

***Building
Comprehensive
Solutions to
Domestic
Violence***

Publication # 20

A Vision Paper

***A project of the National
Resource Center on
Domestic Violence, in
collaboration with
Greater Hartford Legal
Aid, Inc.***

**When Battered Women
Stay...
Advocacy Beyond
Leaving**

Jill Davies

June 2008

© 2008 National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRCDV)

The contents of this publication may be reprinted or adapted with the following acknowledgement: "This material was reprinted/adapted from the publication titled *When Battered Women Stay...Advocacy Beyond Leaving* by Jill Davies for Building Comprehensive Solutions to Domestic Violence (BCSDV), a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence."

An electronic copy of this paper and other BCSDV materials are available at www.vawnet.org. Paper copies can be requested from the NRCDV.

**The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence
A project of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence**

6400 Flank Drive, Suite 1300

Harrisburg, PA 17112

800-537-2238 TTY 800-553-2508 Fax 717-545-9456

This paper was developed under grant number 90EV0374 from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The points of view expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

About Building Comprehensive Solutions to Domestic Violence

Comprehensive Solutions to Domestic Violence require:

- Visions, policies, and practices that respond to the current realities facing domestic violence victims and their families, especially those living in poverty;
- Effective collaboration; and
- A victim-defined advocacy approach that respectfully connects victims from different cultures and experiences to resources relevant to their needs.

In practice, victims from different cultures and life experiences, victims with children affected by domestic violence, victims with financial needs – a living wage job, housing, income, child care, education, health care – and victims experiencing chemical dependency or mental health issues, will all find respectful and relevant advocacy and resources.

These efforts are supported by an ongoing initiative called Building Comprehensive Solutions to Domestic Violence. BCSDV is a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, in collaboration with Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc.

Author's Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the many survivors who have taught me about how they perceive and make decisions about their relationships, and in particular, those living in poverty and survivors of color. I am grateful, too, for all that I have learned from the advocates working with these survivors, and acknowledge in particular the leadership of advocates of color for raising up the reality and perspectives of survivors who stay connected in different ways to their abusive partners.

Thanks to those who read and thoughtfully commented on drafts of the paper, including: Sandy Barnett, Kansas Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence; Miriam Berkman, Yale University Child Study Center; Jacquelyn Boggess, Center for Family Policy and Practice; Debbie Cain, Michigan Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment Board; Lonna Davis, Family Violence Prevention Fund; Cheryl Howard, Illinois Coalition Against Domestic Violence; Sue Julian, West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence; Jennifer Lopez, Hartford Interval House; Tonya Lovelace, Women of Color Network; Anne Menard, National Resource Center on Domestic Violence; Tonia Moultry, Ohio Domestic Violence Network; Lisa Nitsch, House of Ruth Maryland; and Katie VonDeLinde, Redevelopment Opportunities for Women.

About the Author

Attorney Jill Davies is the deputy director of Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc. and directs the Building Comprehensive Solutions to Domestic Violence Initiative. She has written and consulted extensively on family violence, advocacy and safety planning, poverty, and legal issues. Attorney Davies is the author of numerous articles and materials regarding violence against women and is co-author of the book, *Safety Planning with Battered Women: Complex Lives/Difficult Choices*, Sage Publications, 1998. Recent publications include *Helping Sexual Assault Survivors with Multiple Victimitizations and Needs: A Guide for Agencies Serving Sexual Assault Survivors*, and *Supervised Visitation Programs: Information for Mothers Who've Experienced Abuse*. Her BCS publications include: *Policy Blueprint on Domestic Violence and Poverty*, *HarborCOV: One Community's Effort to Build Comprehensive Solutions to Domestic Violence* written with Laurie Holmes, and *Introduction to Policy Advocacy and Analysis: Improving How Systems Respond to Battered Women* – a curriculum for advocates. She is the editor of *Building Comprehensive Solutions to Domestic Violence: A Leadership and Organizational Guide* by Deborah Linnell.

