

## **A Working Protocol for Domestic Violence Programs When Approached by Researchers**

*This Working Protocol was drafted in 2000 by Holly Rosen, Executive Director of MSU Safe Place (the domestic violence program on the Michigan State University campus), Cris Sullivan from MSU Violence Against Women Research and Outreach Initiative (VAWROI: a group of MSU researchers interested in violence and research issues for the campus community), and Mary Keefe, Executive Director of the Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence.*

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### **The Role of Domestic Violence Programs in Research**

#### **Introduction**

Domestic violence shelter programs have been providing shelter, support, advocacy and community education services in the United States since the mid-1970s. While some programs across the country have worked with researchers over the years, most domestic violence programs have not had much contact with researchers requesting access to service participants or files.

In recent years, this has changed. Programs across the country, especially those in close proximity to larger universities, have been called upon to assist with conducting research about domestic violence. For many programs, there are no policies or mechanisms in place to guide staff on how to review such requests.

There is a growing need for domestic violence service providers to become active in assessing the value and process of research. This is necessary to ensure that safety and confidentiality is maintained for those seeking services; that research that is victim-blaming or reinforces damaging myths be evaluated before it occurs; that service providers take part in the interpretation process; and that an informative, clear process is in place before providers are confronted with the complex decision of whether to take part in supporting research efforts that include current or past program participants.

With these thoughts in mind, we have come up with some guidelines that we hope will assist in this process. We hope they will be useful.

#### **Step One: Assessing the Researcher and the Research**

Domestic violence programs have an obligation to assess potential researchers to protect the participants of the research study, as well as the clientele as a whole. Research can be used to further victimize battered women. The risks and benefits of each research study must be evaluated before a program agrees to participate. Safety and confidentiality of participants must be maintained.

## Considering the Researcher's Prior Experience

A relationship between you and a researcher should be mutually beneficial. You each bring a different expertise to the table, and you should each gain something valuable from the endeavor. Find out right from the start what the researcher expects to get out of this relationship. If the researcher works with a university, she or he is probably expected to write grants and/or publish articles and/or contribute back to the community. Such activities result in promotions and pay increases, so you are as important to the researcher as the researcher is to you.

One of the most important things you are looking to determine from your conversations with the person is: is the researcher simply "intellectually curious" about the issue, or does she or he understand and care that women's lives are at stake? Before agreeing to work with a researcher you don't know, check out their track record with other community-based organizations. You want to know that the researcher is not going to "take your data and run," which often happens. Has she or he worked with other community-based organizations? If so, ask someone from that organization for a reference. Did the researcher collaborate with the organization? What happened with the results of the research? Were they shared in appropriate and helpful ways? Most importantly, would the organization work with this person again? Why or why not?

You might consider requiring researchers to attend program training to better understand domestic violence. If they have prior training, this can be waived. If they attend the training and do not demonstrate an adequate understanding of the issues, there is no requirement that the program take part in the research.

We have developed a "Research Approval Application" (attached at the end of this document) that you can use or modify to gain initial information about the researcher and the research.

## Considering Women's Safety

Researchers generally approach domestic violence programs because they want access to either the women who use our services or to women's records. One of your first questions to the researcher should be: How will you protect women's safety and confidentiality?

**Do researchers want to contact women by phone or mail?** Caller ID now increases the risk for survivors when researchers or programs make calls without blocking them as a standard procedure (\*67). Others answering the phone, hearing answering machine messages, or retrieving mail not intended for them to read are some of the ways victims can be put at risk by researchers. How a researcher contacts the victim is critical to assess. Procedures agreed upon (by the local program(s) participating and the review

committee) must be included in the Research Agreement Contract so all parties are safe. This should be a number one priority at all steps of the research process.

**Do researchers want to interview women in person?** The following things should be considered: location of interview, survivors getting to location of interview, and survivor leaving location of interview. The risk of being followed, safe transportation, and maintenance of confidentiality should all be examined to increase safety. Methods to maintain safety should be built into procedures before any research is conducted.

**What are the risks/benefits of the research to participants and battered women in general?** Does the researcher have an understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence? Are the expected results victim-blaming or are they likely to lead to negative outcomes for women (e.g., “proving” women are so psychologically damaged by abuse they can not care for their children)? Does the research intend to study psychological variables of the participants (if so, why?) without inclusion of abuser variables or community-level variables?

**How will the data be kept confidential?** Whether information is taken from women themselves or from program records, it is important that the researcher keep all data confidential. That means the data should not be kept with any identifying information with it, and all data should be kept in locked cabinets. No information should be presented that could be linked to an individual woman.

