

Systems Advocacy: Creating Safe, Respectful & Effective Responses Part 2

By Brenda Hill

“It was about six months after my children and I finally got a house in tribal housing. I was struggling to get to work, take care of the kids and keep the car working. I needed my ex to watch the children a couple days a week so I could work. I trusted him to take good care of them for that amount of time. One day I drove to town, about 18 miles away, to get my paperwork up-dated for food stamps. I handed my papers to the worker. She gave me a mean look, grabbing the papers from me, she said, ‘Your husband is at your house all the time! If he’s living with you, you can’t get food stamps!’ There were other people there and she was loud and angry. I was so embarrassed, but mostly I honestly wanted to jump over the desk...! But I knew if I did or said anything, she could “lose” my paperwork – How did she know he was at my house? Who was watching me? She said other stuff to me...I just had to take it...”

“He was screaming ‘I’ll kill you’ while he was pounding on me. Somehow, I escaped and ran to the neighbors. The woman said she heard him yelling but didn’t know if she should get involved! Found out later I had a concussion, a cracked rib and 25 bruises and welts. Shirt was torn. Finally, the cops arrived. I’m sitting there holding my shirt together, just stunned, shocked. The cop says, with his one hand on his gun, the other on his hip, ‘So what’s your problem?’ He told me I had to stand out on the street and watch when they went into my house to get my batterer.... A few days later the sheriff says, ‘Well, I’m surprised you didn’t drop this yet. Most do.’”

“I knew I had to leave. Everybody said I should just leave him. But the lease was in his name. Closest shelter is 50 miles away – my job? Kids’ school? No car and 3 children. I call the county housing authority about low-income housing. They say I have to bring all kinds of paperwork and show up on Monday morning at 7:30 in person. That’s the only time they take applications. How do I do that? Especially with getting kids to school? And there’s a two-year waiting list!”

The next step in doing systems advocacy is to listen to women. Creating relationships with women is the beginning place for advocacy. Trusting relationships are imperative for healing from trauma and allow for getting integral information to provide individual advocacy and institute systems change. First assuring that immediate needs are met, intake or contact paperwork is an opportunity to ask about who they have sought help from in the past, with focus on the response by the program or agency, not on the woman’s choices. *It’s about what happened, not what they did.* Who did they ask for help? What was the response? How did it impact them? Were there difficulties accessing the resource/program/agency? What worked? What didn’t? How do they want things to change? What are their suggestions?

Gather and analyze that information to paint a picture of the issues needing to be addressed. Is it an individual staff person needing training? A policy or procedure issue? Does the situation point to a need for system-wide training/cross-training? Addressing myths about

violence and providing accurate information has the potential to transform responses of individuals, systems and communities.

“The prosecutor said if I didn’t testify against my husband for assaulting me, I’d go to jail. He didn’t ask why I didn’t want to.... His family has beaten me up before when I left. I was so scared that even if he got convicted, he’d just be pissed off and beat me more when he got out...”

Next, do some research about the programs or agencies involved. What codes, policies and procedures exist? Are they written or informal? Who are the decision-makers? Are job descriptions clear? Are they limited in how they can respond? What do they know about violence against women and its impact? Get to know the culture, struggles and strengths within those systems. It’s important to identify common ground. Often, we can relate to each other’s challenges like lack of resources and staff, etc. We also all have need for allies and in some way, have shared goals around helping others. Native people also share the desire to protect and enrich tribal sovereignty and culture. This is key to strengthening our connections as community members and systems change initiatives. These can make up the foundation of effective working relationships. This common ground is the touchstone when conflict arises.

Step back and **create a strategy** based upon the information gathered and the goals of your organization. A strong strategy identifies goals and objectives, existing resources and clear expected outcomes. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. There is a plethora of national, state and tribal expertise, model policy, procedure and protocols available. Mending the Sacred Hoop, National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center, Tribal Law and Policy Institute, Red Wind Consulting and the National Domestic Violence Resource Network are some of organizations that provide materials, training and technical assistance.