

Survivors' Perspectives on Confidentiality at DSHS

A summary report of themes from focus groups
with survivors of domestic violence and stalking
who received welfare assistance from DSHS

**Compiled by Mette Earlywine
for the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence
April 2007**

This project was supported by Contract Number 0632-08482, administered by the Economic Services Administration of the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. Points of view in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services.

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Introduction

“As a domestic violence victim, you don’t want to be set apart; but the reality is, you are different, you do need to be set apart. That separate care and attention helps you move forward.” ~ focus group participant

In 2006, the Washington State Legislature passed House Bill 2848. Included in the text of this bill was language directing the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) to “review methods to improve the protection and confidentiality of information for recipients of welfare assistance who have disclosed to the department that they are past or current victims of domestic violence or stalking.”

In response, the Economic Services Administration’s Public Disclosure Manager convened a workgroup to look at the issues identified by the Legislature. The workgroup consisted of representatives from several divisions of the Economic Services Administration, along with community stakeholders. Please see the Appendix for a list of workgroup members.

As a first step, workgroup members examined existing laws and departmental policies related to confidentiality and reviewed how information about domestic violence and stalking survivors is managed across the various computer systems used by state welfare assistance programs. The workgroup then decided to gather more information about the range of confidentiality-related issues that might impact victims of domestic violence or stalking who are receiving welfare assistance. Workgroup members agreed to collect this information by hearing directly from: 1) survivors of domestic violence or stalking who had received welfare assistance from DSHS; 2) community-based victim advocates co-located inside Community Service Offices; and 3) front-line workers at the Department’s welfare assistance programs.

Workgroup members agreed that focus groups would be an effective means of hearing from survivors. The goal of the focus groups was to create a space where survivors would feel

they could speak candidly about their experiences with confidentiality at DSHS. Discussion questions were designed to elicit information about any and all specific concerns that survivors of domestic violence or stalking have about their confidentiality within DSHS, and to identify whether there are additional precautions or accommodations that DSHS should implement. Workgroup members decided it would be important for survivors to have the option of participating in the groups without having to reveal their names. Members also discussed that low-income survivors might need additional supports to attend and participate in a focus group, such as on-site childcare, interpretation, and financial assistance to cover transportation expenses. The workgroup determined that it would be preferable for a non-governmental agency to convene and facilitate the focus groups with survivors in order to best preserve the participants' confidentiality while providing financial support for their participation in the focus groups. Consequently, the Department contracted with the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (WSCADV) to convene and facilitate four focus groups with survivors of domestic violence or stalking who had received welfare assistance from DSHS.

Methodology

While WSCADV was responsible for convening and facilitating the focus groups, the methodology and discussion questions were developed in the workgroup.

Locations

The workgroup was interested in getting a diverse, statewide perspective on the confidentiality-related issues and concerns that might impact survivors receiving welfare assistance. For this reason, the workgroup decided to host the focus groups in Spokane, Yakima, Olympia and Seattle.

Recruitment of Target Participants

WSCADV worked with local anti-poverty advocacy groups and domestic violence victim service agencies to organize the focus groups and identify and recruit potential participants. These local organizations recruited participants who met the following criteria: 1) a survivor of domestic violence and/or stalking, and 2) applied for and/or received welfare assistance from DSHS, and 3) willing to describe personal experiences related to confidentiality while applying for and/or receiving assistance from DSHS.

Supports for Participation

WSCADV, in collaboration with the local organizers, arranged for focus group participants to receive a \$20 cash stipend, along with dinner and on-site childcare. Additional transportation assistance and interpretation was provided as needed.

Participants

Twenty-eight survivors of domestic violence and stalking participated in the four focus groups. To protect their privacy and confidentiality, participants were not asked to provide any demographic information. However, during the discussions, all participants identified themselves as survivors of domestic violence and all had received some form of welfare assistance from DSHS. Many participants reported that they had been stalked by their

abuser. No participants reported being stalked outside of the context of ongoing domestic violence.

Focus Group Agenda

The focus groups were scheduled to last approximately 2 ½ hours, with time built into the beginning of the meeting for participants to arrive, check in, eat dinner with their children and then get their children settled with the childcare providers. Afterwards, the facilitator introduced herself and any other members of the workgroup who were in attendance. Participants were given the opportunity to introduce themselves if they wanted to do so. Next, the facilitator offered some brief remarks to frame the focus group discussion, including reviewing the purpose of the focus group and its specific emphasis on confidentiality-related issues, describing what kind of information would be collected during the discussion, and explaining that the notes would later be compiled into a summary report that the DSHS workgroup would use in formulating its recommendations. The facilitator then proceeded to ask six open-ended questions on a range of confidentiality-related issues. As participants answered the questions and shared their experiences, the facilitator and workgroup members wrote down the participants' responses (omitting any identifying details). Near the end of the scheduled meeting time, the facilitator closed the discussion, thanked the survivors for their participation, and reminded participants about what would happen with the information they shared. Please see the Appendix for a copy of the Facilitation Agenda.