When Battered Women Stay...Advocacy Beyond Leaving

A Note from the Author

In this paper, I tried to be true to the realities of battered women who stay and to all of us advocates who strive to work with all survivors. Honestly, the work ahead will be complicated and difficult. Our historical focus on strategies for leaving, the fear and reality of a survivor injured or murdered, the doubts about changing violent behavior, the dilemma of children emotionally connected to fathers who are violent – these are issues I grapple with in my own advocacy. This paper raises key issues and questions not as a criticism of our current advocacy, but as one tool to help us all to explore some next steps toward expanding that advocacy. BCSDV is committed to working with survivors, their families and communities, advocates, and others to offer answers to the questions raised in this paper and to building resources and other tools to broaden our advocacy. This is not the first discussion about survivors who stay and certainly will not be the last. As an advocate working to expand her own advocacy, I humbly offer this paper as a way of engaging other advocates in these challenging issues and questions.

Sheila and Ben

Sheila met Ben when she joined the youth choir. He was handsome and made her laugh. When she told Ben about the incest he was kind and he told her about his father's beatings. They were in love when their first child was born, five months after high school graduation. Seven years and two more children later, Sheila sat on the couch in the domestic violence shelter living room wondering how it could have come to this. Knowing she had decisions to make.

The advocates were great. They went with her to court to get the restraining order, helped her enroll the two oldest children in school, and stood by her when she cried. As Sheila held her head in her hands, the weight became too heavy. It was all on her now, paying the bills, finding a place to live, the kids, starting over. She'd never felt more alone. In that moment, despite all the talk about options and all the support, Sheila knew it made

sense to go back. She'd give Ben the chance he asked for and she'd try to make a home and family for her children.

You walk in and ask, "How's it going? You look tired." Sheila looks up and smiles at you, "I am tired, but I know what I have to do. Everyone here has taught me so much and I want things to be different this time. I need your help...."

Nellie and Junior

When Nellie ended things with her son's father, her friend Junior stepped in to help. He spent time with her son and when he moved in seven months later, he paid his share of expenses and helped out in other ways. For a couple of years, Nellie was happy. Life got harder after Junior lost his job. Relying on her paycheck alone, they struggled to pay the bills. When Junior couldn't find another decent job, he gave up and just sat around the apartment. He found something wrong with just about everything Nellie and her son did. On weekends, his friends would come over and they'd drink too much.

Nellie wasn't surprised when one Friday night, a drunken Junior slapped her, demanded sex, and threw her down on the bed. She knew Junior had a mean streak. Nellie screamed at Junior, "get off of me you bastard, get out of here!" Junior spit on her, called her a bitch and slammed doors on the way out of the apartment.

She sat up all night thinking about what to do. Nellie was no fool. She left her son's father when he got abusive, but Junior wasn't at all like him. Junior was a good man and a caring father to her son. He was just acting stupid. When he didn't come home that night, Nellie worried that something bad might have happened to him. She was relieved when she found him at his mother's house. His mother Rudy gave Nellie a big hug and they had a long talk about Junior and his father. Rudy told Nellie, "I'll talk to Junior but I'm not sure what good it will do. You know how he is. He needs some help."

Nellie calls you because she knows you from when she was having trouble with her son's father. "I need your help again, but this time it's not for me. It's my boyfriend, Junior...."

As an advocate, how will you respond to Sheila and Nellie? Will you try to talk Sheila out of returning to Ben? How far will you go to convince her? What do you and your program offer that might “make it different” for Sheila this time? And how would you respond to Nellie’s request for help for Junior? Will you refer her to a batterer intervention program, along with the subtle or not so subtle message that “they don’t work”? Maybe you’ll offer a suggestion to call the police or get a restraining order? And maybe, you’ll suggest Nellie come to the support group or call for shelter when she needs it?

