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Building Collaborations with Child Welfare: A Guide for Domestic Violence Advocates

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Collaborating with Child Welfare

Every year, tens of thousands of survivors of domestic violence (DV) and their children come into contact with the Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS)¹ social workers in Washington State. A Washington study found that 47% of the referrals accepted for child neglect or maltreatment investigation have some indication of adult DV in the child's home.²

Domestic violence advocates have long understood the impact that involvement with the child welfare system can have on a survivor and her children and the need for improvements in the communication and linkages between the two systems. A number of recent collaborative efforts between domestic violence advocates and their child welfare colleagues both locally and nationally have demonstrated the power of collaboration in addressing these needs.

Collaborations can:

- open lines of communication between participants
- improve relationships
- increase trust, knowledge and resources
- and, perhaps most importantly, break down barriers between individuals and systems resulting in better support for families

Collaborations are one of the most effective ways of achieving real, lasting change between systems since representatives from both sides are engaged with and committed to the effort.

For some advocates, the thought of collaborating with child welfare workers might be uncomfortable, since contact between the two disciplines has historically been fraught with conflict and mistrust. Advocates may hesitate at the idea of working more closely with your child welfare colleagues, particularly when the so many of the survivors with whom we work are very fearful of DCFS involvement in their lives. However, the objective of a successful collaboration is not to get advocates to think or act like child welfare workers or vice versa -- indeed, advocates should take care to make sure their work in the collaborative process is consistent with their agency's mission and values and to stand firm in their role when at odds with their child welfare colleagues. Rather, the aim of the collaboration is to discover and create ways in which the two disciplines can effectively work together towards a *shared goal*: safety and support for battered women and their children. Worthwhile and effective collaborations result in meaningful benefits for domestic violence victims and their children. As advocates, we need to consistently evaluate the collaboration in terms of how the effort impacts their lives. If the collaboration improves both our and the child welfare system's response to domestic violence victims and their children, then we can be assured our energy is well spent.

This guide addresses many of the questions that may come up when beginning and sustaining a collaborative effort with child welfare colleagues and offers suggestions for avoiding some of the major pitfalls advocates may encounter. Use it for guidance and structure as you begin your project and throughout the collaborative process.

DCFS, DSHS, CPS, What are all these acronyms?

It helps to start with an understanding of the structure of child welfare in Washington State and some basic vocabulary.

- **DSHS and DCFS:** The Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) houses Children's Administration, which in turn, has a Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS). This is where child welfare services are housed.
- **Child Protective Services (CPS):** Most people think of "CPS" when they think about child abuse or maltreatment. While Child Protective Services (CPS) is a commonly used term for the entire child welfare structure, in Washington, it has a particular meaning. In our state, CPS refers specifically to the function of *investigating* reports of child abuse and neglect. Thus, CPS social workers are investigators, the ones who respond first to reports of child maltreatment and who determine whether or not the child needs state intervention to be safe.
- **Child Welfare Services (CWS):** Once child abuse is determined to have taken place, the case moves to CWS, or Child Welfare Services. CWS social workers help families access services they may need and follow cases through the dependency process.
- **Dependency** refers to the entire process of the state taking responsibility for a child, either by placing the child in foster care or with another relative, or allowing the child to live with the parent under certain court ordered conditions, and ultimately deciding whether to allow the child to return to the parent(s) or severing parental rights. Attorneys General, or the state's attorneys, represent DSHS/DCFS in these cases. Parents must obtain their own attorneys or use legal aid attorneys.
- **Family Reconciliation Services (FRS)** is also housed within DCFS. FRS assists families who voluntarily request help with their adolescent children.
- **Licensed Resources** is also housed in DCFS. Licensed Resources is responsible for monitoring DSHS licensed care providers such as foster families and group homes. See DSHS's web page for more information on any of these services: www.dshs.wa.gov/ca/about/abServices.asp.

Given the specific meaning of CPS in Washington, we prefer to refer to DCFS social workers, the child welfare system, or DCFS.

I have an idea for a collaborative project with DCFS. Where do I start?

First you must get organized! Some of the organization for the project should occur before inviting participants; some must occur once the collaboration is under way and input from the collaborative partners can be incorporated. Consider the following suggestions when getting started.

