A Collaborative Effort Toward Resolving Family Violence Against Women

By Andrew L. Giacomazzi and Martha Smithey

2004
NCJ 199716

Andrew L. Giacomazzi, Ph.D., is Associate Professor with the Department of Criminal Justice Administration, Boise State University, Idaho. Martha Smithey, Ph.D., is Associate Professor with the Criminal Justice Program, Department of Sociology, University of Texas at El Paso.

This project was supported under grant 97–WE–VX–0131 from the National Institute of Justice. Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the authors and do not reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Traditional attitudes and practices of noninterference toward family violence are changing. Multilevel, public-private, collaborative partnerships among the criminal justice system, the medical community, educational leaders, the religious community, human services, and public and private advocates have emerged in an effort to promote the safety and welfare of the victims of family violence and to prevent further abuse.

The collaborative approach to family violence recognizes that crime problems and their effects on victims are not solely a law enforcement matter. Through the formation of partnerships, typically within the context of community policing, a comprehensive, coproductive approach to family violence is currently viewed as a promising way to reduce the occurrence of family violence. For example, Straus (1993:29) emphasizes that "complex, multiparty conflicts require the design and large-scale collaborative problem solving processes."

Despite the appearance of interagency collaboration, barriers toward effective problem solving exist. The following discussion examines one such approach to interagency collaboration—a domestic violence prevention commission. It then presents focus group and archival data, which highlight the obstacles that face collaborative problem-solving approaches. The researchers conclude by suggesting that participating agencies should examine their own policies and procedures that obstruct or facilitate collaboration. For a detailed evaluation on which this summary is based, see Giacomazzi and Smithey (2001).

The City and the Collaborative Process

The city that serves as the site of this study is a large metropolitan area located in the southwest United States with an estimated population of approximately 500,000. Its corporate limits encompass approximately 250 square miles. According to the 2000 census, this metropolitan area is a minority-majority city; more than two-thirds of the population are of minority descent.

One of the local police department's most frequent calls for service is for a reactive response to allegations of family violence, with an average of approximately 2,400 such calls per month (Domestic Violence Prevention Coordination Unit, 1999). According to police department records, 81 percent of family violence arrests between 1996 and 1998 were of males who allegedly either committed or threatened acts of violence against women (Domestic Violence Prevention Coordination Unit, 1999).

With funding from the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, the local police department established the Domestic Violence Prevention Commission for the primary purpose of developing an effective approach to reduce family violence in the city. This public-private, multilevel collaborative partnership includes members of the police department, the district attorney's office, the county attorney's office, the city attorney's office, probation and juvenile probation, parole, the military, the school district, the Council of Judges, State, county, and municipal legal assistance, the battered women's shelter, the YMCA, the transitional living center, the clergy, and other volunteer services dealing with the problems of family violence.

In addition to formalizing the Commission, the police department established a Domestic Violence Prevention Coordination Unit (DVPCU) for the primary purpose of implementing a multifaceted approach to combating family violence in the city, based on recommendations from the Commission. For example, in conjunction with the Commission, the DVPCU facilitated family violence training for police officers at one of the city's regional command centers. (For evaluation findings of the Duluth model training in this city, see Smithey, Green, and Giacomazzi [2000]).

Research Questions

This study was a process evaluation of a multiagency collaborative. Rather than examine the outcomes of the process, researchers examined the process itself as implemented in this southwestern city. Therefore, the following questions guided the study:

- Can individuals from relatively autonomous agencies work together to address the problem of family violence?
- To what extent was "collaboration" realized?
- What can be learned from this case study that might aid other collaborative efforts at addressing family violence issues?

Research Design

Focus group interviews and archival research were the primary methods used to assess the interagency effort and the extent to which collaboration existed among members of the Commission. According to Stewart and Shamdasani (1990:16), focus group interviews are an ideal way to collect qualitative data. They allow researchers to interact directly with program recipients, obtain large amounts of data in respondents' own words, and further question responses and build on answers for further discussion.

Four focus group interview sessions were conducted at strategic points in the evaluation process: Two were conducted in early 1998, which corresponds with the end of the Commission's planning efforts (phase 1), and two additional focus groups were conducted in early 1999, approximately 1 year into the Commission's implementation efforts (phase 2). Focus group participants consisted of representatives from Commission agencies. For the phase 1 focus groups, a systematic random sampling procedure was used to select 19 agencies from the Commission membership. Fourteen agency representatives agreed to participate in the focus group discussions, and 11 individuals (7 women and 4 men) participated in the scheduled focus group meetings. Although few in number, focus group participants represented the breadth of membership of the Commission: two probation officers, one police officer, one private security officer, two nonprofit advocates, two human service employees, one educator, one municipal court administrator, one military officer, and one legal aid attorney.

