant in 1997 to provide domestic-violence training to AFS and partner staff. The grant, entitled “Impacting Domestic Violence from the Inside Out,” used three strategies to address staff training needs:

1. Three Ed-net teleconferences on domestic-violence issues were funded under the grant. A total of five such training presentations have been held.

2. An expert trainer was hired to develop an advanced curriculum on domestic violence and case management.

3. Also as part of the grant, “Self-Defense from the Inside Out,” a course that emphasizes development of self-esteem and assertiveness skills for safety, was taught to AFS staff and partners to prepare them to facilitate client groups.
Publications

A brochure for clients is now available in all AFS offices. Titled “Are You Being Hurt by Someone You Love,” it describes the kinds of help that AFS and its partners can provide to domestic-violence victims. The pamphlet is available in eight languages.

A “safety plan” brochure is also available, which gives suggestions to help a person be more safe inside and outside their home, and lists items and documents a person should take when leaving a violent household.

Local offices have “business cards” listing local domestic-violence and crisis-intervention resources. All of these materials are placed in branch lobbies, restrooms and work areas, so women can easily pick one up. This allows women to obtain them even if they choose not to tell us they are being victimized.

Another important part of the AFS strategy is getting information about domestic violence to the public and lawmakers. AFS has prepared information sheets that can be distributed to advocates and the public, and can be used in legislative presentations.

Newsletter

AFS is producing a quarterly newsletter devoted to domestic violence for its staff and partner agencies. The newsletter, “Fragile, Handle With Care,” is primarily an educational tool. It contains excerpts from studies, articles that discuss the myths and realities of domestic violence, and provides information about how to support victims.

There are also quizzes, information about upcoming seminars and workshops, and staff reviews of resource materials. The newsletter is sent to all AFS staff members, as well as domestic-violence service providers, JOBS partners and other human-resources offices. With its wide distribution, it is an effective way to distribute information such as updated crisis-line numbers.

Child support

Collecting child support for families is a key part of the AFS self-sufficiency strategy. Understandably, formerly abused women are usually very reluctant to cooperate in efforts that might disclose their location to a batterer. AFS is working with the Oregon Child Support Program to develop effective ways to obtain child support without endangering the mother and children.
Two strategies to protect women are currently in place. One is the use of an “address of record,” a mailing address that is different from the woman’s residence. The other, known as “non-disclosure based on claim of risk,” is the ability to keep certain information (such as employer’s name, social security number and driver’s license number) out of court records.

**Computer Equipment**

AFS is lending computers that it no longer needs to many domestic-violence shelters in the state. This will allow residents to produce résumés, write letters, and practice their computer skills.

**Internet page**

AFS has set up an Internet page to direct people to domestic violence resources in their counties. By clicking their county on a state map, viewers can see a list of the resources that chose to be included on the page.

**Expenditure tracking**

A new expenditure code has been added to the AFS computerized client data base, to allow tracking of TA-DVS benefits.

A flag for domestic violence has also been added to the systems used for other public-assistance programs administered by AFS, to signal payments for services related to domestic violence.

**Local initiatives**

**“Point people”**

AFS has identified domestic-violence “point people” in each of its 15 districts, who are in communication with central office and partners. These staff people help disseminate information and bring feedback to central-office management. They also coordinate with local providers for branch training and client staffings.

**Local plans**

Each district has prepared, along with local partners, a plan of how services will be provided to victims of domestic violence. Among the special services offered by various districts and branches:

- adding a domestic-violence module in the up-front orientation process which is often conducted by staff from local shelters or other domestic-violence providers.
• developing, in collaboration with local shelters and providers, assessment tools to help identify signs of abuse at home.

• assigning one case manager to handle all cases that involve domestic violence, and having bi-lingual staff available to work with non-English speakers.

• making arrangements for local domestic-violence service providers to come into AFS branches and work with victims immediately. The number of hours in the branch vary from three to 40 per week.