Discussion Questions

The same discussion questions were used at all four focus groups. The first question asked participants to think broadly about their experiences with confidentiality at DSHS and to share their initial, big-picture thoughts on the topic. Next, participants were asked to describe how they thought their confidentiality would be handled at DSHS, their experiences with giving consent to the sharing of their information, and whether they knew when their information was being shared. Following this discussion, the facilitator asked participants who had moved into or out of state or transferred offices within the state to explain how their confidentiality was impacted by moving or transferring. The facilitator then asked

participants to discuss whether sensitive information, such as their identity and location, was adequately safeguarded while they were receiving assistance from DSHS. Participants were specifically asked whether they believed their abuser or stalker had ever found out information about them from DSHS. In addition, the facilitator explained that DSHS must provide a yes or no answer if anyone inquires whether a person is currently receiving assistance. Participants were asked whether they believed this requirement had enabled someone to get information about them in a way that caused them harm. After these discussions, participants were asked to discuss whether they ever told DSHS about the abuse or stalking they had experienced and any associated positive or negative outcomes. The facilitator explained that currently there is no single, uniform way for DSHS to identify that a client has disclosed a history of abuse or stalking across all of the computer systems and assistance programs administered by DSHS. Participants were asked for their opinions about whether DSHS should implement a uniform identifier across all programs and computer databases. Finally, participants were asked to describe their ideal vision for how their information and confidentiality would be handled at DSHS.

Please see the Appendix to read the complete text of the scripted discussion questions.

Themes

To protect the privacy and confidentiality of the survivors who participated in these focus groups, this report does not reveal specific stories or incidents recounted by the participants. Instead, this report summarizes the common themes that emerged from the group discussions. The information and experiences shared by participants have been categorized into six themes:

1. Survivors generally do not understand what happens with their information
2. Survivors are concerned about the lack of privacy at Community Service Offices
3. Survivors are concerned about who has access to their information
4. Survivors have mixed opinions about a uniform DV/stalking identifier
5. Certain DSHS requirements and practices compromise survivors' safety and confidentiality
6. Failure to properly implement existing policies and procedures compromises survivors' safety and confidentiality

Focus groups were designed to elicit information about confidentiality issues; however, in the course of the discussions, survivors also described a variety of other experiences and concerns related to their participation in welfare assistance programs. Information about these concerns is presented at the end of this section.

Theme #1: Survivors generally do not understand what happens with their information

"I never knew if my information was being shared, and I wanted to know when that was happening." ~ focus group participant

Survivors of domestic violence and stalking often consider the safety implications of what happens with their personal information. For example, many survivors need to ensure that the person abusing or stalking them does not find out where they are living or working or where their children are attending school or childcare. Other survivors may want to talk with a case manager or social worker about the abuse they are experiencing, but do not want their abuser (or others) to find out they have disclosed to the Department. Still other

survivors are concerned that their abuser may use information about their receipt of public benefits against them – in a custody dispute or in other ways.

Survivors are constantly thinking about their safety, and making plans – and adjustments to those plans – to try to prevent their abuser or stalker from harming them or their children. It is important for survivors to have an accurate understanding of what happens to their information within DSHS welfare assistance programs so that they can plan appropriately for their safety.

Throughout the focus group discussions, it was evident that survivors generally do not understand what happens with the information that DSHS collects about them. Survivors know that DSHS collects a lot of information about them and that DSHS enters or scans that information into a computer system, but they do not realize how many different databases their information resides in, nor do they understand how or when their information is shared between various DSHS databases and with other databases administered by federal and state agencies and contractors. Survivors did not have an accurate sense of how many workers and administrators across various DSHS departments and other partner agencies have access to their information.

When first applying for benefits, many survivors carried a range of different assumptions about how their information would be handled, including: 1) DSHS keeps their information confidential/does not share information about them, 2) only workers assigned to their case have access to their information, 3) if they tell one DSHS worker something (e.g., disclose abuse), everyone else they work with will also know that information, and 4) DSHS can make absolutely sure that their information is not shared with the ‘wrong person’ (e.g., their abuser or anyone else they think should not have access to their information). However, some focus group participants did not believe that their experience at DSHS reflected those initial assumptions. Many other participants simply did not know if, when or with whom their information had been shared.

It is worth noting that many survivors felt pressured to sign the consent form to give DSHS permission to share their information with other service providers. Focus group participants shared that they did not always understand what they were being asked to sign, nor did they understand how signing the consent form would affect what happened with their information. Across the four groups, survivors did not feel they really had a choice about whether or not to sign the form; many believed (and some were told) that their benefits would be affected if they refused to sign the consent form.

Recommendations:

- Survivors should be informed about how their information is handled within the context of DSHS welfare assistance programs so they can plan appropriately for their safety.
- DSHS workers should fully explain the consent form to clients, including 1) explaining what information will be shared with whom (if they sign the form), and 2) assuring clients that their benefits will not be affected if they refuse to sign the form.