It won’t be easy to provide the assistance that Nellie and Sheila are asking for. Most domestic violence advocacy programs have very limited resources and options to help battered women¹ who remain in their relationships or stay in contact with current or former partners. The focus has been on strategies and options for victims to leave – with good reason. The violence, the danger is clear. Broken bones, black eyes, big patches of yellowing purple bruises are images that every advocate has seen, and none will forget. And for some victims and their children, there are the destructive effects of living under the control of a violent partner or parent. A trip to the grocery store is prohibited, contact with family or friends banned. Conversation, an idea, a dream, or even laughter is squashed and punished. Adults and children always “walking on eggshells” have no respite from fear. Advocates know the sad, faraway look in the eyes of a child who barely speaks and no longer bothers to play. For so many of these victims, the present is painful torment, a brighter future inconceivable. That is, until someone offers options, some hope, a way out.

For some victims and children, leaving makes things better. For some it is life saving. New lives are built. Stability and peace allow children to flourish. Advocates focus on helping victims leave abusive relationships because leaving works. And over the years, the domestic violence movement has gotten very good at helping victims escape. It is essential, meaningful work with tremendously positive outcomes – but advocates know that strategies for leaving are not enough.

¹ This paper will use the terms “battered woman,” “survivor” or “victim” because they are commonly used and understood. However, current labels are inadequate descriptions of those experiencing domestic violence. Because most domestic violence survivors are women abused by a male partner, this paper will use “she” and “woman” when referring to a victim of domestic violence. All survivors deserve safety, financial security and advocacy including those in same-sex relationships and male survivors abused by female partners.

Why Strategies for Leaving Are Not Enough

- **For many victims, leaving an abusive partner does not guarantee physical safety and raises other risks.** Leaving can destroy any chance for financial security and can place children in precarious legal and emotional circumstances. Leaving can mean the loss of home, health care, a job, an education, custody, a faith community, immigration status, or the support of family or friends. Before a victim decides to leave, she weighs all the consequences. For each victim, the calculation is different. Some victims face high levels of physical violence and control, some do not. Some have financial resources, many do not. Some face custody and legal battles, some do not. Some see their partners' violence as their greatest risk and priority, some do not. Each victim will also make decisions in the context of their life experience and culture. And once the decisions are made, some victims find that leaving the relationship made things better, that the struggle was worth it. Yet, for many victims and their children, leaving makes their lives more difficult and dangerous. For others, particularly those living in poverty, leaving is not a viable option because of the combination of life-generated and batterer-generated risks.²
- **Many victims don't want to leave.** Victims like Sheila and Nellie want someone to change their partners – to help him stop the violence, to be a better partner, a better parent. Since the violence is the problem, asking for help to fix the problem makes sense. It is a rational request, given the commitment most victims have to their families and their relationships and the very high stakes of leaving. At the same time, victims want protection, someone to shield them and their children from the violence and control by enforcing some of society's most basic principles. Although many victims want to get out as quickly and as safely as possible, many others want us to try to change their partners' violent behavior and to protect them while we try.

² For more information about batterer-generated and life-generated risks see, *Safety Planning with Battered Women: Complex Lives/Difficult Choices*, by Jill Davies, Eleanor Lyon, and Diane Monti-Catania, Sage Publications, 1998.

- **The focus on strategies for leaving has created an expectation that victims should leave.** The view that leaving is the answer to domestic violence is so strong that it has become the standard by which victims are judged. Leave and you are worthy of the full range of services and protection. Stay and the resources may be limited, the consequences sometimes severe. Victims who don't leave are often unfairly judged to be making poor decisions, viewed as "not being serious" about stopping the violence, or as somehow responsible for not preventing it. The success in making domestic violence the priority in the hierarchy of risks, and leaving viewed as the most effective option, has led to some unintended consequences.

