

**REPORT ON FOCUS GROUPS CONDUCTED
WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE VICTIMS
OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN WISCONSIN**

2014



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This report would not be possible without the courage and candor of the 55 women who participated in the focus group sessions. We appreciate their willingness to share their stories, their ideas, and their hopes for all of those are struggling to overcoming domestic violence. Through the voices of these women, we have an opportunity to listen, hear, and understand what these women say they want and need. These women have earned our deep admiration and respect.

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INTRODUCTION

End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence (“End Abuse”), is the statewide membership organization of programs and individuals working to end domestic abuse and the leading voice for domestic abuse victims in Wisconsin. The work of End Abuse focuses on educating shelter and program volunteers and advocates, law enforcement, legislators, and community members to provide safety and support to survivors.

End Abuse honors the wisdom and strength of domestic abuse survivors and embraces the voices of diverse communities. Through our REACH project, End Abuse strives to continue progress towards becoming a domestic violence movement which includes and represents all survivors and all non-dominant WI populations. To this end, End Abuse conducted a series of focus groups in Wisconsin with African American women who are survivors of domestic violence to discuss with these women their experiences and their opinions about the service needs of African American women who are domestic abuse victims in Wisconsin.

Domestic Violence Statistics-Wisconsin

The statistical evidence of increasing domestic violence rates and domestic violence related homicides among African American women throughout Wisconsin is telling. African Americans are over-represented in the rates of intimate partner homicide in Wisconsin.¹ In spite of accounting for only 6% of the state’s population, African Americans comprised nearly one-third of the state’s domestic violence homicide victims in 2012.² African American women have also been significantly over-represented among women who commit domestic violence related homicide in Wisconsin.³

In Wisconsin, there are 73 domestic violence programs located in more than 100 local sites. In any given year, local domestic violence programs serve nearly or more than 40,000 women, children and men through a variety of services including shelter, outreach, advocacy, and counseling/supportive services.⁴ Data collected by the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families documenting utilization rates of domestic violence services show that African American women victims are over-represented as victims served annually by local domestic violence programs in Wisconsin, accounting for 20% of domestic violence services recipients statewide.⁵

¹ Gibart, Tony, Sarah Krall, Patti Seger, and Jane Sadusky. "Wisconsin Domestic Violence Homicide Report: 2011-2012." 2013. <<http://www.wcadv.org/ourwork/homicide-reports>>.

² Gibart, Tony et. al., “Wisconsin Domestic Violence Homicide Report: 2011-2012”, *supra*.

³ Sadusky, Jane. “Wisconsin Domestic Violence Homicide Report: 2009.” Noting that between 2005-2009, 11% of domestic violence homicide perpetrators were women and of those 22 women, 68% were African American.

⁴ State of Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (hereafter “DCF Data”)- Domestic Abuse Program Data, 2012-2013.

⁵ State of Wisconsin Department of Children and Families- Domestic Abuse Program Data, 2012-2013. The data states that African American women were comprised roughly 20% of all person served by domestic violence agencies in Wisconsin.

While the majority of African Americans reside in Wisconsin's southern and southeast regions, with the largest population in Milwaukee County, nearly every DV program in WI serves African American victims, even those in remote/rural locations.⁶

Research on Domestic Violence in the African American Community- Summary

Research exploring socio-economic factors that affect the prevalence of intimate partner violence in the African American community note that a variety of socio-economic factors such as poverty and unemployment status affected the rate of intimate partner violence.⁷ Psychosocial factors such as racial and gender stereotypes have also contributed to the incidence of victimization of African American women.⁸ Moreover, as one researcher noted, African American women in particular face a "double-bind" when confronting domestic violence, often placing their own well-being behind what they perceive as the greater good of the African American community and their children.⁹ Specifically, existing research notes that many African American women who are victims of domestic violence forego reporting abuse in order to protect their intimate partner from abuse by the police or loss of income through imprisonment or incarceration, resulting in an increased risk for violence and lethality of abuse for African American women.¹⁰

