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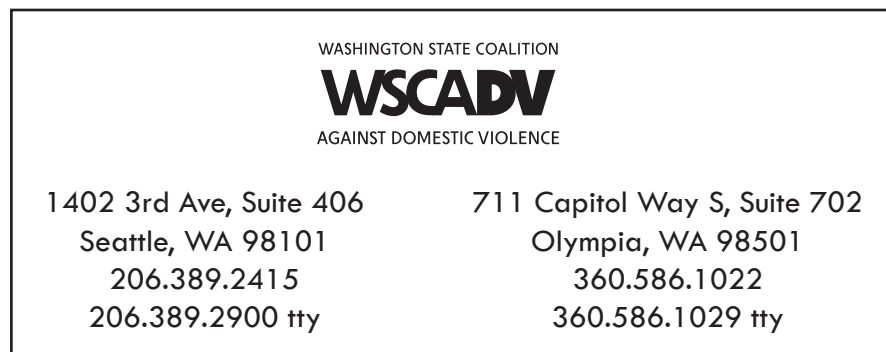
Case Staffing: The Role of the Victim Advocate at CSOs

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For the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence

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Tyra Lindquist serves as Administrative Coordinator for the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence. As a victim advocate, administrator, educator, and fundraiser, Ms. Lindquist has served in the domestic and sexual violence movements for 30 years. She authored *BERTHA: A Practical Guide to Working in a Domestic Violence Program in Washington State*, and created educational materials and curricula on domestic violence and sexual assault for the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Safeplace: Rape Relief and Women's Shelter Services in Olympia, the Washington State Coalition on Women's Substance Abuse Issues, the Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs, and the Skokomish Indian Tribe. As a victim advocate, and as an advocate for victim services, Ms. Lindquist has dedicated herself to helping individuals and programs understand how systems can be made to work, as designed, to enhance victim safety and support, and to maximize perpetrator accountability. Most recently, the focus of her work has been on how economics impact battered women and their children.



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Introduction

Although this paper talks specifically about challenges victim advocates face in welfare office case staffings, all the information here can be generalized to other systems where advocates are called in to accompany or represent victims at meeting with other professionals.

Sometimes called case consults, case reviews, or staffings, we're talking about any meeting where an advocate might be brought into a conversation with one or more (in some cases many more) people to discuss the specific circumstances of an individual. For us, this would be to discuss an individual survivor of domestic violence, and we'd ostensibly be included in a conversation because the survivor had spoken with us. Whether the survivor has spoken with us directly or not, case managers at times seek our expertise and advice. Case staffings might occur for any number of reasons. But regardless of how formal the proceeding is, any time we are talking with one or more DSHS personnel about a specific person, we are case staffing and the principles in this paper apply.

In many CSOs, case staffings already occur on a regular basis. You, as an advocate, may or may not have been asked to participate. You may or may not have had success inserting yourself in the process. The sanction policies in the office where you work may include more emphasis on case staffings.

Case staffings may become increasingly common practice in CSOs. Policies already exist that mandate case staffing – for example, as clients reach certain milestones in the length of time they have been enrolled in TANF. Family Violence Advocates, among others, are specifically named in policy as important participants in these staffings. In fact, many domestic violence programs that contract to provide services in CSOs are required in their contracts to participate in case staffing. Many of us have already participated in case staffing. Many more of us will be called upon to do so. This paper is designed to provide some guidance for navigating the problems as well as the positive outcomes that can come of case staffing.

It's a good thing

Several advocates have told me recently that they don't want to be involved with case staffing and see it as a basic breach of their role and their responsibility, primarily with regard to confidentiality. While I applaud advocates defending confidentiality so vigorously, confidentiality does not mean silence nor non-engagement.

Case staffing has become a fact of life at DSHS, and domestic violence victims are going to be subject to "case review" whether we are there helping them or not. Survivors want our help. They need our advocacy skills. Even aside from individuals benefiting from our presence, I see case staffings as an effective way to educate people about critical domestic violence issues, and to help staff improve their understanding and skills.

It goes without saying that respect is the cornerstone of any good case staffing. Some advocates have reported that DSHS staff and others have been disrespectful and have dishonored their clients in case staffing. This is extremely regrettable *and fixable*. Systems advocacy is all about

working to change malfunctioning systems. As difficult as it is at times, it is a big part of our jobs, as advocates, to wade into situations like poorly facilitated case staffing and lend a voice for respect, dignity, understanding and truly helpful problem solving for battered women.

We, as victim advocates, have a unique role that is different from that of the case manager, the social worker, the mental health counselor, the drug and alcohol professional – different from anyone else who may have been called in to participate in a case staffing. We are not there to be an impartial or neutral observer. We are there to stand up for battered women and their children. To use our voice to amplify what is true for victims in general and to understand what an individual survivor wants specifically. We must know what is possible within the rules and laws of the welfare system (no small task there), and to shamelessly promote resolution that supports, to the absolute greatest degree possible, a survivor's safety and an unencumbered journey to economic self-sufficiency. Unencumbered, that is, from both a batterer's attempts to use the welfare system against the victim, and unencumbered by the system itself imposing things that put a survivor in danger or at risk of returning to a violent situation only because of lack of resources and money.

The law allows for flexible, individualized plans. Domestic violence victims and survivors need and deserve them. It's our job to negotiate safe and workable plans. Case staffings are one place where this negotiation takes place.