- The first and most important step in organizing your project is to define the purpose of the collaboration. Why bring domestic violence and child protection fields together? What problem or experience first prompted you to think of contacting and collaborating with child welfare? Your focus could be as narrow as forming a schedule for ongoing dialogue about

difficult cases coming into either your program or DCFS, or as broad as writing guidelines for interagency communication and interactions. If you are struggling to articulate your goal, ask the question “are we helping keep kids and survivors safe and together?” and “if not, what needs to change to do so”?

- Once you’ve determined the purpose and scope of your project, your next task is to decide on whom to invite to the table. Who is currently involved with these issues at your agency? What DCFS staff role is most appropriate for the issues to be addressed? Does anyone at your agency have any relationships with any staff person(s) from DCFS? Who has decision-making authority at either agency and is it necessary for someone with that authority to be engaged at this point? Brainstorm a “dream team” of collaborators, both within your agency and at DCFS.
- Identify a highly skilled facilitator for the process. Navigating the cultural and philosophical differences between the advocacy and child protection fields will be addressed later in this guide, but it’s safe to say that some representatives from both areas may come to the collaboration with mistrust, skepticism or misunderstanding of those in the other role. These feelings have the potential to undermine these individuals’ commitment to the entire project. If possible, anticipate this possibility by identifying an independent, knowledgeable facilitator to lead your project meetings, preferably someone unaffiliated with either advocacy or child welfare.
- Consider finding funding for professional facilitation. Securing even a few hours a month of a facilitator’s time can significantly impact the stability and effectiveness of your project. Be creative about funding for this! The right family foundation or individual donor may be very happy to fund facilitation for the collaboration, given the large and positive changes a relatively small investment can leverage.
- Collaborations are usually impermanent and focused on achieving a specific goal or outcome. How will you know when yours is finished? Establish measurable outcomes or benchmarks to define the direction and anticipated progress of the work. You may be able to do this before convening the group or this may be a valuable discussion to have once the project has begun. If the collaboration is more focused on ongoing relationship-building (e.g., establishing regular case consultations with no defined endpoint), identify avenues for feedback from collaborators and the families impacted by the collaboration and establish mechanisms for incorporating the feedback into future practices.

I’ve got my ideas for the collaboration solidified. How do I get child welfare staff to participate?

So you’re organized and ready to invite others to participate in your project. How do you get them to the table? Many of us groan when we are asked to add yet another meeting to our already hectic schedules. So how do you motivate child welfare colleagues and others to create space in their sometimes staggering work loads to focus on your collaboration?

- Remember that “dream team” list you made of all the people you want to participate in

your project? Depending on the nature of the collaboration, it might be difficult to get all of those players to the table in the beginning. Don't worry. As your group becomes more established and your project gains momentum, others will be more likely to see the value in the collaboration and want to be a part of it. If an important member drops out along the way, take it in stride. Continue the work as you find someone to fill their role. Don't worry if every role that should be represented isn't present the beginning or at points along the way – start anyway.

- In any organization, especially one as complex as DCFS, relationships and politics will play a part in any endeavor. Keep this in mind as you invite people to the table. If you're inviting line workers, also communicate with their supervisors and administrators to get their input and buy-in. Don't be afraid to extend an invitation more than once to someone in a key role, especially as your project gains momentum. Remember that personal invitations and communications are almost always more effective than form letters or mass emails.
- Make an effort to point out the benefits of the collaboration to the DCFS staff person or people you are trying to engage. In other words, show your child welfare colleagues what they would gain in return for their time. How would your project give them more tools for increasing the safety of kids? Would it increase opportunities for them to get help with difficult cases? Would better collaborative relationships address a current gap in services for their clients with which they currently struggle? Would more training, case consultation or resources be available to them? Show them how your project would help them to do their jobs better or more easily, and this will increase their motivation to join in the collaborative effort.

How can I address cultural and philosophical differences between advocates and child welfare colleagues?

There are many important reasons for the differences in the approaches, philosophies, and methods each discipline utilizes in working with survivors of domestic violence. It is a *good thing* that these aspects of our work sometime come into conflict. The goal of the facilitator and the collaborative partners should not be to *resolve* these differences so that they no longer exist, but rather to conduct the conversation about these disparities in a respectful and constructive manner.