The above-noted disparities and related obstacles for African American women call for research into the prevalence and need for prevention of domestic violence and domestic violence related homicides within the African American community in Wisconsin. The limited corpus of research which considers the nexus of race, poverty, and domestic violence also calls for a much closer examination of the economic, social and community underpinnings, conditions, and obstacles to accessing resources that can increase the vulnerability of African American women to domestic violence and homicide in Wisconsin. Further, research is also needed which examines ways that domestic violence service providers and other related systems interventions may or may not be meeting the needs of African American victims who are at risk of domestic abuse and of being killed or killing their partners.¹¹

End Abuse held a series of four focus groups with African American women designed to provide the women with a venue for them to speak directly, honestly, and on their own behalf, about their ideas on how to improve the services provided to African American women. We learned

⁶ DCF Data, 2012-2013, *supra*.

⁷ Bent-Goodley, T. B. (2001). Trauma, Violence & Abuse: A Review Journal: Eradicating Domestic Violence in the African American Community: A Literature Review and Action Agenda. *Trauma, violence & abuse : a review journal.*, 2(4), 316-330. (Hereinafter "Bent-Goodley, Eradicating Domestic Violence in the African American Community").

⁸ Bent-Goodley, Eradicating Domestic Violence in the African American Community, *supra*.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Bent-Goodley, T.B. & Williams, O.J. (2004). *Community Insights on Domestic violence among African Americans: Conversations about Domestic Violence and Other issues affecting their community*, Seattle, Washington. Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community, St. Paul MN: University of Minnesota Press.

¹¹ Gillum, T. L. (2009). Improving service to African American survivors of IPV: From the voices of recipients of culturally specific services. *Violence Against Women*, 15(1), 57-80.

through our discussions with these women that they greatly appreciate the work of local domestic violence agencies and that they do not view the current paradigm of domestic abuse services as fundamentally oppositional or essentially antagonistic toward their ability to receive services that adequately address their needs.

What also became immediately salient through the stories shared by the women is that the experiences of African American women who are victims of domestic violence occur within the complex and challenging social context of being a racial minority in the United States. The perceptions of the women in the focus groups are clearly influenced by their experiences as members of a racial minority that continues to experience the pervasive legacy of historical trauma, institutional racism, and discrimination. Additionally, some of the women's experiences are affected by chronic and acute poverty and attendant experiences of economic insecurity.

Consequently, any attempt to understand the experiences and address the needs of African American women must necessarily consider their experiences as racial minority, the possible influence of poverty, and how these realities and factors may influence their feelings, perceptions, and experiences with domestic violence service providers and related systems. These particular experiences may also influence what an African American woman may need from domestic service providers, what she believes her options are within existing intervening systems, how she may be perceived and (mis)served by the same.

We recognize that this report alone cannot provide a precise panacea for the incredibly complex experiences of African American victims, though we also believe it is important to validate the experiences of these women by providing them with a venue to have their voices included as we continue to make progress together as a movement to lift up every victim as we climb. We do this with a deep sense of humility and with a deep appreciation for the good will and good work of domestic violence service providers. We do not intend this report to be an indictment of domestic violence advocates or the current domestic violence services model, but rather a platform from which we can continue to inform and improve our service practices and our advocacy on behalf of African American victims.

Description of Focus Groups

Fifty-five African American women participated in four focus groups over the course of 2012 and 2013. The women ranged in age from 18 to 60 years. The focus groups were conducted at domestic violence agencies in the cities of Milwaukee, Racine, Madison, and Appleton, Wisconsin. The communities were chosen for their higher concentration of African American residents and high concentration of African American victims/survivors utilizing local domestic violence services.

Local programs within those communities posted notices of the focus groups within their programs, at neighboring programs, and at community gathering places. The purpose was to obtain ‘expert’ information from the women that would explore and document the experiences, wants, and needs of African American women survivors. Consequently, the facilitators created a ‘safe environment’ for the women to say what they felt without fear of recrimination or judgment. With permission of the participants, each of the focus groups were tape-recorded and transcribed.

In each focus group, participants were asked a series of questions about the services available to African American victims of domestic violence and the services and resources they would like to see made available to African American women, and the experiences and responses of African American women to domestic violence.¹² The focus group lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours, and during that time, the participants shared and explored their views freely and without restraint. The women were given a \$25 gift certificate for participation in the session.

