

II. The Initiative for Violence-Free Families and Communities in Ramsey County, Minnesota: Fourteen Years of Innovative Strategies to Prevent Family Violence

By Donald Gault

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to provide information on two major efforts by The Initiative for Violence-Free Families and Communities (the Initiative) in Ramsey County, Minnesota: 1) The Men's Line, a unique resource developed in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota in 1997, and 2) a successful program to eliminate media messages that condone violence against women, children, and men.

Background

During the mid-1980s, Ramsey County convened a series of Abuse Councils, whose charge was to examine and improve County intervention services and programs that respond to family violence (child abuse, elder abuse, and domestic violence). Through these councils, intervention services were improved, and the County Board became much more aware of the financial and human costs of family violence in the community. In the late 1980s, a 5-year old boy was kicked to death by his mother's boyfriend while his family's case was under the jurisdiction of the County. This incident, in conjunction with the work of the Abuse Councils, led the Board to make a commitment to family violence prevention.

In April 1990, the Minneapolis League of Women Voters published Breaking the Cycle of Violence: A Focus on Primary Prevention Efforts. Research compiled in the League report helped to lay the groundwork for the two initiatives:

- The report identified primary prevention¹, i.e. trying to reach the entire population with tools and resources designed to prevent violence before it occurs, as a central component to breaking the cycle of violence.
- The report also provided the rationale for a sustained, community-wide approach.

In addition, the Initiative adopted a communication strategy used in successful marketing campaigns and public health education efforts—multiple messages from multiple messengers, over time. Our primary prevention efforts are built on a model articulated in the League Report. All parts of our community—schools, faith-based institutions, workplaces, media, and other groups—are engaged through action teams in creating and institutionalizing positive, respectful messages and strategies to promote nonviolence. These teams also identify and remove messages and incentives that can increase the likelihood that individuals will turn to violence.

Several accomplishments of these action teams have made Ramsey County a more peaceful community. They include:

- Development of policies, tools, and strategies to assure violence-free, respectful workplaces;
- Creation of a broad range of resources promoting peaceful parenting, including the Welcoming Places Campaign, which works to make health care and other public facilities respectful, welcoming places for families and children;
- Partnership with schools (K-12 and higher education) on tools promoting peaceful classroom and school environments, and on athlete/coach codes of conduct to assure respectful and peaceful sporting events;
- Partnership with the Hmong community to create and implement a broad range of strategies for promoting peace; and
- Collaboration among faith community leaders, family violence prevention advocates, and musicians and playwrights to create musicals about the causes of family violence and ways to build respectful, healthy relationships. (The most recent outcome of this work is the musical “Change,” which will be filmed by Twin Cities Public Television in April 2003 and broadcast on June 1.)

Staffing and core resources for the work of the Initiative have been provided by Ramsey County principally through the Department of Public Health. During the initial planning phase, a planning and administrative position was “loaned” to The Initiative by the County. There are now three full-time staff dedicated to supporting the work of action teams. These staff work with faith communities, health care systems, schools, media, and other groups to create and integrate into the fabric of the Ramsey County community primary prevention tools and messages. These staff positions have been funded not through private grants, but through a local tax levy and other more stable sources, thus better ensuring the long-term sustainability of the work. At the present time, county-wide budget cuts are looming due to significant state deficits. It is our belief that the impact of the Initiative on the Ramsey County community will assure that these efforts continue to be supported in the foreseeable future.

More information on the Initiative for Violence-Free Families and Communities in Ramsey County can be found at the Department of Public Health website:

www.co.ramsey.mn.us

The Men’s Line

In July 1997, the Initiatives for Violence-Free Families and Communities in Ramsey and Hennepin County started The Men’s Line.ⁱⁱ This is the first and, to our knowledge, the only resource of its kind in the United States. The Men’s Line is a free, confidential, 24-hour phone line for men, answered by trained counselors at the Crisis Connection, the Twin Cities’ primary 24-hour crisis line. The Men’s Line was modeled after pioneering work done by Dale Hurst and associates in the 1980s and ‘90s in Melbourne, Australia. Designed to give men a resource to break their isolation and address issues of stress, anger, and depression, the Men’s Line received over 3,000 calls from July 1997 through

December 2002. In 2002, it averaged over 65 calls per month, and 85 in both November and December.

A 1999 assessment of the program found that calls received by the Men's Line fell into the following categories:

- Men who are depressed and need to talk, or who need referrals to deal with anger or financial, legal or medical issues;
- Men seeking advice on relationships, communication skills, and parenting or how to deal with an abusive family member;
- Women calling for resources for a male partner, another family member, or a friend; and
- General information requests.

A lethality index, measuring whether there is an immediate threat of physical violence, is used for each call. The 1999 assessment found that approximately 7% of the calls documented indicated a medium level of lethality, while 2% were documented as high.

