

Systems Advocacy: Creating Safe, Respectful & Effective Responses

By Brenda Hill

“I spent 4 days in jail for an unpaid traffic ticket. My boyfriend beat me up and I called the cops. He was gone by the time they got to my house. But they ran my name and arrested me...”

“It was such a struggle - I needed to get a protection order against my husband. Took time off from work, got a ride from a friend...embarrassing, depressing. I wanted me and my kids to be safe, sleep good at night... I asked the clerk of courts for the protection order form. The clerk looked exasperated, didn't even say hello. She started to hand me the papers. I reached for them and she pulled the papers back, saying 'Are you serious about this? You're not going to come in here tomorrow and drop it, are you? You all just make a lot of work for me when you do that!'"

Advocacy for women who have been battered and/or raped is a continuum of relationships, actions and strategies that begin and end with the women who are victimized by violence. The relationship between the woman who is battered and the advocate includes: validation of the voice, expertise and leadership of women who are battered; modeling respect, compassion and non-violence; personal accountability for our internalized oppression and behavior; belief in and non-judgmental support of women as whole human beings and women's right to sovereignty.

Most advocates are overwhelmed by the immediate crises of individual women and their children. However, the over-arching goal of advocacy is to create social change that ends violence against all women, upholding women's integrity and prioritizing comprehensive safety and accountability everywhere in women's lives.

In all initiatives, it's important to remember and validate the reality that violence against women is not traditional in indigenous communities. The solution lies in reclaiming our traditional beliefs and lifeways founded on values of respect, generosity, fortitude, humility and compassion. When the understanding that we are all related is infused into every aspect of our lives and work, the response to women who are battered/raped, and other victims of violence will be transformed in powerful ways – everyone becomes an “advocate.” In many ways, being an advocate is being a good relative.

Systems advocacy is a key element within the continuum of advocacy.

The goal of systems advocacy is to ensure women will receive consistent, effective and easily accessible responses and resources in a respectful and safe manner from every agency, organization and institution. Ideally, what is needed and helpful, how resources or services are provided, is defined by those receiving the services and resources. This is one aspect of social change that focuses on change of policies, rules, procedures, or laws that determine how and what services are delivered to victims of domestic and sexual violence. Systems change is a part of coordinated community response, which is modelled in many ways upon the traditional practice of what has come to be called community policing.