

**Survivor
Listening
Sessions:
2022-2023
Report and
Findings**



**Office for the
Prevention of
Domestic Violence**

Contents

Executive Summary	1
About the New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence	2
Mission	2
Vision.	2
Role	2
OPDV's Three Pillars—The Lens Through Which We View Our Work.	2
Methodology	4
Participant Demographics	6
Survivor Experiences	7
Nonprofit Organizations Serving Victims and Survivors	7
<i>Strengths</i>	7
<i>Challenges</i>	8
The Civil Legal System	11
<i>Strengths</i>	11
<i>Challenges</i>	12
The Criminal Legal System	13
<i>Strengths</i>	13
<i>Challenges</i>	13
Conclusion	15
Acknowledgments	16

Executive Summary

As part of OPDV's commitment to improving New York State's domestic violence response system, OPDV has been facilitating listening sessions with victims and survivors of domestic violence. These sessions allow us to hear directly from survivors about their experiences when navigating the gender-based violence response system. Survivors shared with us the strengths and challenges of the system and the impact the system had on them.

Consistent themes were noted in the listening sessions. First, survivors frequently mentioned three key systems:

- Non-Profit Organizations Serving Victims and Survivors
- The Civil Legal System
- The Criminal Legal System

Second, survivors described a need for:

- A reduction of barriers associated with the current emergency domestic violence shelter system.
- Increases in the availability of safe and affordable housing options for survivors to more quickly transition out of emergency shelter as well as for survivors who do not wish to or are unable to go into shelter.
- Increases in the availability of flexible financial assistance for survivors so they can quickly meet their individual needs.
- More in-depth training for professionals who respond to gender-based violence, including law enforcement, judges, and service providers.
- Better collaboration between system responders.

To address these needs, Governor Hochul and OPDV have taken several key steps to better serve survivors with a survivor-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive approach:

- The Fiscal Year (FY) 25 Budget includes the creation of the Survivors Access to Financial Empowerment (SAFE) Fund. This recurring funding stream, the first of its kind in the nation, will be administered by OPDV and will provide flexible financial assistance to survivors.
- Governor Hochul directed OPDV and the Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) to review and improve law enforcement domestic incident report processes and procedures, heeding survivors' calls to improve the law enforcement response to gender-based violence.
- The FY 25 Budget prioritizes domestic violence as part of the evidence-based Gun Involved Violence Elimination program with the goal of identifying high-risk offenders, holding them accountable, and connecting victims to services.
- OPDV is a representative on the New York State Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative (ESSHI) Interagency Workgroup. Victims/survivors of domestic violence are part of ESSHI's eligible target population and OPDV and the Office for Children and Family Services have convened an Emergency Shelter Workgroup to address regulatory barriers to safe shelter.

About the New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence

The Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, created in 1992, is the country's only executive-level state agency dedicated to the issue of domestic and gender-based violence. It replaced the former Governor's Commission on Domestic Violence established in 1983.



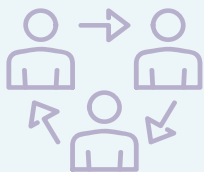
Mission

To improve New York State's response to and prevention of domestic violence with the goal of enhancing the safety of all New Yorkers in their intimate and family relationships.



Vision

To create a State in which communities and systems are committed to supporting and promoting equality, dignity and respect so that individuals can feel safer in their intimate and family relationships.



Role

To advise the governor and legislature on policies and best practices; train professionals across the state; facilitate coordination between state agencies and stakeholders on issues related to domestic violence; and serve as a resource on the issues of domestic and gender-based violence.

OPDV's Three Pillars—The Lens Through Which We View Our Work

After reflecting on its mission, OPDV expanded its work beyond domestic violence to include other forms of gender-based violence. We know that we cannot address domestic violence without confronting other forms of gender-based violence such as sexual violence, trafficking, and more. The White House (2023) defines gender-based violence as:

“Any harmful threat or act directed at an individual or group based on actual or perceived sex, gender, gender identity, sex characteristics, or sexual orientation. [Gender-based violence] encompasses, but is not limited to, physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, economic, and technological abuse or harm; threats of such acts; harassment; coercion; and arbitrary deprivation of liberty.”

While gender-based violence can be perpetrated against anyone, this pervasive threat disproportionately impacts women and girls.