Theme #2: Survivors are concerned about the lack of privacy at Community Service Offices

“Talking to someone in a cubicle, you don’t know who is listening on the other side of the wall.” ~focus group participant

“Who knows who will be there at the office, in the waiting area, to tell him about me and my whereabouts?” ~focus group participant

Focus group participants unanimously expressed feeling serious concerns about the lack of privacy at Community Service Offices (CSO). Survivors reported being asked to disclose and discuss confidential information – including their name, social security number, physical address, and information about the abuse they had experienced – in public settings such as office waiting areas, front reception counters and worker cubicles. Survivors stated that they were very worried about who might overhear this information, and they were reluctant to talk about abuse within earshot of other people. Some survivors reported that even being

present in the CSO was a safety risk, as other people in the waiting area might be able to identify them and report their whereabouts and activities to the abusers or stalkers.

Survivors were concerned about a range of practices which they felt compromised their privacy and safety:

- 1) Workers calling their names out loud in public waiting areas
- 2) Having to say their social security number or client identity number out loud (or write it down/enter it within view of other clients) in order to check in for their appointments
- 3) Having to provide or discuss sensitive information at the reception counter, within view or earshot of other clients
- 4) Being asked to use the phone in the waiting area to call the Call Center to report changes to their circumstances (which often involves revealing sensitive information such as a new home, work or childcare location, or reporting changes to the assistance unit that may be a result of abuse)
- 5) Having to talk with their case manager or social worker about private and sensitive issues in a cubicle instead of in an office with a closed door

Recommendations:

- Implement methods for clients to privately check-in for appointments and update information about their circumstances.
- Implement procedures for calling clients to the reception counter or to their appointments without revealing the client's identifying information (including name, social security number and/or client identity number).
- Consider strategies for ensuring that clients can discuss sensitive issues with their case manager or social worker in a private office.

Theme #3: Survivors are concerned about who has access to their information

“Do we really have confidentiality when so many people see it?” ~focus group participant

During the focus groups, survivors expressed concern about who has access to their information, and they indicated a strong preference that their information only be available to those workers who need it to coordinate and deliver services. Survivors were worried about the number of workers who have access to their information. Many focus group participants described experiences which revealed that their information is vulnerable to being accessed by the ‘wrong person’.

Survivors were particularly worried that it would be easy for someone, including their abuser or stalker, to get information about them over the telephone. Multiple focus group participants reported hearing – or directly experiencing – that a person need only know a client’s name and client identity number or social security number to get information about that client by phone, including sensitive information such as a client’s workplace or childcare provider. Many survivors believed that it would be easy for their abuser to get another woman to imitate them and retrieve information about their circumstances by calling the CSO or Call Center. Since many of their abusers know their full names, social security numbers, birthdates, children’s names and mother’s maiden names, it would be relatively simple for the abuser to bypass ordinary identity verification checks. Other participants confirmed this theory when they shared that they had been able to easily obtain information about their boyfriend’s or husband’s case over the phone simply by providing his name and social security number. Another participant shared that she worked with her CSO to implement additional identity verification procedures as a safety measure to prevent her abuser from obtaining information about her over the phone. However, she later discovered that the CSO was not using those additional requested procedures when she herself made a test call. Many of the survivors did not think that their abuser had in fact gotten any information about them from DSHS, but they nevertheless believed that it would be easy for their abuser to do so if he wanted.

Participants were not only concerned that their abuser might be able to obtain information about them; they also feared their abuser would report false information or otherwise make changes to her case file and benefits via the telephone. One participant reported that her abuser got another woman to pretend to be her and call in a change of address; consequently, DSHS mail was sent to the abuser's address.

During the discussions, we explained that under RCW 74.04.060, DSHS is obligated to provide a "yes" or "no" answer if anyone inquires whether a person is currently receiving benefits. We asked participants whether they believed anyone had used this law to obtain information about them in a way that caused them harm. Only one participant described hearing of a case where a stalker called the CSO, found out that the person he was stalking was receiving benefits, waited outside the CSO until the person showed up and later followed her home. While none of the other participants believed this particular law had directly harmed them, they all expressed dismay over this requirement, stating they did not believe this requirement was safe. Survivors believed this could be an effective way for an abuser or stalker to find them.

Survivors were concerned about other ways that abusers might be able to access their information. These concerns included a fear that workers who are friends or family members of the abuser would share confidential information with the abuser, and a fear that the abuser would be able to obtain information through his involvement with the child support enforcement case.

Recommendations:

- Implement more stringent security protocols for verifying identity information over the phone prior to releasing client information
- Amend RCW 74.04.060 to prohibit DSHS from verifying whether or not a person is currently receiving benefits if that person has disclosed to the Department that she or he is a survivor of domestic violence and/or stalking.

- Ensure that workers across DSHS welfare assistance and related programs (such as child support enforcement) properly follow existing confidentiality policies and procedures to prevent the unauthorized disclosure of confidential client information.

