

Colorado Model Office Project

CHILD SUPPORT AND  
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:  
THE VICTIMS SPEAK OUT

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# **CHILD SUPPORT AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: THE VICTIMS SPEAK OUT**

## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the most controversial aspects of new welfare reform legislation (PRWORA, 1996) is its impact on victims of domestic violence. While architects of the new law contend that its aggressive approach to self sufficiency (including child support establishment and enforcement) will better enable victims to leave abusive relationships, advocates for victims of domestic violence fear that the new policies will increase the threat of harm that these women and their children experience. They contend that welfare is often a path out of an abusive relationship (Raphael, 1995) and that more stringent welfare requirements, lifetime time limits and other exclusion policies might keep women in abusive relationships or drive them back to relationships they have sought to leave (Raphael and Tolman, 1997). To bolster their arguments, advocates cite data showing that women who have experienced physical violence by a partner: are more apt to have remained on welfare for a combined total of five years or longer (Saloman, et al, 1996); have greater rates of physical and mental health problems that could affect their participation in training and employment (Lyon, 1997); experience harassment by an abusive partner that keeps them from going to school or work (Curcio, 1997; Allard, et al, 1997; Lloyd, 1996).

While most of the debate has focused on the impact of time limits, work requirements and family cap components of PRWORA on victims of domestic violence, the child support requirements also pose a potential threat of harm. Under PRWORA, applicants for public assistance are required to name the father of their children and provide other identifying information for the purpose of establishing paternity and pursuing child support. PRWORA also “revolutionizes” child support policy. In addition to expanding in-hospital paternity establishment programs and streamlining genetic testing procedures, PRWORA toughens child support collection through the use of expanded, computerized and automatic procedures to locate noncustodial parents, and identify and attach their incomes and their assets (Legler, 1996).

Advocates feel that paternity and child support actions have the potential to renew violence because they alert the abuser to the victim’s location, precipitate physical contact between

the abuser and the victim in the courtroom, and/or stimulate desires for custody and visitation that could lead to regular and dangerous contact. Aggressive child support enforcement could also arouse the ire of abusers who may well be subject to automatic wage withholding, driver's license suspension, asset liens, and attachment of tax refunds, unemployment and workers compensation benefits. One writer describes the connection between child support and domestic violence this way:

Many domestic violence victims who have gone 'underground' to avoid violence cannot seek child support because they might alert their abusers to their location. By their very nature, paternity and child support enforcement court proceedings involve physical contact with the abuser in the courtroom, and this often leads to renewed violence or stalking. Advocates have seen that many abusers react to child support enforcement by beginning or reviving efforts for visitation and child custody, which could endanger women and children (Raphael, 1996b:193).

Recognizing that many of the strict requirements in PRWORA that aim to move women into work and enhance their financial standing through the collection of child support may actually compromise their safety, Congress has given states the option of screening women for domestic violence and providing temporary waivers and modifications of the state plan such as time limits and work requirements. Currently, 28 states have adopted the Wellstone/Murray Family Violence Amendment to the federal PRWORA (Section 402(a)(B)(7) of Title 1, TANF) which gives the state the right to waive any federal or state requirements that make it more difficult for women to escape situations of domestic violence or that unfairly penalize a parent or child who has been a victim of domestic violence. An additional 18 states have included violence programs and services in their state welfare plan.

In the child support system, "good cause" exemptions for reasons of domestic violence already exist although PRWORA makes several changes to the process, transferring the cooperation determination from the public assistance IV-A agency to the child support enforcement agency, allowing the child support agency to define what constitutes cooperation, and allowing each state to determine which agency defines what constitutes "good cause" for not having to cooperate with child support enforcement. The stakes are high for both individuals and states. Individuals who do not cooperate with paternity

establishment and child support enforcement and do not have “good cause” for failing to cooperate face the loss of 25-100 percent of their public assistance grant. States that fail to deduct the amount of the penalty for noncooperation face a 5 percent reduction in their block grant from the federal government (U.S. Department HHS, 1997).

This report support policies. It provides the only empirical information available at this time on the incidence of domestic violence among applicants for public assistance and their interest in pursuing a good cause exemption to the child support requirements. We address the debate between domestic violence professionals and administrators of child support programs about the impact of new policies on women who have experienced abuse. Finally, we offer recommendations on how domestic violence professionals and child support administrators can collaborate to meet the self sufficiency and safety needs of many public assistance recipients.

