Aggression and Violent Behavior 16 (2011) 354–360

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Aggression and Violent Behavior

Evaluating domestic violence support service programs: Waste of time, necessary evil, or opportunity for growth?

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 12 April 2011

Keywords:
Woman abuse
Outcome evaluation
Performance measure
Empowerment

ABSTRACT

More and more funders of non-profit organizations are mandating that grantees engage in outcome evaluation. Given that this mandate is rarely accompanied by additional funding to devote to such efforts, as well as the limited skills many staff have in conducting outcome evaluation, this has been a significant hardship for human service programs. Domestic violence victim service programs have additional barriers to evaluating service effectiveness, including: (1) each survivor[1] comes to the program with different needs and life circumstances; (2) there is debate about which 'outcomes' are appropriate for these programs to accomplish; (3) many service clients are anonymous or engage in very short-term services; and (4) surveying survivors can compromise their safety or comfort. Some programs, therefore, resist evaluating their services (which can compromise their funding) while others engage in evaluations that can compromise their integrity or values. Others, however, see outcome evaluation as an opportunity for growth and improvement. Evidence is provided that, if done appropriately and sensitively, outcome evaluation can be incorporated into ongoing staff activities, can provide evidence for program effectiveness, and can improve services for survivors of intimate partner abuse.

Contents

1. Introduction

Domestic violence victim service programs have been under increasing scrutiny across many countries to demonstrate that they are making a significant difference in the lives of those using their services (Bare 2005; Macy, Giattina, Sangster, Crosby, & Montijo 2009). As funding dollars become more scarce, grantors from federal agencies all the way to private foundations are faced with making difficult choices about where to target their financial support (Frone & Yardley 1996). Increasingly, funders are expecting non-profit organizations to demonstrate that these dollars are being well-spent—not just that agencies are spending the money as intended, but that their

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[1] While all those being victimized by an intimate partner deserve effective advocacy, protection, and support, the overwhelming majority of survivors using domestic violence services are women battered by intimate male partners and ex-partners. For that reason, survivors are referred to as "women" and "she/her" throughout this article. A conscious decision was also made to use the term "survivor" instead of "victim" throughout. Although there is debate about the use of these terms in the field, the author is more comfortable referring to women, not in terms of their victimization, but rather by their strengths, courage and resilience.

1359-1789/$ – see front matter
doi:10.1016/j.avb.2011.04.008

efforts are resulting in positive outcomes for service users (Campbell & Martin 2001; Rallis & Bolland 2004). While on the face of it, such an expectation appears reasonable—money should be spent on services that are known to make a positive impact on clients—this mandate is in fact quite controversial for a number of reasons. This article lays out the common concerns voiced by many staff of domestic violence victim service programs as they struggle with accurately evaluating their work. A field-tested evaluation protocol is then described that will hopefully assist these programs with their efforts.

One of the most common, and understandable, concerns voiced by domestic violence program staff with regard to outcome evaluation is that they are concerned that the evaluations demanded by funders will either endanger the very survivors they are trying to help (such as when funders expect programs to follow clients over time to gather outcome data), or will not accurately reflect their work. Some funders, for instance, tell domestic violence programs what their outcomes should be, and these outcomes are either unrealistic or reflect stereotypes that programs are trying to counteract (Behrens & Kelly 2008; Hendricks, Plantz, & Pritchard 2008). For example, some funders have grantees document how many women "leave the abusive relationship" after exiting shelter/refuge[2] programs as a sign of program success. Others expect an outcome of service to be that women will no longer be abused. Some funders think that if women return for service it is a sign of program success (she trusted the program enough to return, and found it helpful to her) while others believe that a return for service is a sign of failure (she was re-abused).

While domestic violence support service programs do focus on protecting women from future abuse, they (and the women themselves) are not ultimately responsible for whether abuse continues (Stark 2007; Sullivan & Bybee 1999). All of those engaged in this work have known women who have done everything in their power to protect themselves and their children, only to be re-abused or killed. Perpetrators are responsible for their behavior, and until our communities adequately hold them accountable and protect victims from them, abuse will unfortunately continue for many women and their children. The staff of domestic violence victim service programs is also all-too-aware that leaving the relationship does not necessarily end the abuse (Browne & Bassuk 1997; Fleury, Sullivan, & Bybee 2000; Sev'er 1997). In fact, abuse often escalates when a woman leaves or threatens to leave the relationship (Hardesty & Chung 2006; Stark 2007). For this reason, as well as the fact that some women want to maintain their relationships if the violence would end (Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok 2000), scholars as well as practitioners doing this work understand that "leaving the relationship" is not an outcome that accurately reflects domestic violence programs' work to keep women safe, nor does it reflect all women's intentions.

