



HHS Demonstration
Project Summary

Enhancing Services to Children and Youth in Virginia Exposed to Domestic Violence





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The Action Alliance is a non-profit agency dedicated to raising awareness about sexual and domestic violence, increasing public access to resources and services, offering opportunities for professional development, and initiating legislative and policy change that will bring Virginia closer to our vision: a world free from sexual and domestic violence.

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Enhancing Services to Children and Youth in Virginia

Report on a Demonstration Project Funded by the Family Violence Prevention and Services Program

2006-2008

Introduction

In the United States, approximately 7 to 14 million children are exposed to domestic violence each year.¹ Exposure to domestic violence threatens the well being of children. Research findings indicate that children exposed to violence may be affected physically, emotionally, behaviorally, socially and cognitively. Without the appropriate intervention, the negative consequences can be life long. National surveys indicate that it is highly likely that the severity, frequency, and chronicity of violence each child experiences vary greatly.² Since the effects vary greatly based on the child's experiences, interventions should be individualized based on the needs of the child/youth survivor.

Children living in violent homes are also at risk of being assaulted. The majority of U.S. nonfatal intimate partner victimizations of women (two-thirds) occur at home.³ Children are residents of the households experiencing intimate partner violence in 43 percent of incidents involving female victims.⁴

In Virginia, based on national data and our population, an estimated 300,000 children are exposed to domestic violence each year.



Though exposure to domestic violence can affect a child in a negative manner, research suggests that children are resilient and with age and developmentally appropriate support and intervention they can “bounce back” from the traumatic experience of being exposed to domestic violence. After extensive research, the Search Institute, a national non-profit whose mission is to promote healthy children, youth and communities, (www.search-institute.org) has identified building blocks of healthy development, known as Developmental Assets, that help young children grow up healthy, caring and responsible. Increasing the number of developmental assets in a child’s environment can promote healthy development, decrease the risks for engaging in harmful behavior such as violence or drug use, and even promote resiliency—the ability to rebound in the face of adversity. These assets include **the presence of a parent who offers a high level of consistent and predictable love, a variety of adults who engage with children and youth in caring relationships, a community that prioritizes the health and safety of children and youth, and the education and tools for children to accurately assess danger and turn to trusted adults for help.**

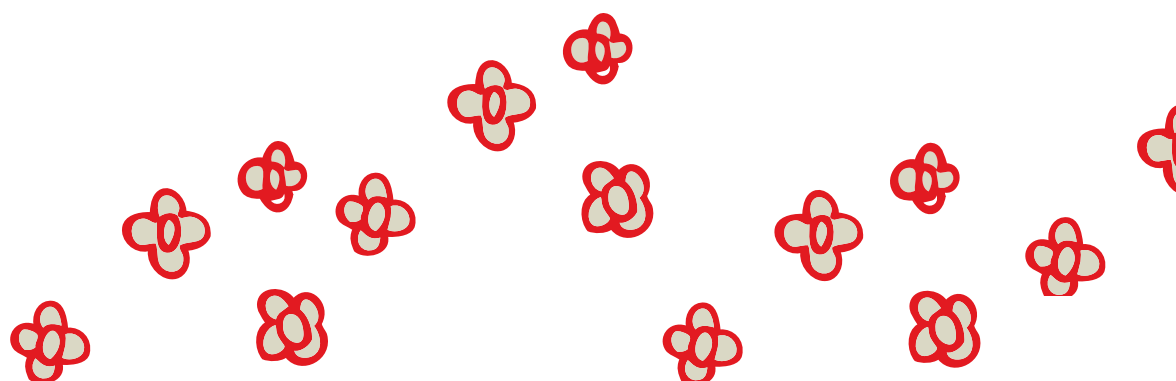
In 2005 the Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance set out on a journey to substantially improve the response to children and youth who have been exposed to domestic violence as well as services and support to their non-abusing parents. We pursued strategies to address the impact of domestic violence in the lives of children and youth—as well as strategies to build the “assets” of individuals, families and communities. As a result of this three-year demonstration project, a number of affordable intervention and support strategies were successfully developed, tested and evaluated.

¹ Carlson, B.E. (2000). Children exposed to intimate partner violence: Research findings and implications for intervention. *Trauma, Violence and Abuse*, 1(4), 321-342.

² Edleson, J.L., in consultation with Nissley, B.A. (2006). *Emerging Responses to Children Exposed to Domestic Violence*.