Some victims are arrested for "violating" protective orders – forced not only to leave but to have no contact with their partners or spouses. No contact, even if they did not request the order, even if shared lives, finances, families, and children make no contact unrealistic. Some battered parents will have their children taken from them if they stay – even when leaving might raise more risks for the children. Despite well-intentioned statements about self-determination, despite the reality that leaving just does not make things better for some victims or their children, there is enormous pressure to leave. In some programs, leaving is a pre-condition for receiving assistance. Such pressures limit victims' options and in some circumstances, create additional problems and risks for victims and their children.

- **When a victim leaves, it makes the partner who batters more available to hurt and control other partners, other children.** In many circumstances, the partner moves on to another relationship, battering his new partner and affecting any children in the household. This result falls way short of the societal change necessary to end domestic violence. That change will only come when those who batter, stop battering.

What Does Letting Go of Leaving as the Primary Safety Strategy Mean for Advocacy?

If you have worked in a shelter, it is likely that you have sat with a woman like Sheila and probably worried, maybe even lost some sleep, about her and her children. If you've

answered the hotline, you have probably fielded questions from women like Nellie, those wanting help for their partners. Concerned about giving them false hope, you may have discouraged them from believing their partners could change and encouraged them to think about leaving. The advocacy for leaving comes from our principles and the well-intentioned and heartfelt concern for physical safety.

For advocates, a profound and core principle is that all victims, adult and child, should be able to live free from violence and control. Letting go of leaving as the primary safety strategy does not sacrifice that principle, rather it makes room for new and different approaches to enhance safety for all victims. Victims like Sheila and Nellie. Victims who leave and return, victims who want their partners to change, victims who have not yet left, victims who continue to have contact, and victims who, for a wide range of reasons, decide to stay in their relationships. Expanding our safety strategies beyond leaving will allow us to be advocates for all these victims and to prevent others from being victimized. It will also take us closer to our mission of social change, of ending violence.

Central to our expansion of advocacy beyond leaving is the exploration of three key issues:

- 1) Safety planning and advocacy with victims who stay;
- 2) Ending violent and controlling behavior; and
- 3) Knowing what children need to be OK.

1) Safety Planning and Advocacy with Women Who Stay

Although advocates already work with victims who stay, many such victims do not seek or use our services. There is a lot more to learn from them and from those to whom they turn for help.

How will we learn more about the needs, perspectives, and risks of victims who stay?

Victims ask that we see all of who they are, that we not totally define them or their options by the violence that they experience. They'd like us to understand that each of them has a unique life, a unique path – that, in addition to the violence that is for some overwhelming and for others a smaller part of their lives, there are children and school activities, jobs, chores around the house, church committees, health concerns, family members who need care, hopes for keeping the family together, and struggles to make

ends meet. For some, there is also racism, poverty, and other forms of oppression and discrimination that limit meaningful options for them and their abusive partners. Victims assess their risks and resources in the context of their lives and culture. How will we learn enough from them to continue to build new strategies, options, and responses that better protect victims while they remain in relationships or in contact with their partners?

Victims ask also for a more complete view of their risks. Most victims include a wide range of batterer-generated and life-generated risks in their safety planning and decision-making. Conversely, many advocates tend to focus on physical violence. Some advocates see the potential for escalating or life-threatening violence in nearly every circumstance of domestic violence. Each loss of life is an excruciatingly painful experience that understandably and necessarily changes how we look at violence and how we respond. Yet, how will we balance our responses, in particular our drive to help victims leave, with the understanding that – fortunately – most domestic violence victims are not killed? How will we learn from victims about how to hold a more complete view of their risks?

How will we work with victims to develop more options, strategies, and resources to enhance the safety of victims who stay?

This paper is not saying that victims should stay. It is saying that we – the domestic violence movement – should do more to protect and advocate for those who do. At the same time, we must continue to support and strengthen victims' options to leave. Our advocacy must also preserve each victim's right to make decisions about her relationship, including whether to stay or leave.

