

Not Enough: What TANF Offers Family Violence Victims

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Domestic violence and poverty are intersecting issues. Significant numbers of women living in poverty are battered and the violence they experience can make the climb out of poverty unattainable. Poverty, in turn, can make it impossible to escape violence or deal with its effects. To be safe, victims need to be free from the violence and control of those who abuse them, but they must also be able to meet their basic human needs.

To more fully understand how TANF, the Family Violence Option and related child support enforcement provisions are working for victims of domestic and sexual violence, Legal Momentum and the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (NRCDV) conducted a national survey in the Fall of 2009. Nearly 600 staff from domestic violence programs and other agencies working with victims on TANF related issues completed the survey. Respondents included individuals from all 50 states and Washington, D.C. The majority (78%) of respondents work at domestic violence or dual domestic violence/sexual assault programs. Most respondents (82%) provide victim direct services to victims.

Survey responses show that some victims in some places are getting the TANF resources – a financial bridge to safety – that they need. In these instances, TANF often represents the difference between safety and continued violence for a victim and her children. Unfortunately though, the survey data also reveals a different reality – for too many victims, TANF does not provide what they need to be safe. It is not enough.

Key Findings

with direct quotes from respondents' answers to open-ended survey questions

1. **Victims living in poverty need TANF assistance and related services.**

"[TANF] is often the difference between a survivor jumping from shelter to shelter, living in unsafe conditions, or returning to their abuser and actually gaining their own safety, stability, and self sufficiency."

Over 96% of survey respondents answered "yes" to the question "is access to TANF financial assistance an important resource for a significant number of family violence victims." Seventy-one percent estimated that at least half of the victims served by their agency needed TANF as part of their safety plan.

2. When TANF family violence responses work well they make significant differences in the lives of victims and their children.

“When the victim gets a case manager who knows the system and family violence it works well. They advocate for her and help her through the system instead of creating barriers. We recently had a victim facing lethal danger who needed to get safely to another state. The victim got her grant quickly and was able to get safely out. When our agencies work well together we are able to save lives!”

3. For too many victims, TANF does not provide what they need to be safe.

a. The TANF application process creates barriers to assistance and to appropriate family violence responses.

“Victims feel lost, confused, and frustrated with the system and it gets to a point where going back to the abuser is easier than dealing with the current system.”

TANF cannot be a path to safety if victims do not have access to the financial assistance that TANF is supposed to provide. The survey asked respondents to estimate the percentage of victims served by their agency who were able to access TANF benefits when needed as part of their safety plan. Forty-three percent of respondents estimated that fewer than half of victims were able to access benefits and 20% estimated fewer than one quarter.

b. TANF assistance is inadequate – too little, too late.

Forty-seven percent of respondents selected “Doesn’t work” for the “amount of benefits paid.” Respondents were given a list of twenty-two potential TANF changes and asked which two changes would be most important. Increasing TANF benefit levels was rated as “very important” by 81% of respondents.

4. The Family Violence Option (FVO) and other family violence specific responses inadequately address victims’ unique issues.

a. Victims are not consistently and effectively screened for voluntary disclosure or notified of family violence specific responses, waivers, or protections.

“Screening for domestic violence doesn’t work well. Oftentimes women are interviewed in public places like a counter, and also when the abuser is present, or not asked at all.”

Only 14% of respondents rated screening for family violence as working well and only 12% rated notification of the family violence option or other family violence response as working well. Although larger percentages rated screening (42%) and notification (38%) as working OK, 28% said screening and 33% said notification don’t work.

b. Victims who disclose violence do not consistently receive the family violence specific responses, waivers, or protections that they need to be safe.

“Applying for domestic violence waivers remains a cumbersome, intrusive and arbitrary process, and the agency takes a largely narrow view regard the scope of what can be waived.”

The response to applicants who do identify family violence is often discouraging. The FVO allows states to waive time limits or work requirements as victims often need time to address safety or relocation issues or to overcome the traumatic effects of abuse. Yet, 34%

of respondents rated FVO time limit extension policies as not working and 32% of respondents rated FVO work requirement exemption policies as not working.

c. Some TANF responses can make life more dangerous or difficult for victims.

“Hearing horror stories about the difficulties and degradation experienced accessing benefits might cause a victim to decide not to leave an abusive situation. ”

More than 25% of respondents said, “NO” when asked if family violence information disclosed by victims was handled in an appropriate way. Respondents described private information being disclosed to a victim’s abusive partner and even the confidential location of the shelter being disclosed.

5. Child support enforcement inconsistently addresses safety and financial concerns.

“Child support enforcement has helped in many ways with some family violence victims that we have served and with others it has created more barriers for victims to overcome. ”

Only 12% of respondents reported the child support enforcement cooperation exemption due to family violence as working well. A frequent problem reported by respondents was the disclosure of confidential information to an abusive partner, including a victim’s hidden location.

6. Changes that would make TANF a more effective resource for victims.

Respondents were given a list of twenty-one potential TANF changes. The seven top ranked changes were:

- **Increase employment services that lead to a living wage** - *“Most clients DO NOT want to be on welfare, but many of them don’t see many options...especially if they have children and will have to pay for child care while they are working minimum wage jobs.”*
- **Increase access to child care** - *“Childcare is a must for domestic violence victims. Victims are stuck. They can’t look for work without someone to watch the children. Victims don’t have access to the same support systems as non-victims.”*
- **Increase training for TANF and CSE staff workers around domestic and sexual violence** - *“Training around domestic and sexual violence would enable workers to have a more understanding and compassionate take on dealing with these difficult situations.”*
- **Provide emergency relocation and other related assistance to victims fleeing violence** - *“For some clients this is the only option.”*
- **Increase transportation services** - *“Many women flee their situations leaving behind their vehicles, many are not able to afford upkeep, and many times the vehicles are not in the victims’ names.”*
- **Improve screening for family violence** - *“Improving screening is so important. We need to create an environment where survivors feel safe to share. Many women come to the TANF office for a specific reason, and are not prepared to talk about violence in their home.”*

- **Increase TANF benefit levels** – *“Families cannot survive month to month on TANF. Survivors who leave our shelter with TANF as their only income are at great risk of homelessness. Even \$150 more dollars would be helpful.”*

CONCLUSION

TANF and related services are essential resources for victims of domestic and sexual violence and their children. All victims in poverty should be able to count on this basic assistance when they need it. Although TANF works well for some victims in some locations, access barriers are far too common and benefits far too low, and in many cases these inadequacies mean some victims will not be safe. Significant improvements are necessary to ensure that disclosure of family violence information to TANF workers leads to increased options and safety for victims.

“I had a case where a client showed up for an interview, was referred to me, picked up her children and was helped to flee all in 6 hours. She literally did not have diapers or a bottle even. She was given transportation vouchers, clothing vouchers, diaper vouchers...then TANF put her up in a hotel in a new community and helped her get into shelter there. It was incredible to see them all come together and take action...Overall she left knowing that there are people who care and will pull out the stops to keep her and her children safe.”

“The extension of time limits due to family violence helped two victims that our program has served. It gave them the extra time they needed to regroup, get counseling, find employment, and housing. The 6-month extensions really help them move forward with their lives.”

Full report available at:

http://www.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/NotEnoughTANF-FVFULLReport.pdf