³ *Intimate Partner Violence in the United States* (2006). U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

⁴ *Ibid.*





Project Description

In October 2003, the United States Postal Service (USPS) issued a “Stop the Violence Stamp” to provide the public a direct and tangible way to contribute to funding for domestic violence programs. The proceeds from the sales were transferred to The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to carry out the purpose of the monies. The stamps generated over 3 million dollars to support domestic violence programs. The Family Violence Prevention and Services Program within HHS designated the funds for support of **services to children and youth who have been exposed to domestic violence**.

In 2005, the Administration for Children and Families of HHS, published a funding opportunity for the development of demonstration projects to enhance services to children and youth who have been exposed to domestic violence. Sixty-five applicants responded and nine applicants, including Virginia, were selected to receive three-year grant awards. Other projects that received grant awards were located in California, Colorado, Washington D.C., Michigan, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon and Pennsylvania. Each grantee received an annual grant award of approximately \$130,000.

In Virginia, the Virginia and Sexual Domestic Violence Action Alliance (the Action Alliance) collaborated with the Virginia Department of Social Service, Office of Family Violence, (VDSS) to develop, implement and evaluate a demonstration project with the intention of enhancing services to children, youth and their non-abusing parents statewide. The demonstration project was designed to assess current needs, test service and support strategies to meet those needs, create new standards of services based on the tested strategies, train providers to meet those new standards of service, and identify resources to support statewide implementation of enhanced services to children and youth who have been exposed to domestic violence.

This approach involved collaborating with a variety of statewide agencies and local communities to create an extensive statewide shift in paradigm when responding to children and youth who have been exposed to domestic violence.



In addition to the Action Alliance and VDSS, other project partners included three community-based domestic violence programs, two mental health clinicians specializing in working with children and youth impacted by domestic violence, two legal services organizations addressing issues of domestic violence, a local department of social services, the Office of Chief Medical Examiner of the Virginia Department of Health.

The three partnering domestic violence agencies were Samaritan House, ACTS/Turning Points and Family Resource Center, Inc.:

1. Samaritan House is located in Virginia Beach and is one of Virginia's largest domestic violence programs. The program includes a group of emergency shelters, transitional housing and a community outreach center where advocacy, clinical and legal services are provided to victims and their children. A long-standing collaboration with the local department of social services resulted in one of Virginia's first social services agency based domestic violence projects.

2. ACTS/Turning Points is located in Prince William County, a once rural Northern Virginia community that has become a suburb of Washington, D.C. The program operates two residential shelters, provides a wide array of community-based services and provides one of the most stable and effective batterer intervention programs operating in Virginia.

3. Family Resource Center, Inc. is located in Wytheville and serves a five county area in southwest Virginia. Service provision in rural areas of the state, especially in the southwestern part of the state, faces many unique challenges: long distances, depressed local economics, scarce resources, and a lack of cultural sensitivity around many issues including race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, and sexual orientation. The Family Resource Center has been very successful in the face of these challenges—reaching out to the growing migrant Latino population, developing unique community partnerships to support and enhance shelter services, and offering effective advocacy services on behalf of children and youth.

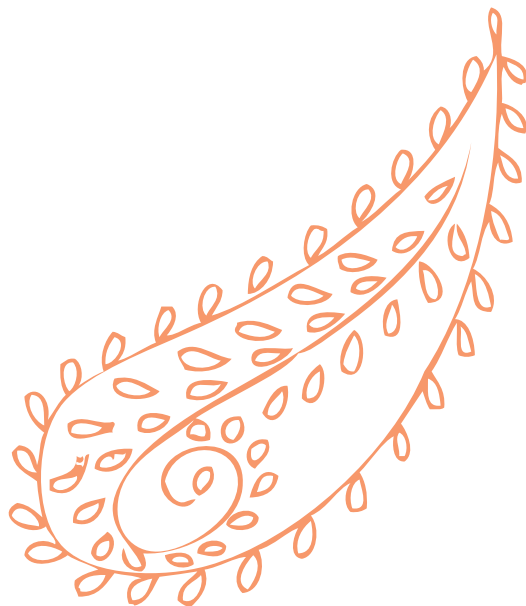
These three diverse domestic violence programs agreed to work with the Action Alliance and VDSS to identify, implement and evaluate achievable service enhancement strategies for children, youth and their non-abusing parents that would bring Virginia domestic violence programs closer to providing comprehensive services to children, youth and their non-abusing parents. **A minimum of 30 children, youth and non-abusing parents were expected to receive enhanced services each month, or 360 individuals in a 12-month period across all three partnering domestic violence programs.** At least 40% of these services were to be delivered in a community setting (non-shelter), and at least 50% were to be delivered to children, youth and non-abusing parents from a traditionally underserved community: racial/ethnic minorities, families in poverty, children/youth/parents with physical, sensory, cognitive or mental health

disabilities or other groups who have been identified by the program as “under-served”.