## **LITERATURE ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, POVERTY AND GOOD CAUSE**

Recent studies on the incidence of domestic violence conclude that it is particularly high for low-income women. According to a 1996 Bureau of Justice Statistics report, women living in households with annual incomes below \$10,000 are four times more likely to be violently attacked, usually by intimates (Craven, 1996). Some writers place the frequency of domestic violence at between 50 and 80 percent of women receiving AFDC (Raphael, 1996a). For example, a recent study of 216 women in low-income housing and 220 homeless women in Worcester, Massachusetts revealed that 63 percent reported serious physical assaults by intimate male partners in Massachusetts (Bassuk, et al, 1996). Interviews with a representative sample of 734 Massachusetts women who received public assistance between January and June 1996 revealed that two-thirds had been abused by a current or former boyfriend or husband at least sometime during their life and one fifth had been abused by a current or former husband or boyfriend in the past year (McCormack Institute, 1997). In a similar vein, 60 percent of a representative sample of Washington State’s AFDC population reported that they had been physically or sexually abused as adults, although the study did not differentiate between current or past abuse (Roper and Weeks, 1993). A 1995 study of domestic violence among welfare-to-work program

participants in Passaic County, New Jersey, found an incidence of 57 percent with 14 percent reporting physical abuse within the previous 12 months (Curcio, 1997). In 50 percent of Portland AFDC cases reviewed because of apparent lack of progress toward work, women reported they had been physically or sexually abused at some point during their lives. Finally, 58 percent of women who entered a Chicago welfare-to-work program over a one-year period reported current domestic violence (Raphael, 1995).

Despite these high rates of domestic violence, only a tiny fraction of public assistance applicants have historically applied for exemptions to child support cooperation requirements for reasons of domestic violence. In 1993, there were five million AFDC eligibility determinations in the United States reported to the Department of Health and Human Services. Only 6,585 custodial parents claimed good cause for refusing to cooperate in establishing paternity and child support. In 4,230 cases, these claims were determined to be valid (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1995). This translates into a request rate of 0.13 percent and an award rate of 0.085 percent.

The discrepancy between the incidence of domestic violence and the incidence of good cause requests and waivers has provoked a good deal of debate between domestic violence professionals and administrators of public welfare and child support programs. Many welfare and child support agency administrators contend that domestic violence is not a common reason for noncooperation. In their experience, noncooperation more commonly reflects a mother's reluctance to jeopardize her relationship with the father and the informal support he provides by involving him in the formal paternity and child support system (Wattenberg, 1991; Pearson and Thoennes, 1996; Edin, 1995; Ellwood & Legler, 1993). Although they acknowledge that domestic violence is a factor for many women, they feel that child support often has little impact, with many victims failing to want or need a waiver from cooperation with paternity establishment and/or child support enforcement. Not only might the routine award of waivers to victims absolve batterers of their financial responsibilities, but it might stimulate battering by men seeking to evade the child support system.

Domestic violence and welfare advocates, on the other hand, tend to view child support enforcement as having a definite impact on victims. For example, one attorney who has represented victims of domestic violence estimates that at least 20 percent of clients seeking an order of protection had been abused as a direct result of cooperating with IV-D child support enforcement proceedings (Pollack, 1996), and a recent Massachusetts study (Allard, et al, 1997) found that over half (52%) of women who had been abused in the last year had also argued with a man about child support, custody, or visitation during the same time span. Among their non-abused AFDC counterparts, the incidence of arguments was only 20 percent.

According to advocates, the low rate of good cause requests and waivers is due to the lack of information about the option and the documentation required to obtain it (Mannix, et al., 1987; Pollack, 1996). Public assistance applicants may not receive required written notice of the right to claim good cause before requiring cooperation, or it may be lost in the flood of paper that accompanies the application process. Even if they receive written notification, applicants may not understand their rights or need to be reminded of the good cause option as they move through the application process. Those interested in good cause may be deterred by the requirement to corroborate a good cause claim with documents and agency records. Finally, the agency might not provide the applicant with the help she needs to obtain records and other documents needed to support a claim of good cause.