Call records and interviews with phone counselors highlight a single core issue addressed in the vast majority of calls: isolation. The men who call in typically have a general sense of loneliness and disconnection from their families and community. It is our belief that the connection and support offered by the Men's Line helps men to live healthier lives that are less likely to include the use of violence.

Support for New Dads

Community partners are committed to expanding the reach and effectiveness of the Men's Line. Most recently, a partnership with Health East (a metropolitan area health care system with three hospitals and numerous clinics) has resulted in a campaign focused on expectant and new fathers. This program was inspired by several sources, including 1) recent medical articles citing homicide as the leading cause of death for pregnant and postnatal women, and 2) observations by Health East staff that couples in their obstetrics program were experiencing relationship troubles.

This effort is built on a central premise borrowed from Rollo May that "Deeds of violence . . . arise largely out of powerlessness." In analyzing why men might be violent towards their partners around the time of childbirth, program planners focused on powerlessness and on isolation, a theme identified by the Men's Line. This new effort, to begin in Spring 2003, will reach out to men in prenatal education programs and in obstetrics clinics with a brochure entitled "Quick Guide To Being a Dad." In addition to providing tips on what to expect and how to care for themselves as fathers, the guide will give men information about Health East educational programs and the Men's Line.

Media Campaigns

One of the Initiative action teams, which focused on media, identified two goals for its work: 1) developing messages that promote respect and nonviolence in relationships, and 2) identifying and removing images that condone violence against women, children, and men. Over the years, this team has successfully convinced advertisers to remove dozens of violent images from the community, including a university's "Pain, Suffering and Brutality—All for \$8.00" ad campaign for its football team and a grocery store's "So Fresh You Could Slap It" billboard advertising the freshness of their produce.

The media action team respectfully points out to advertisers its concerns about messages contained in certain ads, appeals to the businesses to recognize that these potentially violent messages are inconsistent with their public image, and seeks to establish long-term working relationships to promote a respectful, peaceful community. The team's most prominent and complex effort was to convince the Twin Cities' two major newspapers, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* and the *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, to remove sexually explicit ads for strip clubs and x-rated movies from their sports sections. An agreement with the *Star Tribune* was reached in June 1999, after two years of correspondence with the publisher. The *Pioneer Press* removed the ads in March 2002, after over 5 years of correspondence with three different publishers. In each case, the newspapers realized that removing the ads not only served their own best interests, but also helped assure a more respectful, violence-free community for everyone.

Conclusion

Through the creativity and dedication of hundreds of people across Ramsey County over fourteen years, we have learned that a primary prevention model can be used to address an issue as complex as family violence. Our community-wide partnership to address the root causes of violence demonstrates that communities have the power, and therefore the obligation, to prevent acts of family violence today and in the future.

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ⁱIn Public Health, we refer to **Three Levels of Prevention: Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary**. In Primary Prevention, no group or individual is designated "high risk"; instead, we work to bring a message or skill set to an entire population in order to prevent those individuals from ever beginning a risky behavior or practice. Moving to Secondary Prevention, we target our prevention messages and tools to individuals and groups already engaged in potentially damaging behaviors, but not yet showing any ill effects as a result. When we move to Tertiary Prevention, or Intervention, we work with people who are both engaged in risky behaviors and in need of treatment to address ill effects caused by these behaviors.

A simple analogy to illustrate these three levels is cigarette smoking: Primary Prevention efforts are designed to provide populations with information and incentives to convince them not start smoking; Secondary Prevention campaigns target smokers who have not yet developed any smoking-related illnesses, with messages and tools to quit smoking before they become ill; Tertiary/Intervention efforts must convince and assist smokers to break the habit while simultaneously providing treatment for emphysema, lung cancer, and other smoking-related disease.

This analogy also points to the difficulty, and often seemingly poor results inherent in traditional approaches to intervening in cases of family violence (as well as other manifestations of violence, in the workplace, community, schools, etc.). By definition, intervention systems must wait until serious, documented harm has occurred in a family/school/workplace setting, and then come in to break the cycle of violence, attempt to heal or undo the effects of violence to individuals, and provide consequences to "perpetrators" (while generally ignoring the effects on other people and community systems around them.)

While acknowledging and respecting the need to maintain and continually work to improve intervention approaches to family, workplace and community violence, the Initiative is based on a Primary Prevention model. Our efforts have been built on the premise of providing messages and tools to entire populations in order to change the context and messages received by people in our communities/schools/workplaces and prevent acts of violence from occurring in the first place.

ⁱⁱThe Minneapolis-St. Paul Twin Cities area is comprised of seven metropolitan counties; the two largest are Hennepin County [pop 1,116,000] and Ramsey County [pop 511,000].

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