

Post-PRWORA Implications for Poor Abuse Victims: How Do They Fare?

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Introduction:

According to Rebecca Blank, “there is no one ‘face’ of poverty in America. Simplistic images of the poor only lead to a misunderstanding of poverty.”¹ Similarly, there is no one “face” of abuse victim. Abuse occurs in its various forms and levels of severity to women, men and children; the young and old; people of all races, religions, and ethnicities; and to people of all sexual preferences. Abuse happens to people of all socio-economic backgrounds. However, the majority of situations involve repeated, long-term cycles of abuse between intimate partners.² Two very strong links between abused women and poverty become apparent through the research: abuse “makes them poor, and it keeps them poor.”³ Much of my experience with domestic violence comes from my volunteer work at Project Horizon, a shelter and crisis center “dedicated to reducing domestic, dating, and sexual violence.”⁴ The great majority of all Project Horizon clients are survivors of *family violence*, a broad term used to cover all forms of violence and abuse from intimate partner and child physical and sexual abuse to stalking behavior of ex-partners and emotional or psychological abuse and neglect.

Because most instances of physical and sexual abuse towards women fall into the category of family violence, in this paper I focus on the various forms of family violence in the United States. First I examine the problem of family violence as a whole and then I refocus on those individuals most likely to suffer incidents of family violence in their lives—poor women. I also explore the many effects a history of abuse has on victims and

¹ Blank, Rebecca M. It Takes a Nation. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. p.13.

² Project Horizon

³ Brandwein, Ruth A., editor. Battered Women, Children, and Welfare Reform. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999. p.18.

⁴ Project Horizon

the established links between abuse and poverty, making larger causal inferences along the way. Finally, I explore the effects that the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) and the Family Violence Option (FVO) on domestic abuse victims. Ultimately, my goal is to evaluate the quality of existing welfare support structures for victims of abuse and make recommendations for further improvements.

Violence Against Women in the United States: Still a Major Social Problem:

- Each year, three to four million women suffer from physical abuse by intimate partners (husbands, sexual partners, and boyfriends). Half of these women are beaten severely, and in three out of every ten reported cases, the abusers used weapons.⁵
- Each year, nearly 800,000 women seek medical care for injuries from physical or sexual assault.⁶
- Each year, intimate partners stalk half a million women.⁷
- Intimate partner abuse is ongoing for many (20-32%) current welfare recipients.⁸
- At least some adult history of abuse is *very* common among many (55-65%) welfare recipients.⁹

One of the major misconceptions about family violence is that women in abusive relationships can leave at any time if they really want to. This notion paints a picture of abuse in the United States that greatly underestimates the severity of the problem, forcing

⁵ Brandwein, Ruth A., editor. Battered Women, Children, and Welfare Reform. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999. p.18-9.

⁶ Beechey, Susanne and Jacqueline Payne. "Surviving Violence and Poverty: A Focus on the Link between Domestic and Sexual Violence, Women's Poverty, and Welfare." NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund. September 2002. p.1.

⁷ Ibid., p.1.

⁸ Postmus, Judy L. "Battered and on Welfare: the Experiences of Women with the Family Violence Option." *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*. June 2004. p.1.

⁹ Ibid., p.1.

the question of why women in abusive relationships do not flee their dangerous situations. There are several substantial impediments to leaving their abusers that women suffering from family violence face.

Most of these impediments tend to center around the availability of financial resources. The short answer as to who leaves abusive relationships, then, is obvious: most women who can leave their abusers choose to do so. According to NYU Law Professor Martha Davis, “most women deal with abuse by trying to leave: between 50% and 90% of battered women attempt to escape their abusive environments.”¹⁰ Typically those women who choose not to flee make their decision because of the unavailability of funds needed to do so. There are two reasons why a woman would lack the financial resources to flee: either her abuser exerts strong economic abuse upon her, preventing her from accumulating the sufficient resources to leave, or the woman is poor to begin with and there are simply very little resources to gather in the first place.¹¹ For the purposes of analysis, women in both situations can be treated similarly. Because they have limited access to funds regardless of their family economic resources, economically abused women in both categories face considerable economic barriers to leaving their abusers.

