

AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL FOR TREATING ABUSIVE MEN

Question: Are there non-traditional ways of treating male batterers?

Background: Each year a large number of women are abused by their male partners. One response to this problem has been to provide treatment to abusive men.

Although there is some evidence that treatment can reduce abusiveness, only a small number of abusers ever attend a formal treatment program and many fail to complete treatment. Consequently, there is a need to consider alternative methods of providing service to a difficult clientele.

Method: The literature on male batterer treatment programs was first reviewed to identify various program delivery models. Next, site visits were conducted with a number of group treatment programs across Canada. The format of service delivery for most of the programs followed the educational (student/teacher) or clinical models (patient/therapist).

Among the various programs examined, there was an innovative program in rural Nova Scotia that seemed worthy of

further examination. Consequently, the service providers at this program were interviewed in detail, treatment groups observed, and a researcher “rode along” with the service providers during a typical working day.

Answer: This program operates as an alternative service organization, as exemplified by certain peace movement or feminist organizations. Alternative service organizations are typically run by non-professionals (often volunteers) committed to addressing a social problem and to reaching clientele poorly served by traditional services. The program’s community action approach includes group treatment to abusive men, but it also includes a wide range of activities outside the usual roles of therapist or teacher, such as community development, crisis intervention, social recreational activities and instrumental help to the men and their partners.

The service providers devote considerable effort to engaging and maintaining men in treatment. For example, a man who fails to

attend the weekly group may receive an unexpected visit at home or at work. Many interventions arise through the spontaneous, informal encounters common in the rural setting in which this program is based.

The program has not been formally evaluated, and the recidivism rates of the participants are unknown. The program, however, is able to keep men in treatment (less than 5% drop-out rate compared to 40% in traditional programs). This low attrition rate is particularly impressive considering that the program works with many offenders who fail in traditional programs (e.g., low education, serious alcohol problems, extensive criminal histories). Should the program prove effective with this difficult population, it could make a significant contribution to community safety.

Policy implications :

1. Program providers may want to considered alternative methods for delivering community treatment to abusive men. Such alternative methods may be particularly useful in stable, rural communities that are not well served by traditional professional services.
2. Some difficult to serve offenders can be safely managed in the community by making active efforts to engage and maintain them in treatment.
3. Social service agencies may be able to improve service for hard to reach clients through the creative use of non-professional volunteers.

Source: R. K. Hanson & R. Whitman (1995). A rural, community action model for the treatment of abusive men. Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health, 14(1), 49-59.

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