



THE NEW YORK STATE COUNCIL ON WOMEN AND GIRLS

COVID-19 Domestic Violence Task Force

MAY 28, 2020

COVID-19 DOMESTIC VIOLENCE TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

On May 20, 2020, Secretary to the Governor Melissa DeRosa and the New York State Council on Women and Girls announced the creation of a new task force to find innovative solutions to address a spike in domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Governor Andrew M. Cuomo charged the Task Force with addressing the impact of the pandemic on domestic violence survivors by looking beyond the traditional ways in which services are provided.

Data reported by law enforcement and domestic violence service providers pointed to an increase in domestic violence cases in the first few months of the pandemic, with the New York State Domestic & Sexual Violence Hotline recording a 33% increase in calls for April 2020 compared to April 2019, and shelter occupancy rates upstate rising to 78% in April 2020, versus 59% in April 2019. Those statistics, however, only told one part of the story. Domestic violence is an underreported crime and one shrouded in shame and social stigma. Stress, unemployment, and financial pressures do not cause people to abuse their partners, but these factors can cause an increase in frequency or severity of violence and create more dangerous situations for victims, especially when compounded with the increased isolation that has come with social distancing.

Since the pandemic began and the NYS PAUSE order went into effect, the state's Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence (OPDV) and all relevant state agencies have been working diligently to reach domestic violence survivors and connect them with information about services and support. OPDV also implemented a new, confidential text line and chat program for survivors across the state. The creation of the Task Force built on that work, convening 27 experienced and knowledgeable advocates, service providers, and thought leaders¹ from across the country to meet virtually three times over the course of the week. They shared their expertise through spirited discussion as well as written proposals submitted after the first meeting. Despite the Task Force members' wide variety of backgrounds and perspectives, the proposals they offered demonstrated a shared desire to allow survivors to define their own needs and goals, meeting the Governor's charge to reimagine systems in order to advance that mission.

As New York builds back better and charts a path forward in the wake of the pandemic, the state has the opportunity to adapt to the new normal and to transform its approach to domestic violence. This moment demands flexibility, innovative thinking, and a willingness to move beyond the idea that shelter is the only option for victims and survivors on the deepest margins of society who are seeking safety. The immediate solutions identified by the Task Force will begin to transform an entrenched system into one that places the needs of domestic violence survivors front and center through three primary principles: **Mobile Advocacy**, **Flexible Funding**, and **Housing Choice**. The recommendations offered by the Task Force are ready to be quickly implemented, cutting red tape and prioritizing cultural competency to better meet survivors where they are, and set a foundation for more innovation in the future.

¹ Please see pages 5-6 for a full list of Task Force members.

The following recommendations are put forward to the Governor:

MOBILE ADVOCACY

As so many different interactions move to online and mobile platforms in people's day to day lives, New York can meet survivors' desires to interact in their own language with service providers and other professionals via mobile devices from wherever is safest and most convenient.

The Task Force recommends that the Governor direct the Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence (OPDV) to partner with national technical assistance providers to enhance knowledge around the use of technology to reach more survivors. This will create a long-term network of experts to whom service providers and survivors can look for advice on best practices and advances in the field of virtual advocacy, and will provide training for providers on best practices in virtual advocacy and safe technology for survivors, including survivors in traditionally underserved populations and young people who may be impacted by intimate partner violence. These services and corresponding trainings should include language access components.

The Task Force recommends that state agencies support programs in purchasing mobile devices and supporting technological infrastructure in an effort to secure such needs with federal funding related to the pandemic and with the redirection of federal funds to support victims of crime.

The Task Force also recommends that OPDV permanently incorporate a chat and text component into the functionality of the NYS Domestic and Sexual Violence Hotline.

FLEXIBLE FUNDING

The Task Force recommends that state agencies provide funding for local programs that can be used to support survivors' safety, housing stability, transportation, and other needs. In tandem with the mobile advocacy strategy, the state should allow programs to use funds to conduct community-based mobile advocacy, with an emphasis on housing stability, economic empowerment, and safety planning, to enable survivors to remain safe and stably housed in the community, if possible.

