

## **D.C. FAMILY POLICY SEMINAR PREVENTING FAMILY VIOLENCE**

The following report provides the **highlights** and a list of participants of the third D.C. Family Policy Seminar held September 16, 1994 in the Reeves Building, Washington, D.C. The information enclosed should serve as a supplement to the material covered in the **Background Briefing Report**.

### *Introduction*

**Dr. Mark Rom**, director of the Family Policy Seminar and faculty member at the Graduate Public Policy Program at Georgetown University, began the conference by welcoming all participants and panelists to the Third D.C. Family Policy Seminar. Dr. Rom briefly addressed the topic of domestic and family violence, discussing its importance currently in the media, as well as its impact within D.C. He proceeded by introducing each panelist in turn.

### *Grace Orsini-Mohamed*

The first speaker, **Grace Orsini-Mohamed**, is the Community Education Coordinator at My Sister's Place in Washington D.C. She discussed in detail the problem of domestic violence within the District and provided a general background of the types of services available to victims, as well as sources of networking for individuals interested in domestic violence issues.

In her opening remarks, Ms. Orsini-Mohamed announced that October is Domestic Violence Awareness month in the nation. In commemoration a candlelight vigil will take place on October 3rd on the Capitol steps beginning at 7:00 PM. The theme of this year's activities is "Many Voices, One Vision". This uniting vision is the eradication of domestic violence, which currently Ms. Orsini-Mohamed quoted as occurring every 15 seconds in the United States.

Ms. Orsini-Mohamed began her presentation by describing the phenomena of family violence as an inter-generational, learned behavior. That is, the violence on the streets is a reflection of that in the home. Further, family violence knows no barriers and does not discriminate across ethnic or economic groups.

She addressed her work and the services and overall mission of My Sister's Place as the empowerment of women and staff. As one of two safe shelters for battered women and their children in the District, Ms. Orsini-Mohamed stressed the underprovision of services and the alarming number of women which must be turned away. Services provided at My Sister's Place include a 24 hour hotline, case management, intake processing, visiting psychiatrists for the children, school placement and job and housing referrals. Volunteerism is a large portion of the functioning of this and similar shelters and need is rising for multilingual staff and volunteers. Forty percent of the funding for this shelter is from the D.C. Department of Human Services. Community outreach and education includes training at religious organizations, schools, universities, medical schools, law schools, the corporate sector and the association sector.

The women at My Sister's Place and similar shelters are recognized as being in an emergency situation, at the most dangerous time for the woman. In such circumstances, the woman faces a multitude of problems including homelessness and economic concerns. Women stay from 2 to 3 weeks or for up to six months, but spacing is limited to 24 women and children with six apartments available for transitional housing.

Ms. Orsini-Mohamed ended her presentation by discussing the enormous networking system throughout the Department of Human Services, Public Health, D.C. Coalition, law schools and

other groups dedicated to the family prevention mode. Such groups cited include the D.C. Bar, the Corporation Council, hospitals, police academies, AYUDA, the Emergency Domestic Relations Project at Georgetown University, the DC Superior Courts' Domestic Violence Coordinating Council and the Advisory Board for the U.S. Attorney's Office.

Ms. Orsini-Mohamed stressed that the eradication of domestic violence is many years in coming, but that individuals must keep a positive mode while becoming introspective in their own dealings with conflict. "Please don't hurt the ones you love," the slogan for My Sister's Place should become the guide for all of our daily interactions.

### ***Kimberly Collins***

**Ms. Kimberly Collins** is the Community Outreach Coordinator for the D.C. Coalition against Domestic Violence. She provided the audience a brief description of the coalition and its work, as well as statistics on domestic violence. She concluded her presentation with an explanation of current legislation in D.C. regarding domestic violence and those pending ratification.