Learning more about victims' views of safety is an important place to begin the work of enhancing advocacy with victims who stay. For example, how broadly do victims define safety? In order to learn how culture and life experience affects the view of safety, it is essential that we explore these issues with diverse victims. For all victims, safety will likely go beyond the elimination of physical violence to also include the elimination of the range of batterer and life-generated risks that most victims face. In addition to being free from the violence and control of an abusive partner, victims must be able to meet their families' basic human needs. Reducing the risk of physical and sexual violence but leaving a victim and her children with no home or means of long-range financial support is not making her safe. Nor will it make her safe to ignore mental health, substance abuse, or

trauma issues, or fail to provide a means of coping with or healing from the effects of violence that some victims experience.

Learning more about how victims approach the risks they face is another critical starting point. If we are not the principle source of help for victims who stay, then we will need to learn more about the people and places they are turning to for help. This is likely to include formal and informal sources, such as family and friends, a new partner, a faith institution, pastoral counseling, or even marriage and family therapists. If we ask and we listen, victims will help us to understand how these approaches can increase safety. What do victims' safety plans for staying look like? How can advocates help to strengthen them? How can advocates help those who stay to gain power in their relationships and to reduce their partners' control? What do safety plans include when domestic violence is not the victim's priority? What additional resources, skills, and knowledge do advocates need to be supportive and helpful to women who choose to stay with abusive partners?

How will we shift the expectation of leaving?

A principal goal of this shift, central to the principles of the movement, is to preserve each victim's right to make decisions about her life and her family. Each victim will then also live with the benefits and consequences of those decisions. Minimally, we must remove leaving as a pre-condition for services to ensure that the full range of advocacy, options, and resources are available to victims who stay. This shift will require caution. As we remove the expectation to leave, it is important that we preserve the right to leave, and expand the resources to pursue that right. We do not want to swing from an expectation of leaving to an expectation of staying, or other unintended consequence that limits victims' choices and options.

What are the implications of the current expectation to leave? Specifically, what are the unintended negative consequences? How do we shift expectations to honor and value victims' decisions about their risks, resources, and relationships?

2) Ending Violent and Controlling Behavior

Many advocates believe that those who batter cannot or will not change. In large part, this belief is based on advocates' experience. Advocates see what happens to victims

when abusive partners promise to stop, promise to change, show up for batterer intervention or counseling. Often what advocates see through the eyes of victims is manipulation, false promises, and no end to the violence and control. For many advocates, this personal perspective frames and informs any discussion about men who batter or efforts to end violent or controlling behavior. While experience is a valuable and valid guide, we also know it has limitations. For example, our experience is limited because the range of victims we serve is limited. In particular, victims who stay and those whose partners have made some positive changes are less likely to seek our advocacy. This probably skews our perspective toward a more pessimistic assessment of intervention with those who batter. How will we ensure our assessment is thorough, and reflects the diverse perspectives of victims? How will we learn from women like Sheila and Nellie?

Whatever our experience or perspective, there is a great deal of debate and uncertainty about whether ending violent and controlling behavior is possible and if so, how to go about it. Uncertainty understandably leads to fear – in particular, our fear for the physical safety of victims and their children. This fear often takes us back to leaving as the best option. It can feel too dangerous to try to change violent behavior. What happens though if we assess that risk in the context of all the dangers that victims face? Advocates know the violence that looms for some victims who leave and often talk about it as the most dangerous time. And we know that physical violence is only one of the risks of leaving. If we honestly assess the danger of leaving, then strategies to change violent and controlling behavior cannot be so quickly dismissed. For some victims, leaving is dangerous. For some victims, trying to change a partner's violent behavior is dangerous. Either way, the level of dangerousness will depend on some combination of each victim's resources and her partner's behavior. How can advocates better support and inform victims' decisions about these options? For example, what information about Junior might help Nellie assess her own danger and know what "help" he needs?

As our work changes, we'll need to take care of ourselves. We advocates currently cope with the danger that victims face and the fear that generates in us. We live with, and are affected by, that fear. How will we support ourselves to cope with the dangers faced by victims who stay while their partners are pushed and supported to change?