Many people question why women in abusive relationships do not attempt to increase their financial autonomy through employment. There are three good explanations for this. First, because physical and sexual abuse is about control, abusers tend to exert control over all aspects of their victims’ lives, preventing them from seeing friends and family, having their own bank accounts and sources of income, seeking and

¹⁰ Brandwein, Ruth A., editor. Battered Women, Children, and Welfare Reform. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999. p.19.

¹¹ Ibid., p.19.

maintaining employment, having their own transportation, and engaging in their own social activities.¹² By preventing women from asserting any form of control over their own lives, abusers force their victims to rely heavily on the abuser for essential forms of support, such as companionship, money, and shelter. According to one University of Massachusetts study, “abused women...were fifteen times more likely than their never abused counterparts to have a current partner who would not like them going to school or work.”¹³

Furthermore, many abusers “directly interfere with women’s attempts to work...[by] keeping women up all night with arguments before key tests or job interviews, turning off alarm clocks, destroying clothing, inflicting visible facial injuries before job interviews, deliberately disabling the family car...and in-person harassment on the job.”¹⁴ This unhealthy sabotage behavior minimizes the chance that victimized women and their children can successfully escape their abuser and establish for themselves an independent life. Not surprisingly, many caseworkers cited “increased or exacerbated violence” among clients in abusive relationships that attempted to gain employment or education, believing it was caused by abusers’ fears that “women with their own economic resources would have the financial means to leave the relationship, or might meet a man on the job who had more resources than they did.”¹⁵

Second, many abusers use psychological intimidation tactics to attack the dignity of their assailants, calling them “worthless,” “ugly,” “slutty,” “stupid,” “damaged,” and

¹² Project Horizon

¹³ Raphael, Jody and Richard M. Tolman. “Trapped by Poverty-Trapped by Abuse.” Taylor Institute. April 1997. p.4.

¹⁴ Tolman, Richard M. and Jody Raphael. “A Review of Research on Welfare and Domestic Violence.” *Journal of Social Issues*, Winter 2000. p.9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.10.

other similar terms in order to reinforce the notion that victims cannot exist independently of their abusers.¹⁶ Over time, this attack on dignity sets in, and abused women tend to accept the idea that they are undesirable to other men and incapable of a life free from abuse.¹⁷ If a woman believes these things, she has no reason to believe a better life is possible and accepts the abusive relationship as inescapable. This calls to mind the passage in Shipler's Poor Support where Ann Brash described the "smothering sense of worthlessness that gathered around her like a heavy cloak" that Shipler believes is at the root of why many poor workers believe they are unimportant and do not call their employers when they are going to be late for work or are sick.¹⁸ Evidence suggests that the same "smothering sense of worthlessness" accumulates in victims of long-term abuse because both poor abused women and poor less-skilled workers "coming out of poverty are rarely armed with support networks, coping skills, and backup mechanisms."¹⁹

Third, many victimized women are financially restrained to staying in abusive relationships because of their children. As is the case with many other situations, children complicate things—especially if the abuser is the biological father of any of the children or if the victim is pregnant or has very young children. Poor women with children are typically charged with the full-time duty of caring for their children and are thus restricted from seeking work, education, and job training. Furthermore, while in some cases a woman may have enough energy, courage, and money to flee an abuser, adding dependent children to the equation makes fleeing more arduous. Traditionally, when a

¹⁶ Project Horizon

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Shipler, David K. The Working Poor. New York: Knopf, 2004. p.129.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.129.

woman chooses to involve the police and courts in her decision to confront her abuser, the presence of children in the family dissuaded law enforcement and judges from harshly penalizing the abuser, writing off the abuse in many circumstances to a simple “lover’s spat” in an effort to preserve the relationship.²⁰

Additionally, the legal system must be involved when the abuser has parental rights, and this impediment prevents many women from leaving their abuser or ever seeking help from law enforcement.²¹ Often this leads to a situation when the woman may feel forced to choose between fleeing the relationship and staying with her children, because any legal attempt to take children away from their father must be done through the courts. This situation is especially perilous when economic abuse also takes place because the father can use his comparative financial advantage in the legal system to exploit the mother. If the father retains partial custody of the children or if the mother attempts to receive child support payments after her decision to flee the relationship, her whereabouts are easily available to the abuser. This is a major threat because even after the victim decides to leave, she still faces the constant risk of violence and stalking. According to Davis, U. S. Department of Justice data reveals that “divorced and separated women report being battered 14 times as often as women still living with their partners.”²² The best way to escape violence and stalking is probably prohibitively expensive for most poor abused women because “for many abused women, the only way

²⁰ Project Horizon

²¹ Ibid.

