

Women's Leadership Network

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Article:

The Women's Leadership Network for Safe and Healthy Relationships (hereafter referred to as the Women's Leadership Network) is an innovative approach to community-based domestic violence resistance programming that infuses best practices in the area of family violence prevention programming, the principles of community organizing, and participatory research methods. We define *domestic violence resistance programming* as community-based programming that encompasses activities designed to prevent new domestic violence from occurring and to respond to domestic violence that already exists within a community. The Women's Leadership Network involves equipping a core group of adult female community residents with the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to plan, develop, and implement domestic violence resistance programming within their own communities. The Women's Leadership Network was implemented in a lower-income, predominantly African American neighborhood in an urban area in North Carolina, and the results of the case study evaluation suggest that the program had a positive influence on the participants and their community.

Literature Review

The Women's Leadership Network was developed as a way to address the major limitations of traditional approaches to domestic violence prevention and intervention programming within communities at higher risk for domestic violence, particularly lower-income, African American communities. Numerous studies have indicated that domestic violence is a significant problem among African American women, with forms likely to be more severe and lethal for low income women of color (Benson & Fox, 2004; Caetano, Field, Ramisetty-Mikler, & McGrath, 2005; Smith, Moracco & Butts, 1998; West, 2005) and contributes to many acute and chronic physical and mental health problems (Coker & Smith, 2005; Coker et al., 2002). The problem of domestic violence for women of color is influenced by its roots related to racism and poverty (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). Given the differential impact of domestic violence, perhaps it is not surprising that African American women are more likely to be dissatisfied with community resources traditionally available to female survivors of domestic violence, with the dissatisfaction rooted in racism and a lack of cultural competence on the part of community agencies (Gillum, 2008). Stephens, Hill, and Gentry (2005) have suggested that agencies serving abused women of color need to make a long-term commitment to resources that allow women to reclaim their sense of autonomy. Stephens et al. also note the need for transitional resources, as well as resources for long-term independence needs. These resources are rarely possible for traditional social service agencies to provide; hence there remains a need for alternative, culturally-sensitive approaches to address domestic violence in communities of color. Our approach to developing a culturally-sensitive, research-based intervention method was to use the principles of community-based participatory research and community organizing to incorporate the best practices identified by the Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPPF; 2002, 2004) in a community setting.

Community-Based Participatory Research

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is a collaborative research approach that is designed to ensure and establish structures for participation by communities affected by the issue being studied, representatives of organizations, and researchers in all aspects of the research process to improve health and well-being through

taking action, including social change (Viswanathan et al., 2004, p. 3). The aim of this research approach is to develop ecologically valid and culturally relevant interventions that take into account the unique needs of the community being served (Viswanathan et al.). Ethnic minority communities may be especially appreciative of and likely to benefit from partnership-based research approaches that honor the unique experiences of participants (Taylor, 2002). Researchers and community members alike can benefit from the shared knowledge, experiences, and resources that are gained through the partnerships that form the hallmark of this type of research (Viswanathan et al.). Because CBPR aims for social action and environmental changes that support positive individual outcomes (Viswanathan et al.), it offers a promising application to domestic violence research and programming targeting diverse cultural communities (Maciak, Guzman, Villalobos, & Isreal, 1999; Sullivan, Bhuyan, Senturia, Shiu-Thornton, & Ciske, 2005).

Community Organizing

Community organizing is a “process that engages people, organizations, and communities toward the goals of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of life, and social justice” (Orr, 2007, p. 2). There are various approaches to community organizing, ranging from the coordinated cooperation of multiple institutions (e.g., churches) on a variety of issues to independent organizations which are focused on addressing specific issues (Orr, 2007, p. 2). In general, community organizing focuses on growing a strong collective body of people who can act together to address identified issues. Moreover, a central component of effective community organizing efforts is the training and growth of indigenous leaders. Community organizing stresses the importance of shared power and the ability of individuals to act on behalf of themselves when equipped with information and tools. For that reason a primary goal of community organizing is leadership development. Cultivating the knowledge, skills, and abilities of community members is essential to building an effective organization which can assert power and create social change (Fisher, 1994; Mondros & Wilson, 1994; Orr, 2007).