- Worldwide, approximately 1 in 4 women report experiencing sexual or physical violence by an intimate partner during their lifetime (Sardinha et al, 2022).
- Approximately 1 in 3 women in the United States have experienced sexual violence (Smith et al, 2018).
- 44% of men in the U.S. report experiences of sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking at some point in their lives (Leemis et al, 2022).
- Gender-based violence occurs across the life cycle; youth can experience dating violence and older adults are also vulnerable to abuse, including from caregivers.
- People can also experience gender-based violence multiple times across the life course. One literature review of 80 studies found that 47.9% of people who experienced childhood sexual abuse were revictimized later in life (Walker et al, 2019)

When we deepen our understanding of gender-based violence in alignment with an understanding of oppression, we know that gender-based violence has disproportionate impacts across different communities:

- Some people have unique risk factors that can lead to higher rates of victimization, such as people with disabilities and Indigenous women.
- Some are less likely to be believed when they report or be blamed for the violence they experienced, such as Black and Latina women.
- LGBTQIA+ people are also disproportionately impacted by gender-based violence including domestic violence, sexual violence, and violence rooted in bigotry toward their gender identity and expression.

People with marginalized identities are more likely to experience barriers to receiving help (Kulkarni, 2018). For example:

- Transgender survivors of intimate partner violence often experience transphobia-related barriers when accessing services.
- According to the U.S. National Transgender Survey (James et al, 2016), 16% of respondents indicated that they experienced discrimination at a domestic violence shelter.
- Being denied equal treatment, verbally harassed, or physically assaulted were reported as common forms of discrimination at shelters (Messinger et al., 2021).

Because of these complexities, we know the gender-based violence response system must not apply a “one-size fits all” approach, which leads us to the three pillars that we use to guide our work. Responses to gender-based violence must be survivor-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive. OPDV defines these three pillars as:

- **Survivor-Centered**—an approach that works with survivors to meet their needs as they prioritize and define them.

- **Trauma-Informed**—an approach that realizes that trauma is common, recognizes the signs, activators, and symptoms of trauma, and uses this knowledge to inform practices, policies, and procedures.
- **Culturally Responsive**—an approach that actively incorporates a holistic approach to a person’s complex identities and cultural values, going beyond simply acknowledging their cultural identity exists. Culturally responsive services respond to differences in identities to actively meet the needs of all survivors and communities.

Methodology

OPDV utilized the following survivor-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive best practices to guide the process for the survivor listening sessions:

- **Confidentiality:** Protecting participants’ identities was paramount throughout this process and was addressed in multiple ways from how participants were recruited to participate in the listening sessions to how OPDV facilitated the listening sessions. We also prioritized confidentiality in reporting on the information gathered in the listening sessions.
 - The names of the partner non-profit organizations have been withheld to ensure that neither the organizations nor participants’ identities could be determined.
 - In preparation for their participation, all survivors worked with their advocates to discuss implications to their safety to mitigate potential risks. This included strategizing for safer use of their technology during the listening sessions.
 - Participation in the listening sessions was voluntary.
 - The sessions were conducted virtually. Participants were given the option to have their cameras on or off and were able to use aliases during the sessions. This allowed them to keep their identity private from other participants if desired.
 - The sessions were recorded to assist OPDV staff in the transcription of the sessions, ensuring fidelity of the quotes. OPDV has restricted access to these recordings, and they were deleted upon creation of an accurate transcript.
 - OPDV requested that participants voluntarily provide demographic information, which is summarized below. Some participants chose not to share their demographic information.
- **Informed consent:** Survivor-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive processes must include opportunities to give power back to survivors. Their experiences are theirs to share with intention. Therefore, OPDV provided information to potential participants, so they were fully informed of the purpose of participating in the listening sessions.
 - OPDV hosted information sessions for the partner organizations so that they fully understood the process, informing their recruitment efforts.
 - The non-profit organizations and the survivors who were considering participation in the listening sessions received the questions in advance. The advocates from non-profit organizations reviewed the questions with participants.

