Priorities for Improving the Health Care Response to Violence & Abuse

Because childhood exposure to violence and abuse affects 2 in 3 Americans and has lifelong health consequences, it is essential that health care providers be trained to recognize and respond to violence as well as implement core prevention strategies in the health care setting. Federal policy can directly influence how health care providers are trained and what they prioritize. New data showing the impact on brain development, educational outcomes and future delinquency of childhood exposure to violence only increase the urgency with which we must address violence and abuse in the health care setting.

Several key pieces of legislation provide excellent frameworks and opportunities for reducing the harmful impacts of violence and abuse as well better treating those who have already been affected.

Key Federal Programs that Improve the Health Sector Response and Prevent Violence and Abuse

Affordable Care Act
The Affordable Care included several key provisions that, once fully implemented, will dramatically improve the nation’s response to violence and abuse. Most obvious is the new requirement that screening and brief counseling for lifetime exposure to interpersonal violence be covered as a core women’s preventive health benefit. This requirement went into effect in August of 2012 and will soon be part of the Essential Health Benefits included in the new health insurance “exchanges” and likely covered by Medicaid. These changes are likely to significantly increase the number of women who are screened for violence and abuse and connected to counseling and other services that could help them.

In addition, two other programs included in the ACA directly address violence and its relation to health. The Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP) provides funding for teen pregnancy prevention programs, specifically addressing other core issues that help youth transition to adulthood and avoid unwanted pregnancy. Building healthy relationships (and preventing dating violence) are among the “adult preparation” subjects addressed in the program.

The Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visitation Program builds on decades of evidence that home visitors --- nurses or other trained professionals --- meeting over the course of years with pregnant women and new mothers can significantly improve health and educational success for their children. Among other benchmarks, programs will be evaluated on their ability to reduce crime and domestic violence. This requirement is quickly improving programs’ quality as domestic violence is a major impediment to the success of home visiting programs and also a troubling but common outcome of children’s own exposure to violence while growing up.

- It is essential that Congress, the Administration and the States support education and training to help providers and health care payers fully implement the new screening recommendation.

Priorities for appropriations include the following:
Fiscal Year 2014 Appropriations

Violence Against Women Act Health Program (Office of Women’s Health)
The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) reauthorization of 2013 continues and strengthens the main national program for helping states and tribes create a coordinated public health response to domestic and sexual violence. Entering its fourth year, Project Connect as the VAWA Health Program is known, has expanded to 11 new states and tribes and is increasing a focus on adolescent health programs as a key entry point to identify abuse early when rates are high but when the health impacts can still be mitigated. Administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Women’s Health, Project Connect is central for helping health systems coordinate with community-based service providers to better recognize and respond to violence in order to improve health and reduce costs. Six states are currently funded: Delaware, Idaho, Maryland, Minnesota, Oregon and Pennsylvania. In addition, five health clinics serving Native American communities have been selected as grantees. Previously, Arizona, Georgia, Ohio, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Texas, and Virginia were funded. Futures Without Violence continues to serve as the program manager and technical assistance provider to the sites.

- We ask Congress to continue funding the Office of Women’s Health Violence Against Women Initiative at $3 million.

Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA), Administration for Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB)
The Family Violence Prevention and Services Act is the only federal program dedicated solely to helping victims of domestic violence and their children. Now, almost 30 years old, FVPSA remains the lifeblood of many domestic violence agencies even as the needs of victims continue to expand. When it was reauthorized in 2010, FVPSA also included a new provision to support the needs of children growing up in violent homes and prevent them from falling victim to the often intergenerational cycle of domestic violence. Despite stagnant funding, the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) has created a program to fulfill that mandate. In FY ’12, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services awarded grants totaling $600,000 from the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA) to four State Domestic Violence Coalitions, to improve responses to and services for children exposed to domestic violence across a selected state or tribe. Coalitions from Alaska, Idaho, New Jersey and Wisconsin were awarded the first set of grants.

- We ask Congress to restore funding for FVPSA to $135 million to help child victims of domestic violence in addition to providing emergency shelter and counseling to victims.

Safe Schools/Healthy Students: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)/Project AWARE
The Safe Schools/Healthy Students initiative is a relatively unique federal grant-making program designed to prevent violence and substance abuse among our nation’s youth. It brings together three Federal agencies --- the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice --- to jointly fund community and school-based efforts to create safe and healthy environments in which America’s children can learn and thrive. In response to the horrific murders of 20 young children and their teachers and principal in Newtown, Connecticut, SAMHSA is looking to modify the initiative to improve school climate and the number of school personnel who are trained to identify mental health problems and connect children and their families to services early.

- We ask Congress to fully fund school violence prevention programs including Safe Schools/Healthy Students and the newer Project AWARE.

For additional information, please contact Kiersten Stewart at Futures Without Violence, 202-595-7383.