¹² See Appendix A: Focus group questions.

WHAT DID SURVIVORS SAY?

The women had a great deal to say about their experiences as victims of domestic violence and about their experiences receiving support services from domestic violence agencies and related systems. They identified a number of specific ways that local domestic violence programs were useful for them and responsive to their needs. At the same time, the women also described some problematic experiences. The most prominent commentary about their experiences, both positive and negative, is synthesized and discussed below.

What's Working?

As the data highlighted in the previous section strongly suggest, in general, African American victims are aware of domestic violence services and rely upon them when necessary. Participants of the four focus groups described a number of specific ways they found local domestic violence programs were helpful to them.

For example, the women expressed that having access to emergency housing and food is critical for safety and they appreciated that there was a place to go and that their basic needs (such as food) would be met in the time of crisis. Also, the women expressed that having counseling services and support groups available for them to participate in eased the isolation they experience as victims and reduced the trauma associated with their abuse. African American women in the groups found value in sharing experiences and support with others, though a number of women felt the experience would be enhanced with support groups composed completely of African American victims.¹³

The women also expressed that having children's services at the same time as adult support groups was helpful because it meant that the needs of their children were being served and that someone was helping their kids to process their trauma while parents have critical time with other adults. Relatedly, the women reported that having access to transitional housing that allows children is vital for many victims, and when African American women have access to that precious service, they felt that their most immediate and acute barrier to overcoming their abuse was met.

Finally, the women reported that having access to technology and internet-based resources allows them to research options safely, without fear that their abuser will follow their internet trails. Many domestic violence programs provide computer access that facilitates housing and job searches, relocation options, and break the isolation experienced by many victims, allowing them to stay connected to family and friends who make up their personal support network outside of the program.

¹³ This point is discussed at greater length in the section "What Do Survivors Want?- Culturally Appropriate Approaches."

What's Not Working?

The women we spoke to also identified a number of ways which local domestic violence programs were not useful for them and not responsive to their needs. An important part of understanding the women's perspectives on this particular issue involves comprehending and appreciating their experiences as African American women and as African American victims of domestic violence.

For example, many described feeling strong pressures from within their communities and larger society to live up to the archetype of the Strong Black Woman who is immune to pain and abuse. As one woman said:

"We're supposed to be strong, and being abused is embarrassing... [people] see us as strong black women... you put on a brave face to protect yourself."

This social expectation led many women in the groups to deny their abuse and to feel too embarrassed to reach out for help to domestic violence organizations.

Feeling Like Domestic Violence Services are Not "For Them"

When some the women did contemplate asking they reported being unaware of any resources or services available to help them and feeling as if they had no options to get the kind of help they needed. This sentiment was salient throughout the focus groups, best expressed by one participant as follows:

"They have a shelter for domestic violence, but that's for anyone who's ever been [abused], but it ain't for specifically you...if there were resources out there specifically for us, that would help us more, but it's none."

Many women who participated in the focus group often discussed feeling that the focus groups were not "for them". At the same time, some of the women also reported feeling that there were many options made available to domestic violence victims. This dichotomous split in the women's opinions regarding the availability of services is noteworthy because, as stated previously, African American women are over-represented the population of victims who utilize domestic violence services.

Hence, it is surmisable that the women's beliefs about the availability of services is not based on actual availability of services, but is based on their opinion that the services and resources offered to them do not meet their specific needs, and are thus not a practical option for them. Many of the women expressed that they thought the services offered which required them to engage with the criminal justice system were not "for them" and thus not viable options. The challenges and system-weariness the women expressed vis-à-vis the criminal justice system is discussed further in the section below.

Alternatively, it can also be deduced that the women's beliefs about the availability of services is based on the women's feelings that some of the services and resources offered to them were not specifically designed to meet the unique cultural needs of African American women and were thus not "for them". This sentiment was shared by many of the women we spoke to in each of the focus groups.