- Near the beginning of the project, commit meeting time to outlining and discussing the roles of the players at the table. Even very experienced individuals will not always have a thorough understanding of the role of those outside of their field. Include conversation about different cultural and philosophical approaches, language, roles, capacities and limits. Deal directly with myths and misconceptions in a constructive, non-judgmental manner.
- Consciously and consistently resist any impulses or pressure to compromise your advocacy philosophy, values, language or perspective for the sake of the collaboration. While mutual understanding and respect are necessary elements of any successful collaboration, keep in mind the important reasons that the child welfare and advocacy roles differ. Advocates serve as the voice of the survivor and the repository of her confidential information. Advocacy programs play a critical role in communities as non-coercive resources, a place where respecting women's autonomy is a central value, and survivors' expertise regarding their

needs and their lives are validated. Maintaining distinct roles is necessary for preserving the empowerment-based, survivor-centered philosophy of advocacy. When advocates shift their focus from supporting survivors' autonomy to supporting the work of other institutions (like DCFS) an important source of support in the community is lost to domestic violence survivors. And we know communities are better off when safe, non coercive resources are available for people to access voluntarily.

- While it's important to respect and preserve the different roles of advocates and child protection staff, it is also imperative that participants in your project establish common ground upon which to build trust. The following are suggestions for fostering this sense of shared purpose in your group:
 - Encourage the collaborative partners to examine their personal expectations and biases and to actively work toward coming together. Acknowledging differences and explicitly pursuing a common purpose will solidify this value early on in the project.
 - Explicitly identify common goals between the two fields. Facilitate a discussion in one of the first project meetings to name the common goals and interests, such as "keeping kids and families safe" or "child welfare and wellbeing", as a starting and reference point.
 - Frame conversations around children and their safety. Participants may have different ideas on the best ways of keeping kids safe, but establishing a common framework and goals will provide a positive focus for discussions.
 - Foster the assumption that everyone brings value to the table and that all involved have good intentions. Set up the expectation that participants will approach the collaboration with an open mind.
- Much of the tension between advocacy and child protection fields stems from language; the two systems often use the same words to mean completely different things. Terms like "assessment", "safety plan" and "risk" are examples of highly charged words that can spark anger, misunderstanding and mistrust on both sides, because the words symbolize the sometimes frustrating separations in philosophy and perspective between advocates and DCFS staff. Take time to explore these differences in meaning with the goal of understanding, not change. Do not attempt to adopt a common set of words; differences in language are a manifestation of the separate and important roles that advocates and child welfare social workers play.
- DCFS wields a significant amount of power, both as an institution and as a force in an individual's life. Once they are involved with a family, child welfare staff have the power to coerce survivors to act in ways that may run counter to their survival instincts and undermine their autonomy. Our DCFS colleagues may also (consciously or not) wield power within the collaborative process in ways that may overshadow the advocacy perspective. In spite of this, child welfare staff may also serve as a critically needed resource, as they have access to services and supports that can make a positive difference for domestic violence survivors. Concentrate on this potential for support while keeping in mind the importance of offsetting this power imbalance in the survivor's life and in the collaborative process.

How should I handle conflicts in the collaborative group and process when they come up?

As discussed in the previous section, some amount of tension between the advocacy and child welfare's roles is necessary and desirable. Exploration of the participants' different philosophies in a constructive manner is integral to the collaboration process, but they can lead to conflict as well. The facilitator of your collaboration, if you have one, must be prepared to handle this kind of conflict. Facilitator or not, each person at the table should be ready to take responsibility for making sure that conversations about philosophy differences do not spiral into heated arguments that reinforce the negative stereotypes of the roles involved and drive participants away from common ground.

- As advocates, it is important that we model respectful disagreement and moving the focus from conflict to common ground.
- As a group, spend time establishing common agreements for participant behavior in one of the first meetings as a full team. These should include guidelines for the general conduct of the meetings, as well as specific agreements for behavior in conflicts. Post these agreements at each meeting and refer back to them if the conversation becomes too heated.
- Basic conflict resolution skills, such as those explained in the book *Crucial Conversations* by Kerry Patterson or *Getting to Yes?* By Roger Fisher are necessary when attempting to successfully navigate highly charged issues. Consider introducing a conversation or educational component on effective conflict resolution skills, especially if the group dynamic is regularly tense.
- If two or three group members seem to be particularly at odds, consider meeting with them separately to work through some of the tension before the next large group meeting.
- Adequate representation of advocates around the table is critical for a balanced process; try to avoid having only one advocate voice in the room. With just one advocate at the table, it is too easy for that person to become marginalized. When one advocate must articulate it alone, the advocacy position can be misinterpreted as a personal position, instead of being clearly understood as reflecting best practices or being grounded in battered women's experiences. Ensuring that more than one advocate is at the table might require more than one advocate participating from your agency. Ideally, a collaboration has representation from more than one advocacy organization. Advocates need to be strategic about backing each other up on challenging points. If your agency is the only advocacy organization in town, cultivate allies within the collaboration, or bring allies into it. For example, public health nurses, system based advocates, and other social service providers are all potential allies for advocates.
- Some advice from seasoned collaborators:
 - Avoid getting overly agitated during conflicts or disagreements. Stay calm, breathe deep, and take a break to gather your thoughts.
 - Anticipate potential "trouble spots" ahead of time and think through how to approach them compassionately, collaboratively and calmly.