Theme #4 Survivors have mixed opinions about a uniform DV/stalking identifier

“Some people may like that recognition. Some people want to leave that in the past.” ~focus group participant

During the focus groups, the facilitator explained that currently there exists no single, uniform way for DSHS to identify across all computer systems and assistance programs that a client has disclosed a history of abuse or stalking. Survivors were asked for their opinions about whether DSHS should implement a uniform identifier across all programs and computer databases, and their responses revealed mixed opinions.

In general, participants approved of DSHS implementing a uniform identifier – if certain conditions were met:

- 1) only the workers assigned to the survivor’s case would be able to see the identifier
- 2) the identifier would eliminate the need for the survivor to tell her story over and over again to various workers
- 3) the identifier would eliminate the need for the survivor to share a lot of details about the abuse or stalking; instead the identifier would simply alert the worker that abuse or stalking is an issue for the client
- 4) the identifier would prompt workers to respond to the survivor with appropriate services, referrals and safety precautions
- 5) survivors could prohibit certain workers from seeing the identifier, if necessary for safety reasons
- 6) survivors could later have the identifier removed from their case file if they no longer wished to be identified in that way

Recommendations:

- Explore the possibility of implementing a uniform DV/stalking identifier that meets the criteria suggested by survivors.

Theme #5: Certain DSHS requirements and practices compromise survivors' safety and confidentiality

*"I'm tired of telling every single person I talk to about the DV situation."
~focus group participant*

*"How many computers do I need to contact to make sure they all know I'm
in the ACP (Address Confidentiality Program)?" ~focus group participant*

*"There should be a special caseworker who understands how to work a DV
case." ~focus group participant.*

Many of the experiences and concerns that survivors shared during the focus group discussions related to certain requirements and practices within DSHS welfare assistance programs, including: 1) address and identity requirements, 2) the ways in which computer databases do or do not link and share client information, and 3) caseload management practices.

It is critical for many survivors of domestic violence and stalking to keep their actual physical address hidden from their abuser or stalker. Several focus group participants were enrolled in the Address Confidentiality Program (ACP), a program administered by the Office of the Secretary of State. This program provides survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking with a substitute mailing address, which all state agencies are required to accept. If a client is enrolled in the ACP, DSHS will enter that substitute mailing address into the computer systems and send all future correspondence to the given substitute address; however, participants described two situations in which the security of their physical address information gets breached as a result of other DSHS requirements.

One such circumstance is when a survivor applies for Additional Requirements for Emergent Needs (AREN) funds to help cover relocation costs. The AREN application form requires

clients to provide DSHS with the landlord's mailing address, so that DSHS can issue and mail a payment voucher to the landlord. In many cases, this address is the same address where the client will be living. The information from this form – including the address information – is entered into at least one computer database for purposes of issuing the voucher, and is scanned into another computer database for archival purposes. Even though the client's main case file retains the ACP substitute mailing address, information about the client's actual address also exists within DSHS computer databases. Some survivors were very alarmed to discover at some point after applying for and receiving AREN funds that mail from DSHS was addressed to their actual address instead of their ACP substitute mailing address. Similarly, survivors also reported that actual address information can make its way into DSHS computer systems via the landlord statement/verification process that happens during eligibility reviews.

Several participants described other concerns related to DSHS address requirements. Many survivors did not know about and were not enrolled in the Address Confidentiality Program, but for safety reasons needed to provide DSHS with a substitute mailing address. These survivors were using a private post office box address or the post office box address of the domestic violence shelter where they were staying. Certain welfare assistance programs (notably, the Basic Food Program) require recipients to provide a physical address instead of a post office box address. These survivors felt pressured to choose between getting the benefits they desperately needed and safeguarding their address information.

Some abusers and stalkers are so dangerous that survivors and their children are forced to change their names and social security numbers in order to stay completely hidden. This process of complete identity change is lengthy and requires survivors to submit copious amounts of evidence about the abuse or stalking to the Social Security Administration. In order for this strategy to be most effective, survivors must ensure that their new names and social security numbers are never linked with their old names and social security numbers. Consequently, many survivors lose the education and work histories they accumulated under their old identities and must apply for welfare assistance. One survivor who underwent a complete identity change reported that when she re-applied for assistance, she

was assured that her new identity information would not be linked to her old identity information. However, the CSO opened her new benefits case using her old client identity number. This was done in order to maintain an accurate count of the number of months she had received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Because her previous case record was updated to include her new name and social security number, her old identity information was automatically linked with her new identity information, limiting the effectiveness of her identity change.

Some participants shared that they had previously received benefits as part of the same assistance unit with their abuser, but were now receiving benefits under separate assistance units. During interviews with their case worker, these participants had seen their abusers' names and information appear on their workers' computer screens when the workers pulled up the survivors' case files. These survivors were surprised that their abusers were still linked to their current case files, and they were concerned that their abusers would likewise be able to see information about them.