Challenges with the Criminal Justice System

The women highlighted many reasons why they believed the criminal justice system is not a viable option to use to meet their needs. Throughout our discussion, many of the women expressed deep mistrust of and a strong reluctance to engage with the criminal justice system. Time and again we heard the women say that fear of police intervention based on previous negative outcomes served as prime motivation to keep quiet about their abuse. As one participant put it:

"Women are scared to call the police when they are being abused by their spouses because they are afraid of going to jail. Because if you try and fight back...they are going check your background and to take you to jail and he has been beating on you all along."

Another said:

"I am scared enough to call the police and the police come out...if the police don't arrest [my abuser], and I end up going to jail, then I am in jail fighting for my life and my kids are out here alone."

The intensity and frequency of the fear the women expressed regarding the criminal justice system was very evident throughout the groups and have implications which likely influence the service needs of African American women who are victims of domestic violence.¹⁴

Challenges with Domestic Violence Services

Many survivors felt that the environment at domestic violence agencies mistreated them and were not supportive or accepting of them. Many also described feeling that there were unnecessary barriers put in place for them to receive adequate assistance. Many also reported feeling like an outsider and like they were being treated unfairly because of their race. One woman described her experience receiving services in the following way:

"You might as well get abused by your abuser than to come up in here and get abused in a different way. Why come up in [the domestic violence shelter] and let staff and residents stress you out?"

¹⁴ These implications are discussed in greater detail in the section entitled "Improving Services for African American Victims."

Some of women reported feeling alienated, uncomfortable, and judged. As expressed by another participant:

“I don’t feel welcome, and I need to be extra nice and can’t be myself. When in Rome. It makes me want to get out of here quick.”

Another stated their feeling in the following way:

“Our voice is heavy and it carries. I think that there is not a lot of diversity and people here are not comfortable tending to the needs of others. They haven’t had to in their personal life or career. We as African Americans are labeled as loud [and] aggressive. We don’t know if we are going to make it here. It bothers me.”

The women also discussed many ways in which they felt there were too many structural barriers in place which decreased their ability to receive adequate services. This included such things as not being asked about what they needed, not being told about available services, or being told too late about services to benefit from them. Others mentioned feeling as if there too many conditions put on them in order to receive the services they needed. As one participant shared:

“Some programs make you first go to a shelter or DV program [group] before they will help you. Why do I have to do all that, when I need to come in? I was just beat up. Why so much put on getting the help, so many conditions? [It’s] one of the biggest barriers for women that flee.”

Many women described feeling “empty”, “unhelped”, and “like a number” after working with domestic violence programs they viewed as being “bureaucratic” and “not compassionate”. Many also reported feeling afraid to speak up about their continuing need for services because they would be asked to leave the shelter. As one woman put it:

“If I push too hard, they are going to kick me out. If I come in demanding stuff, then I will be seen as the black girl demanding stuff. So I have to play nice and not be an inconvenience to them. I was told to slow down, and I was told that I was impatient.”

Many women described ways in which they felt they were treated differently because of their race. This included feeling as if they were offered fewer services than other racial groups, not offered the same services as women of other races, and that other racial groups received more attention and support than African American women. As one participant put it:

“When you are an African American woman and you go [to a domestic violence agency] for services, they are not trying to give all their attention to your needs, they are more catering to the white women...I feel like I am brushed off to the side.”

Another participant stated:

“They are more attentive to other races...and that’s all fine and dandy, but when you do speak up, you don’t get what all those white women do. And that’s the reason why it’s always a closed mouth...We have already been thought this behavior for centuries. They don’t see us as victims. So that’s why so many black women of today hold [their emotions] in.”

The women we spoke with expressed a number of challenges and heartfelt emotions related to their experiences with receiving domestic violence services. Each of the challenges and emotions presents an opportunity for domestic violence agencies to consider ways in which they can work and think creatively about enhancing and revising the services they provide to better meet the needs of this critically vulnerable population of domestic violence victims.

When Women Fight Back

The notion of black women “holding their emotions in” also came up around the critical question of when African American women fight back against their abusers. While many of the women reported they often did not fight back against their abusers, the women who reported fighting back against their abusers reported that their decision to fight back was driven by a number of factors, including acting in self-defense, feeling “optioned out”, and reaching an emotional breaking point.