²² Brandwein, Ruth A., editor. Battered Women, Children, and Welfare Reform. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999. p.20.

to stop violence that continues after separation is to move a great distance away from their abusers.”²³

Finally, many women are apprehensive about taking children away from their fathers and feel obligated to “stick it out” in the best interest of their children. Traditionally, many social scientists place strong value on two-parent households. However, this is not always the best option, as David Ellwood points out: “There are good reasons to wonder if [welfare reducing the need of women to rely on a man for support] is entirely bad. Surely a system that allows children and their mothers to escape an unhappy, destructive, or even dangerous family environment can be beneficial to the individuals and to society.”²⁴

All these explanations tie in well with LaDonna Pavetti’s treatment of poor individuals she classifies as “the hard-to-employ,”²⁵ who she characterizes as low-income people that face considerable obstacles to employment. Not surprisingly, Pavetti includes domestic violence as one of the major barriers to work due to the complex relationship between abuse and capability.

Various Troubling Effects of Long-Term Abuse on Victims:

Now that the obstacles to leaving abusive situations have been explored, it is prudent to discuss some of the most concerning effects of long-term abuse. Just as abusers sustain poor women’s poverty by preventing them from seeking employment and education opportunities, a history of abuse also has negative implications for a woman’s

²³ Brandwein, Ruth A., editor. Battered Women, Children, and Welfare Reform. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999. p.20.

²⁴ Ellwood, David. Poor Support. New York: Basic Books, 1988. p.22.

²⁵ Sawhill, Isabel V., R. Kent Weaver, Ron Haskins, and Andrea Kane, editors. Welfare Reform and Beyond. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2002. p.136.

capability to work in compliance with PRWORA regulations. LaDonna Pavetti points out that "many [PRWORA-]sanctioned families experience personal and family challenges that may make it difficult for them to comply with program requirements, including...domestic violence."²⁶ Unfortunately Pavetti suggests that many studies have shown that "substantial proportion of families that left welfare because of sanctions or time limits are struggling...anywhere from one-third to one-half of the respondents reported that they were having trouble making ends meet."²⁷ A survey of the evidence supports the need to look at the long-term links between abuse and employment, as "cross-sectional data do not demonstrate a significant association between domestic violence and employment." Taken at face value, cross-sectional data suggests substantial barriers to work do not exist for abuse survivors without clearly presenting the full picture.²⁸ Because abuse is so varied in its forms, severity, and duration between different low-income women, it is unsurprising that they "have many different responses to the abuse: some battered women struggle to work, others work but cannot sustain employment over time, and still others do not or cannot obtain jobs at all."²⁹ Building upon this, the Better Homes Fund study researchers found:

A complex relationship [exists] among domestic violence, welfare usage, and employment. About one-third of the sample reported more than one stay on welfare and these welfare cyclers were three times more likely to have worked in the past year than were continuous welfare users, but cyclers used welfare longer overall than those who stayed on welfare continuously. Cyclers were more likely to have experienced violence than continuous users. Rates of violent victimization, both in childhood and in

²⁶ Blank, Rebecca M. and Ron Haskins, editors. The New World of Welfare. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2001. p.260.

²⁷ Ibid., p.261.

²⁸ Tolman, Richard M. and Jody Raphael. "A Review of Research on Welfare and Domestic Violence." *Journal of Social Issues*, Winter 2000. p.12.

²⁹ Ibid., p.12.

adulthood were uniformly higher for those on welfare for a longer period of time.³⁰

Because many adult survivors of abuse were also abused as children and because child sexual abuse “emerges as one mechanism transmitting poverty to the next generation,”³¹ it is important to also consider the effects of childhood abuse. There are many long-term health and capability issues stemming from child physical and sexual abuse: “low self-esteem, sexual acting out, and post-traumatic stress disorder” to name a few.³² This calls to mind the story of Sarah Goodell in Poor Support: “I got molested twice as a child...I was molested by an uncle and a family friend. I have a lot of mental health problems because of my upbringing. That’s why I can’t work. I suffer from severe anxiety, panic, post-traumatic stress syndrome, all kinds of different stuff.”³³ As is demonstrated by Sarah, there are clear employment implications for survivors of child abuse. According to University of Washington Women’s Studies Professor Debra Boyer, many long-term problems arise from a history of child abuse:

Children who have experienced... abuse may be affected over time and demonstrate motivational, developmental, cognitive, and emotional deficits. The clinical literature on child abuse reports such long-term effects as psychiatric illness, depression, anxiety, suicide ideation, negative sexual esteem and sexual maladjustment, drug addiction, and repeated victimization. Victims of sexual abuse are generally at high risk of problems of mental health and social functioning arising from the powerlessness and stigmatization of the abuse process.³⁴

³⁰ Tolman, Richard M. and Jody Raphael. “A Review of Research on Welfare and Domestic Violence.” *Journal of Social Issues*, Winter 2000. p.14.

³¹ Shipler, David K. The Working Poor. New York: Knopf, 2004. p.145.

³² Brandwein, Ruth A., editor. Battered Women, Children, and Welfare Reform. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999. p.8.

³³ Shipler, David K. The Working Poor. New York: Knopf, 2004. p.34.

³⁴ Brandwein, Ruth A., editor. Battered Women, Children, and Welfare Reform. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999. p.136.

Even though Sarah was not abused as an adult, she still felt the impact of her past abuse in her adult relationships: “By twenty-one her marriage to Willie would collapse and she would have four children by three fathers...Sarah’s marriage was stormy while it lasted. Having grown up watching her mother hit her stepfather, she explained, she did the same to Willie.”³⁵ Sarah’s story addresses a second effect of an abusive childhood in poor women—the tendency to be violent themselves. If the tendency for poor female child abuse survivors to be abusive towards their own children is strong, it implies that many of the “39% of W-2 applicants in Milwaukee in 1999 [that] had been investigated for child abuse...in the preceding decade” were themselves child abuse survivors.³⁶ Violence and aggression are impediments to goals such as stable work, healthy relationships, and responsible parenting for abuse survivors and are best addressed through counseling.³⁷

Washington and Lee University

The rate of illegitimate childbirth in the U. S., especially among teens, was one of the issues of most concern to those involved with welfare reform in the 1990s.³⁸ Many people believed that teenage girls were making conscious decisions to have children out of wedlock due to the availability of welfare support, even though Haskins is fast to point out that “empirical studies...provide only moderate evidence that welfare is linked with illegitimacy”³⁹ and “popular beliefs do not always rest on empirical data.”⁴⁰ The relationship between teen pregnancy and welfare is much more questionable than the

³⁵ Shipler, David K. The Working Poor. New York: Knopf, 2004. p.34-5.

³⁶ Mead, Lawrence M. Government Matters. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. p.203.

³⁷ Project Horizon

³⁸ Haskins, Ron. Work Over Welfare. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2006. p.45.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.3.

relationship between teen pregnancy and abuse. While only about 8% of the women on the welfare rolls at a given time are pregnant unwed teenage girls, many welfare recipients first bore children as teenagers.⁴¹ One study revealed that a history of childhood sexual abuse, though not always tied to public assistance, was found in almost 40% of welfare recipients.⁴²

Another study, this one of teenage girls who were pregnant or already parents, found that 61% had a history of child sexual abuse, and of those, half experienced multiple incidences of sexual abuse.⁴³ Sexual abuse of females during childhood is shown to lead to early sexual activity, high-risk sexual activity and an increased occurrence of teenage pregnancy.⁴⁴ Additionally, there are long-term health and capability risks such as drug and alcohol dependency problems and sexually transmitted diseases associated with being an abused teen mother.⁴⁵ Therefore, substantial evidence suggests that childhood abuse is a much stronger predictor of teenage pregnancy, illegitimacy, and adult poverty than the availability of welfare benefits, even though welfare reformers focused very little on this connection during the creation of PRWORA.