Many survivors were confused about how and when information that is disclosed to one worker or entered into one computer database gets shared with another worker or computer database. Participants assumed that when they shared critical information with one worker, the other workers assigned to their case would also get the same information; yet, in most cases, this exchange of information did not occur. Most frequently, participants expected that critical information would be shared between their case workers at the CSO and their case workers at Division of Child Support. Participants repeatedly expressed frustration over having to tell the same information to different workers, and they inquired why new workers assigned to their case do not review their case file to learn more about the issues they are facing.

Additionally, participants were frustrated by the experience of getting constantly reassigned to new case workers. Survivors were dismayed at having to "start over again" with a new worker to explain how the domestic violence or stalking affects their lives and their participation in the welfare assistance program. Individual differences between workers

meant that sometimes new workers were really helpful in responding to the survivors' domestic violence and stalking-related barriers, and other times, new workers were unsupportive or created more barriers. Still other times, new workers pressured survivors to share additional, specific details about the abuse and stalking, which concerned survivors and made them feel as if they had to justify their requests for help or prove that the abuse and stalking had actually occurred. Many survivors were uncomfortable sharing specific details about the abuse, especially when those details were being recorded into DSHS computer databases. Numerous focus group participants asked whether DSHS could assign victims of domestic violence and stalking to specially trained case workers.

Recommendations:

- Review all DSHS forms, particularly those used for special assistance funds and eligibility verification reviews, to analyze whether information gathered on those forms could potentially compromise address security for clients enrolled in the Address Confidentiality Program. Modify forms and/or data entry processes as necessary.
- Develop ways for survivors of domestic violence and stalking who do not have an ACP substitute mailing address to provide an alternate mailing address or post office box address when necessary.
- Ensure that previous identity information is never linked with new identity information for clients who have completely changed their identities.
- Ensure that clients cannot obtain or view information about other clients, even if they were previously members of the same assistance unit.
- Review information-sharing practices between workers and computer systems to determine whether there are ways to minimize survivors having to repeat information about their circumstances multiple times to multiple workers.
- Explore the feasibility of implementing specialized caseloads for survivors of domestic violence and stalking.

Theme #6: Failure to properly implement existing policies and procedures compromises survivors' safety and confidentiality

The Department already has numerous policies and procedures in place to protect the confidentiality of all client information. Some of the experiences shared by survivors arose from a failure on the part of workers to properly implement those existing policies and procedures. While there is always a possibility of human error, it is important to remember that these failures can have serious and potentially lethal consequences for survivors of domestic violence and stalking. Workers across all welfare assistance programs must take confidentiality seriously and should be mindful at all times to protect client privacy and confidentiality in accordance with DSHS policy.

Following is a list of key steps that workers are already required and/or permitted to take, according to current policy, but which were not taken on behalf of the survivors who participated in the focus groups:

- 1) Inform clients about the availability of the Address Confidentiality Program when they have a need to safeguard their actual physical address.
- 2) Inform clients about the option to pursue good cause for non-cooperation with child support/medical support enforcement, especially when the client has disclosed a history of domestic violence or stalking and is concerned about the other parent getting access to information about the client and the client's children.
- 3) Inform clients if their good cause waiver for non-cooperation with child support/medical support enforcement is going to expire, and inform clients of the steps they need to take in order to request and receive an extension of the good cause waiver.
- 4) Inform clients who have disclosed a history of domestic violence or stalking that they can receive additional assistance and safety planning to address their confidentiality needs with an on-site family violence victim advocate and/or local community-based victim services agencies.
- 5) Inform clients about the option to have a telephone interview when domestic violence and/or stalking make it difficult or dangerous for the client to physically visit the CSO.

Schedule telephone interviews instead of in-person interviews when the client requests them for safety reasons.

- 6) Properly record all information provided by clients about changes of circumstances, including address changes, into the appropriate computer systems.
- 7) For Division of Child Support cases, do not release confidential information to the other parent, except as authorized or required by law. Redact or otherwise hide confidential information to which the other parent is not entitled prior to sending documents to the other parent.

Recommendations:

- Provide periodic trainings and reminders on confidentiality laws, policies and procedures to workers across all DSHS welfare assistance programs, including specialized steps to take and referrals to make for victims of domestic violence and stalking.
- Implement supervision strategies to ensure that workers correctly follow confidentiality laws, policies and procedures.

Other Issues that Survivors Raised During the Focus Groups

“It depends on the person, who you talk to and how they interpret domestic violence.” ~focus group participant

While the purpose of the focus groups was to elicit information about confidentiality-related concerns and needs, survivors who participated in the groups shared additional information about the ways in which domestic violence and stalking impact their participation in welfare assistance programs and how the response from DSHS workers in general impacts their safety and well-being.

A common experience for many focus group participants was that their abusers were persistent about tracking them down, stalking them, interfering with their participation in work and welfare assistance programs, and interfering with their receipt of financial

assistance. Participants reported that their abusers had come to harass and intimidate them at their work or training sites and in the parking lots at Community Service Offices. Abusers contacted DSHS and reported false information about the survivors' circumstances, including attempting to change their addresses, and lying about changes to household composition and income levels. Survivors also shared that the demands of coping with and responding to the abuser's or stalker's actions made it difficult to work. Finally, many survivors recounted stories about harm and harassment they and their children experienced as a result of being forced to pursue child support/medical support enforcement against the abusive other parent.

