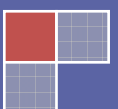


Cross-System Dialogue

An Effective Strategy to Promote Communication
between the Domestic Violence Community, Child
Welfare System, and the Courts

A report for the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges
Prepared by Stacy M. Lowry and Olga Trujillo
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**Family Violence
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This project was supported by Award No. 2004-WT-AX-K080 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication, conference agenda, or product are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice.

**Family Violence
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Cross-System Dialogue

An Effective Strategy to Promote Communication Between the Domestic Violence Community, Child Welfare System, and the Courts

In 1999, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges developed *Effective Interventions in Domestic Violence & Child Maltreatment Cases: Guidelines for Policy and Practice*, also referred to as the “*Greenbook*.” The *Greenbook* and its guiding principles were designed to promote dialogue among domestic violence service providers, child welfare agencies, and the courts in cases where domestic violence and child maltreatment co-occurred and to enhance system responses to families by enhancing victim safety, holding the batterer accountable, and promoting the stability and well-being of children.

A primary focus of the *Greenbook* is on the importance of reducing conflict and building collaborations among system partners. To this end, the cross-system dialogue is one strategy that has been used to improve communication. The cross-system dialogue is an approach that promotes and helps to facilitate communication among representatives working in the domestic violence, child welfare, and court system. It provides a formal structure to address conflict in a productive manner. Cross-system dialogues bring people together, lay the groundwork for effective communication, and give those who work with families experiencing both domestic violence and child maltreatment an increased confidence that meaningful cross-system communication is possible.

I. Barriers to Collaboration and Communication

Although adult and child victims often are found in the same families, child welfare and domestic violence programs historically responded separately to victims. Conflicts were largely due to differences in each system's mission, development, mandate, policies, and practices. The primary mission of child welfare agencies and dependency courts is to protect and serve children. Child welfare workers and court personnel may view domestic violence service providers as protecting the adult victims without regard to the safety of the children. On the other hand, the primary

mission of domestic violence service providers is to protect and serve adult victims of intimate partner violence. Domestic violence service providers may view child welfare workers and court personnel as re-victimizing the adult victim of domestic violence and punishing them for failing to protect their children and themselves from the violent acts of another. Given that these systems are driven by different policies, mandates, and perspectives, they often fail to effectively communicate, despite their common commitment to ending family violence.

II. Emergence of the Cross-System Dialogue

In 2000, six sites¹ were selected for a federal demonstration initiative to pilot the *Greenbook's* guiding principles. These six sites, commonly referred to as the *Greenbook* sites, collaborated within their communities and worked toward developing common goals. They experienced success on distinct projects, however, sites also struggled with communication about broad and complex issues, such as a mother's role in protecting her children from violence.

In response to these struggles, technical assistance providers² to the *Greenbook* sites sought to create a safe and structured process for the sites to address controversial and emerging issues. The goal was to create a process that would enable the sites to come to a resolution for conflicts that emerged, promote sustainability of the collaboration, and contribute to further success. What resulted was the cross-system dialogue strategy.³

For the purposes of this paper, "system" will refer to the field in which an individual works; child protection services, domestic violence agencies, or the courts. "System representative" will indicate an individual from one system selected to represent the views of that system. "System partners" will refer to the multiple systems working together around a common issue.

¹ The six sites were El Paso County, Colorado; Grafton County, New Hampshire; Lane County, Oregon; San Francisco and Santa Clara Counties, California; and St. Louis County, Missouri.

² The technical assistance team included staff of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, Family Violence Prevention Fund, and American Public Human Services Association.

³ The concept of the cross-system dialogue was developed by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges in order to encourage productive communication between systems.

III. The Role of *Process* in the Cross-System Dialogue

A deliberate and reflective process is an important element of the cross-system dialogue. The basic process of a cross-system dialogue can help systems in a number of ways.

- 1) It requires intra-system dialogue. Many service providers are often unable to engage in thoughtful dialogue with their peers. Despite appearances, each system and its representatives are not monolithic.
- 2) It provides a forum for discussing contentious issues in a respectful manner; engaging system representatives in discussions about what fuels their disagreement and identifying ways they can work together to resolve it.
- 3) It presents an opportunity for system representatives to hear from and develop their understanding of the reasoning behind other system partner actions and attitudes, creating institutional empathy, and contributing to a potential shift in attitudes.
- 4) It requires that process be turned into a course of action. Process for the sake of process will not improve service, create systemic change, or produce better outcomes for battered women and their children.

IV. The Three Steps of the Cross-System Dialogue

Step One

The first step of a cross-system dialogue is to select a facilitator.⁴ The facilitator convenes system representatives from one system to discuss the topic at hand. This is done by posing a series of questions to a group of peers from one's own system and guiding the conversation. The facilitator's objective is to guide each system representative through the process of exploring the issue, his or her concerns, and the perspective of others in the system.

This exchange of ideas serves as a vehicle for clarifying their view and response to an issue and proposing possible solutions and next steps. Ultimately, the conversation helps the system representatives reach consensus about their position

⁴ It is preferable that the facilitator be a person who is not associated with any of the systems involved in the collaboration.

on an issue for the purposes of communicating them to other systems. Below is a list of general sample questions that a facilitator might propose.