The only empirical study on the topic of domestic violence and child support policies is a qualitative investigation we conducted in Denver, Colorado in the fall of 1996 (Pearson and Griswold, 1997). Based on in-depth interviews with 20 victims of domestic violence and a review of 69 applications for good cause filed with the Denver Department of Social Services, we found support for the views expressed by both the administrators of child support agencies and the advocates for victims of domestic violence. Some of the victims we interviewed said that they had been apprised of the good cause option but wanted child support and did not believe that the pursuit of child support would expose them and their children to further harm. Other victims, on the other hand, were fearful that the pursuit of child support would trigger new violence or kidnaping. Still other victims we interviewed

had no recollection of being told about good cause and little understanding of the option and/or the application process. The experience of victims with the good cause process also varied, with some reporting having received little or no information about it, and others reporting problems meeting corroboration and documentation requirements.

Based on that study, we recommended several ways for social service agencies to pursue both safety and self-sufficiency. The recommendations included: identifying domestic violence problems among applicants for public assistance; training public assistance and child support workers about the problem of domestic violence; creating a climate conducive to disclosure in child support and public assistance agencies; referring clients to specially trained staff who can discuss child support and safety; preparing and distributing simple written materials on good cause; making sure that child support activity stops while a good cause application is pending or approved; controlling the release of address information for cooperating victims on agency and court documents; helping good cause applicants obtain documentation; accepting individual and/or witness statements if official records are unavailable; and collaborating with local domestic violence professionals for staff training, client referral and assistance with documentation (Pearson and Griswold, 1997:32).

While this research provided some useful insights for advocates and child support professionals, it failed to answer a number of important questions:

- What is the incidence of domestic violence among applicants and recipients of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)? How frequently is the perpetrator of the abuse the father of minor-aged children against whom child support action might be taken?
- Are women who have been victims of domestic violence interested in establishing paternity and receiving child support, or do they wish to receive a waiver from the requirement to cooperate with the child support program? What factors influence the decision to apply for good cause?
- When is a good cause waiver granted? When is it denied? What are the applicant, abuse and documentation characteristics of good cause requests that are approved versus those that are denied?

In the next section of this report, we describe a research project we conducted to answer these questions.

## RESEARCH METHOD

Our study was conducted in four Department of Social Services agencies (DSS) located in three Colorado counties: Denver, Mesa, and Archuleta. These are large, medium, and small counties in urban and rural settings. In Denver, we focused on two office settings: the central main DSS office and a satellite office serving Montbello which is a predominantly African-American neighborhood. Since 1995, Denver, Mesa and Archuleta counties have been target sites for the Colorado Model Office Project, a multi-faceted demonstration/evaluation project aimed at testing the efficacy of various innovations dealing with child support practice. In December 1997, approximately 4 percent of Denver's population were recipients of TANF, the DSS agency had 6,229 open TANF case, and the Child Support Enforcement Division had 135 workers who handled approximately 44,825 cases. The TANF rate in Mesa County is 2.3 percent and in December 1997 there were 655 open TANF cases and 4,791 child support cases that were handled by 15.5 workers. In Archuleta County, there were 26 open TANF cases in December 1997 and the county's 1.5 child support workers handled 469 cases.

During April-December 1997, intake and child support workers in Montbello and Mesa and Archuleta counties questioned all applicants for public assistance about their current or past domestic violence experiences. The same identification process was used with two teams of intake and child support workers in Denver county who saw about 20 percent of the agency's caseload selected on a completely random basis. In each county, a self-sufficiency (IV-A) worker initiated the identification process by distributing a written notice to applicants explaining that they would be asked questions about domestic violence, that responding to the questions was voluntary, and that they might be granted an exemption from some of the requirements for getting public assistance if the Department determined that pursuing child support might put the applicant or her family at risk of harm. Following the distribution of the Notice, clients were asked a few questions about whether they had been in a relationship where they were physically, emotionally or sexually abused. Abuse was defined behaviorally and six examples were given. Clients were asked about current and past abuse experiences. Those who disclosed that they had experienced abuse were asked whether the abuser was the father of any of their children. And those who disclosed

abuse by a past partner who was the father of at least some of their children were referred to a child support technician for information about the good cause option and more data collection about their abuse experiences. In every office setting but Mesa, this screening was conducted orally by the IV-A intake worker. In Mesa County, the applicant completed the screening form herself and returned it to the receptionist who referred those who met the criteria to the child support worker for a good cause interview.

