



*Formerly Family Violence Prevention Fund*

***“You can’t be held accountable if you don’t count”***

**The impact of the National Institute on Fatherhood, Domestic Violence, and Visitation on the capacity of supervised visitation centers to Engage Men and Enhance Family Safety**

Written By:

Lisa Goodman, Ph.D.  
Margret Bell, Ph.D.  
Jennifer Rose, Consultant

*In Partnership With:*

**Futures Without Violence**  
[www.futureswithoutviolence.org](http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org)

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## **Introduction**

This report describes findings from a survey and in-person meeting with participants of Futures Without Violence's National Institute on Fatherhood, Visitation, and Domestic Violence (NIFDV) in order to evaluate the impact of the Institute in its first five years of existence. In addition to assessing impact, the goal of this project was to identify lessons learned, obstacles to implementation of the Institute's principles, and fruitful next steps for future iterations of the Institute.

## **Background on the NIFDV**

In July 2003, Futures Without Violence (Futures) received its first grant from the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) to provide technical assistance (TA) to four Safe Havens Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Program grantees across the United States. The goal of the TA was to enhance the safety of victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) and their children by developing strategies for working with non-custodial fathers who use these programs and who had been or continued to be abusive to their partners. This goal was based on the premise that some men who use violence can be encouraged to stop doing so through engagement around their role as fathers. Following these pilot projects, Futures developed the curriculum for the National Institute on Fatherhood and Domestic Violence: Special TA series for Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Programs.

The first Institute took place in San Francisco in 2007. Futures anticipated that Institute with a range of hopes and fears. On the one hand, we hoped that we could support local programs to engage with men who use violence in respectful and human ways while balancing the safety of women and children; and that through this



engagement, men would come to understand the impact of their violence on their children and, eventually, their partners. On the other hand, we worried that engagement with men could translate into collusion; and that in an effort to support men who use violence participants would lose sight of the needs and safety of women and children.

Despite our hopes and fears, we strongly believed that supervised visitation and safe exchange programs, in partnership with key community partners, are uniquely positioned to work with each member of the family in a manner that can support safety and create opportunities for change. By the fall of 2011, we had conducted five Institutes with over 40 communities (over 200 participants). It was time to take a pause to determine whether the work we were doing was in fact supporting safety and wellbeing.

To support this endeavor, we sought to learn from the communities who had participated in the Institutes. We did this in two ways: First, we sent a survey to anyone who had participated in one of the five Institutes. (Fifteen people completed the survey). Second we invited representatives of programs from six communities to a two-day meeting held in Boston on July 12 and 13, 2012, the purpose of which was to learn together about the impact of the Institute and how to enhance the work initiated there. The communities chosen to participate included Bend, Oregon; Contra Contra County, California; The State of Michigan; Duluth, Minnesota; Grand Rapids, Minnesota; and Dekalb, Georgia.

In addition to inviting representatives from supervised visitation and safe exchange programs in these communities, we asked that each of these programs invite

one additional participant from a partnering agency. Also present were Futures staff and consultants, a representative from a local CPS office and two domestic violence research consultants. In total, 20 participants attended the meeting. Finally, in preparation for the meeting, we asked attendees to use open-ended questions provided by Futures to gather information from key stakeholders (families, staff and community partners) about the impact of the Institute, successes challenges and additional needs. Attendees were asked to be prepared to share the information acquired from these stakeholders during the meeting in Boston.

Given that the results of the survey were consistent with the discussion at the two-day meeting and the responses that meeting participants had obtained from key stakeholders in their communities, the remainder of this report integrates these sources of data to summarize 1) the overall impact of the Institute on participating programs, 2) obstacles to further change, and 3) next steps.

### **Overall Impact of the Institute**

In both the survey and the meeting itself, we explored how and to what extent participation in the Fatherhood Institute triggered changes in philosophy (beliefs and ways of thinking) and practice (methods of working directly with men, women, and children) among participating programs.

In terms of philosophy, the results of the survey and the in-person meeting were similar. A majority of participants in both contexts reported that their programs' overall orientation had transformed since attendance at the Institute. Specifically, participants talked about two fundamental philosophical changes: First, they began to understand their roles differently. Whereas before the Institute, staff at their programs saw

themselves as visit coordinators, afterwards, they began to perceive themselves as active facilitators of positive and healthy relationships among family members. This was a transformation from which many specific practices flowed.

Second, participants articulated a shift in their programs' interest in and capacity to connect and engage with men in particular. Program staff began to recognize that safety for women and children could be enhanced by respecting men as fathers rather than seeing them simply as perpetrators of abuse. As one participant put it: "You can't be held accountable if you don't count."

Participants provided the following examples of how these philosophical changes had changed their work with men, women, and children:

Work with men: In terms of their work with men, participants described a move to become partners with men rather than enforcers. This meant changing the language they used about the men with whom they interacted -- for example, using the phrase "men who have used violence in their relationships" versus "batterers" or "perpetrators." It also meant having deeper conversations with men on many different topics, including how their children might experience the violence, separation, and visitation; how they could improve their relationships with their children; or simply how they were doing in their own lives. Finally, it meant working harder to understand what might be driving fathers' problematic behavior at the center: As one participant described it:

A father might be really hard to deal with, being inconsistent with visits, not paying his fees, etc, to a degree that might warrant kicking him out of the program. Now, we are more aware of trying to engage him to understand the reasons for his behavior, and to work with him to find a way that he can

become more accountable and remain with us. Because once he can't come here, it potentially is much less safe for mom and kids.

