



2020 - 2021

Domestic Violence Regional Councils

Cross-Regional Needs and Current Efforts

A Report for the NYS Domestic Violence Advisory Council

Introduction

The Domestic Violence Regional Councils (DVRCs) originated from a series of listening sessions with domestic violence service providers across the state that provided stakeholders with feedback that current methods of communication across systems and regions were both decentralized and inconsistent. Based on the feedback from that work, the 2019 Domestic Violence Task Force proposed the creation of DVRCs as part of the Governor's 2020 State of the State to examine how services and resources were being delivered on a regional basis. In 2020, the Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence (OPDV) launched the Domestic Violence Regional Councils initiative. The following report details the goals of these regional councils, the findings from the first two rounds of regional council meetings, and OPDV's current efforts to address the issues raised. OPDV hopes the NYS Domestic Violence Advisory Council will consider and prioritize the issues and ideas gathered from these meetings as they examine their agency priorities and prepare policy initiatives for the coming year.

The Domestic Violence Regional Councils

In order to make informed policy decisions that best serve survivors in New York, the State must understand what is happening across all systems that intersect with victims of domestic violence and how those systems work together – or don't. The Domestic Violence Regional Councils serve as one forum for fostering this understanding.

The ultimate goal of the DVRCs is a collaborative reimagining of a more survivor-centered, trauma-informed and culturally responsive domestic violence service delivery system. To actualize this reimagining, OPDV needs input from all systems in the field to better understand what statewide policies and programs need to be developed, what statutory changes might be needed, and what regulations are standing in the way. The information gained from all ten regional meetings will be compiled on an on-going basis and presented to the NYS Domestic Violence Advisory Council for their consideration when making policy and programmatic recommendations, as well as a potential basis for new interagency collaborations. Where systemic barriers that can easily be rectified are identified, state agencies will take action to be responsive and remove such barriers.

Regions are defined using the ten Empire State Development (ESD) Regions and meetings are held in each region. The ESD Regions are as follows: Capital Region, Central NY, Finger Lakes, Long Island, Mid-Hudson, Mohawk Valley, New York City, North Country, Southern Tier, and Western NY.

Led by volunteer co-chairs (see appendix), the DVRCs are intended to be comprised of representatives from domestic violence service providers, local departments of social services, law enforcement, court representatives, probation, health professionals, representatives from Continuums of Care, and education/BOCES representatives. Additionally, staff from state agencies including the Office for the Prevention of Domestic

Violence (OPDV), Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), Office of Court Administration (OCA), Office of Victim Services (OVS), Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA), Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS), Office of Mental Health (OMH), Office of Addiction Services and Support (OASAS), Office of Probation and Correctional Alternatives (OPCA), Division of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) and Department of Health (DOH), as well as statewide partners including the New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NYSCADV), are invited to attend each meeting. Active participants during the first two rounds of meetings included, OCFS, OCA, DCJS, OVS, OTDA, OPCA and DOCCS, as well as NYSCADV. Regional Council meeting topics may include but are not limited to: challenges occurring across systems, opportunities for increased collaboration, upcoming funding opportunities, or any other of-the-moment issues impacting survivors in the Region.

Regional Findings

The first two rounds of Regional Council meetings demonstrated that many challenges and concerns in domestic violence systems are shared across regions. After each round of meetings, OPDV has worked to efficiently address the needs raised, both by offering timely solutions and laying the groundwork for systemic and cultural change, but the need for continued emphasis on these issues remains.

Widespread Lack of Prevention Work

Many service providers expressed a need for more prevention work, especially through education efforts in schools. Regional council members across the state emphasized the importance of educating young people about healthy relationships and teaching them to identify the dynamics of domestic violence. Though some domestic violence programs may already have prevention outreach programs, they stressed a need for more funding if they are to continue to do this important work adequately.

Weak Relationships Between Systems

Better communication between systems was described as a persistent need. Regional council members statewide noted the meaningful benefits of strong relationships across systems, especially when these relationships are grounded in a shared understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence. However, they also all lamented that these relationships are still novel and not common. Frequently, they are based on personal relationships with individuals. Unfortunately, when these individuals leave these institutions, the relationships are often lost and the cross-system approach dissolves. Service providers across the state expressed a desire to create a way to institutionalize these relationships.

