

Screening for domestic violence woefully weak in welfare offices

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Even though federal welfare-reform legislation calls for case workers to screen for domestic violence and most states have agreed to implement this requirement, just 9 percent of women applying for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families were screened for domestic violence, according to data from a University of Washington study.

An analysis of 782 transcripts of in-person interviews between case workers and clients in four states by researchers from the UW's School of Social Work also showed that just slightly more than 1 percent of the women actually received effective screening that resulted in them revealing that they were victims of domestic violence.

“This is not about bad case workers. This lack of screening is an institutional problem that existed across states, across different welfare offices and different workers,” said lead author Taryn Lindhorst, a UW associate professor of social work. “Policy makers have placed the focus in assistance programs on getting women into the workforce and off of welfare rolls. Unfortunately, even in situations of great potential harm to women and their children, welfare offices do not effectively identify these women or help them access needed resources in the agency and community.

“For poor women, the welfare office is a place that could contribute to their safety and that of their children, but the offices largely don't provide help, despite a legislative mandate to screen and provide services for victims of domestic violence,” she said.

For the study, the UW researchers analyzed transcripts from assistance interviews conducted in 11 welfare offices in New York, Texas, Michigan and Georgia between 1999 and 2000. They found only 73 out of 782 cases in which there was any screening for domestic violence.

Previous research has shown that between 30 percent and 60 percent of welfare recipients report having experienced domestic violence, said Lindhorst. That means welfare offices are not identifying missing huge numbers of women who could be helped in dealing with potentially life-threatening situations caused by abuse.

“Other research with battered women indicated that they want to be asked about domestic violence, provided that their information is kept confidential and the person asking is motivated by a genuine desire to help. The bottom line is we can’t help women until we know that they are in these dangerous circumstances. We know there are many women who could be identified and have services offered if welfare offices conducted more and more effective screening.”

Lindhorst said inquiries during the interviews by caseworkers were mostly cursory, at best. Clients were typically asked about domestic violence once as part of a laundry list of routine questions. But there are a number of more effective ways to help women disclose violence and get help, she said. They include:

- Assuring confidentiality.
- Establishing rapport with clients.
- Telling clients what is going to happen to them. Many have concerns such as losing their children. Clients need to know how telling about violence will help them.
- Asking directly about abuse. Workers need to ask if clients have been threatened by a partner, hit or abused sexually.
- Providing the client multiple opportunities to disclose abuse.

To improve the situation in the welfare office, the UW researchers said that a major cultural shift in welfare organizations is needed, including requiring welfare offices to report to Congress the number of women they identify as victims of domestic violence and the services they provide to them.

“Welfare offices need to focus on ways to support women who have limited financial resources, and who are experiencing abuse from a partner,” Lindhorst said

“Welfare workers need to see screening for domestic violence as part of their responsibility. To do that they need training and they need to be rewarded for helping clients, even if this means that they remain on the welfare rolls. Right now, they are only being held responsible for how many people they remove from their caseloads, not how many they assist.

Source: University of Washington

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