Representatives from each partnering domestic violence program and the other project partners formed an **Advisory Council**, to provide leadership in the development, implementation and evaluation of the three-year demonstration project.

The Advisory Council was tasked with:

- Defining comprehensive services for children, youth and their non-abusing parents who have been exposed to domestic violence.
- Developing and analyzing a statewide needs assessment to assess the capacity of Virginia domestic violence programs to provide comprehensive services to children, youth and their non-abusing parents who have been exposed to domestic violence.
- Developing service enhancement strategies to address statewide gaps in services for children, youth and their non-abusing parents who have been exposed to domestic violence.
- Creating guidelines for use in all Virginia domestic violence programs for comprehensive services to children and youth (and their non-abusing parents) who have been exposed to domestic violence.
- Creating guidelines for use in community collaboration for services that support and enhance domestic violence programs’ services and reach children and youth whose parents may or may not have accessed domestic violence program services; and
- Identifying the state and community resources required to support these comprehensive services as well as a strategic plan for obtaining these resources.



Project Activities

Initially, the Advisory Council, based on their diverse expertise:

1. Defined comprehensive services for children, youth and their non-abusing parents who have been exposed to domestic violence;
2. Conducted a statewide needs assessment; and
3. Developed service enhancement strategies to address gaps in services which were identified by the results of the statewide needs assessment and interviews conducted with several professionals who work with families impacted by domestic violence.

The Advisory Council then developed a comprehensive service model outlining services they deemed necessary to effectively respond to children and youth who have been exposed to domestic violence. The comprehensive services model was used to develop **a needs assessment**, to be used to assess the capacity of Virginia's domestic violence programs to provide comprehensive services to children and youth exposed to domestic violence.

The needs assessment was distributed to domestic violence programs statewide. Of the 45 agencies that received the needs assessment, 37 responded, an 82% response rate. Each domestic violence program that responded submitted completed surveys from the Executive Director and from at least one direct service staff person.

To address identified gaps in services for children/youth and their non-abusing parents who have been exposed to domestic violence, **seven new service enhancement strategies** were created by the Advisory Council. The partnering domestic violence programs chose five of the seven strategies to implement and evaluate in their very diverse communities by collaborating with new community partners.



The five strategies that were chosen, implemented and evaluated were:

- 1.** Developing staff guidelines for providing interactive, age-appropriate safety planning and education with middle school youth who have been exposed to domestic violence, based on their individual circumstances and abilities;
- 2.** Developing and implementing a mini-mentoring program for children and youth in a transitional housing program to promote strength and resiliency amongst children and youth who have been exposed to domestic violence;
- 3.** Developing a support and educational support group for teen mothers who have been exposed to domestic violence as children and/or in their teen relationships focused on safety, building relationships skills and activities that teach how to nurture their children;
- 4.** Developing a support and educational support group for parents and children /youth for an underserved population that promotes positive interactions and an understanding of how domestic violence impacts the parent-child relationship and;
- 5.** Developing a model of trauma-informed advocacy services for children and youth based on an empowerment approach to services that recognize how trauma affects an individual's interactions with the world around them.

The two strategies created but not chosen by the partnering domestic violence programs for implementation were:

- Development of an age appropriate, multicultural information packet and advocates' guide to using the packet for use while educating parents of children exposed to domestic violence on safety planning with their children; and
- Development of a model for advocacy related to child custody, support and visitation that is empowerment based, helps non-abusing parents to explore risks and benefits of options related to custody, support and visitation and educating parents about the legal process and court procedures.

Project Outcomes

Services: Each partnering domestic violence program received approximately \$15,000 annually to implement and evaluate their selected service enhancement strategies during the final 18 months of the project.

With this limited funding, the domestic violence programs provided new and enhanced services to approximately 1,141 individuals: 1,012 children and 129 non-abusing parents, exceeding the project goals by more than 100%.

Additionally, approximately 300 public school personnel received comprehensive training on the impact of exposure to violence on children and youth and how to effectively respond to their individual circumstances.

The new services were primarily community-based, and the majority of the services were delivered to children, youth and non-abusing parents in communities that had previously been underserved by the agency.