- Remember to connect your points to the common goals you all agree on.
- Work to understand why someone sees something so differently from you, and how their point of view is rooted in their role or institution.
- Separate people from their positions, and disagree with positions, not people.
- Work to communicate that you value the individual with whom you disagree, along with your thoughts about the position they represent.

How can I sustain this collaborative effort in the long term?

The objectives of your collaboration will determine the length of time your project will need to last; the more complex the goals, the longer it may take to achieve them. Some projects, such as creating a forum for ongoing case consultations could last indefinitely. Consider the following suggestions when undertaking a long-term effort.

- Even if your collaboration is broad in scope, start with short-term, small goals to get some early successes under your belt. The team's sense of cohesion and efficacy will increase and expand as the project makes tangible progress.
- The most effective and sustainable collaborations obtain the support of leadership from both sides at some point. However, having this support and long-term commitment is not necessary for the start of the collaboration. In some cases, support only comes after the collaboration starts to show results; don't be discouraged if leadership does not step up right away. Think of organizational leaders as a group that is watching out to ensure resources are being committed wisely, and work to show them that the collaboration is consistent with this value.
- One important function of the group facilitator is to document the work of the collaboration, especially with long-term undertakings. Accurate meeting minutes and a record of the accomplishments of the group provide a sense of history and a clear picture of what in the group has changed, what efforts worked and didn't work, and how the group evolved along the way.
- Anticipate natural fluctuations in participants' involvement in the project. Depending on how long your group is actively meeting, people will leave the collaboration or limit their participation for any number of reasons, from schedule changes to staff turnovers. Ask participants to replace themselves with someone in their agency or field if they must leave, and make every attempt to continue the work of the collaboration while looking for new members to fill any gaps. If a key group member is considering leaving the collaboration, are there any adjustments, such as changing the meetings times or locations, that would make it easier for him or her to continue to participate?
- Meet individually with new members to orient them to the purpose, history and makeup of the team; provide them with a group roster, minutes from past meetings and any products of your collaboration. New members of the group will need to work through the same issues as the others that came before them; be prepared to revisit discussion topics that had previously

been resolved as new members' understanding of the issue and the other roles at the table evolve.

- In any organization, individuals in leadership positions identify worthwhile issues and projects and allocate staff time accordingly. It's important that leadership from your agency and from DCFS (and anyone else participating in your project!) maintains enthusiasm and support for the collaboration for it to survive over a long period of time. Keep those higher up in the organization's hierarchy informed and engaged by reporting on your project's progress and impact. Even a quick email describing a success story can convince a supervisor that your collaboration should be prioritized over other projects.
- Celebrate your accomplishments! Applauding the group's victories, even the small ones, will help to sustain the participants' enthusiasm and commitment to the project. Set aside meeting time on a regular basis to report on progress and recognize the hard work of the group members.

How do I address questions or conflicts around information sharing?

When and how information is shared between domestic violence agencies and DCFS is often a sticking point in collaborative work between the two groups. Advocates often feel frustrated because of the pressure to divulge confidential information to DCFS, knowing it could jeopardize the safety of the survivor and her children. Child welfare workers are sometimes frustrated at the perceived lack of cooperation on the part of advocates. Communicating about the circumstances under which information can be shared between the two entities, and the reasons why information sometimes can't be shared, will help to alleviate these frustrations and smooth the way for ongoing collaboration.