Funding should be flexible to meet a range of needs, including housing costs, safety measures and allocations for essential needs that might present barriers to safety and housing stability, such as debt or car repair expenses. Support should have more flexible parameters, should meet survivors' needs as quickly as possible, and should be available until survivors feel safe. Program outcomes should be based on survivors' safety and housing stability over the long-term.

Further, the state should continue its commitment to partnering with the philanthropic and advocacy community, collaborating to leverage support, fill in the gaps where existing funds fall short and foster further innovation.

HOUSING CHOICE

New York must support housing solutions beyond shelter for survivors seeking a safe place to live. Honoring survivors' desires and individual goals for themselves and their families must be a centerpiece of the service delivery system. Too often, existing systems and funding mechanisms have taken a "one-size-fits-all" approach to domestic violence housing that offers survivors no choices.

The Task Force recommends that state agencies connect providers to diverse housing-related funding streams to support a housing navigator system. Navigators will work with survivors to help them access available resources and support for housing beyond shelter and work with domestic violence advocates to help them better understand and assist with their clients' needs around housing.

Federal funding for housing-related needs is available within the community and is being increased due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, but those who are not housing experts may not know how to access such funding. Domestic violence programs should designate a portion of one staff member's salary to be used for housing navigation services, and community-based resources should incorporate this information into their resource database in order to fully support those victims. The role of the housing navigator would be to "bridge the gap" between domestic violence services and housing providers in order to ensure that the housing needs of domestic violence survivors are met.

CUT RED TAPE

To advance the strategies laid out above, the Task Force recommends that the Governor issue an executive order to remove the requirement that domestic violence victims file a police report in order to access to Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funding. Many domestic violence survivors may be unable or unwilling to file a police report against their abuser. Expanding access to VOCA funding while the state of emergency remains in effect will allow survivors to navigate the COVID-19 crisis with crucial financial support to seek safety.

Additionally, the Task Force recommends that the Governor direct state agencies to continue the collaboration that has been prioritized during the COVID-19 pandemic. Better communication among the agencies charged with supporting and overseeing domestic violence service providers will only benefit survivors seeking the services they need to feel safe.

CREATE CULTURALLY COMPETENT SERVICES AND PREVENTION STRATEGIES

The Task Force recommends that the tenets of diversity, equity, and inclusion be incorporated into all domestic violence programs and policies, and that the Council on Women and Girls establish a standing committee prioritize and coordinate the creation of culturally competent service delivery designed to address the needs of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) survivors of gender-based violence.

The committee should operate under a shared understanding of the impact of systemic racism on BIPOC survivors of gender-based violence, and will meet bi-monthly to create an action plan for implementing inclusive elements of service delivery, including comprehensive prevention strategies, improved language access, and culturally competent outreach. This committee will address the intersectionality of race and ethnicity, culture, religion, sexuality and gender identity, disability, and immigration status with gender-based violence, identify interventions that are

survivor-centered, and create a safety net of culturally competent services. The committee will include organizations with expertise in providing services to culturally specific populations, and will expand beyond traditional partnerships and service provision norms to craft comprehensive approaches to respond to survivors' needs.

The Task Force also recommends that the state launch a paid and earned media campaign to promote prevention in a culturally competent way and reach specific populations across New York State.

NORMALIZE DV SCREENING IN MORE HEALTH SETTINGS

As our health system increasingly operates through both in-person and telehealth visits, the Task Force recommends that the Governor direct OPDV and the Department of Health (DOH) to create guidelines for best practices in identifying and responding to intimate partner violence via telehealth. DOH and the Department of Financial Services (DFS) should explore the rapid deployment of Medicaid (and commercial) payment mechanisms for intimate partner violence screening and response through telehealth. OPDV should develop and provide training, technical assistance and appropriate literature for healthcare providers to encourage safe screening for domestic violence and appropriate responses when domestic violence is suspected or identified during telehealth visits.

PROTECT IMMIGRANT SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Immigrants are among the most vulnerable populations experiencing domestic violence. An attorney may be the only resource able to help victims gain access to multiple benefits and protections available to them, but there are not enough attorneys to meet the need. The Task Force recommends that the Governor direct OPDV to coordinate a program with the New York State Bar Association and other bar associations and legal services providers to facilitate training and promote the need for representation of immigrant victims by large law firms through their pro bono programs.