Barriers to Economic Stability

All regional councils identified survivors' struggle to achieve and maintain economic stability as a predominant concern. Across all ten regions, a multitude of issues linked to these challenges were raised as persistent problems, including:

Need for Flexible Funding

Service providers statewide consistently highlighted increased access to flexible funding opportunities as an enduring need. Many service providers argued that an increase in flexible funding opportunities for both survivors and domestic violence programs is crucial to facilitating a truly survivor-centered system. Though several regions acknowledged that the few additional flexible funding opportunities offered since the onset of the pandemic have been helpful, providers also stressed that these programs are not sufficient, nor as flexible as they should be in order to be truly survivor-centered. During a New York City Regional Council meeting, a service provider and advocate shared her frustration with the laborious reporting process required by city-administered grants that were presented as being “flexible.” Globally, this has also been stated about state and federal funding stream reporting requirements. In this advocate’s account, for a survivor to use the flexible funding to buy groceries, she had to log every specific grocery item she intended to purchase. As we build a survivor-centered system, it is imperative to trust survivors in realizing their own safety and to provide adequate resources to do so. Already forced to navigate a labyrinth of bureaucratic processes, accessing flexible funding opportunities should not create added burdens for survivors, nor service providers.

Housing

Housing was also identified as a persistent issue throughout all ten regions. Providers identified several different facets of housing obstacles. Regardless of funding levels, many providers described a lack of available housing stock as a major issue to providing safe housing to survivors. Representatives from Capital Region domestic violence programs described a commonly shared experience of searching for available housing in all the neighboring cities and counties to no avail. They stressed that expansion of housing stock must be an investment that is prioritized now, as the problem will only intensify in coming years. Other regions described a lack of regionally diverse affordable housing options. For example, service providers in the Southern Tier acknowledged that the shelter options are chiefly located in the larger cities of the region. However, some survivors from more rural parts of the region do not feel comfortable moving to the “big city.” Additionally, representatives from domestic violence programs in Central NY described an excess of regulations precluding provision of permanent housing.

Transportation

Absence of adequate transportation was stressed as a barrier to serving survivors in many regions, especially in predominantly rural regions. Providers in the North Country stressed the need for innovative transportation solutions to combat the lack of a robust public transportation system. Without transportation, survivors struggle to access support services, which are frequently located in different towns. Moreover, if they need to relocate to protect their safety, they may be re-housed far away from their job or their children’s school. In this sense, council participants from many regions stressed that the

absence of transportation is a significant barrier to survivors' safety and economic stability.

Childcare and Employment

Providers in many regions also pointed to a dearth of affordable childcare options as a significant obstacle in the path of many survivors' efforts to secure employment and work towards economic stability. Service providers in Long Island highlighted the disparity in access to childcare in their county that persists between those staying in a domestic violence shelter and those staying in an emergency shelter. Those staying in domestic violence shelters are not eligible for childcare until they secure employment, while those staying in emergency shelters do have access to childcare while actively seeking a job. According to New York State regulations, eligibility is determined by county and based on availability of funds. Expanding access and availability of childcare subsidies to domestic violence survivors would be a significant step towards fostering a survivor-centered system, facilitating survivors' ability to seek stable employment without having to worry about what they'll do with their children when they are offered an interview.

Absence of Trauma-Informed, Survivor-Centered Practice Across Systems

A need for improved systems response was also consistently stressed across the regions. Regional stakeholders repeatedly acknowledged that there is widespread lack of trauma-informed, survivor-centered responses. More trauma-informed training in all systems was identified as a need in most regional councils. The lack of a trauma-informed practice across all systems was frequently identified as a major barrier to fostering a consistently survivor-centered experience for those moving through the systems. Though systems may not always be capable of yielding a survivor's desired results, the person-to-person interactions between survivors and those working within systems heavily impact their experience seeking life-saving services and supports. Unfortunately, systems established to help New York's survivors have too often exacerbated their trauma. As the State strives to offer trauma-informed and survivor-centered services to all New Yorkers, more personnel across systems must be trained in implementing trauma-informed practice in their daily work.

A need for trauma-informed training was especially stressed in the court system, with law enforcement, and in the social services system. Domestic violence program providers in the Finger Lakes stressed that the court room can be intimidating and scary even for those who have not experienced trauma, much less for survivors who have often suffered extensive trauma. In these settings, a judge's manner of communicating with survivors is crucial to facilitating a safe environment, rather than instilling a sense of fear and intimidation. Utilizing a conversational style of communicating with survivors rather than an interrogating style can yield immensely better experiences for survivors, alleviating the many difficulties inherent to leaving abusive partners and building safer lives.

