

Systems Advocacy: Creating Safe, Respectful & Effective Responses

Part 3

By Brenda Hill

“I was so tired I could hardly think. Petrified about going to court. The prosecutor was an angel. Kind, patient. He actually said he was sorry I got beaten up, I didn’t deserve it – no matter what. Then he said he would do the prosecution without me if I wanted. The cops did a great job investigating, documenting, and the doctor did a detailed report, so it was possible for him to go ahead without me!”

“I was a new advocate in a new domestic violence program on a reservation of about 5,500 people. Went to the police station to find out why a protection order hadn’t been served in over a week when the guy was out and about going to work, partying and stalking the woman I was trying to help. The officer checked the file and said, ‘We’d serve it, but it hasn’t come over from the court.’ I go to the clerk of courts, who looks through mounds of paper stacked on her desk. She says, ‘I’ll try to get to it by the end of the week.’ Found out that she was the only staff person handling all kinds of court documents, there was no policy for prioritizing protection orders, no computer software to track anything – papers got stacked up and added to everyday and she just started from the top and tried to work her way down.”

Getting to know individuals within other agencies is key. *Relationships are integral to ending violence in every aspect of advocacy and social change.* Take the time to connect as human beings, as relatives. Tillie Black Bear once said, “Sometimes we need to do some ‘subversive’ activity. Drop in and visit. Invite them for coffee or lunch. Visit, ask about their work and how it’s going. Share some information about yourself. Make a relationship. Then drop some information on them. Maybe later bring up your concerns.” This helps get past assumptions and stereotypes, makes us human to each other. It allows us to create rapport and collaborate, with the shared goal of helping our relatives.

Keep in mind that advocates are the experts on violence against women. That’s 100% of our work, unlike other programs and systems which have other competing interests and concerns. That means **advocates must provide the leadership** for any initiative involving violence against women. It’s not unusual for advocates to feel uncomfortable with that role. Requesting technical assistance, training and consultations is an ongoing part of being an advocate. Ask for help and support when you need it!

Be aware that for systems change, advocates must strike a balance between aggressively pushing agencies to change and being co-opted by those agencies. Mistakes and conflicts are teachable moments – look for the lessons and try to see these occurrences as potentially powerful! Be clear about your goals, remembering that at the end of the day, advocates are **accountable to the women** we work with.

Advocacy models differ across the country, so how system change gets done will vary. Systems advocacy is never “one and done.” It is a **continuous process** involving a great deal of dialogue and interaction between advocates and criminal justice agencies, law enforcement, social services and other agencies women regularly use.

In the Victims Advocacy Manual (1995, Section Two, Advocacy), Ellen Pence and Anne Marshall describe four aspects of advocacy, including the personal relationship with the woman who's been battered, decision-making and:

“Clearing the path. Of all the people involved in the response to domestic violence, the advocate is the most likely person to have an overall picture of what a battered woman faces. It is the advocate's responsibility to advise and, if need be, educate the service providers and agencies of all the obstacles that are in a woman's way before she can gain some control over her life: taking care of her children, finding a home that is affordable and safe for her and her children, having reliable transportation, reconnecting with family and friends from whom she has been isolated. Many times, rules, regulations, long-standing practices or attitudes of people who control resources prevent women following a course of action. The advocate's role is to use her influence, her knowledge and her pervasive powers to help women overcome those obstacles. Certainly, stopping the abuse is paramount, but the other very real obstacles cannot be ignored and often prevent women from making what an onlooker may see as her only choice.”

Knowing the system also refers to knowing what boundaries are constricting an advocate. While good advocacy may typically mean arguing a victim's position at every level of decision making, the justice system is not an environment conducive to challenging decisions. The advocate who walks into a judge's office to tell him or her that they “blew it on the Stevens case” may compromise her effectiveness. Yet an advocate who is afraid to raise objections will also fail to be effective. Those within the system must recognize the obligation of the advocate to question all decisions on behalf of the victim's safety and integrity.

The success or **effectiveness of systems advocacy** is measured by women who are battered and/or raped. Has she been made safer? Has she gotten what she needs? In a good way? Have offenders, as well as those responsible for providing her with resources, protection etc. been held accountable? Evaluate your strategy, initiatives and projects based upon women's experiences and opinions. This means building in methods (formal and informal), to ensure women who are battered / raped are a part of the process all along the way.

“I'll always remember that clerk of courts...She smiled at me. Called me by my name and looked at me. She said she'd be glad to help me fill the papers out if I wanted and to take my time. She said she knew it could be difficult and there's some women, advocates, who'd be glad to help me- and did I want their number? She made me feel like I wasn't invisible, a 'problem.' Her small kindness meant the world to me.”

The systemic oppression of people through racism, sexism, classism, able-bodyism, and heterosexism is a result of hierarchy. Native women are impacted by multiple forms of oppression, diminishing their ability live safely and autonomously. From this perspective, advocacy, safety and accountability are framed as civil and human rights issues. Identifying the root cause of violence against women as culturally-based expands our work to pro-active social change with the aim of sovereignty of women throughout society. Excerpt from Sharing Our Stories of Survival. Sarah Deer, B. Clairmont, C. Martell, M. White Eagle. Chapter 12: “The Role of Advocates in the Tribal Legal System.” - Brenda Hill.