- Survivors who chose to participate were provided a consent form informing them of the process and purpose of the listening sessions. OPDV retains these consent forms in a secure location following best research practices.
- **Recognition of expertise:** Survivors of gender-based violence are subject matter experts and should be compensated for their expertise and time. The non-profit organizations who partnered with OPDV are subject matter experts and should also be compensated for their time.
- OPDV provided funding to the non-profit organizations who recruited survivors. The money was used to cover nominal administrative costs and provide a stipend to the survivors for their participation.

OPDV utilized semi-structured focus groups as the qualitative methodology for the listening sessions. A team of four OPDV staff with research experience then analyzed the transcripts. Due to the nature of the virtual platform and the optional use of video by participants, it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between individuals and their comments. Therefore, when documenting the frequency of topics and themes, some may include comments from the same individual at different points of the conversation.

Each session lasted 90 minutes and included up to eight survivors, totaling 45 participants overall. Participants only took part in one session.

The following questions were used for the listening sessions:

1. If you used a helping system, what did you like about it and what did you dislike about it?
2. What led to your decision to avoid contacting systems for help? Was there anything that stopped you from asking for help?
3. What did you need that you could not get from a helping system?
4. What are your recommendations for improving responses from helping systems? What changes would you like to see happen?

Helping systems were defined as including but not be limited to:

- The criminal justice system, including law enforcement.
- The family court system: judges, court staff, hearings for orders of protection, custody, child support, forensic evaluators.
- Court-appointed attorneys, attorneys for children, legal aid services, private attorneys.
- The Department of Social Services: temporary assistance unit, domestic violence liaisons, child support unit, child welfare and child protective services.
- Domestic and gender-based violence programs, or any other organization that assisted with support and services.

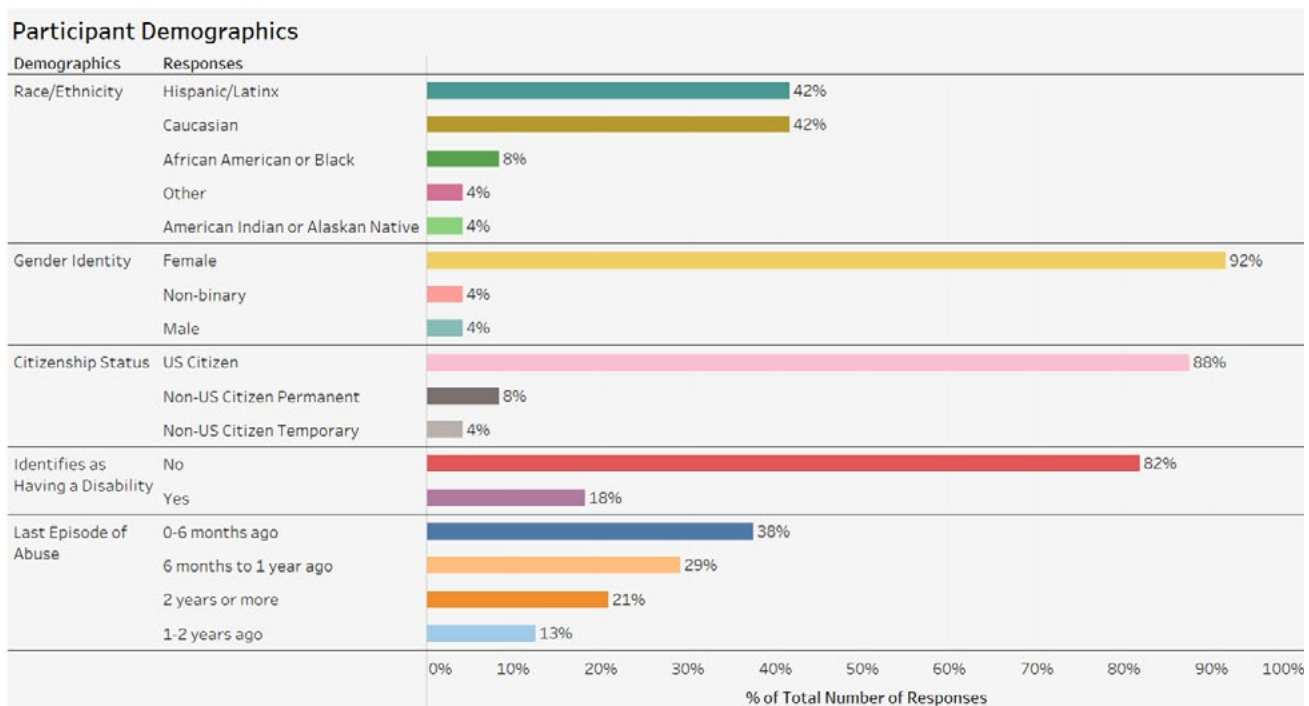
- Housing: shelters, subsidized housing programs.
- Healthcare programs, clinics, hospitals, or any other clinical setting a survivor might perceive as a helping system.