Another common theme that emerged is that the way in which the DSHS worker responds to a survivor when she or he discloses a history of abuse or stalking has a great impact on the survivor's comfort level, safety and ability to achieve self-sufficiency. Some survivors reported that it didn't seem to make a difference when they told workers about the domestic violence or stalking, so they stopped telling. Others described feeling judged, mocked, or disbelieved by some workers. These survivors did not receive information about or access to specialized services, waivers and referrals that could have improved their safety while receiving welfare assistance.

Conversely, many survivors described having very positive experiences in which the response of DSHS workers made a huge difference in their lives. Some participants had experienced the contrast between workers that were supportive, provided helpful referrals, and facilitated the survivor's access to specialized services and waivers and workers who had not been supportive. These participants talked at length about how important it was to them and their ability to achieve a greater degree of safety and self-sufficiency when they had a worker who responded positively to their disclosure of domestic violence or stalking. Participants also discussed how helpful it was to get connected with an on-site or community-based domestic violence advocate.

Survivors described a range of specific behaviors that were helpful, including:

- 1) The worker had a supportive, understanding, non-judgmental, and compassionate demeanor
- 2) The worker informed the survivor about the option to apply for good cause for non-cooperation with child support/medical support enforcement
- 3) The worker informed the survivor about the Address Confidentiality Program
- 4) The worker referred the survivor to a domestic violence advocate
- 5) The worker took special care to make sure that the survivor's address was safeguarded
- 6) The worker arranged for a block to be placed on the survivor's file so that only a limited number of workers would be able to see confidential information about the abuse
- 7) The worker noticed the survivor's reluctance to leave her children with the other parent, so the worker privately screened the survivor about domestic violence
- 8) The worker did not release confidential information to the abuser when he tried to obtain information about the survivor
- 9) The worker allowed the client to fill out paperwork at the shelter and let the advocate turn it in, so that the survivor (who was in hiding) did not have to go to the Community Service Office in person
- 10) The worker arranged for the survivor to use a special "code word" so that others in the office knew she was working with a domestic violence advocate and needed special care.

Recommendations

“In a perfect DSHS, what would confidentiality look like? How would your information be handled?” ~focus group facilitator

“It won’t ever be perfect, but the closest thing is that they take you to a private room to talk and give you information – not in the lobby with people right next to you and right behind you. The door is shut; you feel safe, comfortable, and you can talk about anything. You use a card or something to sign in instead of giving your social security number. And you don’t have to repeat your story over and over again or give a lot of details.” ~focus group participant

“You trust them to keep things confidential.” ~focus group participant

The recommendations below are derived from the experiences and concerns of survivors of domestic violence and stalking. Final recommendations will be developed after the workgroup considers this information along with information gathered from front-line workers and victim advocates.

- Survivors should be informed about how their information is handled within the context of DSHS welfare assistance programs so they can plan appropriately for their safety.
- DSHS workers should fully explain the consent form to clients, including 1) explaining what information will be shared with whom (if they sign the form), and 2) assuring clients that their benefits will not be affected if they refuse to sign the form.
- Implement methods for clients to privately check-in for appointments and update information about their circumstances.
- Implement procedures for calling clients to the reception counter or to their appointments without revealing the client’s identifying information (including name, social security number and/or client identity number).

- Consider strategies for ensuring that clients can discuss sensitive issues with their case manager or social worker in a private office.
- Implement more stringent security protocols for verifying identity information over the phone prior to releasing client information
- Amend RCW 74.04.060 to prohibit DSHS from verifying whether or not a person is currently receiving benefits if that person has disclosed to the Department that she or he is a survivor of domestic violence and/or stalking.
- Ensure that workers across DSHS welfare assistance and related programs (such as child support enforcement) properly follow existing confidentiality policies and procedures to prevent the unauthorized disclosure of confidential client information.
- Explore the possibility of implementing a uniform DV/stalking identifier that meets the criteria suggested by survivors.
- Review all DSHS forms, particularly those used for special assistance funds and eligibility verification reviews, to analyze whether information gathered on those forms could potentially compromise address security for clients enrolled in the Address Confidentiality Program. Modify forms and/or data entry processes as necessary.
- Develop ways for survivors of domestic violence and stalking who do not have an ACP substitute mailing address to provide an alternate mailing address or post office box addresses when necessary.
- Ensure that previous identity information is never linked with new identity information for clients who have completely changed their identities.
- Ensure that clients cannot obtain or view information about other clients, even if they were previously members of the same assistance unit.
- Review information-sharing practices between workers and computer systems to determine whether there are ways to minimize survivors having to repeat information about their circumstances multiple times to multiple workers.
- Explore the feasibility of implementing specialized caseloads for survivors of domestic violence and stalking.
- Provide periodic trainings and reminders on confidentiality laws, policies and procedures to workers across all DSHS welfare assistance programs, including

specialized steps to take and referrals to make for victims of domestic violence and stalking.