Best Practices in Family Violence Prevention Programming

With funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPPF; 2002, 2004) studied the most effective community-based approaches to addressing and preventing domestic violence. The FVPPF reviewed 18 programs across the United States that were already utilizing community-based family violence prevention programs. In doing so, they identified five important aspects of community-based prevention programs that they indicated should serve as goals for organizations who wish to undertake community-based domestic violence work. These five goals are as follows: (a) raising awareness of family violence and changing norms, (b) building networks of leaders within the community, (c) connecting community members to services and supports, (d) making services and institutions accountable to community needs, and (e) changing social and community conditions that contribute to violence (FVPPF, 2004, p. 4). Figure 1 includes a flow chart that demonstrates the manner in which these FVPPF guidelines were incorporated into the Women’s Leadership Network. The Women’s Leadership Network uses the second goal of building networks of community leaders as the means for addressing the other four goals.

Overview of the Women’s Leadership Network

The mission of the Women’s Leadership Network program is to train a core group of adult female residents in the designated community to increase the community’s ability to resist domestic violence by (a) increasing residents’ knowledge and awareness about domestic violence, (b) promoting residents’ capacity for healthy, nonviolent relationships, and (c) increasing the community’s capacity to respond to residents who experience domestic violence. The implementation of this project as described in this article was funded by a grant in the amount of \$12,500.00 from the local United Way. The Women’s Leadership Network involves two levels of program activities. The first level involves a leadership training program for a select group of residents. This program aims to equip the participating residents (i.e., the Women’s Leadership Network members) with the knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy needed to develop, plan, implement, and evaluate domestic violence resistance programming within their neighborhood. The second level involves the Women’s Leadership Network members developing and implementing domestic violence resistance programming within their

community. The specific format and content of this programming is determined by the network members during their completion of the leadership training program.

The Women's Leadership Network was developed through a partnership between university personnel and the neighborhood association in the designated community. The involvement and support of the preexisting neighborhood leaders, particularly the President of the Neighborhood Homeowners Association, was crucial to the success of the program. The other key individual involved in the Women's Leadership Network was the community organizer hired to be the project manager. The community organizer was affiliated with the University and was not a resident of the community in which the program was implemented. This person had extensive experience working in both domestic violence and community organizing. She collaborated with the university research team to compile the leadership training program materials, and she met with them regularly as the program unfolded. She also implemented the leadership training program in the designated neighborhood, and assisted with other project-related administrative duties.

The Women's Leadership Network was implemented in an urban neighborhood in North Carolina that is home to a predominantly lower-income, African American population of approximately 300 families. During the early stages of program planning, a focus group was conducted to determine the community's needs and priorities related to domestic violence. The focus group participants reported a need for more information about the dynamics of violent intimate relationships. Community residents were particularly interested in learning how to respond to known domestic violence within their neighborhood. In addition, they expressed a need for increased understanding of how to manage feelings of frustration when assisting a victim of domestic violence who is unwilling to leave her partner. Finally, residents indicated a need for additional information regarding the community resources available to help individuals who have experienced domestic violence. Six adult female residents of the neighborhood, all African American, were recruited to participate in the leadership training program. Initially, a larger number of prospective participants were intended to be involved in the program; however, the program proceeded with the six participants that agreed to participate as a result of the initial recruiting efforts, which are described below.

Due to the formative stages of the Women's Leadership Network program, a case study evaluation plan was used. Our primary goal for the evaluation was to study the steps required to develop the program and implement it successfully in one community. The evaluation process was inextricably linked with the program planning and implementation. The qualitative data we collected included the transcripts of the focus groups held in the early planning stage and after the leadership training program was complete, field notes, administrative documents, meeting minutes, and the collective recall of the project team. We conducted ongoing data analysis through a series of regular (i.e., approximately biweekly) meetings with all project members. During these meetings, existing information and data about project implementation and evaluation were reviewed, barriers and opportunities were considered, and next steps were outlined.

Project Development, Implementation, and Evaluation

This section presents the six phases involved in the development and implementation of the Women's Leadership Network.

Phase One: Development of Program Materials

The program materials that were developed for this program include administrative forms and the materials for the leadership training program. The leadership training program materials were developed to guide a 20-hour program. The major components of the training program include an introduction to the program and team-building, information about violence in the lives of women, leadership and self-efficacy development, and planning for the community-based programming that the network members will implement. Following the principles of CBPR, the program materials were shaped through ongoing dialogue with the participating community residents during the implementation of the project. Verbal endorsement of the program materials by the neighborhood leadership was sought prior to implementing the program. Although further refinement of the

program materials is needed through the future development of this program, an electronic copy of the preliminary version of these materials is available from the first author.