At Project Horizon, I interacted with and read about several poor women with histories of child abuse who bore their first children as teenagers. “Tanya” was the youngest shelter resident I met and was abused by multiple family members as a child. Only twenty-one years old, she was unmarried, uneducated, jobless, homeless, and had

⁴¹ Brandwein, Ruth A., editor. Battered Women, Children, and Welfare Reform. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999. p.9.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.135.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.133.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.134.

already lost custody of her own daughter for reasons unknown to me.⁴⁶ Perhaps the most telling story of child sexual abuse and its life-altering effects comes from Jason DeParle's American Dream. Hattie Mae, who was first molested at age seven by her grandmother's abusive boyfriend and then molested again by an uncle. Reporting her uncle's abuse resulted in physical retaliation by her aunt. She first got pregnant after being raped by a much older man when she was twelve. Her life quickly spiraled out of control; she married an abusive man by fifteen, was pregnant again by sixteen, and at age twenty-three, found herself uneducated, once again pregnant, and on welfare. She remained on welfare for decades and would eventually have eight children with several different fathers.⁴⁷ Although Hattie Mae may represent an "extreme" account of child sexual assault, her early welfare dependency is not out of the ordinary. According to Debra Boyer, "about three-fourths of unmarried adolescent mothers begin receiving welfare within five years of the birth of their first child."⁴⁸

The Complex Relationship Between Poverty and Abuse:

When researching information about how poverty and abuse are intertwined, it is easiest to look at the best-documented cases of poor abuse victims—those who at some point apply for public assistance—because "the integration of the two previously separate fields, welfare and domestic violence, is more important than ever."⁴⁹ Ruth Brandwein, Professor and former Dean of the School of Social Welfare at SUNY- Stony Brook, asserts that there were two major pieces of social legislature passed through Congress

⁴⁶ Project Horizon

⁴⁷ DeParle, Jason. American Dream. New York: Penguin, 2004. p.30-6.

⁴⁸ Brandwein, Ruth A., editor. Battered Women, Children, and Welfare Reform. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999. p.132.

⁴⁹ Tolman, Richard M. and Jody Raphael. "A Review of Research on Welfare and Domestic Violence." *Journal of Social Issues*, Winter 2000. p.25.

during the 1990s. The first, the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 (VAW), formally marked the first time the federal government acknowledged the major problem of family violence in the United States. The second, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), which Ron Haskins called “the most fundamental change in American social policy since the Social Security Act of 1935,”⁵⁰ “embodies a sea change in how U.S. society treats families in need.”⁵¹

Brandwein also connects the two laws, stating,

Ironically, often the same women are targeted in both sets of legislation...When observed through the lens of domestic violence, the women are victims in need of assistance. When observed through the lens of public welfare, many of these same women are demonized and assistance is denied or provided sparingly and with punitive conditions.⁵²

The Family Violence Option—a new lifeline?

The fact that “growing evidence suggests that the two issues are inextricably linked” spawned the creation of the Family Violence Option (FVO) to PRWORA by Senators Paul Wellstone (D-Minnesota) and Patti Murray (D-Washington).⁵³ Fortunately, although the FVO was added to PRWORA as an optional amendment, most states chose to adopt it.⁵⁴ The FVO offered provisions for confidentially screening public assistance applicants and recipients for past histories of abuse and violence and then offering exemptions on some or all of the PRWORA requirements for aid on a per-case basis. The

⁵⁰ Haskins, Ron. Work Over Welfare. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2006. p.2.

⁵¹ Brandwein, Ruth A., editor. Battered Women, Children, and Welfare Reform. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999. p.4.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁵⁴ Tolman, Richard M. and Jody Raphael. “A Review of Research on Welfare and Domestic Violence.” *Journal of Social Issues*, Winter 2000. p.4.

main goal of this amendment was to protect women and their families with reasonable risk of further victimization.⁵⁵ According to Tolman and Raphael,

In theory, the FVO provides states with the ability to craft more flexible responses and meet the individualized needs of battered women on welfare...federal regulations require states implementing the FVO to assess women for domestic violence and refer them to a person trained in domestic violence issues to create an individualized service plan designed to promote employment safely. Under the regulations, states must reassess the plan every six months for each woman.⁵⁶

Ultimately, states that choose to adopt the FVO are allowed “to carry more than 20 percent of its caseload past the sixty-month federal lifetime limit” without repercussions from the federal government.⁵⁷ While the availability of exemptions on PRWORA requirements is helpful to many battered women, the greatest benefit of the FVO may be its use as a “vehicle for delivery of preventative and interventive services” for at-risk women.⁵⁸ Frequently provided services through the FVO include “access to domestic violence counseling [and] safety planning.”⁵⁹

FVO Implementation Strategies in Different States:

According to Raphael and Tolman, “new data support the hypothesis...that many women on welfare who do not comply with work or training requirements while receiving assistance may be prevented from doing so by the direct behavior of an intimate

⁵⁵ Brandwein, Ruth A., editor. Battered Women, Children, and Welfare Reform. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999. p.6.