The good cause explanation and interview was conducted by a child support worker. The session was conducted with applicants who disclosed past abuse by a partner who was the father of at least some of her children and hence potentially eligible for child support action. The child support worker distributed written information on good cause and explained it orally. Applicants were told that if they wanted to be exempt from participating in the child support program, they needed to apply for good cause and that their application must include records, letters or documents supporting their claim of domestic violence. Applicants were also told that they needed to evaluate the benefits and risks of pursuing child support and good cause and that their address might appear on public court documents that could be seen by the abuser or that they might have to attend a court hearing with the other parent. Finally, applicants were told that they could get help with their application.

The interview conducted by the child support worker elicited more information on the severity and scope of the abuse the applicant had experienced, whether or not she was interested in applying for good cause, the reasons for her interest or lack of interest in good cause, and her ability to produce various types of documents and records to support her claim of domestic violence.

All self-sufficiency intake and child support workers in the participating counties attended a half-day training program on domestic violence conducted by local domestic violence professionals. Every training program involved an introduction to the dynamics of domestic violence, its prevalence and the forms it takes. A survivor of domestic violence talked about her experiences and answered questions. Local service providers made brief

presentations on the assistance available to victims including safety planning, housing and shelter, obtaining restraining orders, and other legal interventions and counseling. Finally, self-sufficiency and child support workers were given a stack of printed business cards listing a few key resources for victims in the community and instructed to distribute the cards to all applicants who disclosed.

Copies of all completed screening forms and good cause questionnaires were sent to the Center for Policy Research for data entry and analysis. During the project, we received 1,237 screening forms of which 1,116 involved new applicants for public assistance and 121 involved clients who visited the Department of Social Services for annual redeterminations. In this analysis, we focus on the 1,082 female, new applicants for public assistance for whom a screening form was completed.

## RESULTS

As in previous studies of women on welfare, our screening effort reveals that domestic violence is extremely common (see Table 1). Across the four office sites, 40 percent of applicants disclosed current or past abuse. In three of the four offices, rates of disclosure were fairly comparable and ranged from 42-43 percent in rural settings to 49 percent in the central office of Denver’s DSS. In the Montbello satellite office, however, the rate of disclosure was only 28 percent. The pattern is puzzling. According to police records, domestic violence arrests are only slightly lower than what would be expected given the population size (5% versus 8%). The most obvious difference between the Denver Central and Denver Montbello offices would seem to be their racial and ethnic composition. The Montbello office has a higher percentage of African-American clients compared to the Denver Central office (70% versus 20%); however, this does not provide any obvious explanation for its lower disclosure rate.

Table 1 The Incident of Domestic Violence Among Applicants for Public Assistance in Four DSS Offices in Colorado: April - December 1997					
	Denver Central	Denver Montbello	Mesa	Archuleta	Total

Percent reporting abuse by an intimate partner	49% (329)	28% (352)	43% (382)	42% (19)	40% (1,082)
Abuser is:					
Current partner	1%	6%	0	12%	2%
Former partner	95%	73%	55%	50%	74%
Current and former partner	4%	21%	45%	38%	24%
Abuser is father of her child	79%	69%	75%	100%	75%
Relationship with abuser is:					
Never married, never lived together	11%	13%	5%	0	8%
Never married, used to live together	41%	51%	29%	25%	37%
Married, living apart	30%	17%	32%	75%	29%
Divorced	18%	19%	35%	0	26%
N=	(158)	(100)	(166)	(8)	(432)

Most of the abuse reported by the women only involved former partners (74%). About 24 percent said they had been abused by both a current and former partner. Two percent disclosed abuse by only a current partner. Three-quarters reported that their abusers (75%) were the fathers of one or more of their children. In the two Denver DSS offices, applicants and their abusive ex-partners were most likely to have cohabited and not married. In rural areas, applicants were fairly evenly distributed across non-marital cohabiting, married but separated, and divorced statuses. Across the four project sites, 8 percent had never married and never lived with the abusive ex-partner, 37 percent had never married but had cohabited, 29 percent had married and separated and 26 percent were divorced. Nearly half (45%) of victims reported that they were afraid of the father of their children.

Child support technicians explained the good cause process and completed a good cause questionnaire with 305 women who disclosed domestic violence by a former partner who was the father of at least one of her children. Victims were asked more detailed questions about the level and severity of the abuse they had experienced (see Table 2). Nearly all

the women (81%) reported being hit or beat up, with half characterizing the frequency as “more than a few times,” (28%) or “often” (32%). Half also placed the last beating within the past two years with 21 percent saying it had happened less than 6 months ago, 15 percent between 6-12 months and 14 percent between 1-2 years ago.