The same procedure was used for phase 2 focus groups. Eighteen agencies were randomly selected, and the designated agency member who had been participating in Commission

activities was contacted. All 18 agency members (15 women and 3 men) agreed to participate. As was the case for phase 1 focus groups, participants were representative of the Commission membership.

Meeting notes and other documentation provided information regarding the number of Commission meetings, average attendance at meetings, and agencies participating in Commission activities.

Findings

A total of 22 collaborative meetings took place during the phase 1 planning stage. The average attendance at the meetings was 36. The meetings included the six joint Commission meetings and meetings of the Commission's subcommittees. Also included in the total were four community forums seeking input from citizens regarding family violence interventions.

The Commission represents 88 distinct organizations (not including concerned citizens who have no organizational affiliation), including the clergy, courts, education, law enforcement, medical, nonprofit agencies, private-sector service providers, and public social service agencies. All Commission members were asked to join one of three subcommittees where they could make the greatest impact: law enforcement, judicial/prosecution, or human services. Subcommittees presented progress reports to the Commission during monthly Commission meetings in 1997. The monthly Commission meetings also afforded members the opportunity to hear topical presentations on a variety of family violence issues.

Phase 1 ended when Commission members developed formal recommendations to carry out their mission. The recommendations were organized within six focused areas:

- Prevention through public awareness.
- Specialized domestic violence response team.
- Enforcing domestic violence cases.
- Victims' assistance.
- Programs for offenders.
- Funding.

By early 1998, the Commission undertook phase 2, the implementation of the recommendations. At the first phase 2 Commission meeting, subcommittees were formed to explore the implementation of the phase 1 recommendations. Through October 1999, approximately 10 subcommittees, including the judicial, speakers' bureau, law enforcement, and education subcommittees, met on various occasions and presented reports to the full membership at 8 Commission meetings. The average attendance at the phase 2 Commission meetings was 30.

Despite the high activity of Commission members during phase 1 (and to a lesser extent during phase 2), and the outward appearance of collaboration, focus group data disclose the practical and philosophical problems that may threaten interagency collaborative efforts during both the planning and the implementation phases.

Self-Interest as a Motivation to Participate: Turfism

Focus group data reveal that agency motivations for participation in the Commission's activities are not directly goal oriented. At the very least, focus group responses raise the question of whether agencies are motivated to participate out of self-interest—to protect their "turf."

Many apparently collaborative endeavors suffer from "turfism"—partners who consciously or unconsciously strive to remain in control, protecting their own interests. The researchers found that the Domestic Violence Prevention Commission was no different. Turfism emerged during the phase 1 focus groups and continued in the phase 2 focus groups. Focus group participants agreed that turf issues remain a stumbling block for true collaboration because they affect each agency's sense of safety, security, and membership in the wider systems represented in the collaborative process.

Leadership and Dominance

Several phase 1 focus group participants were concerned that because the Commission was established by the police department, the police department might control the Commission's activities, which might run counter to true collaboration.

Perceived dominance by the founding agency appears to undermine the necessary conditions of lateralization of power and intra-ownership. According to Straus (1993:31–32), resistance to a collaborative process results from a growing dissatisfaction and distrust with leadership that is fueled by a fear of loss of power and a need to try to solve all the problems by making all the decisions themselves. Persons who are subordinated must therefore "legitimize" their ownership in the solution to the problem by pointing to flaws or omissions by the dominant agency. Flaws or omissions by the police department were articulated by several non-law-enforcement Commission members.

By phase 2, another leadership problem arose. Focus group participants were concerned about the general lack of leadership in the Commission's undertakings regardless of which agency representative took the lead.

Organizational Ambiguity Resulting in Unclear Expectations

A variety of other barriers to the realization of the Commission's goals also were reported, including perceptions of waning interest in the Commission's activities, lack of organization, scheduling of meetings, and unclear expectations of participants. Although collaborative efforts may offer the best hope for long-term solutions to the problem of family violence, loss of interest due mainly to long time frames for the Commission's activities and organizational problems related to the scheduling of meetings and the failure to frame expectations concisely, pose potential threats to collaboration and the realization of the Commission's goals.

Absence of Key Players in the Implementation Phase

The Commission is cochaired by the director of the battered women's shelter, the chief of police, and the president of the local university. Phase 2 focus group respondents were frustrated by the lack of involvement of these and other key leaders in Commission activities. In addition, the chief of the local police department resigned his position in the fall of 1998. Researchers found

that without the involvement and buy-in of key leaders in the representative agencies, implementation becomes problematic. While the product for phase 1 activities simply was a plan that outlined recommendations for change, the product for phase 2 activities was action. It appears the old adage "easier said than done" applies here.