When the women fought back in self-defense, they described feeling that the abuse was so bad and that they felt too afraid not to fight back. As one woman put it, because it was “him or me”. Many of the women also reported they fought back against their abusers because they felt as though there was no other resource or service available to help them stop the abuse. As one woman put it:

“There are no resources, no services, you are fearing for your life...when you ask for a restraining order or call the police, it’s not taken seriously...that’s when you feel like you can handle it on your own. When you feel like the police and no one else is going to do it...I didn’t know anything about no shelter for abused women.”

Additionally, many of the women spoke to how being abused while also experiencing all the other stressors in their lives brought them to an emotional breaking point. Almost uniformly across all focus groups, the women reported they fought back when they felt “sick and tired of being sick and tired”. As one woman stated:

“We have the tendency to carry everything on our shoulders. With the poverty and living in the conditions that have to live in. And they, you are always stressed out about money, and now you have to be extra stressed out because you are getting your ass kicked on top of it. That’s a lot of things to have to carry, as a woman.”

Another said:

“ I think that with the problems in our country, as far as African American people as whole goes, because he have to deal with more than Hispanics and white women...you got money issues, you got food issues, you got housing issues, you got rent....you are tired.”

As is apparent in each of these statements from the women we spoke with, the decision to fight back against their abuser is a tremendously critical and vexing choice that each woman arrived at based on her individual circumstances. For this reason, it is best viewed in light of the totality of the circumstances and context in which she experiences abuse.

What Do Survivors Want?

The women also discussed which kinds of services they would like to see and what their service priorities were in the context of the direct services provided by domestic violence agencies. While some of the needs the women identified went beyond the scope of the traditional range of services available at domestic violence agencies, much more of what the women identified as the kinds of services they would like to see made available to African American women is within the scope of what service providers already offer, but would require domestic violence agencies to explore alternative, culturally specific services, designed to be used by and perhaps delivered by African Americans to African American victims.

Culturally Appropriate Approaches

The women expressed their need to have domestic violence services and interventions specifically designed to meet the needs of African American women. The women said these culturally specific services would best manifest in two main ways.

First, the women asked for services specifically for African American women. In particular, the women asked for (more) support groups, housing, mentoring programs/opportunities, employment opportunities, crisis lines, and resource and community guides for African American women which are tailored to meet the needs African American women.

“There is nothing for African American women. We need something specific for African American women because our culture is different. I should have the option to share with my sisters...we’re being clumped [with women of other races] and we feel like someone else won’t understand. I don’t want to go to a shelter where they don’t look like me because I feel I will be judged.”

Moreover, the women also said that an important aspect addressing their unique needs would be to have the opportunity to have fellowship with other African American women. For example, having the opportunity to by celebrate African American culture with other African American women, having unstructured group time together, and having opportunities to connect spiritually together were all identified as ways African American women would feel more comfortable and feel a greater sense of community and belonging while receiving services.

Second, the women said they would like to see more African American staff at domestic violence agencies and having the culturally specific services delivered to them by staff members who are African American. As one participant stated:

“It’s nice to have a person of color working here...when I saw other African Americans, it made me feel better....When I don’t see staff like me, I don’t feel welcome. We need the representation, someone that understands what we are saying and where we are coming from.”

The women also stated that having more diverse and representative staff at all levels of domestic violence agencies would help them to feel more understood, more comfortable, and more likely to be treated fairly when receiving domestic violence services. They also believed having more

representative staff would help them relate better and get more helpful feedback. Similarly, the women also mentioned that they would also feel more welcome at domestic violence agencies if staff that are not African American would make more effort to understand them and their experiences as black women.

Economic Supports

The women stressed their strong desire to have access to an array of supports to address their economic needs and fewer obstacles to accessing those supports. For example, assistance with affordable housing, employment, technical training, literacy programming and educational supports, childcare assistance, and transportation services, all ranked very highly for the women in our focus groups.

According to many of the women we spoke with, survivors who leave their partners are also in great need of emergency housing, additional “home-like” living options, and secure housing options. Many of the women voiced their strong desire for affordable single family homes, single-family apartments, 24-hour safe houses, and housing in areas away from their home communities but also in close proximity to many economic resources.