- Focus on this issue after accomplishing some positive things together, unless conflicts over information sharing are so substantial that no other work can be accomplished until this is addressed.
- Talk about information sharing *outside of a specific case*. This releases the conversation from the time pressures and emotions of a particular case and makes it easier to discuss general principles and policies, which you can then test by applying them to specific cases.
- With the collaborative group, review and clarify Washington's state laws on advocate privilege (RCW 5.60.060) and mandated reporting (RCW 26.44.030) and how they intersect. Here's a brief overview: when pursuing an investigation, DCFS has the right to request the child's *written records relevant to the investigation* from mandated reporters (including advocates).
- Highlight the key points of the law:
 - the request for records must happen in the context of a current, open investigation
 - DCFS may request written records (not conversations) for the child (not the mother)

- The law does not clearly define what constitutes “relevant” or who gets to determine relevancy.
- Collaborative teams may want to discuss what constitutes an “investigation” (i.e., after child maltreatment is “founded”, is the investigation over?), and what sort of information is and is not relevant to investigations, and who decides this.
- Collaborative groups should also review RCW 70.123.076 which clarifies the obligation domestic violence agencies have to protect both the mom’s and child’s privacy.
- Most domestic violence agencies hope to avoid requests to hand over written records on the families they serve, because they have no control over how that information may be used once they have done so. Advocates wish to engender trust and confidence in the survivors they are serving so that the survivors feel confident that their confidentiality will be protected and that it is safe to reveal all of the information about their situation. At the same time, DCFS has the formal right to ask for some of a domestic violence agency’s records some of the time. Many agencies keep very minimal records with little or no narrative content for this reason. If this is the case with your program, it can be useful to show your collaborators the sort of forms your agency uses to record services; it may become apparent quite quickly that these records will be of little use in an investigation.
- Make sure your internal practices with regard to record keeping are consistent with best practices. Women’s and children’s records should be separate, records should record minimal information in respectful language, releases of information should be strictly observed when sharing information. The Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence’s model protocols on record keeping and confidentiality when working with battered women have a number of suggestions for agencies in this area and is available at wscadv.org.
- It is likely that your DCFS office will request records at some point. Use the collaboration to determine the process for how this should happen before it does happen (or happen again): who will make the request, where and how they will they make the request, how your agency will respond, and so on. If your agency does have to turn records over, consider marking each page with a sticker or stamp indicating that the records are confidential and privileged and citing RCW 70.123.076. This can alert DCFS workers to the fact that these records should not be freely shared.

What are some techniques for running effective collaborative meetings?

You’ve got your collaborative partners together, your purpose is clear, and you’re prepared to negotiate some potential pitfalls; now all you have to do is conduct the meetings!

- Start with the basics. Sometimes the hardest part of sitting through a meeting isn’t the time or effort involved, it’s the experience of the meeting itself. The procedures that you appreciate in a well-run meeting are the same procedures you should be practicing in your collaboration. Show the meeting participants that you respect their schedules by starting and ending the meetings on time. Provide a clear meeting agenda and stick to it. Make coffee and water

available and consider providing food; even a small snack can make a big difference in people's attendance and level of participation. Consider participants' schedules when setting meeting dates; don't make the meetings too frequent or unpredictable.

- Establish a parking lot of ideas – keep record of what issues come up during discussion to be handled at a later time.
- If you see the need and have the time, consider facilitating team-building activities at the beginning of the collaborative process. These can break the ice, develop trust and start dialogue between group members. *The Big Book of Teambuilding Games* by John W. Newstrom and Edward E. Scannell and *Team Building Activities for Any Group* by Alanna Jones have many great suggestions for team-building activities.
- For larger undertakings, consider breaking the group into smaller subgroups. Decision making is faster and more effective as power to make decisions is delegated to appropriate subgroups. Big projects are more approachable when the work is divided into more manageable portions.

Whether your goal is to improve the relationships between advocacy and child welfare colleagues in one office or to create state-wide, interagency service guidelines, collaborations play a vital role in improving the level and quality of services between and within the domestic violence and child welfare agencies. Of course, one tool cannot address all of the possible ways in which a collaboration might develop, so you will need to be creative and resourceful in addressing new situations and needs as they come up. Ultimately, if you honor the perspective of the survivors on whose behalf you are working, regardless of how your collaboration evolves you will be successful in improving the relationships and systems that protect and support survivors of domestic violence and their children across our state.

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1. DCFS, the Division of Children and Family Services, is the child welfare section of the Department of Social and Health Services. See the next section for more on acronyms.
 2. Domestic violence in one state's child protective caseload: A study of differential case dispositions and outcomes by Diana J. English, Jeffrey L. Edleson, Mary E. Herrick, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27 (2005) 1183–1201