Services were delivered to Latina women and children, to pregnant teens, to middle school youth through new collaborations and new methods of service delivery. For example, focus groups with Latina women in one community led to the development of a Spanish language group for women as well as a group for children on the same night and in the same location as a Spanish language court-ordered group for batterers—with coordinated and complementary content in each group.



Notable outcomes of the service enhancements included:

- Members of the Latina women's group demonstrated an increased understanding of the impact of domestic violence on their children, reported an increase in communication with their children, and **substantially increased their communication as parents with their children's schools.**
(ACTS/Turning Points)
- Middle school youth who participated in a support and education group completed "risk inventories" prior to beginning the group and again at the end of group. 100% of the youth demonstrated an **increase in their personal perceptions of their strength to face challenges in life.**
(Samaritan House)
- After training all staff on the delivery of a trauma-informed model of advocacy for children, staff members were able to work with children and youth to achieve a **significant reduction in trauma related symptoms and behaviors.**
(Family Resource Center)

Training: One of the findings of the needs assessment was that training on advocacy for children, youth and parents was very inconsistent across the state; many advocates and directors reported no specific staff training about working with children and youth. Therefore, a priority of the project became ensuring that ALL staff of domestic violence programs receive at least basic training. The Basic Child and Youth Advocacy training was developed by the Advisory Council and Action Alliance staff and launched in 2007.

The training was designed to be offered multiple times each year in different regions of the state. During 2007-2008 the training was offered 6 times, with attendance ranging from 8 to 24 new advocates in their first two years on the job.

More than 95% of the participants reported that the Child and Youth Advocacy training increased their understanding of how to use basic information about child development as an advocate for children and youth.

Resources: These guidelines are based on the comprehensive service model developed by the Advisory Council and evaluation of the five service enhancement strategies evaluated for the demonstration project.

Guidelines were developed to assist Virginia domestic violence programs with the enhancement of services for children, youth and their non-abusing parents, in their shelter and community programs.

Each guideline defines: type of services, setting for service, benefit of the service to children/youth and their non-abusing parents, and guidance on provision of services based on staffing levels. The guidelines are intended to provide Virginia's domestic and sexual assault programs with a tool to assess where their program is on a continuum and how they might be able to advance on the continuum based on their program needs and resources.

As a result of the demonstration project, **a new statewide collaborative effort was developed on behalf of children and youth across the state of Virginia; the Action Alliance Child Advocacy Task Force was formed.** The multi-disciplinary group has been committed to identifying issues faced by children and youth who have been exposed to sexual and domestic violence and to collaborating on the development of effective strategies, tools and interventions to meet the needs of these often forgotten "silent" victims and their non-abusing parents. The Task Force meets bi-monthly, has produced an annual conference, and is developing resources for use by child and youth advocates. Working together, the Advisory Council and Child Advocacy Task Force identified **resources that would be helpful to domestic violence programs** and as part of this project those will be distributed to each Virginia sexual and domestic violence agency along with a copy of this report.

Perhaps most importantly there has been increased dialogue statewide about the issues faced by this underserved population and the need for implementation of effective intervention and prevention strategies to decrease the adverse consequences. The Action Alliance's public policy committee, member programs and child advocates from across the state used the lessons learned from the three-year demonstration project to talk with legislators about the need for state funding to support services for children and youth who have been exposed to domestic violence. The project provided the supporting documentation needed to illustrate the urgency to fund services for children and youth who have been exposed to domestic violence.

In 2008 the Governor of Virginia included in his budget new funding for the prevention of sexual and domestic violence with a focus on children and youth.

Though the initiative was not successful, it paved the way for VDSS to distribute approximately \$1.5 million in funding to domestic violence agencies for initiatives that would enhance services to children and youth for 2008-2009. In 2009, a legislative proposal sponsored by Senator Mary Margaret Whipple to provide funding for services to children and youth was stopped by a single vote. With the attention of key stakeholders, the project partners are confident Virginia will appropriate new funding for children's services in the future.

Funding cannot come too soon--funding continues to be identified as the number one barrier for domestic violence programs to provide comprehensive services to children, youth and their non-abusing parents.

This three-year project allowed three domestic violence programs the opportunity to "think outside of the box" to implement and test new service enhancement strategies with limited funding. The strategies developed and tested by the partnering domestic violence programs can be used as "models" for domestic violence programs all across Virginia. As resources continue to be a scarce, these "model programs" have produced various intervention tools that have been evaluated and can be modified to meet the needs of community programs.



We would like to extend our gratitude to everyone who contributed significantly to the success of this project.

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