

**Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence  
Survivor Listening Project Report  
June, 2009**

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# **FCADV Survivor Listening Project Report June, 2009**

## **Executive Summary**

The goal of this project is to ensure that the voices of survivors remain central to, and continue to inform the work of the Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence (FCADV).

A central theme of this project is the understanding that the insight provided by survivors is crucial to our work and the Battered Women's Movement. With this as our focus, FCADV will continue to provide opportunities for battered/formerly battered women to share their successes, challenges, and lessons learned from their encounters on the road to safety.

We have listened to numerous survivors and advocates across the state and documented their words. This report will highlight their demographics and the substance of what they told us.

## **Listening to the Voices of Survivors**

FCADV heard the voices of 106 females and 1 male survivor of domestic violence representing rural (27%), urban (39%) and suburban (24%) communities across the state. We heard from young, middle age, and elder survivors. 55% of those who completed our demographic survey had children living in the home. 31% were single, 25% of the women were separated, 20% were divorced and 18% married. 48% were unemployed and looking for work, 4% were retired, and only 18% were employed full time.

Survivors told us over and over that their two most pressing needs are for affordable housing and for a fair, better educated and sensitive justice system: judges, family law attorneys, law enforcement and prosecution, including immigration laws and enforcement. We were also told that the next most pressing needs were for jobs that paid a living wage, and quality and affordable childcare.

## **Housing Responses/Needs**

Public housing everywhere in the state has long waiting lists for accepting applications and once applications are accepted, they often face another long waiting list for openings, sometimes as long as one to two years, and many units are inaccessible for women who have no transportation.

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Traditional housing options are often unaffordable and those that are affordable often require a certain length of employment for eligibility and a good credit rating. Due to the violence of their abuser, many survivors have had to leave their last place of residence without notice to landlords who are often insensitive to the needs of survivors resulting in broken leases and negative reports to credit reporting agencies. Additionally, survivors find it very difficult to come up with the first month's rent and the deposits that are required to move into another house or apartment.

### **Suggestions Survivors Made to Help Meet Housing Needs**

An almost universal suggestion was to develop grants/funding for more transitional housing units/programs supported by the domestic violence centers for those leaving homes of domestic violence. The goal of this transitional housing program would be to assist and support families while they save money, repair their credit and buy their own home or find other permanent housing. The estimated timeframe for such a program was between one to five years.

Other ideas were to develop a rent/mortgage forgiveness program for survivors of domestic violence who fall behind on payments because they are trying to find safety from abuse; develop a loan program that pays landlords for rent/mortgages until the survivor can get back on her feet financially; develop a rent-share program where survivors live together; develop a program to assist domestic violence centers' with funding to help survivors with the necessary deposits, furniture and moving expenses; and that transitional housing programs at the centers should partner with Habitat for Humanity to help women build and own their own homes.

Survivors also thought that information on housing resources should be available at the domestic violence centers and that advocates should have and share knowledge about HUD laws and regulations.

### **Justice System Response/Needs**

The most positive response we heard from survivors was that the domestic violence centers provided advocates to help them navigate the court and immigration and naturalization systems.

The most often expressed concern by survivors about the judicial and law enforcement systems was that the judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officers, and attorneys were insensitive and uneducated about the issues related to domestic violence and the power and control tactics batterers use against them. They are blamed for not stopping the violence and for not

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taking their children and leaving the abuser. They believe the courts and law enforcement are often manipulated by their batterer and that his rights are more of a concern than the rights of the survivor and children for safety and support.

The survivors told us that they are forced to share their children's custody and visitation with their abuser even when the abuser is considered dangerous to both of them. They are pressured into accepting plea agreements that reduce criminal charges against the batterer and are presented with impossible choices in family court having to agree to unsupervised visitation or losing custody of the children all together.

Survivors told us they have little or no affordable legal representation available to them and that the attorneys they are able to get are often uneducated about domestic violence and try to coerce them into bad decisions that are not in the best interest of the survivor or her children.

We were told that dual arrests are common in many jurisdictions across the state when domestic abuse is involved on a law enforcement call. Survivors themselves are being charged with domestic abuse. One woman reported almost losing her job because she was advised to plead no contest to charges of domestic abuse and was then forced into anger management classes with abusive men.

Some battered women who flee the state for safety and then return to file for divorce and custody are required to wait six months even though they have lived here all their lives. Legal Services is inundated with cases and attorneys often have little preparation time to learn the complex details for her case.

Many survivors also told us that the justice system is too cumbersome and places responsibility on victims who have to take off work, arrange for childcare, transportation, etc. Survivors are forced to "jump through hoops" when they try to get justice and safety. Judges and police officers are often unfamiliar with new laws and are not enforcing injunctions that have been violated by their abusers. An abuser's prior history of abuse is rarely considered by the courts and domestic violence criminal cases rarely go to trial.