## **Reviewing the Study in Detail**

It is important not to just “take the researcher’s word for it” when deciding if the study is useful or damaging to women with abusive partners. Request a copy of the actual study proposal (every researcher has one; if they don’t, don’t participate with them!) and have it reviewed by a **domestic violence research review panel**.

**Research Review Panel:** The Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence has created a research review panel comprised of a team of individuals willing to read research proposals for you. The team will be created based on the topic of the research, but would consist of at least one researcher trusted by MCADSV, one domestic violence service provider, and one survivor of domestic violence. You might also want to create your own panel if you have enough expertise in your area. If you want to use MCADSV’s panel, reviews can take place through email, conference calls, or in-person. Contact Mary Keefe at MCSCSV for more details.

Finally, “human subjects approval” must be obtained by the researcher’s institutional review board (IRB) or funder before data collection can begin.

## **Step Two: Determining Each Party's Roles and Responsibilities**

If you decide to work with a particular researcher, and the research study has passed review by the domestic violence research review panel, it is important to clearly decide at the outset what each party's roles and responsibilities will be.

The kinds of questions that need to be answered to the mutual satisfaction of the researcher and the program include:

1. What exactly is needed from the program in terms of time?
2. How will the program be compensated for its involvement?
3. When and how will findings be presented to the program?
4. Who will interpret the findings? Researcher only? Program only? Both?
5. What if findings are interpreted differently? Who decides what gets published?

A sample **Administrative Agreement**, outlining roles and responsibilities, is attached at the end of this document.

# Initial Research Approval Application - Page 1

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

If you are a student: College or University affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

College or University City and State \_\_\_\_\_

Program or degree you are pursuing \_\_\_\_\_

Describe training with a domestic violence program (if any): \_\_\_\_\_

**If you have training**, number of hours trained \_\_\_\_\_ Dates trained \_\_\_\_\_

Program (city, state, name) \_\_\_\_\_

Length of time you worked there \_\_\_\_\_ Your role \_\_\_\_\_

Are you willing to attend a \_\_\_\_\_ hour training if the program requested it? \_\_\_\_\_

Specific task related to research project:	Estimated start date		Estimated ending date	
	Month	Year	Month	Year
Gathering research				
Sharing findings with domestic violence providers				
Interpreting data with input from providers				
Publishing research results				

Where you hope to publish results: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of participants you hope to interview/survey: \_\_\_\_\_

## Initial Research Approval Application - Page 2

Answer the following questions on attached paper:

- 1) Describe research process in detail.
- 2) Were or are those being researched involved in the planning process?
- 3) What are the benefits to participants for taking part in your research?
- 4) What are the risks?
- 5) How much staff time, and other resources, would you need from the program(s) you are utilizing to gather research? (Be specific on staff involvement in planning, assistance in gathering data, involvement in interpretation, etc.)
- 6) How do you plan to compensate the service program(s) for resources they use (staffing, access to interview rooms, etc.)
- 7) How are you going to use the information? (Academic publishing? Other?)
- 8) Describe if there will be compensation for participants.
- 9) What method(s) will you use to address issues of confidentiality for those interviewed? (Caller i.d., mailings, phone messages, where interviews will take place, confidentiality in maintenance in gathering and tabulating information, etc.)
- 10) Indicate who provided Human Subjects Approval and the date of this approval.

# Administrative Agreement

Administrative Agreement  
between (Name of Researcher) and (Name of Domestic Violence Program)

(Name of Researcher) agrees to:

1. Follow these procedures for ensuring the confidentiality of information from participants in this study:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Follow these procedures to maximize the safety of those participating in the research:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Compensate participants with:  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Compensate program with:  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Complete \_\_\_ hours of training, to be determined by Name of Domestic Violence Program
6. Notify (Name of Domestic Violence Program) when data collection and analyses have been completed, to include them in interpretation of findings. This will be done before publishing initial findings. (Name of Domestic Violence Program) will be acknowledged for their participation whenever any findings are presented verbally or in writing. If (Name of Domestic Violence Program) disagrees with any of the interpretation of findings, this will be acknowledged as well in **all** publications and findings. The program will be allowed to state differences of opinion and why interpretations differ.

The (Name of Domestic Violence Program) agrees to:

1. Provide training (unless waived)
2. Provide (Name of Researcher) access to residents, ex-residents and non-residents for the duration of the study so that participation can be explained to them.
3. Assist in interpreting results at the completion of data collection.

*This agreement would be modified to meet the needs of each project and would be signed by the researcher and appropriate staff of the domestic violence program.*