CONFRONT FINANCIAL ABUSE

The Task Force recommends that OPDV expands the functions of its existing text and chat line to serve as a conduit to address the various forms of financial abuse experienced by domestic violence survivors. OPDV and DFS are well positioned to launch a public awareness campaign to highlight financial abuse. The Task Force also recommends the establishment of a pilot project with local domestic service providers to identify victims whose credit has been ruined as a result of their abuse and work to repair and rebuild their financial standing. Safety and independence is often not possible without good credit and the access to resources it creates.

SUPPORT OFFENDER ACCOUNTABILITY

The Task Force recommends that OPDV exercises its oversight authority for abusive partner interventions programs in New York State and directs it to launch a new prevention initiative specifically directed at men, emphasizing the connection between domestic violence and harm to children. Educating men on the impact of domestic violence on children, with an emphasis on their accountability to their entire family, has been shown to be an effective message to reach individuals who choose to harm.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR FUTURE PROGRESS

The recommendations offered in this report represent just a small fraction of the many ideas and best practices offered by the members of the Task Force over the course of their work. Among the long-term strategies to be further explored are policies around court innovation, ways to address the connection between child abuse and domestic violence, robust prevention programs, and more comprehensive data collection practices. While the Task Force will no longer formally convene, its members have generously offered to continue serving as resources to the state as it develops these long-term plans.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the limitations of our social safety net and the ways in which our traditional systems were letting down vulnerable populations. As New York builds back better, the state must prioritize nimble solutions to domestic violence that center the needs and lived experience of survivors. Policies and practices emphasizing **mobile advocacy**, **flexible funding**, and **housing choice**, incorporating cultural competency and using an intersectional lens, will allow the state to meet survivors where they are and partner with them to reach the outcomes that best fit their lives and ultimately allow them to stay safe.

COVID-19 DOMESTIC VIOLENCE TASK FORCE MEMBERS

- Scott Berkowitz - Founder and President, Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN)
- Alejandra Y. Castillo, Esq. - CEO, YWCA USA
- Karma Cottman - Executive Director, Ujima, Inc: The National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community
- Nathaniel M. Fields - President and CEO, Urban Resource Institute (URI)
- Ruth M. Glenn - President and CEO, National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV)
- Peg Hacskaylo - Founder and CEO, National Alliance for Safe Housing (NASH)
- Jim Henderson - Probation and Domestic Violence Expert, Battered Women's Justice Project
- Grace Huang, JD - Policy Director, Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence
- Tandra R. LaGrone - Executive Director, In Our Own Voices
- Cindi Leive - Senior Fellow, USC-Annenberg School of Journalism and Communications
- Tonya Lovelace, MA - CEO, Women of Color Network Inc (WOCN)
- David Mandel - Executive Director, Safe & Together Institute
- Karol V. Mason - President, John Jay College of Criminal Justice
- Joan S. Meier - Professor of Law, George Washington University Law School and Director, National Family Violence Law Center at GW
- Connie Neal - Executive Director, New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NYSCADV)
- Ana L. Oliveira - President and CEO, The New York Women's Foundation
- Leslye Orloff - Director, National Immigrant Women's Advocacy Project at American University Washington College of Law
- Farzana Safiullah - CEO, National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRCDV)
- Lynn Hecht Schafran, JD - Legal Director and Director, National Judicial Education Program at Legal Momentum, The Women's Legal Defense and Education Fund
- Lucy Rain Simpson - Executive Director, National Indigenous Women's Resource Center (NIWRC)

- Joe Torre - Co-Founder and Chairman, The Safe at Home Foundation and Special Advisor to Major League Baseball (MLB)
- Patricia Tototzintle - CEO, Casa de Esperanza/National Latin@ Network for Healthy Families and Community
- Deborah D. Tucker, MPA - President, National Center on Domestic & Sexual Violence (NCDSV)
- Deborah J. Vagins - President and CEO, National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV)
- Troy Vincent - Executive Vice President of Football Operations, NFL and National Advocate to End Domestic Violence
- Carole Warshaw, M.D. - Director, National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health
- Joanne Zannoni - Executive Director, New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NYSCASA)