The D.C. Coalition against Domestic Violence is a non-profit advocacy group of legal persons, shelters and concerned individuals. The coalition works for policy changes and legal issues and was crucial in the adoption of the mandatory arrest law which is estimated to have increased domestic violence case loads by 15%. The overall mission of the coalition is to dispel the myth that domestic violence is a normal action, but rather stress that violence is not within the functioning of a healthy relationship between intimate partners.

Ms. Collins stressed that the occurrence of domestic violence endured long before Nicole Simpson. In fact, the American Medical Association reports that the highest cause of injury to women is due to domestic violence. At the root of the problem, according to Ms. Collins, is the need for power and control through physical or emotional means. Battering occurs not because of outside substances, such as alcohol, but because of a low self esteem of the batterer. Statistics cited by Ms. Collins include:

- 42% of battered women are later murdered by their partner
- 48% of victims do not report intimate violence out of fear or lack of resources
- 30% of domestic violence cases visit the emergency room
- 25% of domestic violence victims later commit suicide
- 25% of domestic violence victims seek psychiatric help

The Coalition celebrates the current passage of the Crime Bill which allocates \$1.8 billion dollars to prevention measures in domestic violence. Ms. Collins noted that the above statistics, however, illustrate that the violence in the street is but a microcosm of the violence in our homes.

Pending legislation in D.C. includes the Violence against Women Act which allows for CPOs (Civil Protection Orders) to cover all women, not just those who have a common child with their abuser. Safeness in Homes and the Joint Custody of Children Act which would help judges to better decipher visitation rights. The Intra-Family Offenses in Child Custody Act has been passed and states that an abuser found guilty in court must be accompanied when visiting any children involved.

Ms. Collins stated that the D.C. Coalition is a resource center for networking and carries out a public education campaign explaining the urgency of domestic violence and the need for lobbying of bills. She welcomed any questions during the question and answer section of the seminar to expand on the role of the Coalition and on current legislative initiatives.

## *Nancy Turner*

**Ms. Nancy Turner** is the Public Policy Advocate for the National Coalition against Domestic Violence. She briefly described the role of the National Coalition and current national legislative initiatives. Ms. Turner then noted various organizations which work with the National Coalition and several activities which are occurring across the country to empower women with information on domestic violence.

The National Coalition is a grassroots, non-profit, membership based organization with members ranging from coalitions, shelters and individuals. At the national level, the National Coalition works on such initiatives as curricula, programs and advocacy work.

Recent legislative efforts involving great dedication by the National Coalition include the Crime Bill and its allocation to the Violence against Women Act which includes provisions for battered immigrant women and enforcement of interstate protective orders. In addition, this Act dedicates more funds for battered women shelters. Current work is targeted at the fiscal year 1995 Appropriations Bill which hinges on discrepancies between the House and Senate regarding funding for the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act.

Ms. Turner explained several co-sponsorships between the National Coalition and other organizations including the American Medical Association which has produced guidelines for practitioners, as well as acting as the co-sponsored the Domestic Violence Identification and Referral Act. This Act ties federal funding of medical schools to domestic violence training requirements. The American Bar Association also worked closely with the Coalition in piloting a study on elderly abuse. The National Coalition interacts directly with a host of women's organizations and task forces, creating a strong network among its members. Finally, education has been key to the National Coalition through the Family Violence Prevention Funds Education Campaign, "There's No Excuse".

Activities across the country and state have great ramifications at the national level through community and legislative reform and educate diverse audiences from school-aged teens to the press and media.

## *Points Raised Following the Presentations*

\* \* Councilmember Hilda Mason attended the presentations and posed the question as to what the Council could do to better address the question of family violence in the District. Ms. Orsini-Mohamed urged that more shelters are needed and that work must extend to include all victims and abusers in family violence, including within those of the gay and lesbian community. In addition, greater support groups need to comfort the staff members who deal with domestic violence. Ms. Collins posed the need for service and treatment programs for the abuser and the victim, as well as more efficient and affordable legal services. More funding should also be made available for sensitivity training of the police force. Ms. Turner finalized the suggestions by recapping the urgent need for the passage of legislation regarding the CPOs as a fundamental protection for all women. In addition, more awareness should be called for the effectiveness of warrantless arrests in cases of violation to the CPO.