How will we learn more about victims' perspectives of their partners and what they think will change their violent behavior?

We'll need to listen carefully to how victims talk about their partners and what they believe will change their partners' violent behavior. If we listen to victims and build our advocacy on the needs and perspectives of victims, then we will have more complex and complete views of those who batter. The range of views will be broad and conflicting. Some victims see their partners as cruel and evil with no hope for change. Some see the good side of their partners and know that if their partners could just talk to someone, or get help then things would be better. Some victims want their partners to be punished, to suffer as their partners made them suffer. Many – although not all – victims will ask us to hold a more complete view of their partners, not to label them solely as batterers, deserving only constraints and punishment. How will we learn and hold all victims' views as we invent and support more strategies to end violent and controlling behavior?

For many of us, this is going to be hard. It will be hard because we do not regularly work with all victims, hard because victims have diverse and conflicting views, and hard because we will have difficulty looking beyond the violence to see “batterers” as more than just their violent behavior. We've seen the devastating effects of violence, and honestly, we may struggle to see other information as relevant. It is not that Nellie's advocate needs to let go of Junior's threat to rape Nellie, it is that she should also see Nellie's view of Junior as an involved father-figure to her son, a previously good partner and friend, and a guy with a mean streak who's lost his job, drinks too much, and just can't get a break.

When we listen to victims, we care more about what happens to their partners. We care because what happens to men who batter affects their partners emotionally, financially, and may affect their physical safety as well – including the partners who leave, but especially those who stay and those who are living in poverty. To care about men who batter does not mean excusing or ignoring their use of violence. We need not, should not, and will not silence our voices about ending violence against women.

But we must be cautious that our messages about violent behavior do not dehumanize or demonize. This approach can lead to unjust treatment and ineffective interventions – particularly for men of color. On this topic in particular, we need to listen to victims. Part of why *some* victims defend their partners is that they see them being treated unfairly – as one-dimensional – by the criminal legal system, by child support enforcement, or any other system that has entered their lives. How will we expand our views of men who

batter to also see them as the people, fathers, husbands and partners the women know them to be – albeit violent and abusive ones? How will we actively engage with victims to develop language and principles that hold both the mission to end violence and victims' varying perspectives of their partners?

How will we know which strategies, resources and constraints will change violent and controlling behavior?

We'll talk to victims and we'll ask them, those we currently serve and those we've yet to serve. We'll analyze current research and evaluate interventions, at the same time advocating for additional research that may have a different focus. And, we'll talk with advocates and our allies who work with those who batter. We'll need to take some deep breaths, resist assumptions, and listen. We've been doing this a long time and we know a lot, but there is always more to learn.

We need to learn and understand more about which strategies are most effective for which types of violent and controlling behavior. Those who batter are not all the same. The violence and controlling tactics they use are not all the same. There may be similarities and ultimately a common motivation of power and control, but the reality is that victims are facing different levels of violence from partners that cannot be lumped together. Those who batter are diverse individuals whose life experience, race/ethnicity, gender, and culture affects what they do, how they do it, what response they will experience, and what will make them change. What pushes and supports Junior to reduce violent and controlling behavior may not work with Ben. While a current focus, criminal legal system interventions cannot be the only strategy. Although some who batter will only respond to the intervention that arrest, prosecution, and court oversight can provide, some will respond to less intrusive and punitive approaches. More strategies provide more options to more victims. How will we learn more about what works and for whom?

How will we protect victims while their partners are pushed and supported to change?

Victims' safety plans are stronger when they are based on accurate information about their risks and resources. The difficulty in predicting human behavior and the uncertainty about the effectiveness of intervention strategies often leads us to "err on the side of safety." In practical terms, this can mean that we assume every person who batters might

kill his partner and that no intervention program works. Because some victims do face lethal violence and some of those who batter will not be capable of change, part of our challenge is to refine how we identify and characterize those who batter. How might we improve the information we provide victims about violence, including life-threatening danger? What other information about those who batter could improve the advocacy and information that we provide to victims? How might safety strategies that we now use for leaving be retooled to protect those who stay?