The data in this report is based on 8 listening sessions conducted with eight different nonprofit organizations between 2022–2023.

- Seven OCFS licensed and approved domestic violence programs.
- One community-based organization that is a population-specific provider.
- Four out of eight programs serve historically marginalized populations: Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC), Immigrant, and LGBTQIA+ communities.
- Five programs serve suburban communities, two serve rural communities, and one metropolitan, all from the following regions of New York State: Long Island, New York City, Mid-Hudson Valley, Capital District, Mohawk Valley, and the North Country.

OPDV staff recruited programs through announcements during a monthly virtual meeting hosted by OPDV specifically for organizations that provide services to victims and survivors of gender-based violence, as well as during other routine meetings OPDV hosts or attends. Additionally, OPDV staff emailed and called non-profit organizations known to OPDV for their work with victims and survivors of gender-based violence, particularly culturally responsive non-profit organizations that may not be formally recognized by the State as service providers.

Participant Demographics



Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Survivor Experiences

Qualitative analysis of the sessions revealed that survivors consistently spoke about three systems:

1. Nonprofit organizations serving victims and survivors
2. The civil legal system
3. The criminal legal system

The qualitative analysis of the sessions describes strengths and challenges within each system.

Nonprofit Organizations Serving Victims and Survivors

STRENGTHS

1. Survivor-Centered Services

Meeting survivors where they are—physically and emotionally—exemplified survivor-centered practices. When advocates were available to be on-site during a crisis, they were able to better provide survivors critical support and resources. This empowered survivors to make informed decisions supporting their navigation of the crisis and beyond.

“I was in the hospital and they [the advocate] came immediately. Having someone there by my side without question, just showing up for me at the hospital, was very impactful because I had never had that in my whole life. I didn’t even know the organization existed. I had never heard of them. They told me what I would need. They literally showed me all these resources I didn’t know were available to me. That was a really good experience!”

“Thanks to the advocate meeting me at school I was able to receive a lot of help and a lot of information about what I was experiencing.”

“Thanks to the support of the [domestic violence] shelter and what they have done with me, I’ve been able to go out to the streets again, to take the train, to be able to enroll in school - like a beauty school. And I’m still in the shelter, but it it’s been wonderful.”

2. Trauma-Informed Services

Trauma affects a person holistically. Services that supported survivors beyond the crisis contributed to survivors’ overall health and wellbeing.

“There were times I felt my presence wasn’t necessary, that I didn’t need to live. I wasn’t useful for anything -- that’s what the abuse made me feel like. The advocate spoke to me, boosting my morale. She showed me that I’m worth something. She made me feel safer because at some point I wanted to end my life and she pulled me out of it. They are still helping me.”

“The non-profit organization is sometimes the only friendly face, affirming voice, or comfort during one of the worst moments of my life. I want to really echo the necessity of these organizations and how pivotal they are not only in the seeking of justice but also the survival of the person. The support I received in the long-term aftermath, up to six months after, came from this organization.”

“The follow through just, the past two plus years, has been incredible and I can’t say enough about it. And then my counselor following up with me and being there with me every step of the way through the court process. The organization always had someone there for me. So, between the counseling services, and between the advocate services, the availability, the follow through, all of that has just been remarkable.”

3. Culturally Responsive Services

Culturally responsive services respond to differences in identities to actively meet the needs of all survivors and communities. Survivors across most listening sessions underscored the positive impact of access to culturally responsive services.

“I was eventually able to get into an emergency shelter where I was offered a lot of support and help. I also got counseling and legal services through them. When they were screening me, I didn’t know if they were going to accept me. I didn’t believe they would because I was still in the process of getting my immigration papers processed. They later informed me that my family was accepted into their program. I got to work with an employment specialist. They offered me counseling and legal services. I was eventually able to move into more permanent housing all because of their help.”