\* \* A member of the Department of Community Services clarified that funding for the police should be in *sensitivity* training, not overall budgetary increases. Ms. Turner also noted that in the Violence against Women money will be granted for the training of judges and other law enforcement agencies in family violence cases.

\* \* A representative from Adult Services questioned why the focus had been solely on

domestic violence where the women are the victims when men are often not the abuser, but the victim. He felt that a greater awareness must be made of the family violence taking place in the elderly community and to children. Ms. Orsini-Mohamed agreed that a purposeful focus was established because the topic of family violence was simply too broad to be covered in such a short time frame. She added that statistics at the national level state that 95% of the people who do the battering are men, and hence the panelists focus.

\* \* A participant from the D.C. Public Schools requested more general information on family violence as a whole, not simply domestic violence. In addition, he asked the participants what can be done with young people in the schools who are clearly effected by violence in the home. Ms. Turner stressed the panelists' views between the connection of violence in the home and violence in the street. Ms. Collins again noted that men were categorized as abusers simply because of the national statistics.

\* \* One attendee requested information about organizations or rehabilitation systems for the batterer, as well as legislation which addressed the batterer. Ms. Collins stated that most cases were referred to the intervention program in the Probation Center located at 4th and E. She later expounded that the House of Ruth had a program for batterers, but it was not feasible to maintain because of low turn-out rates. Ms. Turner stated that the Violence against Women Act originally contained proposals for the treatment of sex offenders and batterers. However, because little research is available on effective treatment for batterers, the treatment language was hence dropped and no provisions are currently present. Ms. Orsini-Mohamed expanded by stating that My Sister's Place does not have any rehabilitation services for the batterers, nor for victims who are men. What is needed, she stressed, was a greater number of men actively involved in the education of this topic. D.C. does have one mandatory program for abusers, but in her assessment the program is too short term to have the desired effects.

\* \* A fellow member of the D.C. Public Schools asked for recommendations on the psychological effects of violence in the home for K-3rd grade children. Ms. Orsini-Mohamed noted that case workers do work with psychologists, but that the reports stay in-house. Difficulty arises in the maintenance of secrecy in the location and identification of the victim and her children. She suggested group meeting with the education community (ex: with staff counselors) to be held to explain the need for maintaining confidentiality.

\* \* A representative from the Department of Justice offered their services for publications and statistics on abuse, at the very least at the national level. In addition, she asked whether in the Crime Bill or the Violence against Women Act there was any stipulation regarding children, or the young abused girl. Ms. Turner stated that within the Family Violence and Services Act there was a title on Child Abuse and Neglect. In the Violence against Women Act there is no title expressly for children; however, the Crime Bill does address youth who are victimized by violence in several titles.

\* \* A member of the D.C. Commission of Public Health announced that the Department is currently seeking a CDC grant for surveillance in D.C. of this violence issue. In addition, they support programs which are teaching these issues to the young. Finally, he announced the Coalition on Violence Prevention will be meeting October 20th at 9:30 AM at the Martin Luther King Library. He encouraged attendance to organizations who deal with this topic and pledged support to all member organizations of the Coalition.

\* \* A member of the National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health asked whether any programs existed which addressed the educational needs of domestic and family violence throughout the life cycle. Ms. Orsini-Mohamed stated that not one set program addressed all groups, but that many different presentations are given dependent upon the audience at hand. These educational services need to be expanded. Yet, she warned that by the high school years, it

is late for prevention, but not for intervention.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

Dr. Rom concluded the session by thanking the speakers and participants and announcing that the next scheduled D.C. Family Policy Seminar will be in November with a focus on family friendly welfare reform. Dr. Rom offered to distribute summaries of the meeting and a list of all participants to all those who attended the conference.