⁵⁶ Tolman, Richard M. and Jody Raphael. “A Review of Research on Welfare and Domestic Violence.” *Journal of Social Issues*, Winter 2000. p.19.

⁵⁷ Blank, Rebecca M. and Ron Haskins, editors. The New World of Welfare. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2001. p.313.

⁵⁸ Tolman, Richard M. and Jody Raphael. “A Review of Research on Welfare and Domestic Violence.” *Journal of Social Issues*, Winter 2000. p.24.

⁵⁹ Raphael, Jody and Sheila Haennicke. “Keeping Battered Women Safe Through the Welfare-to-Work Journey: How are we Doing?” Taylor Institute. September 1999. p.4.

partner, or by the indirect effects of the abuse on their health and well-being.”⁶⁰ Because of concerns over welfare recipients whose transition to work may be impeded by present or past domestic violence, states have tended to choose from three strategies when assessing welfare recipients’ eligibility for FVO deferments and exemptions. First, some states let recipients know about the availability of FVO waivers, requiring that women “self-disclose” without asking any further questions about any history of domestic violence or abuse. Other states use questionnaires to screen for domestic violence rather than directly informing women of the availability of FVO waivers, focusing on the results of the questionnaires to correctly separate out those recipients and applicants who qualify for waivers. Finally, some states use questionnaires to screen for domestic violence in addition to informing welfare recipients of the availability of FVO waivers—a two-tiered strategy that aims to identify as many victims as possible.⁶¹ The differences in strategy between different states identifies varying levels of commitment towards identifying and helping those women who face the additional impediments to work and self-sufficiency posed by a history of abuse.

States also differ considerably in how they choose to allow FVO exemptions and extensions for women with histories of abuse. There are three different general strategies individual states employ. First, some states extend or eliminate the sixty-month lifetime term limits for TANF at their own discretion. Second, some states completely exempt women from work requirements while keeping the sixty-month lifetime TANF limits. Finally, some states include a recipient’s participation in battered women’s services

⁶⁰ Raphael, Jody and Richard M. Tolman. “Trapped by Poverty-Trapped by Abuse.” Taylor Institute. April 1997. p.6.

⁶¹ Raphael, Jody and Sheila Haennicke. “Keeping Battered Women Safe Through the Welfare-to-Work Journey: How are we Doing?” Taylor Institute. September 1999. p.9.

towards fulfillment of the work activity requirement without extending or eliminating the lifetime TANF term limits.⁶² Additionally, waivers are completely at the discretion of individual states and thus vary widely in their terms and conditions. For example, three states provide one-year work requirement waivers that are not renewable while nine other states provide six-month waivers that are renewable indefinitely.⁶³ Furthermore, some states will not rely exclusively on the sworn statement of the abuse victim in determining eligibility for FVO waivers, demanding that victims provide additional evidence of abuse, while other states are content with the victim's revelation.⁶⁴

Finally, there are differences in how individual states choose to deliver services to welfare recipients and applicants determined to be abuse survivors. Many states require women who receive waivers to participate in domestic violence services if the women believe their participation in the services is currently safe. These states make it clear to the women that they need to focus on "elimination of the domestic violence serving as the work barrier," and should do everything they can without placing themselves at risk to accomplish this goal. Some states did not require participation in domestic violence services at all while still others had participation that became mandatory after waivers and exemptions needed to be renewed. For many states, renewing exemptions and waivers required that recipients provide caseworkers or domestic violence providers with evidence of their abuse acting as a continued work barrier—examples include clinical assessments by health providers, copies of medical records, and police records and

⁶² Raphael, Jody and Sheila Haennicke. "Keeping Battered Women Safe Through the Welfare-to-Work Journey: How are we Doing?" Taylor Institute. September 1999. p.19.