“What made it so comfortable going there [the organization] was just knowing that there are like-minded people or people that are like me in certain aspects. Being around people of color and then finding out that they also served the LGBTQ community made it more comfortable and easier for me to approach [them].”

“The organization was approachable and friendly. They were specifically queer- and trans-affirming. When [the organization] says that it’s a welcoming space, that it recognizes that domestic violence is expansive... that it can happen to anyone regardless of gender, regardless of sexuality, regardless of gender presentation, that’s important. The staff reflected the community. It’s really important to have Black trans people there, Black nonbinary people there, Black queer people... I’m a Black person so for me, the reflection was important.”

CHALLENGES

1. Available Financial Assistance Does Not Fully Meet Survivors’ Needs

Ranking high on survivors’ list of priorities was access to financial assistance for basic needs such as food, transportation, and housing. Survivors also highlighted the need for assistance to expand beyond the basics. They noted funding for legal services, childcare costs, security

deposits, moving and storage expenses, as well as money for phones, computers, and related expenses, is vital to their mental and financial security.

“It’s really important to be able to access resources immediately as needed, for example, furniture or things like that. Basic needs.”

“We have problems with transportation. We don’t have money for the bus or the trains. How can we go outside our house to get to people who understand what happened to us? The transportation issue keeps us trapped at home with the abuser.”

“You’re living in a hurricane of trauma. What we need is someone who says, ‘here’s a survival kit’... not ‘go look for a resource.’ We don’t have time to look for resources. We’re healing from physical injuries and looking for homes to live in. We don’t have jobs anymore. Give us a cell phone. Give us a laptop so we can get back to work. I can’t apply for a job if I don’t have a cell phone. I lost my business; I was a self-employed person. How do you go from having money to no money? Now you’re in debt. Give us the tools, physically give us the tools so we can survive.”

2. Demand for Emergency Domestic Violence Shelter Space

Listening session participants described several negative experiences when trying to access emergency domestic violence shelter, most of which stem from a problem that has existed for years—not enough emergency domestic violence shelter space to meet demand. The quotes we share here demonstrate the impact this systemic issue has on survivors:

- a. If there is no space, many survivors remain with their abusive partner until space is available or they give up trying to get shelter.

“The organization tried to help me, and it was just the same thing as with others. They didn’t have enough beds, I had 5 [people needing beds] at the time and they couldn’t help.”

“Had emergency housing been [an] option when I needed it, that would’ve been helpful. I didn’t feel strong enough to do all the things I needed to do, that would’ve been very helpful.”

“The [shelter] system is ... failing and when it comes to communication with the persons who are in danger—to be constantly having to call to find out if they have a space for you; it’s very dangerous.”

- b. In New York City, adults without children are frequently redirected to the homeless shelter system due to a lack of emergency domestic violence shelter beds available for single adults.

“It was traumatic [being] in the homeless shelter for women. They had no respect for the women, no respect for the victims. It was a hostile environment and abusive. And that was my first experience [in a shelter].”

“I reached out to a shelter and because I had no children, they put me on a waiting list. In the meantime, I was still stuck with the monster within [the house]. It was hard. Every place I reached out to it was like you either got to wait or we can't help you right now. I felt defeated at that point.”

“Once I was in the (homeless) shelter system, I didn't exist. They did not care. I was placed in a building on the highest floor, and it was difficult for me to be able to just get up and down the stairs. The case managers that were in house, they were almost never available until I'm banging on their door, threatening to call 311 because they're not helping me.”

3. Inconsistent Delivery of Survivor-Centered, Trauma-Informed and Culturally Responsive Services

While most listening session participants described positive experiences with the non-profit service providers, there were participants who had negative experiences when trying to get help from some non-profit organizations serving victims and survivors.

“You spend a whole day trying to get help. You call a non-profit who just tells you they are going to give you resources. You write down the number, you call then get referred right back to the non-profit. They just tell you to call back later. There isn't any real help for us.”

“The reason why sometimes I don't ask for help from certain organizations is because of the person who answers the phone. They have a person—a receptionist—who answers the phone and she's very nasty and she hangs up the phone on you. I know I need help but I'm not going to keep calling to get the same reaction from the same person so I stopped calling there because of that person answering the phone, I can't get through to the person who could possibly help me. They help who they want to help.”