Percent Reporting:	Denver Central	Denver Montbello	Mesa	Archuleta	Total
He hit her/beat her up	82%	82%	80%	88%	81%
Called police	72%	79%	67%	63%	71%
Got a restraining order	45%	30%	50%	63%	45%
He violated restraining order	36%	17%	26%	20%	27%
He prevented her from working	42%	51%	45%	25%	44%
He isolated her or children	49%	67%	64%	50%	58%
He destroyed her possessions	62%	73%	64%	75%	65%
He monitored her calls and activities	57%	61%	60%	50%	59%
He accused her of being unfaithful	82%	74%	73%	63%	76%
He forced her to have sex	28%	51%	44%	25%	39%
He threatened suicide	29%	20%	38%	50%	31%
He told her she is worthless	91%	88%	93%	100%	91%
He threatened to harm/kill her	65%	84%	67%	57%	69%
He threatened to harm/kill children	7%	23%	21%	25%	16%
He threatened to take the children	56%	75%	62%	57%	38%
He followed her when she tried to leave	65%	72%	62%	62%	65%
Frightened her due to drinking/drug use	58%	52%	58%	62%	57%
He threatened her with a weapon	35%	46%	29%	25%	34%
N=	(111)	(57)	(129)	(8)	(305)

Substantial proportions of women reported experiencing many other types of serious abuse: threats to harm or kill her (69%), threats to take (38%) or harm (16%) the children; following her when she tried to leave (57%); and threatening her with a weapon (34%).

Although we did not focus on the impact of domestic violence on the work requirements in the new welfare reform law, it is relevant that 44 percent of the victims reported that their abusive ex-partner had prevented her from working and 58 percent reported that he had isolated her or the children. While most victims reported that they had called the police in response to the abuse they experienced, a far smaller proportion (45%) obtained a restraining order and only 27 percent said that the batterer had violated a restraining order.

After describing the good cause option, child support technicians asked each interviewed victim whether she was interested in applying for it. Across the four DSS offices, 6.7 percent of interviewed victims said they would be interested in applying while 89 percent declined. Looked at somewhat differently, 2.7 percent of all applicants for public assistance studied in this project expressed an interest in applying for good cause.

Asked why they were uninterested, nearly all of those who declined to apply for good cause (93%) strongly agreed with the statement, "I want child support." Other common reasons given by about half of the women who rejected the good cause option were: "The absent parent knows where I live," "The abuse happened long ago, there's no current danger," and "I already have a child support order for him." A quarter of the victims strongly agreed that they faced a dangerous situation but felt that it would not be exacerbated by the pursuit of child support. A quarter said that while they preferred not to deal with their abusive ex-partner, it was not a dangerous situation (see Table 3).

Percent saying "Very True":	Denver Central	Denver Montbello	Mesa	Archuleta	Total
I am afraid of the abusive partner	11%	30%	25%	20%	21%
I want child support*	95%	87%	94%	100%	93%
The absent parent knows where I live*	35%	47%	64%	80%	51%
The absent parent visits the children*	11%	11%	28%	20%	19%
I want to get back at him by going after support*	8%	13%	5%	0	8%
I don't have documents to prove harm*	9%	50%	39%	40%	32%
Danger exists, but child support won't make it worse	14%	31%	25%	25%	23%
I don't want to deal with him, but there's no danger*	9%	44%	26%	20%	25%
The abuse happened long ago, there's no current danger*	25%	52%	44%	40%	40%
I don't want to do the paperwork for good cause*	14%	57%	38%	60%	36%
I don't think good cause would be granted	3%	7%	2%	0	3%
I don't understand good cause	3%	0	0	0	1%
No one would believe me*	1%	2%	1%	0	1%
I already have a child support order for him*	55%	34%	45%	0	45%
N=	(87)	(54)	(112)	(5)	(258)

\*Differences across sites are significant at .05.