- Implement supervision strategies to ensure that workers correctly follow confidentiality laws, policies and procedures.

Appendix

Workgroup Members

- Sydney Dore, Public Disclosure Manager, Workgroup Facilitator
DSHS, Economic Services Administration
- Aurea Figueroa, WorkFirst Family Violence Program Manager
DSHS, Economic Services Administration, Division of Employment and Assistance Programs
- Michael Luque, Social Services Coordinator
DSHS, Economic Services Administration, Community Services Division
- Nancy Koptur, Rules and Policy Manager
DSHS, Economic Services Administration, Division of Child Support
- Andrew Nord, Database Manager
DSHS, Economic Services Administration, Operations Support Division
- Mette Earlywine, Program Specialist
WSCADV, Economic Justice Project
- Jennifer Quiroz, DV Advocate co-located at Federal Way CSO
YWCA of South King County
- Lindsey Lauderdale, DV Advocate co-located at Olympia CSO
Alternatives Professional Counseling
- Cynthia Haglund, DV Advocate co-located at Olympia CSO
Alternatives Professional Counseling

Focus Group Materials

- Sample text for recruitment flier, provided to local organizers
- Recruitment flier, emailed to DV advocates co-located at CSOs and to DV program directors at community-based victim service agencies
- Facilitation Agenda, including scripted discussion questions
- Written comments form for participants

Sample text for recruitment flier, provided to local organizers

Your voice can make a difference!

Are you a survivor of domestic violence or stalking?

Have you received welfare assistance from DSHS?

If so, what were your experiences with confidentiality at DSHS?

Who's asking, and why do they want to know?

DSHS is currently looking at ways to improve confidentiality for survivors of domestic violence and stalking who receive welfare assistance.

DSHS is very interested in hearing directly from survivors and has asked the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence to host discussion groups around the state.

One or two policy-makers from DSHS headquarters will attend to hear your ideas about how DSHS can best protect confidentiality for survivors.

How can you help out?

Make sure that survivors' voices are heard loud and clear as DSHS considers what next steps to take!

Join us for a discussion group about confidentiality issues at DSHS on

[DATE]

[TIME]

[PLACE]

We'll provide

Dinner, On Site Childcare, and \$20 for your time

Please contact [insert name] if you're interested.

*Note: Please let us know if you have any safety concerns about coming to this discussion. The DSHS policy-makers do not need to know your real name, and your participation at this discussion will not affect your benefits.

Recruitment flier, emailed to DV advocates co-located at CSOs and to DV program directors at community-based victim service agencies

Please help spread the word to survivors about the discussion groups we're hosting!

What are the discussion groups?

- DSHS is currently looking at ways to improve confidentiality for survivors of domestic violence and stalking who receive welfare assistance.
- WSCADV is hosting four discussion groups around the state to hear directly from survivors about their experiences. One or two policy-makers from DSHS headquarters will attend each discussion group.

Who can participate in the discussion groups?

- Someone who is a survivor of domestic violence and/or stalking, AND
- Applied for and/or received welfare assistance from DSHS, AND
- Is willing to describe personal experiences related to confidentiality while applying for and/or receiving assistance from DSHS.

Participants will receive a \$20 stipend. Childcare, food and interpretation will be provided. Please request interpretation one week in advance of the meeting.

How does someone sign up to participate?

- To preserve anonymity/confidentiality, a local group is organizing each meeting and making the arrangements for childcare, food and interpretation.
- Contact the group organizing the meeting to sign up (see below). DSHS will NOT be given personally identifying information about who participates in the discussion.

Where and when are the discussion groups?

- **SPOKANE (downtown): Jan. 30th**, starts at 5:30 pm, ends around 8 pm. Contact Cathy Mann at VOICES to sign up
- **YAKIMA (downtown): Feb. 26th**, starts at 5:30 pm, ends around 8 pm. Contact Lori Perez at YWCA of Yakima to sign up
- **OLYMPIA (downtown): Feb. 21st**, starts at 5:30 pm, ends around 8 pm. Contact Monica Peabody at WROC to sign up
- **SEATTLE (downtown): Feb. 13th**, starts at 6:30 pm, ends around 8 pm. Contact Liesl Eckert at WROC to sign up

Facilitation Agenda, including scripted discussion questions

Check-in (first 30 min)

- Connect participants with interpreters as needed
- Participants eat and get children settled in with childcare providers

Welcome & Introductions (15 min)

- Meeting facilitator introduces self, acknowledges meeting organizers
- Introduce workgroup members & their connection to DSHS
- Housekeeping (location of bathrooms, okay to get up & stretch, take care of self, etc)
- Allow participants the opportunity to introduce themselves if they would like to do so

Frame the Discussion (15 min)

