

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

HEARINGS
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON SELECT EDUCATION
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
NINETY-FIFTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

ON

H.R. 7927 and H.R. 8948

TO AUTHORIZE THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH, EDUCATION,
AND WELFARE TO ESTABLISH A GRANT PROGRAM TO DE-
VELOP METHODS OF PREVENTION AND TREATMENT RELAT-
ING TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES

HEARINGS HELD IN WASHINGTON, D.C.,
ON MARCH 16 AND 17, 1978

use of the Committee on Education and Labor
CARL D. PERKINS, *Chairman*



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CONGRESSIONAL HOUSE HEARING

ON VIOLENCE PREVENTION ACT

FORMAL TESTIMONY

Harriet Tubman Women's Shelter
presented by Kenyari Bellfield
March 17, 1978

INTRODUCTION

Domestic Violence towards women; which is being addressed by this legislation and which we who work with women who have been victims of abuse is perpetuated in a vast number of ways, one of which is through the mass media.

Stereotypical and psychologically unflattering portrayals of women in the media have done much to set unrealistic standards for "women's roles" in the American home. Women are depicted through the media as being obsessed with cooking, dusting, washing dishes and getting rings out of collars. This abstract concept of perfectionism particularly where housework is concerned sets women up to abuse when they fall short of the mark of the "perfect housewife".

Another dangerous portrayal of women is that somehow women enjoy being abused. In the January 30 issue of New York magazine, an ad read, "How Vilho Vatanen, the Finn, created the world's first sauna when he locked his wife in the smoke house, set it afire, beat her soundly with birch leaves, and discovered she loved it." This type of advertising speaks to an acceptance of violent behavior towards women as an inherent marital privilege and the justification for the behavior is based on the assumption that if she stays she likes it.

The Harriet Tubman Women's Shelter was conceived and developed by the Women's Union of the Minneapolis Housing and Redevelopment Authority, in response to lack of emergency housing for women and children in the Minneapolis area. Members of Women's Union incorporated as The Planning Committee and Governing Board of the Harriet Tubman Women's Shelter. About a year and a half before the shelter opened (on March 9, 1977), much preparatory work was done by the Board of Directors, the previous co-coordinators, and a group of dedicated volunteers. This work included fundraising, volunteer training and coordination, extensive rehabilitation on the house, community outreach and speaking.

The shelter is a three (3) story brown 12 bedroom house (only six of which can be used by residents because the Minneapolis housing code does not allow the use of third floor bedrooms as living space, so they are utilized for small group meetings, office and storage space). The shelter is located in a socio-economic and racially diverse neighborhood near hospitals, schools, parks, churches, stores and community resources and in easy access to public transportation. To battered women protection is of the utmost importance. The Shelter has a combination of internal electronic alarm systems and attention from Minneapolis 6th Precinct car patrol. A well developed communications network has also made it unnecessary to openly publicize the shelter's location.

As a staff we started in a way similar to the manner in which the house itself fills when residents who are strangers in the beginning ^{are} brought together by a common bond. In the case of the staff, the common bond was a desire to work actively on the issue of domestic violence, combining skills, talents and diversity to bring an idea to reality. After intensive training, last minute painting and furniture moving, with some work still to be done on the third floor and basement,

and a budget not fully funded for the coming year, the shelter opened. The paid staff totals 18, and is comprised of two co-coordinators/advocates who share programmatic and administrative duties, five women's advocates (including two VISTA's), two full-time child advocates, an administrative assistant/bookkeeper, two full-time (CETA) child activities coordinators, one housing advocate, one employment advocate, two hospital advocates, one resource advocate, one 3/4 UYA student and one half-time maintenance person. With the aid of approximately 20 volunteers we work to meet the needs of the women and children who call on or stay at the shelter. We work also to educate the public about the issue of family violence to promote positive change around this issue, and last but not least to run an orderly and humane organization.

Our primary focus of providing crisis-intervention shelter and services combines with the ongoing tasks of extending emotional support to women and their children; interacting with other service organizations, and running the shelter and raising money for its program and operation.

Another purpose in providing shelter to battered women is to help women gain confidence in themselves and control over their lives. This is encouraged by adopting a policy of having the residents operate the house themselves. They decide what to eat and who is to do the cooking, and among themselves policies which effect the day to day operation of the shelter. Two primary responsibilities are asked when a woman comes 1) to sign up for a job every day and 2) that she attend nightly house meetings.

Another objective of the HTWS program is to recognize the needs of children through adequate planning, staffing and activities. Our children's component includes the following goals: 1) to provide daily 12 hour staff coverage for children's activities, 2) to develop a full program both inside the house (activities, meetings and groups) and outside by utilizing available community resources, 3) to get a much needed van so that we can transport children more easily, 4) to recruit and train volunteer staff to work with children, 5) to gather information concerning the special needs of children from violent homes, and to continue to build a program around these needs, 6) to work with mothers in developing parenting skills and with general and particular problems arising in the shelter. A parenting group is now meeting weekly for ten weeks and future plans are to seek funding to continue special needs projects as they are identified.

As a community of women living together, sharing common problems and experiences, the shelter offers a non-judgmental supportive atmosphere where women can begin to recover from the devastating effects of physical and psychological abuse. Twice weekly support group meetings give women an opportunity to air concerns and share experiences, and maintain contact once they have left the security of the shelter.