• selecting branch “point people,” who work with the district point people and coordinate services on the branch level.

• expanding collaboration on the local level with Services to Children and Families, the state’s child-protective agency.

• providing training on AFS services and benefits for local domestic-violence shelters and advocates.

• setting up special sections in branch resource rooms with domestic-violence information, referral and crisis resources, and self-study materials.

• using “reinvestment” funds from the state’s caseload savings for special projects. In one project, a domestic-violence counselor routinely is available in the domestic-violence section of the resource room, so a victim can decide on the spur of the moment to talk about her abuse.

• bringing in, as part of another reinvestment project, a domestic-violence specialist to help abused women as they go through counseling, finding shelter, etc. One branch has set up a “Skillful Means” educational support group for victims. It is a cooperative project with local service providers, shelters and the regional intergovernmental council.

• setting up a fax system between AFS and local providers to enable quick communication when domestic violence is an immediate issue for a client.
• having local advocates accompany clients to their case-management sessions with AFS and partners.

• becoming part of a county Family Violence Coordinating Council, made up of staff from SCF, domestic-violence shelters and programs for batterers, along with judges and district attorneys. The goal is to work together to help victims and to incarcerate or offer rehabilitation to men.

• arranging for shelter staff to make direct referrals to AFS when a new resident is received.

• joining with the local domestic-violence committee, in one area that had no shelter, to obtain a grant to provide money to open a shelter.

• participating in Domestic-Violence Awareness Month activities. These include fund-raising, “shadowing” domestic-violence workers on the job, development of information bulletin boards for staff and clients, wearing purple ribbons to increase awareness, and inviting local experts to speak on domestic violence, to name a few. On a statewide basis, in both 1997 and ’98, domestic-violence self-assessment flyers were sent to 200,000 clients who receive medical cards.

• giving special treatment to applications for the Oregon Health Plan (OHP) which indicate domestic abuse. Designated OHP staff people contact the applicant within 24 hours, to determine if it is safe to mail them information about domestic-violence services, and to find out what else we can do to help them.

• offering victims the option of attending the “Developing Capable People” (DCP) classes offered in most branches. This self-esteem-building course was specially adapted for AFS clients by the Staff Development Unit.

• offering special self-defense courses in conjunction with DCP training. These are presented by a contractor who has extensive background in working with domestic-violence victims; often, special support groups are available afterward. This is important,
since being put in a self-defense situation can have emotional ramifications for many abused women.

Local training

As part of their plans, districts are required to include training sessions for staff, which are provided by the local domestic-violence service provider.

Staff involvement

Local AFS staff from all levels are encouraged to become active in community efforts around domestic violence. This can include becoming active in advocacy groups, serving on boards of service providers, and attending conferences or other activities that focus on domestic violence.

This outreach has included a cooperative effort with the Oregon Public Employees Union (OPEU). In October 1996, a joint memo went out from AFS Administration and OPEU outlining ideas for branch activities to increase awareness of domestic violence issues.

Things we’ve learned

Advocates

Advocacy groups for abused women should be involved in as many aspects of planning and providing services as possible. They make valuable contributions regarding the needs of this population and point out sensitivities that must be addressed in working with victims.

Networking

In Oregon, it was found that a number of other public and private agencies also have initiatives directed at domestic-violence victims. It’s important that outreach efforts be established and maintained to avoid duplication of efforts, and to allow the easy exchange of information about services and “best practices.”

Extended training

There is no quick way to impart the knowledge needed by staff members to effectively and sensitively help these women. The process needs to be continuous and should contain the kind of
information that combats common myths about victims, as well as a wide range of other topics.

**Multi-level**

Strategies should contain components that are handled either on the state or local level. Effective programs cannot be dictated from the state level; local areas need to be invested in the planning and administration of services. Some efforts, such as goal-setting and training, are best coordinated by central office; most other specifics should be turned over to local districts and branches.

