

VICTIMS' VOICES

We wanted to hear directly from individuals who had experienced domestic violence about their resource and service needs, including victims currently residing in a domestic violence shelter, and those living in the community. We heard from 82 individuals about their needs and the needs of their children.

FOCUS GROUPS

BACKGROUND

Vulnerable populations may be reluctant to give feedback to service providers. Focus groups can be used to generate information on a given topic (i.e., the needs of domestic violence victims), and diversity within focus groups can help to learn about different perspectives on

similar issues (Ruppenthal, Tuck, & Gagnon, 2005). Preferably, focus groups should range from 6 to 12 people but smaller groups can be better when discussing emotionally charged topics (Lasch et al., 2000; Morgan, 1996).

METHODS

After securing permission from Human Subjects Committees at Florida State University and the Florida Department of Health, nine focus groups were held with domestic violence center service recipients (e.g., shelter residents) between November, 2006, and April, 2007. Focus groups were held in northwest, north, northeast, central, southeast, and southwest Florida. Five centers served primarily urban areas (Jacksonville, Orlando, Tampa, Ft. Lauderdale, and Ft. Myers), two were located in rural areas, and the rest served small to midsize towns. The domestic violence centers visited ranged in size from 9 to 100+ beds.

Notices were posted in domestic violence shelters prior to the group meetings that stated the purpose of the focus groups and who would be conducting them. One or two persons

from the Institute for Family Violence Studies facilitated each focus group. Spanish translation was available. Facilitators took notes but names and other identifying information were not linked to statements. Each group began with an approved script that explained the details of the focus groups and sought the participants' consent. Participants were asked to respond to the following questions:

1. When you left home, what were your immediate needs?
2. Now that you are here at the shelter, what kinds of things do you and your children need to be safe?
3. What things do you think you will need in the future to maintain a life free from abuse?
4. Finally, if you could advise the people that plan services for survivors of domestic violence and tell them one thing about your needs, what would it be?

RESULTS

Comments from the residents participating in the focus groups were aggregated and analyzed for general themes. In addition, a frequency distribution was generated, calculating the percentage of times that a general topic was mentioned across focus groups.

Themes

Throughout all of the questions on needs, both current and anticipated, five general themes emerged from all of the comments. Those themes centered on the DV center, mental health, housing, law enforcement, and legal services.

DV Centers

The first theme focused on needs and expectations related to DV Centers. Participants in the focus groups clearly identified the crisis they were in at the time that they left their abuser and the need for a safe place stay. Respondents described a need for assistance with a safety plan and increased capacity or greater availability of shelter options. Respondents spoke at length about the wide variety of needs they hoped the DV centers would be able to meet for them. These included information on such things as resources within the shelter and in the community in addition to information about victim rights. Victims repeatedly stated they needed more on-site services including health exams and group therapy, job training, computers with internet availability, longer stays, phone services such as cellphones, calling cards or voicemail, and 24-hour support services. Another general area that respondents addressed about the DV Centers involved issues of

sensitivity. Victims indicated that they needed support and to be treated with respect and didn't feel like that need was addressed on a consistent basis.

Mental Health

A second major theme raised the need for mental health services. Respondents felt they needed both professional services including individual and group counseling for themselves and their children, and supportive services available through outreach programs, peer support systems, etc. Several suggestions were made for different types of group therapy that victims thought they needed including setting boundaries, parenting, assertiveness, healthy relationships, etc., and a particular focus on raising self-esteem and understanding how to break the cycle of violence was regularly mentioned. The need for support and counseling was repeatedly cited as an essential need for victims and their children.

Housing

A third theme of the focus group participants centered on housing. Respondents repeatedly described the need for affordable housing that was available when the shelter stay ended. While the general focus was on affordability and transitional housing, respondents also described the difficulties they have finding housing because they were denied relocation funds or had a bad credit history. Respondents also described financial needs related to making deposits for apartment, utilities, etc.

Law Enforcement

The fourth theme that emerged from the focus groups involved law enforcement. Respondents were interested in both tangible needs such as a desire for female responders, police providing information about the DV centers when victims call, transportation to shelters or to the home to retrieve belongings, and enforcement of restraining orders. However, respondents were also interested in having more intangible needs met such as having officers who were sensitive to the crisis situation that they were in. Respondents described times they felt revictimized by law enforcement and in general, respondents expressed ambivalence about the helpfulness of the law enforcement response to their situation.

Legal Services

The final general theme to emerge from the focus groups addressed a variety of needs related to legal services. Affordability was again a critical issue with victims describing the need for pro bono attorneys or those willing to utilize a sliding fee scale. Additionally, victims described specific legal needs including divorce and injunction assistance, custody and visitation issues, help with obtaining important documents such as a birth certificate, social security number, etc., and immigration issues.

Frequency Distribution

Once all of the notes taken at the focus groups were transcribed, search terms that reflected the common themes were entered into the computer and frequency with which the terms were mentioned was counted. For example, terms such as "housing," "home," "place to live," etc., were all identified to count the number of times that the general theme of housing was mentioned in the transcripts. The distribution is presented below.