Emotional Supports

Another service priority the women identified as highly important to addressing their needs as victims was to have more opportunities to talk about their emotions and trauma and to have opportunities to build their self-esteem and sense of self-worth. The women stated they would like to have more support groups focused on mental-health to deal with their pain, fear, and anger, as victims. They also identified having an African American therapist or counselor work with them intensely while they were receiving services as a pressing need.

The women also discussed how they would like to be a part of a mentoring program for African American women. Specifically, the women said they would like to have an African American mentor who is a survivor be a mentor to other African American women. They believed having this opportunity would allow them to feel better about themselves and allow them to feel empowered because they would be able to serve as role models and feel like they were more than as victims. The women also said that being part of a mentoring program would make them feel more inclined to open up about their emotional struggles and their needs as victims.

IMPROVING SERVICES FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN VICTIMS

I. Shelter Services:

The concept of needing a “home-like” environment was a theme throughout the focus groups. When we think of what makes us feel at home, it might include furnishings, personal items or food traditions. These are important elements of what makes a home but at the core, we are most at home when we can be *ourselves*, unfiltered, expressing joy, sadness, anger, despair or other emotions as we do most naturally. African American victims who utilized shelters expressed feeling that they could not fully be themselves, they felt constrained, and/or that they were often perceived as loud. As a result, the women felt uncomfortable in the space or that they were under scrutiny. They did not feel like it was a *home-like* place for them and communication differences seem to be a major contributor.

The ability to recognize and appropriately respond to cultural differences in communication is critically important to managing and resolving conflicts or even in ordinary conversation. Many African American women who participated in our focus groups felt as though they were not understood or were misunderstood by non-African American staff or shelter residents. This contributed to them not feeling welcomed, understood, or helped adequately while in the shelter setting and many of them have an underlying belief that it is related to their race.

RECOMMENDATION:

There is a delicate balance that must occur in communal-living situations, such as shelter. Domestic violence shelters offer safety to people whose lives have been disrupted by trauma and violence. People come from all walks of life, all cultures and races, all economic groups. Creating a space that addresses everyone’s needs and maintains that safety is difficult. While no single group or culture communicates exactly the same, and individual differences must always be considered, developing an understanding of how people express themselves is key to managing conflict and communication within a shelter environment.

Also, using the women’s own words as a guide, finding this balance may also require domestic violence service providers to make efforts to provide culturally specific services and resources to African American women who are victims of domestic violence. For example, having support groups, mentoring programs/opportunities, and other additional resources specifically designed for African American women would likely increase the “home-like” feeling for many African American women in shelter. Additionally, having African American staff and volunteers may also provide African American victims with a much needed sense of reassurance that they can in fact be themselves, feel at home, and that there is someone within the organization who understands their experiences as an African American women.

II. Economic Justice

African American victims need and request the full range of services, just as any other victims. However, the women we spoke with clearly identified that their needs are more focused on economic supports such as housing, child care, employment, education/literacy, and transportation than any other advocacy need. The current orientation of domestic violence services focuses a great deal on the legal needs of victims. As we heard from the women we spoke with, they are less likely to use legal options due to the many negative experiences with the justice system and the attendant misgivings they have about (re)-engaging with the justice system. Alternatively, the women were able to articulate that economic empowerment is what will make the difference between long-term stability and returning to a batterer or becoming homeless.

RECOMMENDATION:

Low-income African American victims identified economic supports as a paramount need in their struggle to break the cycle of domestic violence. Domestic violence agencies working to support these women must be aware of the critical importance of this focused need. Service providers should take steps to help African American victims to address their economic support needs, including housing, literacy, education, employment, child care and transportation. At the same time, domestic violence advocates must also be mindful that African American victims - like all victims - may also ask for and need access to other support services, including legal supports.