**Partnerships**

As mentioned earlier, strong partnerships on the state and local level are a necessity for an effective program. Oregon was fortunate to have a very rich array of partnerships in place because of its highly successful JOBS Program. These partnerships provided a firm foundation on which to build a program to address the needs of women in violent situations.

A trusting, collaborative relationship with partners is vital. On the local level, our district- and branch-level managers have a great deal of experience working with local agencies, service providers and the business community. Our partners are committed to working together to solve the problems of welfare families, and the expansion into the domestic-violence area was a logical extension of that endeavor.

**Case management**

Over the past two years, AFS began stressing “family-based” case management for clients. This means that, in creating self-sufficiency plans, the needs of all members of the family are considered, rather than just the head of the household. This approach helps ensure that services to help children and partners are included in plans.

This has made it possible to include such things as mental-health counseling for children and referral to special intervention services for men who commit the abuse. The family focus is critical, we believe, to the success of domestic-violence intervention services.
Public awareness

Members of the general public may be aware of the problem of domestic violence in a general sense, but often hold many myths about batterers and their victims, or may not realize the amount of damage that is done to the community at large.

Therefore, an important part of a strategy is public education. For example, the AFS domestic-violence newsletter suggested that local service groups help prepare “starter kits” for victims escaping abuse. These can be made up of such things as household items, personal hygiene needs, or toys for children. Putting together these kits is a way to emphasize how much a mother and children must give up when they leave a violent household.

Areas that still need to be addressed

Staff ‘burnout’

Research shows that it can take a battered woman a number of attempts to successfully leave an abusive relationship. This can take a toll on the case manager and others who work with the victim, since they may feel their efforts are not being taken to heart, or that the woman is incapable of making the break. Ways to reinforce to staff that this can be a long process, and to support them through it, need to be clarified and put into place.

AFS staff members have regular access to counselors or the state Employee Assistance Program, to help them cope with the disturbing details they are likely to encounter in working with these families, and to support them as they provide long-term services to victims.

Expansion of services

Domestic-violence services originally were targeted toward families on TANF (cash assistance); currently, initiatives are underway to expand services to those on other public assistance programs, such as Food Stamps and the state’s day-care subsidy program. Local planners will need to determine how to provide services to more women, as the expanded AFS assessment identifies more who need help.

Sabotage of success

Research has found that when a battered woman begins to
accomplish things that make it more likely she can escape an abusive situation, the partner will try and sabotage her success to prevent her from leaving.

The most common tactics center around increasing her isolation, or putting up roadblocks to attending activities or work (such as taking the car when the woman needs it, or not taking care of the children when asked). It’s necessary to train workers to anticipate this kind of behavior and help women overcome it.

**Workplace barriers**

Women who are or have been the victim of domestic violence encounter special problems as they move into the workplace. They may be frightened of male co-workers who seem similar to their batterer. It may take them longer to learn a job, or the problems of living independently can divert their attention during work hours.

Adequately preparing women for employment and actively supporting them in the transition period are important to the long-term success of any domestic-violence strategy. To help private-sector employers learn how domestic-violence issues can affect women in the workforce, AFS invites them to participate in joint training activities with branches.

**Sensitivity issues**

Being sensitive to a victim’s feelings is vital to building a trusting worker-client relationship. We know that some staff members bring preconceptions to their work with battered women — those with no history of abuse can’t understand why a woman stays in such a relationship; those who themselves have escaped violent situations may feel others should be able to do it, too. Male case workers also face special challenges in working with these women.

Increasing the sensitivity among staff is an ongoing part of the educational efforts AFS is continuously making.

**Advocates**

The domestic-violence advocacy groups that AFS works with are primarily focused on ensuring the safety of women and children, as would be expected. Along with sharing that concern, AFS wants to move women to financial self-sufficiency. Ongoing dialogues have helped both sides appreciate each others views, and is resulting in better services. These efforts will continue.