Phase Two: Building Community Support and Recruiting Participants

The community organizer worked closely with the Association President as the project began to be introduced to neighborhood residents. As the planning moved forward, the need for program support from other neighborhood residents became increasingly apparent. Therefore, we worked very closely with the Association President as we began to introduce ourselves and the program to neighborhood residents. In addition to scheduling preliminary focus groups with the residents, we hosted informal meetings at the Community Center. These included an information session over a meal and a viewing and discussion of a domestic violence-themed movie. The goals of these activities were to generate interest in the program and recruit participants. All recruitment was done through face-to-face interactions between prospective participants and the Association President and/or the involved university personnel.

Two challenges arose during this phase. The first challenge resulted from timing issues - approximately 18 months elapsed between our initial meeting with the Association President to discuss the idea of the program and the actual start of the first training session. This lag resulted from several factors, including the extent of program development needed, the time involved in applying for funding, and administrative issues, such as securing Institutional Review Board approval. The strategies used to address this challenge included spreading out the scheduling of the above-mentioned community events, designating one university-affiliated program staff member to maintain communication with the neighborhood leaders, and continually seeking the input of the community leaders throughout the planning of the program.

Trust issues were the second major challenge faced during this phase. We learned early in our involvement in this community that its members had a long history of being involved with other community organizations, including the host university. Some of this prior involvement had created a sense of distrust for “outsiders” among some community residents. Initial efforts to build trust between neighborhood residents and the community organizer included walking the neighborhood with the Neighborhood Association President, who introduced the organizer and the purpose of the project. The effectiveness of this particular approach was evidenced in the following comment by one woman who stated to the community organizer, “If you’re with [the Neighborhood Association President], we know you’re alright.”

Phase Three: Implementation of the Leadership Training Program

Once a group of six women were committed to participating in the program, 11 biweekly training sessions were planned and conducted. The initial training sessions focused on building trust between the participants and discussing the various ways that violence impacts the lives of women. Specific issues addressed included the role of faith communities in preventing and intervening in violent relationships, the effects on children who are witnesses to domestic violence, and how to respond appropriately as a friend, co-worker, or neighbor. Furthermore, the participants began sharing experiences of their own victimization, as well as reporting situations they were encountering with other women who were disclosing to them. Therefore, the group spent a significant amount of time discussing strategies for intervention, what would have helped them, and the challenges of being bystanders. The participants also explored ways that they could utilize the Women’s Leadership Network to reach out to the victims with whom they were interacting, as well as opportunities for prevention with the children in the after-school program at the local Community Center.

Phase Four: Community-Based Programming by Women’s Leadership Network Members

The major intended outcome of the leadership training program is for participants to demonstrate their leadership by planning and implementing community-based domestic violence programming in their neighborhood. As part of the leadership training program, and combined with additional time spent on the project outside of the official training sessions, the participants developed programming based on the most pressing needs in their community and their unique set of skills and interests. The women decided to create a “community quilt”, host a dinner and educational program for their neighbors, and purchase supplies to educate

neighborhood children about nonviolence. The quilt was developed as a symbol of the supportive community network they were developing. It included fabric from many women in the neighborhood. Once the entire quilt is constructed (it is still in progress at the time of this writing), a pact of nonviolence will be sewn on the back of it, and they will ask the neighborhood children to put their painted handprints onto the quilt. The quilt will remain in the Community Center on display for all the neighbors to see. The dinner and educational program provided a way for the women to debut their quilt to the community and to begin to share with their neighbors the information they learned about domestic violence. This dinner also served as a way for them to open a dialogue with their neighbors about the impact of domestic violence on their community. The nonviolence-themed educational supplies for the neighborhood children included the book, *Hands Are Not For Hitting* (Agassi, 2000), and a corresponding coloring book by the American Medical Alliance, *Hands are NOT for Hitting* (AMA). These supplies will remain in the Community Center and will be used by the center's staff for age-appropriate children's programming.

Phase Five: Planning for Sustainability

The Women's Leadership Network aims to develop a core group of community leaders who will continue to have a positive role in their neighborhood after the training sessions have ended. Sustainability planning included determining the participants' commitment to continue the program, the type of support they may need in the future, and their specific plans for future activities. By the end of the training sessions, all participants verbalized a commitment to continue their involvement in the program in the future. In addition, as a result of the dinner and educational event they hosted in their community, they secured commitments from seven additional women to participate in the group in the future. The university-affiliated project staff continued to follow-up with the leadership network members following the formal completion of the program to discuss their future directions and offer support for their future efforts.