Building a functional and professional working relationship with DSHS personnel prior to any call to attend and participate in case staffing is a vital first step. Always remember though, advocates are not there to be friends with DSHS staff so much as to have a cordial working relationship where everyone is well informed about and accepts every team member's role – including the victim advocate. (The chapter on advocacy in BERTHA¹ is well worth reviewing if you have questions about the role of a victim advocate, or if you need some reassurance about how you are doing your job.)

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is our biggest mandate. We will be unsuccessful as advocates if victims/survivors cannot trust that we will honor our promise to keep what they tell us private. Our job is not to get information from a person and funnel it to a DSHS case manager or social worker (as much as DSHS would love our help with this). Our job is to listen carefully to what women have to say, help them figure out how to solve their problems, and bring all our knowledge and negotiation skills to bear to help a woman become safe and secure.

Unfortunately, confidentiality is *much* more complicated than just keeping quiet. There are times when what a victim/survivor wants us to do is to be noisy – to amplify her voice. It is always best to encourage women to speak for themselves. Many will, and we can be there to coach the people we are working with and cheer them on. But there are times when victims/survivors cannot speak and should not be expected to. We can and should use our strong powerful voices to speak on behalf of women who cannot speak for themselves. But – and this is a major caveat – before we speak for someone, we must be completely prepared with an understanding of what our clients want.

Another very important consideration is “need to know.” There is usually no need for a DSHS case manager or social worker to know all the humiliating or gory details of what a victim has gone through in order to accomplish what a victim needs within the WorkFirst setting. I am periodically struck by how freely advocates talk among ourselves and among our associates about the details of women’s stories. This may stem in part from our own feelings of stress, horror or vulnerability and the need we have to process these feelings with others – this is completely understandable. But, when we find ourselves succumbing to the temptation to speak indiscriminately about a victim/survivor with others, it is important to think about how to get our own needs for support met somewhere other than in case staffings or conversations with DSHS personnel. If a conversation or communication within case staffing strays beyond the parameters set by a client, we can put the interaction on hold until we have a private moment to get re-centered and re-focused.

Taking steps to preserve our integrity and safeguard a victim’s information can make case staffing a more time-consuming process, which is one of the things that makes it so difficult within the DSHS context. But if we break confidentiality, we lose much more than time. As a critical piece of legal housekeeping, you must have a signed release of information specifying in as much detail as necessary, what will be disclosed, when, and to whom before you disclose confidential information to anyone. There are good reasons to have documentation about domestic violence in the DSHS case notes. There are good reasons to not have documentation in case notes. A well-informed advocate can help a victim/survivor be the best judge of that. As victim advocates, we are in a great position to understand and explain to case managers the pros and cons of disclosing domestic violence and of pursuing various courses of action within the WorkFirst system.

Finally, if at first you don’t succeed - try, try again

Student: “Teacher, what is the secret to success?”

Teacher: “Good judgment.”

Student: “How do I get good judgment?”

Teacher: “Experience.”

Student: “How do I get experience?”

Teacher: “Bad judgment.”

This is tricky business, this case staffing. As we go along, we are going to make lots of important mistakes – and all these mistakes will give us experience we can use to reflect on our role, our performance, the role of our colleagues at DSHS, their performance, and the actual outcome of the staffings we participate in. Having advocates actively participating in case staffings is a fairly recent phenomenon. The process in each office changes over time as people come and go and as the Department’s regulations and focus change. Our skills will improve as time goes on. If you have problems, help is available. Call the Economic Justice Project staff at WSCADV if you need to talk about what is going on or if you need more information or encouragement.

Resources

Even after all these years, I still recommend *Getting to Yes* by Roger Fisher and *Getting Past No* by William Ury as two of the very best books on negotiation. Good negotiation skills are the cornerstone of successful case staffing. Good negotiation skills come in handy everywhere. These books are available at most libraries (including WSCADV's lending library) and local bookstores.

The tips in the next section, *Practical Suggestions for Advocates Participating in Case Staffing*, is adapted from a list written by Patti Bland. You can get technical assistance on your role as an advocate in case staffing from Coalition staff.

Practical Suggestions for Advocates Participating in Case Staffing

- *Always remember you are a victim advocate*
- *Advocacy is not neutral*
- *Clarify and continue to clarify your role as an advocate*

Maintain confidentiality

Use hypothetical or theoretical examples when necessary rather than specifics you don't have permission to disclose.

Get a specific, dated, time limited and signed Release of Information before you share any information.

Context

You must have a good understanding of the public benefits system. Then, you can describe domestic violence and the specific impact of batterer's abusive behavior on women and children in that system

Build on strengths and maintain that perspective

Notice and respond to what a woman is doing right rather than focus on what is perceived as "wrong"

De-escalate

Anticipate challenges

Disengaging can de-escalate power struggles

Remain task-centered

Be clear about the reason you are working together and understand both your own advocacy goals and the goals of the case manager(s) or social worker(s) with whom you are working.

Always remain rooted in the experience of battered women and find ways to stay connected with your home program to nurture your roots.

Style

Avoid defensiveness

Remember to take a breath and start over when you need to

Pay attention and really listen for common ground as well as pitfalls

Non-verbal Behavior

Avoid looking irritated even if you feel irritated

Notice staring, glaring, irritability and tension

Back off from personal opinion and reframe from an objective knowledge base

For example, instead of, "I think you should..." you could try, "Current best practice in the DV field would suggest..."

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1. BERTHA – Basic Educational Resource to Help Advocates – is the manual published by WSCADV for domestic violence victim advocates. A copy is available at most Washington State victim services programs or by calling WSCADV at 360-586-1022.