Marginalization of Commission Members From Non-Law-Enforcement Agencies

If the Commission seems to be taking any direction, it is one primarily focused on law enforcement responses to family violence against women. This was manifested in the provision of law enforcement training for handling domestic violence calls for service, prosecutors' efforts to bring more cases to court, and more programs for offenders.

As such, this direction appears to be marginalizing agency representatives who are primarily concerned with proactively—rather than reactively—preventing family violence against women. Although the researchers have little data to support this assertion, collectively they sense that marginalization of non-law-enforcement agencies is occurring and is a hindrance to interagency collaboration. For example, much of the frustration concerning the Commission activities in both phases has stemmed from focus group participants who represent non-law-enforcement agencies, such as private citizens with no organizational affiliation, educators, and social service agencies in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

Those who support a more preventive approach to reducing family violence appear to have been marginalized, given the more "reactive" approach to family violence supported and undertaken by some Commission members and the disproportionate numbers of participants from the public sector. While it remains to be seen whether marginalization continues, it most certainly is negatively affecting a collaborative approach to remedying the problem.

Implications

The Domestic Violence Prevention Commission—as well as other coordinated, multifaceted efforts—is viewed as a promising problem-solving strategy for reducing family violence against women. However, researchers found that the combination of turfism, leadership and dominance, organizational obstacles, the absence of key leaders, and the marginalization of representatives of non-law-enforcement agencies has hindered collaboration in both the planning and implementation phases and has transformed this process into a negotiative one, rather than a collaborative one.

Implications for Researchers

Future researchers should be forewarned about the difficulties of conducting a long-term process evaluation. While researchers took care to collect objective data over the course of this 3.5-year process evaluation, they acknowledge the possibility of errors. For example, the total number of participants for the focus group interviews was rather small in comparison to the total number of Commission participants. This may lead to problems with generalizability. However, random selection procedures and an analysis of the breadth of representation among participants suggest that all viewpoints were captured.

Researchers also recognize other validity and reliability problems dealing with the focus group method per se. These include reactive effects, dominance by one or more participants, and the possibility of leading questions. Despite these legitimate concerns, the researchers have some confidence in their findings, many of which have been corroborated by non-focus-group participants during informal interviews.

Implications for Practitioners

The results of this research suggest that in an era of multiagency collaboration, the personnel of relatively autonomous organizations—both public and private alike—cannot be presumed to have the organizational capacity and/or the willingness among personnel to truly collaborate. Formidable barriers exist here and elsewhere that hinder collaborative efforts and transform the process to one based on negotiation. Agency policies and procedures that either obstruct or facilitate collaboration should be examined, and effective team-building interventions should be planned in an effort to move closer to collaborative problem solving, the approach that offers the most hope for finding meaningful, long-term solutions to social problems.

Despite the barriers to effective collaboration, there are some encouraging signs for this particular Commission. First, focus group respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the Commission's planning and implementation activities have provided an educational forum for its membership. This is a benefit that enhances collaboration. In addition, some phase 1 recommendations have, in fact, been implemented. For example, a draft of a police officer "checklist" training was finished, a citywide resource directory has been completed, a specialized police department domestic violence response team has been established, and a better working relationship between the police department and the prosecutor's office has developed.

Regardless of whether this interagency, public-private process is collaborative or negotiatory in nature, some positive outcomes will continue to be realized. Further evaluation is expected to show that a collaborative process ultimately will result in more innovative and comprehensive, longer term solutions to the problem of family violence that have greater chances of becoming institutionalized in the region. Further research in this area is warranted.

References

Domestic Violence Prevention Coordination Unit. (1999). Crime Analysis Unit, Southwestern, Metropolitan Police Department.

Giacomazzi, A.L., and Smithey, M. (2001). "Community Policing and Family Violence Against Women: Lessons Learned From A Multi-Agency Collaborative." *Police Quarterly* 4(1), 99–122.

Smithey, M., Green, S.E., and Giacomazzi, A.L. (2000). "A Collaborative Effort and the Effectiveness of Law Enforcement Training Toward Resolving Domestic Violence." Final report, grant number NIJ 97–WE–VX–0131, submitted to the U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, NCJ 191840

Stewart, D.W., and Shamdasani, P.N. (1990). *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Straus, D. (1993). Facilitated Collaborative Problem Solving and Process Management. In L. Hall (ed.), *Negotiation Strategies for Mutual Gain* (pp. 28–42). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.