III. Empowerment

Domestic violence programs provide support and services primarily using an “empowerment model”. Empowerment centers on the belief that women and children can break the cycle of domestic violence through supportive intervention because they possess the ability to make decisions that foster healthy, violence-free relationships. This philosophy acknowledges a women’s competency and offers her support, resources, advocacy, information, and education, always striving to equalize power between a woman and her environment. For many victims who have been under the control of an abusive partner, decision-making and personal autonomy are fully usurped by the power-dynamic of the relationship. Empowerment focused advocacy seeks to restore her personal autonomy by recognizing that she is the best expert to guide decisions about her and her children’s lives.

Survivor-centered advocacy is comprehensive and individualized. It is a method to work with survivors that strives to meet their individual needs, as they define and prioritize them. Survivor-centered advocacy and empowerment are two concepts that are clearly closely aligned and entwined. Practicing survivor-centered advocacy in the empowerment model is critical for meeting the unique service needs of African American victims.

The African American women who participated in the focus groups spoke openly about being “system weary” and feeling oppressed from all sides. As they have tried to advocate for themselves within the various support systems, they have often found individuals who work in

those systems to be judgmental and non-helping towards them and they strongly believe that this is because of their race. This creates a unique dynamic for African American victims as they must rely on certain support systems to free themselves from abuse yet they feel disrespected, not heard and abused within them.

The women also spoke of their experiences trying their hand within the various support systems and how they view domestic violence agencies as a final option after trying to help themselves. They spoke of expecting and needing more particularized and close assistance from the domestic violence advocates who work with them as opposed to being sent out to continue to advocate for themselves on their own. We recognized the advocates' strategies as those of empowerment, offering victims the tools they need to be their own advocates. Yet, based upon the historical oppression of African American women within many systems designed to help (such as economic assistance), a survivor-centered response which strives to meet a victim's individual needs is much needed.

RECOMMENDATION:

African American victims have identified that advocacy services would be most helpful to them if they had more personal assistance from advocates for appointments within various systems, particularly economic support systems. While many DV services providers may have a willingness to support victims in this way, there may be limitations in staffing resources to provide extensive in-person advocacy services at all appointments. It would be useful for advocates to evaluate, with individual victims, the systems which are least supportive and maximize this form of advocacy to "as most needed" situations. Evaluation need not be onerous or difficult. Simply asking victims about their experiences within various systems will yield results.

IV. Instilling a Sense of Dignity in All Victims

The desire for human dignity is universal and powerful. African American focus group participants expressed in many forms the ways in which their personal dignity had been violated, within domestic violence programs and all of the allied systems that support victims such as economic support, law enforcement, criminal justice, and more. The women felt overwhelmed, that there is no place for them, that there is no one they can trust or count on to understand them or to support them. It may never be the intention of any given advocate, service or system to make any other human feel this way, yet the historical and ongoing impact of racism is so pervasive and influential over the lives of African Americans, it is difficult to overcome.

Advocates need to be aware that each African American victim, and actually each victim, comes to them with a complex history that includes various levels of oppression including racism, homophobia/heterosexism, ageism, ableism, classism, and xenophobia. And, they've been victims of domestic, sexual and often community-based violence. *Dignity* is an internal state of peace that comes with the recognition and acceptance of the value and vulnerability of all living

things.¹⁵ To restore personal dignity, Dr. Donna Hicks, an expert in understanding conflict, recommends that we address humans on the following 10 levels:

- **Acceptance of Identity:** *Give people the freedom to express themselves authentically. Accept the ways in which race, religion, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, age and disability may be at the core of all people's identity.*
- **Inclusion:** *Make others feel they belong.*
- **Safety:** *Help people feel physically safe from bodily harm but also from psychological harm, so they feel safe from humiliation.*
- **Acknowledgement:** *give people your full attention by listening, hearing and validating their experiences.*
- **Recognition:** *Validate others for their talent, hard work, thoughtfulness.*
- **Fairness:** *Treat people justly, with equality, and in an evenhanded way according to agreed-upon rules.*
- **Benefit of the Doubt:** *Treat people with the premise that others have good motives and are acting with integrity.*
- **Understanding:** *Give people a chance to explain and express their point of view.*
- **Independence:** *Encourage people to act on their own behalf so they feel in control of their lives.*
- **Accountability:** *Take responsibility for your own actions. If you have hurt someone or violated their dignity, apologize.¹⁶*