⁶³ Ibid., p.20.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.21.

reports. In some states, domestic violence advocates play a role in determining what level of FVO exemption waivers and extensions are needed.⁶⁵

FVO Problem Areas and Recommendations for Improvement:

First, the existing screening strategies of many FVO-adopting states seem to be insufficient for identifying the majority of their abuse victims, as Raphael and Haennicke discovered:

Fully 20 states have notice and assessment processes that on their face appear inadequate—in the words of one state domestic violence coalition, ‘FVO Lite.’ Among these ‘FVO Lite’ practices are one-sentence notions of the FVO that appear in small type face on the TANF application and that serve as the only notice of the FVO, as well as assessment schemes that add one or two questions about domestic violence on the application form or on family assessment forms.⁶⁶

This observation is most disturbing in that it seems to downplay the significance and importance of informing eligible women of the FVO and why it might be a good option for them, describing it briefly and in terms that are either unclear or in terms that they are uncomfortable being associated with. According to Raphael and Haennicke, “many women applying for TANF do not relate to the description of domestic violence and thus will not respond affirmatively.”⁶⁷ The most obvious consequence of this observation is that fewer women than are eligible will realize the assistance the FVO was designed to give them.⁶⁸ Thus, information needs to be conveyed by states repetitively and in a clear manner that most welfare recipients can understand and benefit from. Some states produce helpful and informative pamphlets that include information about the FVO and

⁶⁵ Raphael, Jody and Sheila Haennicke. “Keeping Battered Women Safe Through the Welfare-to-Work Journey: How are we Doing?” Taylor Institute. September 1999. p.20-3.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p.9.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.9.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.9-10.

provide them to caseworkers to distribute to clients. These pamphlets could be extremely beneficial to victims of abuse because they also “provide a great deal of information about domestic violence and battered women’s services in the state.”⁶⁹ Thoughtfully, New York provides recipients with information about the FVO on a business card, which abuse victims can more easily hide from their abusers.⁷⁰

A second concern of many FVO-adopting states involves how caseworkers communicate with recipients and applicants about the issues surrounding domestic violence. Even if knowledge about the FVO is adequately dispersed to clients, domestic violence is a subject that is difficult for many to talk about, and this may present an additional obstacle for welfare recipients who are victims of abuse. According to Tolman and Raphael:

In contrast to research findings, few TANF participants are disclosing domestic violence to welfare caseworkers...where data exists, the rates are between 5 and 10% of the caseload...it is clear that the disclosure rates in welfare offices are considerably lower than the prevalence of domestic violence identified by researchers. This is consistent with research indicating domestic violence advocates obtain four and five times more disclosures than welfare caseworkers. Obviously, concerns about trust, expertise, and confidentiality work against disclosure to welfare caseworkers. These issues may be mitigated through use of trained domestic violence advocates or possibly through improved training of caseworkers and improving procedures within welfare offices.⁷¹

When questioned by researchers about why they did not disclose being afflicted by domestic violence to their caseworkers, Tolman and Raphael found that welfare recipients tended to offer two explanations—they were either afraid of being pitied by

⁶⁹ Raphael, Jody and Sheila Haennicke. “Keeping Battered Women Safe Through the Welfare-to-Work Journey: How are we Doing?” Taylor Institute. September 1999. p.9.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.10.

⁷¹ Tolman, Richard M. and Jody Raphael. “A Review of Research on Welfare and Domestic Violence.” *Journal of Social Issues*, Winter 2000. p.20-1.

their caseworkers or afraid that somehow their abuser would find out about the revelation.⁷² Furthermore, interviews between researchers and TANF recipients in Orlando, Florida, revealed that some women harbored a “fear that their children would be taken away due to a failure to protect.”⁷³ In any case, it is obvious that not enough is being done in some states to ensure that eligible women reveal their abuse to their caseworkers.

Domestic violence providers, individuals properly trained to sensitively and knowledgably interact with abuse survivors, are utilized by fourteen different states in their FVO abuse screening processes.⁷⁴ The utilization of trained experts in this process is smart policy considering the findings that victims are more likely to report abuse histories to domestic violence providers than their caseworkers and the knowledge that many women eligible for FVO waivers are not self-reporting. According to LaDonna Pavetti, “since implementation often requires professional expertise that extends beyond the capabilities of welfare office staff, interventions usually are carried out in partnership with other agencies that specialize in addressing these issues.”⁷⁵ By establishing a policy that utilizes domestic violence providers, states demonstrate their commitment to identifying and assisting as many abuse survivors as possible. It is very important to correctly identify their eligibility for FVO waivers and exemptions because these

⁷² Tolman, Richard M. and Jody Raphael. “A Review of Research on Welfare and Domestic Violence.” *Journal of Social Issues*, Winter 2000. p.21.

