

Improving Accessibility to Services for Immigrant Victims

Lack of information about and access to services to assist battered women is one of the major obstacles battered immigrant women encounter when they consider fleeing a violent relationship. For immigrant women who do not speak English, communities without bilingual services are communities without any services. This paper is designed to help programs help all members of their community who need assistance to end domestic violence.

Step 1: Examine the Demographics of Your Community. Determine what the cultural, linguistic and economic demographics are in your community. Compare the demographics of general community with those of your service population. If there is a difference, it is likely that your services are not accessible to a portion of the population in your area.

Step 2: Change The Way You Work to Make Your Services More Accessible. Build relationships with service providers working with cultural and linguistic minority communities.

- Make a list of organizations that work with linguistic, racial and cultural minority populations.
- Add to the list bilingual/bicultural professionals who work with organizations and government agencies.
- Invite these individuals and organizational representatives to a meeting to help you develop a plan for expanding your services to diverse communities.
- Develop a plan for how your agency can work together with the groups you have invited to your meeting to serve battered women who are immigrants and/or from diverse cultures.
- Train professionals and staff of other agencies on domestic violence.
- Have your staff participate in a training conducted by organizations working with diverse populations on specific issues that affect those populations.
- Identify a liaison who will facilitate communication between your organization and other agencies and professionals so that you will be able to coordinate client services in the future.
- Work out the procedures each agency will use to contact each other to help serve domestic violence victims.
- Work together as a team on domestic violence cases so that women from diverse cultures will have an advocate who is an expert on domestic violence and one who has a thorough understanding of her cultural needs.
- Invite staff members of organizations serving diverse cultural communities who work with you on domestic violence cases to join your local domestic violence coordinating council.

The Need for a Core of Qualified Interpreters Trained on Domestic Violence

The best approach is to contract with interpreters who provide services in each of the languages represented in your community who will work with your office as needed to help offer your full range of services to battered immigrant women. These interpreters should be required to complete domestic violence training and their allegiance would be to your office.

- You should include a line item in your budget to address this need.
- Hiring your own core of interpreters avoids conflicts that arise in small ethnic communities where the interpreter may be a friend of the abuser or the abuser's family and may not respect confidentiality.
- An interim approach might include working with bilingual staff at other agencies who will assist

- offering both interpretation and support for battered immigrant women.
- You might also recruit a group of volunteer interpreters. These may be less available at the times you need them than contract interpreters.

It is DANGEROUS to use the battered immigrant woman's companions or children as interpreters.

- The companion may be the abuser.
- The victims may edit the conversation or be inhibited from speaking because she fears gossip or that what she says will be told to her abuser, or she may want to protect her children.
- Knowledge of the details of abuse may traumatize children or endanger them.

Recruit Bilingual/Bicultural Volunteers for Your Agency

- Community based organizations that serve immigrant communities can help you recruit volunteers.
- Place ads in local non-English newspapers and newsletters. Although you are seeking bilingual staff, these persons often read newspapers both in English and in their other language.
- Create an internship program for bilingual/bicultural students. Upon graduation, these students often continue to work with battered women or immigrants and become a group of trained persons from whom you can recruit staff in the future.

Develop the Basic Language Skills of Your Staff

- Pay for language training classes for your current staff members.
- Bring a language instructor to your office of provide classes during work hours.
- Provide staff paid leave time to take language classes.

Step 3: Hire Multi-lingual/Multi-cultural Staff. This should be the ultimate goal. From this day forward, you should place a priority on hiring bilingual/bicultural staff each time you have an opening in your office in the future. The goal should be to attain as much cultural diversity as possible so that you can better serve all members of your community.

- Bilingual/bicultural staff supplement the work of contract employees and volunteers and offer continuity.
- Having a multi-lingual staff offers much more than interpretation. Some clients will be more able to talk easily with someone who is more like them, from their own culture.
- Some immigrant women fear interacting with members of the majority culture whom they expect to be unfriendly or impatient. They expect to be treated as they have been by others in the community at large.
- If interpretation is to be part of their job, the contract of bilingual/bicultural employees must reduce other job responsibilities to allow time within the normal working day for interpretation so that they are not penalized in their job performance for not completing as many of their other job responsibilities as other employees.
- Bilingual staff must have the same promotional possibilities as other staff members. Your agency must be willing to replace bilingual staff who are promoted with new bilingual/bicultural staff members.

How to Hire Bilingual/Bicultural Staff

- Change the way you recruit staff members the next time an opening becomes available.
- Mail job announcements to organizations and professionals who serve diverse communities.
- Develop a list of ethnic language minority newspapers and newsletters where you can advertise jobs.
- Mail job announcements to language departments and Latin/Asian/Afro-American studies departments of local universities.
- Increase the hiring time frame so that you will have an applicant pool that will contain significant numbers of diverse candidates.
- Remember in making hiring decisions that cultural competency and language proficiency are job skills that should be measured for each candidate who applies for a job.

Step 4: Develop a Community Education & Outreach Campaign on Domestic Violence. In addition to improving your ability to serve immigrant and culturally diverse communities, it is essential that you develop a plan to educate members of the diverse communities in your area that:

- domestic violence is a crime;
- many professionals are willing to help abused women and children-- doctors, nurses, police, judges, attorneys, shelter workers, social workers;
- abuse victims can safely seek help without risking deportation;
- abuse victims can get help even if they plan to continue living with their abusers;
- victims can receive custody of their children and child support; and
- you and others will listen to them and support them through the process of ending domestic violence in their lives.

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