How will we determine our priorities for spending money and resources to end violent and controlling behavior?

Many advocates say that they support batterer intervention but not at the cost of services to victims. As we listen to victims who stay, it is likely that we'll want to reframe the conversation about funding priorities from an either victims or batterers to a both victims and batterers approach. When we think about victims who stay, about prevention, about ending domestic violence, it just is not accurate to say that money for violence intervention services (men) is money taken from victims (women). If changing Ben's behavior is Sheila's best chance for safety then denying money for services to Ben is not simply taking resources from a batterer, it is also taking those resources from a victim who stays.

Services to all victims – not just those who leave – must be a priority. We must demand resources for all the strategies necessary to end violence, including responses to those who batter. From what we've already learned from victims, we now know that those responses must go beyond arrest, batterer intervention, probation, and incarceration. On a practical strategic note, we must also try to avoid being forced into either/or positions by funders and elected officials who often benefit politically by pitting all "men's/father's" groups against us "women's/domestic violence" advocates. While some men's/father's groups are working to undermine our advocacy and our efforts to stop violence, with others, there may be significant common ground. There are important strategic alliances emerging between responsible fatherhood programs and domestic violence advocacy programs around services and funding that benefit poor families struggling to survive and communities trying to rebuild. How will we increase the money and resources to meet our expanded priorities?

3) Knowing What Children Need to Be OK

Children are central to most battered mothers' decisions and safety plans, whether they stay in their relationships, stay in contact with their abusive partners, or leave. Advocates often hear from mothers that the decisions they made were "for my children." Many battered mothers want their children to have contact with their fathers or a father figure. Nellie is thinking about her son's relationship with Junior and Sheila wants her three kids to have a home and a family with Ben. Sheila's and Nellie's children will have their own perspectives. Some children are afraid of their fathers and some need protection. Children often want contact and a relationship with their fathers, and it can be emotionally important for them to do so.

When the decision is to stay, there are risks, consequences, and benefits for the mothers and the children. For some children, staying might mean that they benefit from the support and attention their fathers provide. Staying might also mean there is no need for unsupervised visits with a father who batters. The children will continue to live and interact with their fathers, and their mom may be able to intervene, guide the interaction and be more available to support them if their fathers' behavior has negative effects. Staying may also mean avoiding other serious consequences of leaving.

For some children, this means they won't be homeless or living without adequate food, health care, child care, or education. Staying also may mean that children will not be subject to the uncertainty of custody/visitation orders made by courts still failing to overcome inaccurate assumptions about what is best, and often unable to distinguish between parents who conflict and a parent who batters and controls. Yet, these "benefits" hardly present a cheery picture for children or their battered mothers. And there are also serious consequences of staying for some children. Advocates know that although some children cope fairly well, others are injured and traumatized. How will we know how each child is being affected? Is Nellie's son OK? How about Sheila's three young children?

Children are victims of domestic and family violence. Safety for children requires strategies that are different but intertwined with their battered mothers' safety strategies. Our mission is to end violence and reduce its negative effects for all survivors. Children are very likely to have contact with their fathers, whether their mothers leave, stay in their relationships, or stay in contact. For these reasons, children subjected to domestic violence should be able to count on us to help their battered parents to:

- Know whether or not their children are OK;
- Build opportunities for their children's well-being; and
- Try to prevent future harm.

If our work with battered parents is not enough to keep some children safe, then those children should also be able to count on us to take steps necessary to protect them from serious harm. This might mean involving other family members, social services, developing parenting intervention plans, or in some circumstances may even require involvement of child protection. It may also include an exploration of leaving as a strategy and advocacy that helps the battered parent obtain court orders that only allow safe contact.

How will we help battered parents to know if their children are OK?