The staff works hard and well together to accomplish tasks and meet as well the continuing challenge of its own growth, and to improve and expand service to women in the community. Through the process of ongoing discussions, weekly staff meetings and special training sessions we evaluate both our immediate and longer range goals and objectives.

In response to the cultural, economic and racial diversity and the multiplicity of needs women and children bring, beyond the need for protection, we continually re-examine how we can better provide the resources that will facilitate change. In assessing that need we find that in many ways the social and economic system denies women real alternatives to make changes in their lives. Unemployment, confinement to lower paying occupations and the lack of opportunities to strengthen one's skills while earning a salary, all make it difficult for a woman to leave an abusive situation. Most women face the immediate need to become self sufficient and economically independent. For many women, particularly women responsible for the care of their children, the welfare system and its inadequate provisions for housing and necessities is an inadequate alternative. Blatant discrimination against women with children in the housing system, limited availability of long term housing, all contribute to the entrapment of women in situations of domestic violence. The lack of understanding on the part of police, medical personnel, judges, lawyers, counselors, clergy, social service agencies all must be reexamined in light of how they can provide more effective service for battered women.

We constantly ask ourselves, what can we do for the relatively short period of time women are in the house to help reverse the impact of the trends of our social structure. A part of what we do involves creating a buffer between the shelter and the outside; lending support to women while coordinating with community agencies to provide more viable alternatives, and advocating for social change.

Because we are a small community within a community where women from all backgrounds work and share living quarters, it is necessary for us as a staff to acknowledge our continuous need for evaluation and training. Valuable training experiences have come from the residents themselves, and through specific training in conflict resolution, group dynamics and human relations.

While all battered women experience 1) the constant threat of physical violence, 2) a reluctance on the part of society to view battering as a crime, 3) the lack of adequate protection of the laws and law enforcement agencies, 4) reluctance of society to view women as whole and respected persons, and 5) a lack of community support and resources, we also realize that along with the actual experience of psychological and physical abuse, women of color suffer from the complex phenomenon of racism. The translation of racial oppression to women of color who are battered stems from the basic assumption that people of color are inherently more violent; violence is therefore seen as inevitable among "minorities", and the prevailing attitude is "let them fight it amongst themselves". Law enforcement officers are usually reluctant to intervene in a family altercation where both parties may be unhappy about the ways in which the dispute will be resolved. This may be due in part to the commonly held belief that law enforcement agencies do not provide adequate and safe protection to low-income communities, particularly those in which there exists a large population of people of color. Also, whether the beliefs are real or imagined, they tend to be a deterrent to successful intervention in family conflict where people of color are involved. The realities most low income

minority communities' face are escalating unemployment and a much greater distance from access to goods and services, ie fewer hospitals and medical and dental care, fewer grocery stores, higher prices, geographical restrictions, economically prohibitive housing, inferior education, scarcity of child care, paucity of cultural reinforcement, lack of positive role models, inadequate public transportation, and lack of representation of other people of color in professional helping occupations. For a woman of color who is battered, an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and low self esteem are the result. The effects of racism and sexism seem too great to tackle in the face of having been victimized by a loved one. The woman often times feels powerless to change her situation, tending to feel she is being forced to tolerate the situation longer because the very system which has historically served to subjugate and oppress her is the only system which can save her from the immediate abusive situation. The helping professions must be provided adequate training regarding the issue of battering and the needs of people of color. The old myth that all people are alike reinforces the attitude that, the more different you are, the more difficult you will be to help.

Women of color who suffer from abusive relationships are reluctant to openly communicate problems which are looked upon as "family problems" to a system which A) has not been responsible in data collection - public information about "minority groups" is often distorted and used to stereotype the so-called "minority female". B) Where the fear exists that minority clients will be misunderstood and their problems not be handled in a professional or confidential manner. C) Where the service provider's values are distorted to

the point they feel totally immobilized and inadequate to help minorities or women, and D) due to the shortage of comprehensive services, the endless Rites of Passage from agency after agency is frustrating and demeaning. In many cases, the woman of color feels she must trade off her familiar surroundings for demoralizing exposure to unfamiliar and frightening circumstances of which she has been a long time victim. The two respective shelters in Minnesota in order to address this issue have solicited the assistance of community people to work with shelter personnel to design training sessions around our specific needs to deal with the nature of institutional racism. A diverse house population requires the continuing acknowledgment and assessment of our own attitudes and skills which are necessary to manage the racial conflicts which may arise in the shelter itself or be associated with receiving the services shelter residents need. Although there is no magic solution to resolve family conflict, the results and experience of HTWS continue to be positive. We are actively involved in the ongoing process of empowering women, some of whom are of color, to become an integral part of the shelter program.

At this point in our development we are moving out of the experimental stages and into a period in which we have been solidified as a viable resource for women who are victims of family violence and we have become respected for our expertise by professionals within the social service structure in the metropolitan Minneapolis communities.

Our efforts will continue to demand a commitment to maintaining service in the face of our own development and our rapidly changing awareness of the conditions to which we are responding. Aside from the ongoing problems

associated with securing funds for a new project, I feel we have made extensive progress in the refinement of our scope of services, as well as continuing to raise conscious awareness of the larger community to our concerns.

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