Only 29 victims of domestic violence said they were interested in applying for good cause. These women were convinced that the abusive parent wanted to harm them (62%), and/or take (55%) or harm (34%) the children. Although about half of these women (52%) said that they wanted child support, higher proportions maintained that the abusive parent would visit if she pursued child support (65%) and/or that the batterer was dangerous and that child support would make their situation worse (76%). More than a third (38%) of victims interested in good cause said that the abusive parent did not know where she lived. Most (76%) said that he did not visit the children. A small proportion (10-14%) had applied for

good cause elsewhere or been given it. To avoid an abusive partner, many of the victims interested in good cause reported that they had changed residences (72%), moved out-of-state (55%), and/or stayed at a shelter for battered women (34%) (see Table 4).

Percent reporting:	
Changed Residences	72
Moved out of state	55
Stayed at a shelter for battered women	34
Percent responding "True" to the following:	
Abusive parent wants to harm me	62
Abusive parent wants to take the children	55
Abusive parent wants to harm the children	34
I want child support	52
I have documents to prove harm	90
If I pursue child support, he will visit	65
If child's parent starts to pay or visit, my current partner will harm us	7
The absent parent doesn't know where I live	38
The absent parent doesn't visit the children	76
He is dangerous, child support will make it worse	76
I don't want to deal with abusive parent	100
Child was conceived as a result of rape/incest	7
I am considering adoption for child	0
I understand what good cause means	100
I understand how to apply for good cause	100
I've applied for good cause elsewhere	14
I've been given good cause elsewhere	10
N=	(29)

Eight factors help predict whether an abused applicant for public assistance expresses interest in applying for good cause. The best predictor is whether the abusive parent

threatened to harm the children. This is followed by whether he threatened to harm her, tried to isolate her, hit or beat her up, monitored her telephone calls, prevented her from working, abused her within the past six months, and whether she called the police. Taken together, these seven factors correctly classify 72 percent of the all the cases in our sample (66% of those who want good cause and 73% of those who do not).

As of this writing, we were able to trace the application status of 24 of the 29 women who expressed an interest in applying for good cause. Approximately two-thirds of the women (67%) had their applications denied, while one-third (33%) were successful. Of the eight women granted a good cause exemption, four provided police reports to verify their claims, two relied solely on letters from friends and family (as well as their own affidavits), one woman provided a copy of her restraining order, and one relied on her own statement with a supporting letter from her JOBS case manager.

The 16 women with unsuccessful good cause applications either were denied or withdrew when they failed to provide any supporting documentation or failed to show up for further appointments. During the initial interview and screening, only three of these women indicated that they would not be able to provide supporting documents (other than her own affidavit).

These patterns confirm our earlier findings based on a review of 129 applications for good cause filed in the Denver DSS during March 1996-October 1997. Only 33 percent were approved. The rest were either denied because no documentary evidence was provided (28%), because the evidence was deemed to be insufficient (31%), or because the applicant withdrew her request (8%). The best predictor of a good cause award was the number of documents provided with those most apt to be approved including at least two types of documents.

## DISCUSSION

This project is the first to generate systematic empirical information on the experiences of domestic violence victims who apply for public assistance and their interest in obtaining a waiver from the child support and paternity requirements for reasons of safety. As in past studies of welfare populations, the screening effort reveals that the incidence of domestic violence is high but variable ranging from 28-49 percent in different DSS settings. Researchers and administrators should be attentive to the different levels of disclosure inspired by different methods of identifying domestic violence, as well as variations for different racial/ethnic groups, geographic regions, and office settings.

The fact that a quarter of the victims identified in our screening effort report current and past involvement in abusive relationships suggest that public assistance and child support agencies are logical places to house domestic violence services and/or make referrals to community resources. It is relevant to note that as a result of the screening effort in Denver, DSS has agreed to contract with local agencies to provide support services for domestic violence victims at the agency. Other types of collaborations between domestic violence professionals and public assistance agencies also make sense, particularly those dealing with training and staff development. One example is a joint training project in Massachusetts where advocates receive training on welfare reform while TANF and child support workers are trained on the dynamics of domestic violence. Research is needed to gauge the effectiveness of these types of collaborations and to determine the extent to which victims use services that are offered at the welfare agency.

Our research confirms that most victims of domestic violence want child support. There is no reason for clients, domestic violence professionals and child support administrators to oppose one another about case goals for most applicants for public assistance. Indeed, the objective should be to make child support agencies even more aggressive and effective. Our reviews of the automated child support records for 109 women in our sample six months after they applied for public assistance indicated that very few cases experienced significant child support progress. For example, during this period of time, paternity was established in only 3 percent of the cases and child support orders were

established in only 10 percent. The noncustodial parent paid child support in only 8 percent of the cases. There is clearly room for improvement.