In general, this will involve understanding the strengths and resources of each child, their family, and their community in combination with the effects of domestic violence and other risk factors. Every child is unique. Each has different strengths, resources, risks, and cultural contexts. All children face some risk to their development that might include factors such as domestic violence, poverty, family dysfunction, disability or other health issue, child abuse, inadequate schools, or parenting challenges. To understand whether a child is OK, we must help parents understand their children's behavior, feelings, and interactions with others at home, at school, and in the social community. In other words, "How is the child actually doing?" The effects of a range of risk factors must be viewed together and considered with the benefits of positive aspects of the child's life. Whether or not a child is OK depends on more than just the effects of domestic violence.

As with all advocacy, our work with parents must be done in partnership with them, partnerships built through understanding their perspectives and culture. Battered parents make decisions for their children in the context of their lives, including all risk factors – not just domestic violence. For example, a battered mother might decide her child will be OK, even though he witnesses her boyfriend's controlling behavior, as long as she can put food on the table, a roof over his head, and keep him in his current school – a decision that means she'll need to stay with her current partner. How will we know what protective and negative factors to consider? How will our advocacy strengthen battered parents' understanding of their children's well-being? Since all children are affected by

domestic violence in their families and all face some range of risk, how will we know if children are OK? How will we ensure that our perspective and advocacy is responsive to each family's culture? What collaboration would strengthen our efforts?

How will we work with battered parents to build opportunities for their children's well-being?

We do a lot to support battered women, to build them up. Yet, we can do more to support and strengthen battered women as parents. This is an important step in building children's opportunities to grow and reducing the negative effects of violence and other risks. For example, we could work with a parent to enhance her ability to provide her child with access to adequate nutrition, shelter, health care, emotional support, and education. This advocacy could be as simple and practical as offering her a winter coat for her child, asking how her children are doing in school, listening to her concerns about her children, or referring her to a job training program that will improve her earning capacity. Another aspect is helping parents to identify the resources and strengths of each child. One child may have an extended family, while another benefits from a high level of natural intelligence or the community support of a teacher, minister, or coach. How will we incorporate opportunity building for children's well-being into our advocacy and women's safety plans for staying? For example, we might develop safety strategies that allow children to build support networks at school, with friends and family, or through a faith institution. How will we work with child advocacy, child behavioral health, and other community programs to build opportunities for children's well-being?

How will we work with battered parents to try to prevent future harm?

Although safety planning for staying might be new to some of us, it is not new for battered women. For women, safety plans begin with the violence, not with their first contact with advocates. An initial step for us will be learning about safety strategies from women who stay. When we know more about what women do to try to reduce the harm to themselves and their children, we'll be in a better position to see how our advocacy, resources, and knowledge could strengthen those plans.

In addition to the work to reduce violent and controlling behavior discussed earlier, other areas for exploration are programs and efforts to improve the parenting of those

who batter. For example, a number of collaborations are already underway between domestic violence advocates and certain types of responsible fatherhood programs, those who have integrated a commitment to anti-violence into their work with men. Some advocates may not see this as their work or may even see it as a threat to their work. These will not be easy bridges to build and some domestic violence programs may never cross them. Yet, as advocates for all victims of family violence, including children, and as advocates for battered women with our advocacy defined by those women, it is impossible to ignore that children will have contact with their fathers and that many battered women want their children to have a relationship with their fathers. How will we call on the wisdom of survivors and our movement to carefully and effectively take these steps?

Conclusion

It is time to fully embrace the reality of women's lives and recognize that domestic violence is not the only danger, leaving is not the only – or for many, the best – option for those dealing with abusive partners. As a vibrant, creative, and determined movement, we have the capacity to make the personal and organizational shifts necessary to better advocate with those who stay. This will be hard and complex work, and we will need to move forward thoughtfully and cautiously, yet persistently. Ultimately, we will come to trust that our advocacy, like victims' safety plans, will survive ambiguity, uncertainty, and risk.