Calls for Reforms Within the Court and Legal Systems

In addition to the adamant, repeated calls for greater training on trauma-informed practice in the court system, regional representatives also called for other reforms within the court and legal systems. Representatives from several regions stressed that Family Court staff and custody evaluators need more training on the issues specific to domestic violence. In addition to their concern about custody evaluators' current capacity to effectively respond to domestic violence cases, leaders from domestic violence programs in the Mid-Hudson Region raised concerns about other issues involving courts as well, including the need for the State to disseminate guidance and direction on firearms removal for courts and law enforcement, the need for more specialized domestic violence courts, and the fact that the grievance procedure as a tool to hold judges accountable is difficult, lengthy, and not very transparent. Judges are notified when grievances are filed with the Commission on Judicial Conduct, and litigants who file a grievance are almost always required to continue appearing in front of that same judge as their case moves forward.

Additionally, many regions voiced concern about confusion and a lack of consistent application regarding orders of protection, court practices, and bail reform. In Long Island, domestic violence program providers described a frequent failure of local law enforcement to enforce orders of protection, specifically in contexts where abusers are breaking the order via calls or texts, despite the requirement of police to make an arrest when orders of protection are violated. In Western NY, where co-chairs had distributed a survey to regional domestic violence programs, every survey respondent mentioned bail reform as a concern. Providers described it as a tremendous safety concern for victims, as well as a significant burden for programs. The chief safety concern expressed is that abusers who are arrested may be released within hours, often without enough time for victims to create safety plans, reach out to programs, or make potentially life-changing decisions. Many providers also expressed a desire for more training and information about what the bail reform changes truly entail, both for advocates and law enforcement. Several regions highlighted that there seems to be confusion amongst law enforcement as to when an appearance ticket must be issued.

Finally, several providers from across the state emphasized the benefits of the pandemic-forced expansion of virtual options for court services. Providers recounted their experiences with survivors during this time, many who expressed the benefits to their safety and mental health they felt as a result of such expansion. They specifically noted the ability to testify and file orders of protection virtually as important steps towards a more survivor-centered court process for survivors and stressed the need for continued access to such options even after the pandemic passes.

Desire for New Programming and System Change

New programming and substantive system change were also needs raised in meetings across regions. Specifically, council representatives emphasized the need to examine accountability beyond the criminal justice system and for the current system to function better for the individuals who are using it.

Domestic violence program leaders in the Capital Region offered a succinct description of the current criminal justice system, reflecting sentiments shared across the state: it is slow and not survivor-centered. In fact, many victims and survivors avoid reaching out to domestic violence programs and law enforcement precisely because they do not want to involve themselves, nor their abusers, in the criminal justice system. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the bulk of domestic violence programs' non-residential funding is tied to the legal and criminal justice systems. Because of this, advocates are often extremely limited in what they can offer survivors who do not want to engage with the criminal justice system. The Capital Region leaders shared that many survivors communicate a desire for alternatives to jail time, which may include restorative or transformative justice programs. Disproportionately from communities that have historically experienced undue rates of policing and criminalization, some survivors are eager to pursue alternative methods of accountability and justice. In the State's current landscape, survivors seeking such alternatives have few options.

Persistent Service Disparities Within Regions

Representatives in the regional councils also highlighted that there continues to be uneven resource distribution and system responses between urban and rural areas within the regions. Shelters and other services are frequently based out of larger cities within the region, preventing equitable access to services for all survivors. This inequitable service access is often exacerbated by a persistent digital divide. While reliable broadband is still a challenge in some rural areas, urban areas also continue to struggle with digital equity. Though remote access to services has been a benefit to survivors in many ways, service providers in the Capital Region described the challenges some clients have with accessing these services when they have inadequate technology. Though some may have cell phones, they may not have data to access apps and email, while others might not have access to reliable Wi-Fi. Though not providing services in rural communities, domestic violence program leaders in New York City also identified inequitable technological and digital access as a persistent issue for the survivors they serve.

Additionally, regional representatives are eager for innovative models that reflect the entire state. Though some innovative models and programs exist in New York City, there is a lack of access to these models and programs in other parts of the states. Council members in the Finger Lakes also expressed a desire for greater information sharing across regions to gain an understanding of what innovative programs do exist and are being executed in other regions.

Dearth of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

A need for mental health and substance abuse services for survivors was also underscored. Representatives from the Department of Social Services and shelter providers in the Southern Tier acknowledged that they are witnessing an increase in substance abuse struggles amongst those seeking services, which was noted as impacting the prevalence of domestic violence, as well as survivors' ability to access

shelter. As one county's shelter in the region is unstaffed and unsupervised, those struggling with substance abuse cannot access the shelter.