2. Choosing outcomes that make sense to domestic violence programs

So if domestic violence victim support programs are not responsible for ending violence against women in their communities, what DO they provide for victims and our communities? I have coined the acronym JARS (Justice–Autonomy–Restoration–Safety) as a handy means of describing the typical aims of domestic violence victim support programs. While programs differ in size, capacity, and services provided, most if not all share the following goals of enhancing:

- *J*USTICE—promoting legal, economic, and social justice
- *A*UTONOMY—re-establishing survivors' right to self-determination
- *R*ESTORATION—restoring emotional well-being
- *S*AFETY—enhancing physical *and* psychological safety

[2] Some countries use the term "shelter" while others use the term "refuge" to describe the 24-hour programs available to survivors of domestic abuse that include residential accommodations in addition to their advocacy and counseling support.

Program outcomes, then, can be derived from these objectives, while also bearing in mind that outcomes must be connected to program activities and how much programs can control. So, for example, while programs promote legal justice for survivors by educating them about the legal system, accompanying them through the legal process, helping them obtain legal remedies (such as restraining orders), and advocating on their behalf within legal systems, they are not in control of whether the system will do what is needed to adequately protect the survivor. Program staff, then, might be responsible for helping a survivor *obtain* a restraining order if she both wants and is eligible for one, but they are not responsible for whether the order is enforced by the police.

Another problem plaguing domestic violence programs who want to evaluate their work is that each survivor coming to them for help has her own particular life experiences, needs, and concerns. Unlike some nonprofits who have a singular goal (e.g., improving literacy, reducing teen pregnancy, preventing drug abuse), domestic violence programs offer an array of programs and attempt to tailor their services to survivors' specific needs. Some survivors might want or need legal assistance, for example, while others do not. Some are looking for counseling, while others are not. While this flexibility in service provision is a strength of domestic violence programs, it makes creating standardized outcomes very challenging.

Choosing outcomes on which to judge the work of domestic violence programs is also problematic because traditional outcome evaluation trainings and manuals focus on programs that are designed to *change the behaviors of their clients*. For instance, literacy programs are designed to increase people's reading and writing skills, AA programs are designed to help people stay sober, and parenting programs are designed to improve the manner in which people raise their children. Domestic violence programs, however, are working with victims of someone else's behavior. The survivors they work with did not do anything to cause the abuse against them, and therefore programs are not focused on changing their clients' behaviors. Domestic violence programs, then, need to take a more expanded view of what constitutes an outcome:

> An OUTCOME is a change in knowledge, attitude, skill, behavior, expectation, emotional status, or life circumstance due to the service being provided.

Some domestic violence program activities are designed to increase survivors' *knowledge* (for example, about the dynamics of abuse, typical behaviors of batterers, or how various systems in the community work). They also often work to change survivors' *attitudes* if the women blame themselves for the abuse, or believe the lies they have been told repeatedly by the abuser (e.g., that they are crazy, unlovable, or bad mothers). The program staff also teaches many clients *skills*, such as budgeting, how to behave during court proceedings, or how to create an impressive resume, and some clients do modify their *behavior* if they come to programs wanting to stop using drugs or alcohol, or wanting to improve their parenting.

Domestic violence victim service programs also change people's *expectations* about the kinds of help available in the community. For some clients that may mean lowering their expectations of the criminal legal system (for example, if they think their abuser will be put in prison for a long time for a misdemeanor) while for others it might entail raising their expectations (for example, if they are immigrants and have been told by the abuser that there are no laws in the host country prohibiting domestic violence).

Many domestic violence program services are designed to result in improved *emotional status* for survivors, as they receive needed support, protection and information, and finally, programs change some clients' *life circumstances* by assisting them in obtaining safe and affordable housing, becoming employed, or going back to school.