RECOMMENDATION:

Many domestic violence and sexual assault programs have been moving towards implementing a trauma-informed advocacy model. Under this model, advocates develop an understanding of the *whole person*, working to gain knowledge and understanding of history, historical and current day trauma, including the trauma of race-oppression and violence. Once holistic knowledge is gained, the advocate can tend to the needs of the whole person. We believe this approach will help most significantly to restore a fundamental sense of safety and dignity to African American victims. Using a trauma informed approach means that advocates also assist survivors in strengthening their own psychological capacities to deal with the multiple complex issues that they face in accessing safety, recovering from the traumatic effects of domestic violence and other lifetime abuse, and rebuilding their lives. It also means ensuring that all survivors of domestic violence have access to advocacy services in an environment that is inclusive, welcoming, destigmatizing, and non-retraumatizing.¹⁷

¹⁵ Hicks, Donna, Ph.D., *Dignity: the Essential Role in Plays in Resolving Conflict*, Yale University Press, 2011.

¹⁶ Hicks, Donna, Ph.D. *Dignity: The Essential Role it Plays in Resolving Conflict*, Yale University Press, 2011.

¹⁷ National Center on DV, Trauma and Mental Health, *Creating Trauma Informed Services: Tip Sheet Series: A Trauma Informed Approach to Domestic Violence Advocacy*, August, 2011.

CONCLUSION

African American women who are victims of domestic violence have unique service needs which are influenced by their concurrent identities as domestic abuse victims and racial minorities in Wisconsin. From the information provided by the participants in our focus groups we were able to glean valuable insight into the experiences of African American female victims of domestic violence in Wisconsin. We learned a great deal about their perspective on and experiences with current domestic service model and their hopes for future services. Many of the women we spoke to in our focus groups reported being able to have some of their needs met, but many also reported feeling as though domestic violence agencies needed to increase or modify the amount of services made available to meet their specific cultural, economic, and emotional needs.

The recommendations put forth in this report reflect deep consideration of the stated needs of the women in our groups. The recommendations we provided do not require domestic violence service agencies to create new interventions for African American women from whole cloth, but some do necessitate the enhancement of some of the service options currently available to better attend to the needs of this uniquely situated group of victims. Our recommendations offer meaningful and doable interventions for domestic violence service providers which the African American women in our focus groups believe will be most helpful and will work most successfully with them and other African Americans.

While this report offers beneficial insight into the experiences of African American women who are victims of domestic violence in Wisconsin, future research needs to be conducted to see if the themes identified by African American women in this study are also useful to other African American women. Future research could also explore whether the recommendations provided herein increase the likelihood that African American women who are victims of domestic violence feel that their needs are being met by domestic violence service providers. This research should also examine whether these recommendations, when implemented, lead to a decrease in African American women's experiences with domestic violence and a decrease in their involvement in domestic violence-related homicide incidents.

Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

Question 1: Knowing what you know about domestic violence, what are some resources available today (services, programs, resource, or strategies) that you believe may be helpful to an African American victim?

Question 2: What are specific options available for victims of domestic violence or what are those you would like to see?

Question 3: How do the specific identified options Rank in terms of value or importance to African American women?

Question 4: Available or not available, what would you say is the single most important need an African American victim would want available to her? What would you say are the 2nd and 3rd most important needs?

Question 5: Who/where is your preference to refer a family member, friend, or acquaintance that is in need of help with a violent boyfriend, husband, or a Dating relationship? Why?

Question 6: How do you think victims of domestic violence in the Black community feel and why?

Question 7: How do you think the majority of Black victims handle being in a violent relationship and why?

Question 8: Do you feel that Black women are more aggressive and that they are more prone to “fight back”? If so, Why? If not, why not?

Question 9: Women are far less likely than men to kill their abuser. However, in WI when women do kill their abuser, we have found that 85% of the women are African American (research conducted over an 11 year period). What would you say are the reasons more Black women are killing their partners/abusers?

Question 10: What would you say contributes to Black women being disproportionately impacted by DV? And Why?

Question 11: Can you think of anything else that we have left out but feel needs to be included?