Need for Greater Domestic Violence Awareness in Medical Settings

The need for domestic violence screening in medical settings was also raised in several regional councils. Service providers in the Finger Lakes also described a need for more training for forensic nurses who see victims in the emergency room. They stressed that anyone who may serve as a first point of disclosure for survivors should receive training, with nurses likely being at the top of this list. Providers in the Finger Lakes also expressed a desire to expand the Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners program to also include domestic violence victims. They stated that SANE nurses are willing and ready to do this vital work, however they feel they need more training to do it properly. Unfortunately, there is no budget for this training and additional funding is necessary to enable domestic violence programs to do this kind of training.

Inadequate Language Access

Greater language access was also underscored as a need across regions. This need was highlighted by regional councils in two different contexts. First, service providers in Western NY stressed that expanded language access is frequently needed on the scene of a domestic violence incident. They reported instances of children or perpetrators being used as interpreters on the scene. Not only is this an inappropriate and blatantly inadequate response, but it may also further jeopardize victims' safety. Similarly, program leaders in the Mid-Hudson region identified language barriers as an issue that persists within the court system.

Current Efforts

Having heard the same issues come up again and again in the first two rounds of DVRC meetings, OPDV has prioritized several initiatives in response to the concerns raised.

Facilitating Pathways to Economic Stability

Recognizing that financial and economic barriers are a persistent threat to victims' safety, OPDV is actively engaging in a series of efforts to address multiple facets of these challenges. In one such effort to further ensure survivors' economic stability, OPDV is working to limit the devastating impact of financial abuse by collaborating with partner agencies, stakeholders, and the Department of Financial Services (DFS). Through these partnerships, OPDV seeks to enhance knowledge about domestic violence for financial professionals through training and ongoing technical assistance, as well as to foster active engagement with regulatory experts about preventing financial abuse through regulation and practice.

In partnership with OVS, OPDV has also established a Safe Housing Options Grant Program, which provides \$4 million in funds for one-time, non-competitive grants to 72 participating OCFS-licensed and/or approved DV programs. The grants are focused on

building on the lessons learned from the pandemic in terms of shelter not always being the first, only, or best answer for victims in need of housing and, also, coping with the lack of housing stock and resources for survivors. As part of the grant program, OPDV also established a Safe Housing Learning Consortium. The goal of this consortium is to bring all providers together to share best practices and common challenges in creating more options for survivors to gain access to stable housing beyond emergency shelter. Technical assistance from national stakeholders, OPDV, and OTDA will be carried out in support of the grant work. This consortium will help inform a survivor-centered response to housing and serve as a state and local partnership to share ideas, best practices, and challenges. OPDV will also analyze results and data from the funding with the grantees.

Improving Systems' Responses

Having faced down the crises of the pandemic, OPDV is now centering its work around one ambitious goal: revolutionizing New York's service delivery model and guiding it to be the most trauma-informed and culturally responsive service delivery model for survivors of gender-based violence in the country. OPDV aims for this to be a comprehensive, holistic process, culminating in a reality where survivors' experiences across all systems are survivor-centered and trauma-informed, whether they are in the court system, attempting to get child support, seeking shelter or housing, looking for employment, or interacting with any state agency.

Currently, OPDV has embarked on multiple different initiatives towards this goal, partnering with other state agencies to foster survivor-centered responses across systems. First, OPDV is working with OTDA to ensure survivors are able to successfully navigate the process of seeking child support safely. Second, as previously discussed, OPDV is working with DFS to bolster survivors' ability to make a claim of financial abuse to repair credit. OPDV is also increasing the number of agencies in which it directly trains staff to recognize and respond to gender-based violence, most recently the OCFS Division of Juvenile Justice & Opportunities for Youth (DJJOY).

Another exciting addition to OPDV's cross-agency training work is that of the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. At the direction of Governor Hochul, OPDV will create, develop, and launch a training program for all public-facing employees at state parks, campgrounds, and recreational areas on how to recognize domestic violence and how to intervene. OPDV will develop the training with the goal of delivering it prior to Spring 2022, when many of the State's outdoor recreation sites, which serve millions of patrons annually, will reopen for the season. By prioritizing engagement of non-traditional allies across state agencies, OPDV is working to further its goal of fostering broad, survivor-centered access to safety, resources, and support.

In partnership with DOH, OPDV is pursuing yet another far-reaching initiative to increase survivor-centered services across systems. In response to recent legislation, OPDV has collaborated with DOH to create a model policy for general hospitals about serving domestic violence survivors. Together, OPDV and DOH are also working to develop and

provide training about the policy and domestic violence for all staff at those hospitals. Notably, the policy and training will address how to recognize and respond to non-fatal strangulation cases. This work provides an excellent way for information on domestic violence and non-fatal strangulation to reach a wide range of professionals who are likely to encounter it in their day-to-day work, and to ensure that all hospitals have uniform approaches to assisting patients and staff affected by domestic violence.