In addition, and following directly from the shifts just described, participants articulated that they had become more flexible in their work with men as appropriate. As one participant noted,

We have become more flexible about things in visits like cameras, food, gifts, outside visitors, although we always work with the moms to ensure we're not making decisions that create problems or safety issues for them.

None of this meant being "soft" on men. As one participant said explicitly:

[We are clear that...] engaging men/fathers is for the purpose of safety, promotion of healthy relationships, healing and accountability, it does not mean allowing men/fathers an opportunity to continually undermine the character, parenting, and allowing the focus of his visitation and experience to be about the victim parent.

Work with women and children: Interestingly, participants explained that as their orientation towards men changed, staff also shifted their practices towards women and children. Regarding women, participants talked about spending more time learning from mothers about their experiences as parents, discussing her goals for her child's safety and well-being and , and exploring the benefits of helping the abusive partner become a better father.

Participants' programs also became more engaged with children. Staff began to spend more time talking with children about their experiences with their parents and helping them articulate their feelings to the appropriate parent: As one participant put it:

We are maybe more attentive to how kids feel about their dads and try to be supportive of how kids can feel guilty about wanting to see dad because he's hurt mom. Staff have helped kids have some harder conversations with dads too, for example letting a dad know they are very disappointed or sad or angry that he didn't show up for their visit, etc.

General observations: Overall participants expressed a great deal of pride in the changes their programs had made as a result of their involvement with the Institute and reported that the men, women, and children with whom they interacted were better off as a result. Perhaps as interesting as what they said about the positive benefits of their shifts was what they did not say: None of the participants reported that engaging men had significant unintended negative consequences for women and children; this was despite initial fears on the part of many Institute participants that engaging men could result in collusion. The fact that this did not appear to have happened is perhaps the most dramatic finding of this assessment.

### **Obstacles to Further Progress**

Despite their positive descriptions of shifts in philosophy and practice following attendance at the Institute, survey and meeting participants noted several obstacles to further change. These included time limitations, fears about neglecting women, the need to negotiate complex relational issues, and issues related to community partnerships.

Time limitations: Time, always in short supply, was the most formidable obstacle to participants' deepening their work with families- including fathers.. Many noted that increased engagement meant more staff time, which was difficult given their already

overloaded schedules. Time was also needed to train staff to develop the new skill sets required to work with men, women, and children in different ways. One participant explained, “You can’t put new wine into old wineskins. It’s risky – especially for old-timers-- to see men as able to change.” This shift had to occur slowly, with careful coaching and training, which took time from regular staff duties.

Fears that working with men would mean neglecting women: Given limited resources, participants also reported wrestling with how to engage men without depriving women of attention, resources, or other assistance. Some noted that prioritizing men’s needs might lead to a reduction of violence in the long-term, but in the short-term, it meant potentially less attention to women’s needs. It was often difficult to resolve this internal dissonance, even as participants shifted their actual behavior to be more consistent with Institute principles.

The need to negotiate complex relational issues: Participants noted several tensions that arose as they began to approach men differently. First, they described the difficult balancing act of trying to build rapport with men while simultaneously holding them accountable for their actions. Second, they talked about negotiating victims’ reactions to the attention being shown to their abusive partners, with victims sometimes wondering “Whose side are you on?” And third, in becoming more engaged with families, staff members found themselves spending more time negotiating conflict, intervening in abusive behavior, and managing other challenging relational dynamics. Some wondered whether adding these difficult issues to an already challenging job was worth the trouble.

Issues related to community partnerships: Many participants reported encountering resistance from partner agencies in the community. Although they understood the sources of the resistance, they also believed it was imperative to create partnerships with other community agencies so as to create consistent messaging and coordinated responses and to avoid fragmentation. When partnerships were not developed, the work became more challenging. As one participant commented “the men we do see are not usually being challenged by anyone else, and when it’s all left up to the visitation center, it’s much harder to do.”

### **Next Steps**

As a result of these findings we intend to take the following next steps to enhance the capacity of supervised visitation and exchange programs to work with men who use violence, women and their children: First, we plan to revise our current curriculum by convening a small group of partners to integrate the findings of this report. For example, we will work with participants to develop innovative strategies that address the view that engaging men takes time and resources from women. And we will develop strategies to enable an expansion of our basic philosophy beyond supervised visitation centers to community partners. Second, we intend to provide targeted technical assistance to three sites, the purpose of which will be to improve the alignment between the policies and the practices they are using to engage men who use violence. For example, a policy shift might be to realign priorities so that centers take fewer cases and begin to schedule-in meeting times with men and women who come into the center rather than just talking to visitors on the fly. Third, we will combine lessons learned from the first two steps, to create a set of model policies that can be used by programs

across the country. In addition to being used by supervised visitation and safe exchange programs, we believe that the philosophy, practices, and policies we develop can be adapted by other systems and programs who work with all members of family that are living with domestic violence post separation. .

