

Effective Treatment Programs for Abusive Men

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By Susan M. Omilian

Twenty-five years ago, I was a Legal aid attorney doing divorce work with women who had been abused. Daily, I'd listen to stories of beatings, verbal abuse and emotional coercion and do my best to get these women away from these men.

Years later, I realized that just getting these women away from these men was not enough. The men needed my help too for unless they changed, they'd go on to abuse another woman, terrorize more children and perpetuate violence through their life times.

When my 19-year-old niece, Maggie, was killed by her ex boyfriend in October, 1999, on a college campus in the same city where I had worked at Legal Aid, I was sure that my work to prevent domestic violence must include working with men.

But is it possible for an abusive man to change? I was pondering that question about two years ago when I met Russell Bradbury-Carlin, director of Men Overcoming Violence (MOVE), part of the Men's Resource Center (MRC) of Western Massachusetts.

He told me about MOVE, which since 1989 has worked with men who use physical, emotional, verbal and economic or sexual abuse to control their partners. MOVE is one of hundreds of intervention programs across the country that seek to hold abusers accountable for the violence, not just contain a man's aggression.

"Our perspective on domestic abuse is that it is more than an 'anger problem,'" says Bradbury-Carlin about MOVE. "Although anger management is certainly a component of what we offer, we address a much wider range of issues related to violence and abuse, power and control, and gender. We believe that abusive behavior is not a problem in the relationship but a problem in the abuser."

The first goal of MOVE is have the abuser stop the violence and take full responsibility for his behaviors. "Our approach," explains Bradbury-Carlin, "is one of 'compassionate confrontation.' Groups are carefully structured to create an environment where there is respectful challenging among group members as well as support for each man's best efforts to be abuse-free."

Dave Mandel, partner and co-founder of the Non-Violence Alliance (NOVA), a program in Middletown, Connecticut, that also provides individual counseling and groups for abusers in New Haven and Meriden, agrees.

“The goal is not to make the men feel better,” says Mandel. “It is for the women to be safe and that begins by the man acknowledging that he has a problem with abuse and violence.”

In fact, Mandel says for most abusers breaking through denial is key.

Sometimes that acknowledgment comes when an abuser is arrested for domestic violence and mandated by a court to attend a program like MOVE or NOVA. But both programs also have “voluntary” clients, men who come to the program on their own.

Abusers voluntarily get involved for a variety of reasons, says Sharlene Croteau-Sanchez, Associate Director/Clinical at Wheeler Clinic which operates the DOVE (DOmestic ViolencE Offender Intervention) Program located in Plainville.

“Sometimes an abuser’s partner urges him to join a program in order to eliminate his violence and abuse and save the relationship,” she explains. “Or he may be ‘strongly encouraged’ by his attorney or a worker at DCF (Department of Children and Families) to get into a program.”

All three programs run groups led by male and female co-facilitators that help the men to:

- identify abusive behaviors and the warning signs that lead up to them,
- practice strategies for choosing alternatives to violence and abuse,
- recognize the effects of violence on family members,
- deepen their understanding of the consequences of their abusive behavior,
- develop respect for their partners and children, and,
- explore how their socialization as men contributes to their need to abuse and control others.

But do these programs really work?

“It depends on how you define ‘work’,” says Croteau-Sanchez. “Change is a process. Having a man move from denying that he has a problem to contemplating taking responsibility for his behavior is progress. He may not be ready to move to

behavioral changes yet but the program gets him thinking and realizing that he has choices.”

Changing lifetime patterns of behaviors, emotions and beliefs require concentration and persistence, adds Mandel. “Often times the perpetrator will experience a sense of progress when he handles one situation without violence or abuse where in the past he would have gotten abusive or violent. It will take him months, but more likely years, to translate this into sustained, consistent, and trustworthy change.”

Today, I co-facilitate MOVE groups in Springfield, Massachusetts and find the work rewarding, stimulating and endlessly fascinating. When moments of change do come for these men, I feel hopeful that ending violence against women has, at least, a fighting chance.