“Being more masculine-presenting, I've also found it more difficult to get help. Even though I was the victim, I was always perceived as being the aggressor. That was uncomfortable because I felt like nobody understood what I was actually going through. It was severe abuse. [It] got to a point where I just stopped asking for help. I felt like a lot of males might go through that, but it was a big part of my situation as well.”

“For me, it was easy because somehow, I can communicate in the language [English], but what I saw from another girl—she was Latina, and she didn't know a single word of English. She couldn't receive the same kind of support. She felt isolated. She told me she really didn't feel the companionship in the process of healing. So, I think the language is a barrier to really knowing the tools that you have [available] when you are a victim. I think she missed a lot of things in the shelter that probably could have helped her to do better.”

“I found that a lot of programs are kind of rooted around, ‘this isn't ok, you deserve better, you gotta go, it's not safe,’ There were so many times where I was like, I could lose my life if I leave.”

I'm wondering if there could be safety planning that prepares people to leave over a period of time because it's really about harm reduction.... How do helping systems support survivors?"

Survivors in domestic violence shelters described how rules for residency felt imposing and disrespectful, removing their right to self-determination and autonomy. Such rules made them feel like they had traded one form of power and control for another and led to questioning their decisions to leave the abusive partner.

"They treat you in a way like you're just part of the system. You have a curfew, they search you. Those things are dehumanizing, especially if you were the victim of abuse. It's like, why would you be in a place where they're treating you as if you did something wrong? We know that it's supposed to be for order in the place and to make sure everyone is following the same rules, but if you just came from your own home and living situation, you should be able to move a little more on your own accord or without having to report to someone or be made to feel like that. A shelter doesn't give you agency over yourself and your decisions. That doesn't seem like an appealing option for a survivor."

"You already feel belittled just being here; to have to be respectful [just to] ask for the toilet paper...To simplify it, could be a more caring process from shelter staff."

"I'm afraid to go into a shelter. That's my biggest fear right now. I know we have a good shelter, but I just feel scared to go into one because I am a very independent person and coming from a situation where I was controlled, to then not have the choice to live how I want and need because of their rules.... it's not good."

The Civil Legal System

STRENGTHS

1. Issue-Specific Legal Representation

Non-profit legal service providers rose to the top as the most trusted provider of services in the civil legal system. Attorneys with a comprehensive understanding of domestic and gender-based violence helped survivors feel understood and supported.

"My [immigration legal services] attorney was my lifeline. I wasn't comfortable asking anyone for help. She stood up for me in [family] court. [She] believed me and in me. I didn't trust anyone. I didn't want to talk to an advocate because I was scared to, but I trusted her [my attorney]. She did everything even though she was so busy and didn't have to. She was always there for me."

"We trust them [legal aid services] the most because they are pro bono - not working for money. The pro bono lawyer who gets domestic violence training only gets paid a little bit."

"The attorney followed up with me. Told me what to expect and helped me feel more

comfortable in the court room when I had to sit across from him. It helped knowing I didn't have to look at him or talk because she was there to do that."

CHALLENGES

1. An Overwhelming Process

While the civil legal services system is designed for pro se applicants, the overall process is overwhelming to litigants.

"Every time I go to the court, I come out feeling like I was abused again."

"We're already in a position where we're scared, we're frightened, we've already been trained not to speak. We're supposed to be silent in court too or we're a 'problem' to the judge. I was silent for two years and I'm trying to break that silence now."

"[The courts should] somehow give us a voice. I've been going to court for a year and a half, and I've never once been able to share my story. I have [written a statement about two paragraphs long] of the constant emotional abuse that happened daily. Every time they say they're going to read it out loud [for the court record] and it never happens. We're never given a platform to share in court, at least in my experience."

2. Lack of Understanding about the Dynamics of Domestic Violence

Listening session participants described experiences in Family Court that indicate a lack of understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence and the impact those dynamics have on all parties.

"A judge said to me: 'It sounds like he's just being mean to you.'"

"[Judges] need to listen to both sides equally. My ex spoke and spoke throughout the hearing, I sat there with no opportunity to respond."