Additionally, OPDV, in partnership with OASAS and NYSCADV, will soon begin work to develop and launch overdose prevention training for domestic violence providers statewide. This training, made possible by OASAS' grant award from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), will be developed with the goal of reducing the number of prescription drug/opioid overdose-related deaths and adverse events by training staff in domestic violence shelters and home visiting programs.

OPDV is also forging partnerships with agencies that serve survivors in communities that have been traditionally overlooked. One such partnership is with the Developmental Disabilities Planning Council, with whom OPDV will be developing a training on inclusive service provision for domestic violence and developmental disability providers. Knowing that it takes time, and often multiple contacts, for survivors to be ready or feel safe accessing services, the goal is to create an environment throughout all NYS agencies where survivors feel heard, respected, and able to seek resources and support when they are ready.

Facilitating Opportunities for Further Learning and Development

OPDV is eager to foster education and awareness opportunities for advocates, survivors, and other professionals working in the field. Recognizing that technology-based threats to survivors' safety are constantly evolving and increasing, this October, OPDV convened national experts to host a conference on technology-assisted abuse. The event offered an overview of the emerging risks associated with technology use, recommendations for mitigating technology misuse, and strategies for increasing survivors' privacy and safety. Over 350 individuals participated in this online event and feedback from attendees was overwhelmingly positive. OPDV plans to continue hosting such events in the future, with the goals of widely sharing state-of-the-art knowledge and best practices in order to support survivor safety.

Additionally, as a direct result of concerns shared in multiple DVRC meetings, OPDV is partnering with OCA and DCJS to develop a webinar about bail reform, which will provide an overview of the recent statutory changes and their impact on domestic violence cases. The webinar, taking place in December, will aim to aid both law enforcement officials and service providers in understanding the revised statute and using the legal tools that continue to be available even after the most recent bail reform changes. Such knowledge should help advocates and law enforcement officials as they work to help keep survivors and victims safe.

Conclusion

OPDV recognizes that fostering a truly survivor-centered and trauma-informed response across all domestic violence systems in New York State will require long-term collaboration and innovation. In offering a unique space for stakeholders and representatives from all systems to come together and have dialogue about challenges, concerns, best practices, and ideas, the Domestic Violence Regional Councils are a first step towards that goal. OPDV hopes the Advisory Council will utilize the information gathered in these first two rounds of meetings to inform their policy initiatives and priorities for the coming year.

OPDV is grateful for the dedication of all who participated in these first rounds of meetings, and to all those working to support domestic violence victims and survivors across the state. OPDV looks forward to continuing the important work of the DVRCs in the coming months.

Regional Co-Chairs Appendix

Capital Region

- Lindsay Crusan-Muse, St. Peter's Crime Victim's Services
- Tabitha Dunn, Unity House of Troy, Inc.

Central NY

- Theresa Davis, Liberty Resources
- Jolie Moran, Vera House
- Fanny Villarreal, YWCA of Syracuse

Finger Lakes

- Meghan de Chateauvieux, Willow Domestic Violence Center of Greater Rochester, Inc.
- Rachel Gregory, Safe Harbor of the Finger Lakes

Long Island

- Terray Gregoretti, Safe Center
- Jennifer Hernandez, ECLI/VIBS
- Serena Liguori, New Hour for Women and Children
- Wendy Linsalata, Long Island Against DV

Mid-Hudson Region

- Fredric Green, Westchester County District Attorney's Office
- Kellyann Kostyal-Larrier, Fearless! Hudson Valley
- Elizabeth Santiago, Center for Safety and Change
- Robin Schlaff, Westchester County Office for Women

Mohawk Valley

- Robert Maciol, Oneida County Sheriff
- Will Rivera, Opportunities for Otsego
- Diane Stancato, YWCA of the Mohawk Valley
- Jackie Ward, Catholic Charities of Herkimer County

New York City

- Madeline Bigelow, Urban Justice Center
- Hayley Carrington-Walton, HELP USA/HELP R.O.A.D.S
- Jayna Marie Jones, HELP USA/HELP R.O.A.D.S

North County

- David Marcoux, Clinton County Probation Department
- Jill Parker, Victim's Assistance Center of Jefferson County

Southern Tier

- Fran Bialy, A New Hope Center
- David Bidwell, Binghamton Police Department

Western NY

- Mary Brennan-Taylor, YWCA of the Niagara Frontier
- Amy Fleischauer, International Institute of Buffalo
- Sara Grady, Haven House
- Sara Mahoney, Allegany County Probation Department
- Anthony Turano, Cattaraugus County Department of Social Services