- How do you define the issue?
- What do you want your own agency to know about your concerns related to the issue?
- What do you want your system partners to know about your concerns in regard to the issue?
- How do you believe your system partners view you in regard to the issue?
- What worries you most about the issue?
- What recommendations do you propose to confront and deal with this issue?

Examples of contentious issues that have been explored with the cross-system dialogue include failure to protect, over representation of people of color in the child welfare system, children exposed to domestic violence,⁵ and mandated services for an adult victim.

In most cases, it is helpful to document the first meeting. Documentation creates a written memory of the intra-system dialogue; reminds people that it is important to be clear about a position; and provides a foundation for future conversations, even if that position may change.

Step Two

After each system has gone through a dialogue with their peers, a few key system representatives are chosen to attend a subsequent meeting with representatives from the other system partners. In step two of the cross-system dialogue, selected system representatives come together at a facilitated meeting to share their perspective on the identified issue. The purpose of this meeting is to allow the system representatives to listen to each system's position on the topic, concerns, and potential solutions.

⁵ For a set of sample questions relating to children exposed to domestic violence adapted from the San Francisco Cross-System Dialogue held in December 2003, please refer to Appendix A.

This meeting can reduce the conflict that may accompany the controversial issue by creating a safe space for all participants to present their positions and speak honestly. At the end of the meeting(s), participants will have a more complete picture and better understanding of the perspective of each system. To that end, the meeting should include introductions, time for each system to present the key points, and a facilitated dialogue about the views of each system focused on clarifying the position, finding common ground, and proposing initial recommendations for resolving and moving the issue forward⁶.

Step Three

In Step Three of a cross-system dialogue, a meeting, or series of meetings, is held where recommendations are discussed at length, prioritized, and a plan of action is created. The system representatives participating are responsible for taking these recommendations back to their system and promoting follow-through with the action plan.

V. Determining if the Cross-System Dialogue Will Benefit a Community

Several questions should be posed to determine if a community will benefit from the cross-system dialogue. Some of these questions may include:

- Is there disagreement around a specific issue?
- Are system partners struggling with how to address some of the issues with which they disagree?
- Are system partners invested in meaningful change?

If the answer is “yes” to the above questions, then the cross-system dialogue may be a useful tool for your community.

⁶ For a sample agenda of a multi-system meeting adapted from the Santa Clara Cross-System Dialogue conducted in September 2005, please refer to Appendix B.

VI. Conclusion

The cross-system dialogue can be an effective tool to address controversial issues that may arise in the course of collaboration. It is a beneficial strategy that enables system representatives to engage in dialogue that uncovers practice and policy issues that may impede a system representative or system partner's ability to work effectively within and across systems. The cross-system dialogue helps increase trust among system partners and confidence within communities, demonstrates how conflict can be productive, and more importantly, leads to positive change.

Appendix A

Children Exposed to Domestic Violence Cross-System Dialogue⁷

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- I. Define “child exposure to domestic violence.”
 - a. What are the legal definitions (if any)?
 - b. What are the clinical definitions?
 - c. How do you come in contact with these children?
- II. What are the current and relevant policy responses to children who are exposed to domestic violence?
 - a. What are the implications specific to state, city, shelter, community, courtroom, and office policy responses?
 - b. What responses relate specifically to your discipline?
- III. How are the policy responses carried out in actual practice?
 - a. Do all children get the same response?
 - b. Is there a continuum of responses?
 - c. How do people decide which response is best?
- IV. What do you want for children who are exposed to domestic violence?
 - a. What will happen to children who are exposed to domestic violence?
 - b. What barriers exist that impede your system from being as effective as you would like?
- V. What would you like your system partners to do to make things better for the children who are exposed to domestic violence?
- VI. What kind of community involvement is needed, and why?
- VII. Would you like to receive feedback from other systems on how you are doing around this issue? If so, around what areas would you like to receive this feedback? How should you get that feedback?
 - a. Is it to inform new systems design?
 - b. Is it to build new leadership and community capacity?
- VIII. How will your system prepare for community involvement?

⁷ These sample questions were adapted from the San Francisco Children Exposed to Domestic Violence Cross-System Dialogue held in December, 2003.

Appendix B

Santa Clara Cross-System Dialogue⁸

SAMPLE AGENDA

I. *Welcome and Introductions*

II. *Reports*

Each system partner is permitted 15 minutes to present three to five key points regarding the issue. After each report, five minutes will be allowed for questions.

III. *Discussion*

After all the reports are presented, a facilitated dialogue will begin about the key points that were raised in the reports. The discussion will focus on clarifying questions and proposing recommendations for resolving the issue and moving it forward.

IV. *Wrap up and Next Steps*

The facilitator will briefly sum up the day's discussion and review the next meeting, Step Three of the cross-system dialogue, with participants.

⁸ This sample agenda was adapted from the multi-system meeting of the Santa Clara Cross-System Dialogue held in September, 2005.