- Background: 2848 bill, DSHS' commitment to improving confidentiality for survivors
- The workgroup: purpose, scope of influence
- Purpose of this discussion group: specifically on confidentiality at DSHS; find out what's actually happening, hear directly from survivors about your needs, concerns, successes and challenges related to confidentiality, find out if there are things you need in addition to the base policy
- What will happen with the information you share with us?: notes are on WSCADV laptop and will be compiled into a report describing themes from all four discussions, will not record and report identifying details; however, the summary report will become a public record
- If you need to resolve a specific problem, we are available for consultation afterward
- How the discussion will go: fairly structured, trying to cover a lot of areas, so we may move quickly; will keep the discussion on the specific topic of confidentiality

The Main Discussion (1 hr, 15min)

As we talk tonight, please try to help us understand the impact on your life – positive or negative, and share with us any ideas or insights you have as to how things could be improved with regards to confidentiality.

#1: The Big Picture

Let's start by thinking big and wide about your experiences with confidentiality at DSHS. Think about what it was like when you applied for benefits, went through verification, and completed the assessments and evaluations. Think about what it was like at the actual office – in the waiting area and in the cubicles and offices and meeting rooms. Think about what it was like getting mail or phone calls from DSHS. Finally, think about all the workers you interacted with – within DSHS and at other programs that you were referred to (like Job Search or the family planning nurse). What are your thoughts about the way your information was handled in those circumstances? In the big picture of your involvement with DSHS, what do you want to say about confidentiality?

#2: Knowing What Would Happen with Your Information

Okay, thanks so much for what you've shared so far. Now I'd like to hear about what you thought DSHS would or could do with all the information you shared with them. What was your understanding of how your confidentiality would be handled at DSHS?

If DSHS asked you to sign a consent form (so they could release information to another party), did you understand why they were asking you to sign it? Did you understand what information they would share?

There are a lot of times when DSHS can share information about you with other programs and agencies, even without your consent. Did you know when information about you was being shared with other providers? Either way, what happened as a result?

#3: Moving

Alright, now let's switch gears and talk about moving. If you moved while you were receiving benefits – either in state or out of state – how do you feel about what happened with your information and confidentiality when you had to transfer offices?

#4: Safeguarding Sensitive Information

Now let's hear about your experiences in another area. Many victims of domestic violence are in hiding from their abuser or stalker at some point. Some survivors get a substitute mailing address from the Address Confidentiality Program, and some survivors change their name and possibly even their Social Security Number. What worked well and what didn't work in terms of keeping this kind of information safe while getting assistance from DSHS?

Do you think your abuser or stalker ever found out information about you from DSHS? How do you think your abuser got the information? What happened as a result?

There is a law that requires DSHS to answer yes or no if anyone calls and asks whether a particular person is currently receiving benefits. Do you think someone has used this law to gain information about you that caused you harm?

#5: Did You Ever Tell DSHS?

Thanks for hanging in with us so far. I really appreciate and respect everything you've shared tonight. We're almost done...

A lot of DSHS's current policies depend upon the victim telling DSHS about the abuse or stalking. Did you ever tell DSHS about the abuse or stalking? Why or why not? What do you think are the pros and cons of telling DSHS about abuse or stalking?

It turns out that there is no single way for DSHS to identify someone as a victim of abuse or stalking across all its benefit programs and related services. So even if you told a worker at DSHS, the person at Job Search might not know, and vice versa. One idea is to have a single identifier built into all the computer databases, so all the workers in all the programs would know if you had ever told anyone about the abuse and stalking. The idea would be to put workers on alert so they could discuss safety concerns with you. What are your thoughts about having a single identifier?

#6: In a Perfect DSHS...

Okay, last question. Pretend I've just given you a magic wand that will allow you to make things perfect – at least in terms of confidentiality. In a perfect DSHS, what would confidentiality look like? How would your information be handled?

Wrap-Up (15 min)

- Briefly, is there anything else related to confidentiality that you want to make sure we hear about?
- Close the discussion, honor participants for sharing their stories, ideas, insights with us, thank everyone for their participation
- What happens next: host groups in other communities, develop a report of themes uncovered during the groups
- How can you get a copy of the report?: We'll send to the meeting organizer; report won't be out until this summer
- How can you find out what recommendations and/or changes DSHS will eventually implement?: we'll keep the meeting organizer informed; recommendations won't be out until this fall
- Reminder that workers at the local level probably don't know much about these discussion group
- We're available after the group if you want to discuss a specific problem

Written comments form for participants and other survivors unable to attend the focus groups

Discussion Questions

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#1: The Big Picture

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If DSHS asked you to sign a consent form (so they could release information to another party), did you understand why they were asking you to sign it? Did you feel you had a choice about whether or not to sign the form? Did you understand what information they would share?

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Okay, last question. Pretend we've just given you a magic wand that will allow you to make things perfect – at least in terms of confidentiality. In a perfect DSHS, what would confidentiality look like? How would your information be handled?