"We had extensive bad experiences with the court-appointed children's lawyer. They need to talk to parents, need to spend more time with kids (as opposed to just 10 minutes). They can't just meet with [the children] one time."

"It felt like [the attorney for children] was defending my children's father instead of my children."

3. Unresolved Systemic Problems

People in the field of gender-based violence have long recognized the challenges and limitations in the civil legal services system. The Governor convened a Blue-Ribbon Commission on Forensic Custody Evaluations in 2020 to address the issue of forensic evaluations. OPDV Executive Director Kelli Owens co-chaired this effort and OPDV hosted a series of listening sessions on these reports. These reports are critically important and can mean the difference

between life and death for both survivors and their children. The Commission found there is no guarantee that forensic custody evaluators (FCEs) or other civil court actors understand the dynamics of domestic violence, coercive control, and child abuse. This Commission's work led to a new legislative mandate for FCEs to be trained on these critical topics. While multiple legislative hearings have been held to bring the problems into light and make recommendations for change, survivors and their families continue to experience harm.

“How does this institutional abuse continue? There are so many [survivors] that go to court and the judge is the first one who’s so abusive. Right there! I don’t understand how is that possible? With all the knowledge available and they don’t have to be trained about abuse. And yet the courts give the attention to the abuser. You’re being abused at home, then you have to face the abuser [in court], and then you’re being abused by the judge that even the lawyers are afraid of. I’ve heard that the lawyers don’t even stand up to this judge, or judges in general, because they’re afraid of them.”

“Is there a way for court to track abusers for manipulative behavior? I need them to realize the trends.”

“Abusers are allowed to do the same things [in court] over and over again and they let him.”

“It’s almost like the system is enabling them [abusers]. They have the system wrapped around their finger because they know how to trick every single person in that room.”

The Criminal Legal System

STRENGTHS

1. Professional, Knowledgeable Responses Built Trust in the System

Participants shared that one positive experience from a single actor instilled hope and trust, making it possible to move forward in the process.

“I called law enforcement. They came as soon as I called. They were able to intervene and rescue me from my abuser. They were also able to offer me phone numbers for shelters where I could stay with the kids.”

“They realized I was afraid and didn’t want to stay in the house that night. They asked my husband questions, eventually taking my husband out and putting my daughter and me in a [separate] room. The police stood guard so we could not see him when he was leaving.”

CHALLENGES

1. Minimizing Treatment from Law Enforcement

Listening session participants outlined interactions with law enforcement that indicated police responses were not always trauma-informed. These responses left survivors feeling unheard, and at times, shamed or revictimized.

“It made me feel a lot of shame and I already felt a lot of shame for the situation I was in. It made me feel victimized all over again. It made me feel like I was trying to go to your office because I’ve been directed to go to your office for help and I don’t feel like I’m being supported.”

“The police officers said, ‘Why are you still with him?’ Why are you asking me why I’m with him? Why don’t you ask him why did he hit me? Why aren’t you asking him why I have bruises all over my body? It doesn’t matter why this, why that. What matters is he put his hands on me. He hit my car head-on and you’re asking me why we’re still together? Because you’re not doing your job and locking him up.”

“It’s a scary feeling. [The Assistant District Attorney] is representing the people—that’s us. When you’re a victim of a crime and they don’t take that crime as seriously or see it escalating to something more when you tell them that it is, it’s scary.”

2. Lack of In-Depth Knowledge about Domestic Violence

While listening session participants shared many examples of law enforcement responses that were positive, there were also examples of when responders did not understand the dynamics of domestic violence. This lack of knowledge had chilling effects for survivors' next steps.

“Because of my first interaction with the police, I was afraid to call again. I was afraid I’d be arrested. So, I didn’t contact the police again.”

“They lack training to say the least. When it’s same sex or immigration related, their response is worse.”

“My case was deemed high risk, and . . . some officers did know what it meant and others didn’t. They’re like, ‘well, what’s that mean? What’s high risk?’ . . . I think there needs to be some education on these cases that are high risk for our officers so they can . . . know where they need to look out.”

3. No “Justice” from the Criminal Legal System

Many listening session participants who opted to pursue relief through the criminal legal system had the shared expectations that justice would be served through this system and felt revictimized when the system did not work as they expected.