⁷³ Raphael, Jody and Sheila Haennicke. “Keeping Battered Women Safe Through the Welfare-to-Work Journey: How are we Doing?” Taylor Institute. September 1999. p.12.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.14.

⁷⁵ Sawhill, Isabel V., R. Kent Weaver, Ron Haskins, and Andrea Kane, editors. Welfare Reform and Beyond. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2002. p.138.

recipients and applicants are “at high risk of being sanctioned inappropriately.”⁷⁶

According to Raphael and Haennicke, “TANF caseworkers may never be able to obtain a large number of self-disclosures because of their ability to sanction participants or undertake other official actions. The presence of domestic violence advocates on-site may be necessary to increase the number of women who feel safe enough to self-disclose.”⁷⁷

Third, states are incongruent when it comes to the terms and conditions of their FVO provisions. As was mentioned earlier, there is no federal set of guidelines states must follow when deciding how to provide exemptions, waivers, and renewals. Some states are more generous with FVO benefits than others, which begs the question of what states adopting the FVO aim to receive from FVO-eligible welfare recipients. The primary focus should be on protecting at-risk low-income women and children, with goals of overcoming barriers to work and eventual self-sufficiency coming second. Successful FVO programs should be based on working knowledge of domestic violence trends and focused on providing needed services to victims.

According to Raphael and Haennicke, “many of the women self disclosing do not need waivers from work; rather they need assistance in working through the problems connected with trying to work or obtain training while they are living with an abuser.”⁷⁸

LaDonna Pavetti mentions the need for specialized interventions for the hard-to-employ including “development of safety and treatment plans for victims of domestic violence.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Schram, Sanford F. and Samuel H. Beer. Welfare Reform. Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1999. p.224.

⁷⁷ Raphael, Jody and Sheila Haennicke. “Keeping Battered Women Safe Through the Welfare-to-Work Journey: How are we Doing?” Taylor Institute. September 1999. p.33.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.33.

⁷⁹ Sawhill, Isabel V., R. Kent Weaver, Ron Haskins, and Andrea Kane, editors. Welfare Reform and Beyond. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2002. p.138.

Focusing on the services needed to rescue women from abusive situations has the greatest long-term implications for poverty reduction for these recipients. Because of the need to adequately address and provide victim services to all recipients that suffer current abuse, waivers and exemptions should provide a guaranteed minimum amount of time for victims to come up with an exit strategy and should therefore last a minimum of six months. Furthermore, because all cases are different, there should not be any states that have non-renewable exemptions and waivers. Because it is difficult for many women to escape their abusers without traveling great distances, states should have special funding available⁸⁰ to assist women in extreme situations of abuse with money to relocate a considerable distance from their current abusers. It is important to consider the implications the fact that “the majority of women on welfare have an intimate male partner in their lives” has on welfare recipients who are suffering from abuse. Focusing on strategies aimed at preventing future abuse by “promoting job training and employment for low-income men” is important because it can lead to “positive factors in fighting poverty in women’s lives.”⁸¹ Finally, it is important for FVO-adopting states to keep careful data on the progress made with women who are identified as abuse victims in order to quantify what strategies work best.

Conclusion:

The FVO option presents a strong foundation for the beginning of services aimed at helping victims of past and current abuse. Because the strong links between abuse and

⁸⁰ Sawhill, Isabel V., R. Kent Weaver, Ron Haskins, and Andrea Kane, editors. Welfare Reform and Beyond. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2002. p.141.

⁸¹ Raphael, Jody and Richard M. Tolman. “Trapped by Poverty-Trapped by Abuse.” Taylor Institute. April 1997. p.7.

poverty are starting to be well understood, as was demonstrated by the widespread adoption of the FVO, abused women previously “demonized” as welfare recipients are now more compassionately viewed as what they are—victims.⁸² Hopefully as studies reveal which FVO tactics are most effective in reducing barriers to employment, providing essential services to abuse survivors, and preventing abuse, future policies will incorporate proven strategies into a system capable of making a discernable impact on poor victims of domestic violence.

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⁸² Brandwein, Ruth A., editor. Battered Women, Children, and Welfare Reform. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999. p.132.

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