Only 2.7 percent of public assistance applicants said they were interested in applying for good cause; among domestic violence victims, 6.7 percent expressed interest. These are low levels that should be comforting to child support administrators who fear that attention to domestic violence might erode their agency's collection levels. Of course, these rates are considerably higher than the national request rate of 0.13 percent for all public assistance applicants reported in 1993. It remains to be seen whether our incidence levels are replicated in research on domestic violence and interest in good cause that is currently being conducted in several states with the support of the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement.

While many victims report experiencing serious abuse, most say that they are no longer in danger and/or that pursuing child support will not make their situation any worse. Advocates need to remember that victims are resilient and share many of the qualities, needs and aspirations of their non-abused counterparts. For example, whether or not they have experienced abuse, most AFDC recipients have work experience, and express a desire for school or work (Allard, et al, 1997; Lloyd 1996). Nevertheless, a small fraction of the applicant population believes they will experience harm and wants an exemption from the child support requirements. Based on our preliminary analysis, the best predictor of interest in good cause is whether the abuser threatened to harm the children. The other significant predictors include threats to harm her, hitting and beating, monitoring her telephone calls, preventing her from working, abuse within the past six months and whether she had called the police. This information should help workers in child support and public assistance agencies better determine which clients are suitable candidates for good cause awards and be more supportive of their efforts to protect themselves and their children.

For these reasons, it is disturbing that only a third of the victims who express an interest in applying for good cause receive it. Most either fail to complete the application process or are denied good cause because they lack documentation deemed to be adequate to

support their claim. Those who are awarded good cause generally support their claim of abuse with several types of official records.

Agencies should examine their application procedures and documentation requirements and determine whether they are reasonable and safe. In the Denver DSS, barring a request for a time extension, applicants are given only seven days to complete an application with all relevant documents. How realistic is it for low-income and poorly educated women to obtain two or three medical, police or court records to support a successful application? Another problem is that relatively few victims report having temporary restraining orders and only a slim minority report violations of restraining orders. If these are agency standards for corroborating claims of serious abuse, they will clearly be unattainable for many victims interested in good cause. Finally, until December 1997, Colorado, like many other states, did not accept sworn statements by victims as suitable documentation. Hopefully, if other researchers reach similar conclusions about the low level of interest in good cause and the difficulties applicants experience when they try to obtain it, agencies will relax some of their documentation requirements and permit consideration of sworn statements by victims, relatives, neighbors and friends. Agencies should also explore the feasibility of having local domestic violence professionals conduct assessments of dangerousness for applicants who lack official documents and prepare letters to support exemption requests.

Perhaps the most promising conclusion of this research is that it is feasible to screen for domestic violence in public assistance and child support agencies. Before the project began, agency administrators feared that workers would find screening duties overwhelming; advocates for battered women feared that victims would receive insensitive treatment from intake workers. None of the dire predictions have come to pass. Child support and self sufficiency workers report that the screening process generally takes only a few minutes and that it is valuable for clients. One unanticipated consequence of the project is that it has fostered camaraderie and communication between child support and self-sufficiency workers – patterns that do not commonly occur. The issue is a compelling one for many workers who share similar experiences with victimization. Finally, workers

report that the screening process helps to “humanize” them to applicants and create rapport. Naturally, it will be important to do careful survey research with applicants to discover whether they experienced the screening process as favorably. Among the issues to address is whether they understood that disclosure was voluntary and whether the meaning of good cause and the process for obtaining it was clear.

Victims of domestic violence are complex; they confront different situations and have different needs. This research suggests that for the overwhelming majority of victims, the pursuit of child support is perceived to be compatible with achieving personal safety. This is fortunate because child support, like employment, is a key component of the government’s new program for self-sufficiency, which poor women desperately need. A small proportion of victims, however, feel otherwise and may require more individualized child support interventions that offer them more confidentiality or the suspension of child support interventions altogether. Administrators of public assistance and child support agencies should review their procedures to ensure that these individuals are being identified and accorded reasonable and sensitive treatment aimed at addressing both their safety and self-sufficiency needs. This research project is a first step in showing how this can be done and the outcomes that this type of effort is likely to yield.

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