

Taking a New Tack on Domestic Violence

In Addition to Treating Victims, Experts Say, It Makes Sense to Give More Aid to Abusers



(By Matthew Girard)

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By Katie Balestra
Special to *The Washington Post*
Tuesday, September 23, 2008; Page HE08

When Darrick Moore, a forklift operator, first came to the basement of a nondescript, yellow-brick building in Baltimore this year, he was angry.

Baltimore police had arrested him for hitting his wife, and, as part of his probation, he had to attend a 22-week program run by the House of Ruth Maryland, a nonprofit domestic violence center. Each week he would join a group of men, a sign above their heads serving as a grim reminder of the message they were being taught: "Battering is always a choice."

By the time summer came around, Moore, wearing a dusty blue baseball cap, a colorful Rocawear shirt and jean shorts, left his last meeting with a very different point of view. "The day I walked in here," he said, "I didn't have an open heart and open mind." But he said he learned to take responsibility for his abusive behavior. "I got the shackles off my feet. It's been a long journey," he said. "It changed my life for the best." His wife decided to stay with him.

Amid the launch of the federal [Responsible Fatherhood](#) and [Healthy Marriage](#) initiatives two years ago, social service agencies and industry experts have begun to recognize the importance

not just of helping victims of domestic violence but also of treating the batterers themselves in programs such as the House of Ruth's Gateway Project.

"No matter how many women you take in, it isn't going to cure the problem", said Toby Myers, vice chair of the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence, a nonprofit based in Austin. In May, Andrew Klein, editor of the National Bulletin on Domestic Violence Prevention, wrote that abuser intervention programs "serve a critical need" in making sure that batterers comply with their sentencing and don't repeat their abuse. In June, organizers of a Baltimore-based effort, the Young Father's Conference, decided to put their emphasis on the importance of batterer programs by honoring Lisa Nitsch, a manager at the Gateway Project, with an award for her services.

The programs are struggling financially. In 2005, the latest year for which figures are available, the [Justice Department](#) gave abuser programs only a fraction of the \$113.9 million that was doled out for domestic violence prevention through its largest grant program, Stop Violence Against Women. About 35 percent went to victim services, about half to law enforcement and prosecution services and just \$5.4 million, or about 5 percent, to courts for programs including abuser intervention. Officials in Maryland and the District said their batterer programs receive no funding from these grants.

Abuser programs are like "a stepchild" in the field of domestic violence, says Edward Gondolf, research director of the Mid-Atlantic Addiction Research and Training Institute, who believes the programs offer "a really important laboratory to understand domestic violence and its workings." At the Crisis Intervention Center in [Calvert County](#), for example, victims get about 10 times more one-on-one counseling than abusers; one full-time therapist worked with 392 abusers last year, while six therapists, three of them full-time and three part-time, treated 207 victims.

Ed Dunning, program manager and therapist for a court-mandated batterer program in Vacaville, Calif., says his 2008 budget is about \$27,000 in the red because, like many other programs, it relies on offenders paying a fee. In his program, abusers are expected to pay about \$20 per week. "A guy has to choose between eating and paying me," he says.

"Sometimes you feel like the lone wolf," Nitsch says. "We can't compete with victims' services, particularly when you're talking about private donors. To be able to say, 'I helped build a shelter' feels better to them than to say, 'I funded classes for abusers.'" "It's disheartening, she says, that "some people don't view abuser intervention as a victims' service."

Some experts say part of the problem with obtaining funding for abuser programs is that many of them are ineffective, depending on an outdated treatment model developed in Duluth, Minn., in 1981 that, critics say, largely pins the blame on men seeking to assert power and control over women. This standard, the experts say, doesn't allow for cycles of "mutual violence" -- the recognition that women can be abusers -- and the use of cognitive behavioral therapy techniques for treatment.

Donald Dutton, a professor of psychology at the [University of British Columbia](#), refers to the old models as "shaming" programs.

"It's been demonstrated repeatedly that psycho-educational models don't work," he said, "and then half the guys repeat" their abusive behavior. The Duluth model assumes the male is always wrong, says Janet Scott, the abuser program coordinator at the Calvert County center. Scott developed a group for female abusers in 2001.

Understanding that breaking the habit of domestic abuse involves a more complex process of reflection is part of the goal at Baltimore's Gateway Project.

In the support group that Moore, the forklift operator, attended, one man blamed his partner for his behavior. Others started shaking their heads disapprovingly, fidgeting in their seats. In their eyes, he wasn't yet taking responsibility for being abusive. The men started tossing a ball around the room, taking the floor when they got the ball to tell him how they had learned to own up to their abuse. "When one gets it, it's like a ripple effect," Seanté Hatcher, a group facilitator, says. "When they hear it from their peers, they get it."

Moore realized that, having grown up watching violence, he had come to believe abuse was okay. "It was a cycle," he says. After starting the program, he apologized to his sons, who had witnessed his hitting their mother. "I sat down and told them, 'It's not good to hit a woman at all.' All of us cried to one another."

At the meeting, a new member introduced himself, as veterans like Moore peppered him with questions. One man leaned back, threw his arms into the air invitingly and proclaimed: "We're willing to work with you."

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