“They [District Attorney’s office] didn’t know my ex had five charges against him, and they were spread out between three DA’s and three courts and nobody in the DA’s office knew this. I had to call them, and I had to put all the pieces together. I have emails with them saying, you’re right, we’re not on the same page. The DA’s office is so overwhelmed that they can’t handle these cases.”

“He hasn’t been arrested since [the previous incident]. I have gone to family court, I have gone to criminal court, and he just has warrants [for his arrest]. That’s it. Meanwhile, he still gets to stalk and harass me because nobody has picked him up. I don’t see why they don’t think this is serious because it’s impacting my career, it’s impacting my health, and now it’s impacting my son’s schoolwork.”

“They [justice system] want you to stay within the nuclear family and for you to drop charges and for you to drop the stay away [order]. I have a stay away, but they keep wanting us to get back together it seems like.... That’s what happened to [my neighbor], she was forced into dropping the charges and with doing that, ended up losing custody of her kids. There’s a lot of fear around losing custody, not being believed, being abused more. That was my experience.”

“The person that’s doing [the harm] doesn’t feel they did anything wrong because they aren’t going to jail and they’re only doing six months of a program. How is that going to work in six months?”

Conclusion

Spending many hours with survivors during the course of eight different listening sessions over the last two years confirmed what we know—there are three key systems that tend to be relied upon the most and there are significant structural changes that need to occur to create a more survivor-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive gender-based violence response system.

The three key systems most frequently mentioned by survivors are:

- Non-Profit Organizations Serving Victims and Survivors
- The Civil Legal System
- The Criminal Legal System

Survivors described a need for:

- A reduction of barriers associated with the current emergency domestic violence shelter system.
- Increased availability of safe and affordable housing options for survivors to quickly transition out of emergency shelter, as well as for survivors who do not wish to or are unable to go into shelter.
- Increases in the availability of flexible financial assistance for survivors so they can quickly meet their individual needs.
- More in-depth training for professionals who respond to gender-based violence, including law enforcement, judges, and service providers.
- Better collaboration among system responders.

As the participants of the 2022 and 2023 survivor listening sessions made clear, individuals within the gender-based violence response system have enormous power to support survivors in finding safety and healing. When survivor-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive practices

were used, survivors felt supported. When those practices were not adhered to, survivors felt not only unheard, but also unsafe.

When listening session facilitators asked participants why they avoided systems, fear was a major factor, including:

- Fear that the abuse would worsen if police showed up and did nothing,
- Fear of losing custody of one's children,
- Fear of the quality of life and wellbeing in a domestic violence shelter, and
- Fear of all that may have to be left behind such as family, community, and pets.

These conversations with survivors are the driving force behind OPDV's recent initiatives, including the establishment of the Survivors Access to Financial Empowerment (SAFE) Fund, the agency's creation of an Emergency Shelter Workgroup with the Office of Children and Family Services to streamline access to safe shelter, and the development and delivery of training and technical assistance to local responders across systems. OPDV is dedicated to working in collaboration with other state agencies and stakeholders to continue to uplift the voices of survivors so their expertise informs and transforms the work of NYS to make it possible for all to experience lives free from abuse.

Acknowledgments

OPDV is grateful to the survivors of domestic violence who elected to be part of these survivor listening sessions. Domestic violence is inherently traumatic. The survivors showed great courage in their willingness to speak about their experiences. We asked participants to share not only what went well when they accessed the domestic violence response system, we asked what did not go well. Sharing these experiences with an executive-level government agency is an act of bravery. We respectfully acknowledge their trust in the NYS Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence (OPDV) to deliver their messages. We extend our sincere gratitude for their participation in this project and their genuine desire to promote excellence in the service delivery system.

To the non-profit organizations who dedicated their time to plan and participate in the listening sessions, we extend our appreciation for their partnership and respect for their tireless work. Despite the challenge of limited resources, they committed to this work to ensure the voices of survivors are heard. Their partnership has been instrumental to the success of this project.

New York State Domestic and Sexual Violence Hotline

Text: 844.997.2121

Call: 800.942.6906

Chat: opdv.ny.gov

Free. Confidential. 24/7.

Available in most languages

For more information, contact us:

518-457-5800

opdvpublicinfo@opdv.ny.gov

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**Office for the
Prevention of
Domestic Violence**