Phase Six: Evaluating the Program

In order to evaluate the participants' perceptions about the impact of the Women's Leadership Network on their lives and community, a focus group was conducted after all of the training sessions had been completed. The community organizer conducted the focus group, which included discussion of the participants' opinions of the program's strengths, challenges, and impact on their neighborhood. This focus group was recorded digitally and transcribed. Only three of the women were able to participate in this focus group. This small sample size represents a limitation of this aspect of the evaluation; nonetheless, the consistency of the focus group data with the ongoing feedback we received about the program from all participants is an indication of the representativeness of the focus group sample.

The major strength of the program identified by the focus group participants included the personal impact it had upon their lives. One woman stated, "I haven't really put it all out there, but I've had some things that have hit home with me and it has changed my life." A challenge that the participants faced in sustaining the program following the initial implementation period involved recruiting new program participants and getting them to attend the program meetings. For example, one participant said, "Different people have different schedules and I know we have had meetings during the week and now we are on Friday nights and they still not coming. Um, I don't know, we are just going to have to work a little bit harder." Finally, the participants indicated that they believed that the program had a positive impact on their neighborhood. As one participant stated, "We have touched some people. I really strongly believe that."

Discussion

The sample used in this preliminary study was small, with only six participants from one community. Although the small sample size allowed for a cohesive leadership group to be formed, a larger sample size may have enabled the group to have a larger impact on their community through expanded outreach efforts. The sample was limited to one geographic region, and the program may require modification before being applied in other areas. At the time of this writing, the authors are working to seek funding to implement this program in another neighborhood in their community as part of a partnership between the university and organizations (e.g., the schools and another community center) in that neighborhood. The lack of inclusion of a pre-test/post-test

evaluation renders it impossible to draw conclusions about the impact of the program on the participants and the community at this point in time. The main objective for this evaluation was to identify the steps required to implement the Women's Leadership Network program in a community. Therefore, future research is needed to study outcomes.

Implications for Future Programming and Research

The process evaluation of the Women's Leadership Network revealed the crucial role that the community organizer played in facilitating the project. Based on observations of the community organizer's work, we identified characteristics of the community organizer that we believe to be essential to successful implementation. These characteristics include a willingness to learn from the participants, flexibility to adapt curricular methods and information based on the needs of the participants, a willingness to speak openly and honestly with residents about potential challenges associated with the program, and strong communication skills in acting as a liaison between the participants and other involved personnel. These characteristics are also important for the research team. Implementing and evaluating a community-based project requires that researchers remain flexible and open to changes in their agenda. Hence, it is important that researchers have an open discussion with community residents about the value of program evaluation so that all understand the need for, and are agreeable to, data collection.

Another important consideration for further implementation of the Women's Leadership Network relates to the amount of time and effort required for starting up the program. We did not anticipate the length of the time period that elapsed between the initial conversations regarding the program and the start of the first Women's Leadership Network program session. The time needed to gain the support and trust of the community residents and to recruit participants both contributed to the project's time-line. We encourage individuals who implement this or a similar project in the future to account for this timing issue by building more up-front time into the time-line and by being proactive in addressing any possible trust issues and discomfort about the topic of domestic violence early. In addition, those who implement similar programs in other communities are encouraged to (a) build strong community partnerships, (b) tailor intervention strategies to the unique needs of the target population, and (c) take a long-term view by aiming to build a sustainable network of leaders that will continue to work to support their community's capacity to prevent and respond to domestic violence.

At the present time, only preliminary evidence exists to support the effectiveness of the Women's Leadership Network. Following these preliminary findings, an expanded evaluation of the program is needed. This evaluation should include increased attention to the perceived impact of the program among community residents who are not members of the leadership network. Furthermore, additional research should examine the impact of the program on such outcomes as the development of leadership skills and self-efficacy among the leadership network members, enhanced relationships between community residents and social service agencies, and the rates of domestic violence in the target communities. In addition, as the program grows and moves into other communities, research will be needed to determine the effectiveness of training new staff to deliver the program in other communities and identify appropriate strategies for expansion.

With its foundation in the principles of community-based research, community organizing, and the best practices in family violence prevention, the Women's Leadership Network represents an innovative approach to domestic violence programming. The program involves two levels of activities: leadership development for a core group of female community residents and the subsequent planning and implementation of community-based domestic violence programming by those residents. Through future advances in practice and research, the Women's Leadership Network holds promise for becoming an effective means of building community capacities for preventing and responding to domestic violence.

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