Survivors described the following as being "routine" behaviors of law enforcement officers: Survivors of color experience racist responses by police officers; officers tell survivors "we do not get involved in domestic disputes", or "we'll arrest you both if we have to come back here"; Police try to talk them out of having the batterer arrested by telling them that they

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may lose their children, but batterers are not being arrested or receiving consequences for violating orders of the court, even when there is concrete evidence of those violations. Reports are not being taken and often when reports are made, they “get lost” or include the wrong information; women who get assaulted are being blamed for being there or not leaving; and if a batterer is a police officer he is not going to get arrested or go to jail.

Some other examples of problems with law enforcement include the refusal to transport survivors to safe shelter explaining that they “are not a transportation service” and “only take people downtown”; police creating false reports against survivors; and police appearing to side with batterers (i.e. advising survivors to leave in front of the batterer).

Immigrant survivors often face tremendous obstacles in their attempts to keep themselves and their children safe from their abusers. We were told that they fear deportation if they report the abuse to police; that it is impossible for them to find employment without an ID card from the state or federal government and that getting an ID card is a long and difficult process; there is not enough outreach into the immigrant communities with information about battered immigrant’s legal rights which allows batterers to successfully threaten them with deportation and loss of their children if they seek help; they fear deportation if they seek medical attention or any kind of assistance; a married immigrant survivor must get the abuser’s permission before she can bring her children into the country; they fear custody issues if batterer takes the children out of the country; they fear the abuser will harm family in their home country; and abusers often mistranslate attorney documents about the survivor’s immigration status to keep her confused and dependent.

### **Suggestions Survivors Made to Improve Justice System Response**

Many survivors told us that “timeshare” requirements in custody cases should not apply to domestic violence cases and the effects of domestic violence on children should be required to be taken into consideration. They also believe that the State of Florida should begin monitoring judge’s responses in all domestic violence cases before the courts, and that judges should be mandated to receive sensitivity and educational training on the issues of domestic violence.

We were also told that free legal aid for survivors of domestic violence should be available statewide. There needs to be a statewide protocol that protects victims of domestic violence that have Child Protection Investigators (CPI) cases and any staff accreditations should include mandatory domestic violence training.

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Prosecutors and law enforcement officers need additional and ongoing sensitivity and educational training on the best ways to respond to domestic violence including training on the strangulation law, and all justice system representatives should be mandated to participate on local domestic violence task forces.

Additionally, survivors recommended that: legislation to prevent courts from giving custody to batterers should be enacted; police need to be held accountable for their actions (or inactions) by being investigated themselves and then action taken to give them consequences; complaints should be filed with the state attorney general's office and investigations conducted into the practices of law enforcement, courts and private family law attorneys in areas where the "good ole boy" system lets batterers get away with their abuse; police must separate batterer and victim when answering a domestic violence call; Advocates should ride along with police on all domestic violence calls; police officers should connect women with resources instead of arresting them; allow a specialized domestic violence unit in all police departments.

Immigrant survivors suggested that there be much more communication within immigrant communities so women will know their legal rights; they need more help getting drivers licenses and ID cards so they can work and support their children and suggested changing federal/state laws so that they can get IDs faster, or can get emergency temporary IDs, or emergency temporary permission to work while they are trying to get safe from their abusers; they need the domestic violence centers to provide assistance with learning English; more bilingual police officers.

### **Employment Response/Needs**

Survivors reported positive experiences with the state workforce commission which offers computers to help with job searches, resume development, and training in interviewing skills, and with the public libraries that allow them 1-2 hours a day of computer use to search for jobs.

However, many survivors told us that there are little if any job opportunities in most areas of the state and that they are often either over or under qualified for most of the jobs that are available. In rural areas, we were told that the lack of affordable transportation to get to jobs is a huge obstacle, and in areas where public transportation is available, they do not have the money to use it on a daily basis to search for jobs; the shelter does not provide information on available jobs/ or job training in the area; there is a

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lack of quality, affordable child care; and, survivors who do have jobs are often afraid to go to work because the employer is insensitive to their safety needs.

### **Survivor Suggestions for Improving Employment Needs**

Survivors suggested that the domestic violence centers establish a childcare co-op of qualified survivors to take care of children while other women look for work or are working; provide workplace domestic violence education for employers; job training could be available at the domestic violence centers and the centers could provide/post an up-to-date (daily or weekly) listing of jobs and resources in community.

Survivors also told us they would value training on small business development provided by the centers and that the Coalition could develop a microenterprise initiative that would help the centers give small loans to survivors to begin these small businesses.

### **Childcare Response/Needs**

Survivors were positive about the domestic violence centers that provide assistance with childcare while they are in the shelters. However, survivors have concerns about the lack of money to continue to pay for quality, professional childcare once they leave those shelters.

### **Survivor Suggestions for Improving Childcare Needs**

Have domestic violence centers write a grant to establish a day care program at the centers just for children from homes of domestic violence whether the children or their mothers are shelter residents or not; develop funding to assist survivors with quality, professional childcare services who could not access the centers' programs due to distance; and develop a transitional housing program with units next to one another so moms can help each other out with childcare. They believed this would also provide an opportunity for their children to continue to play/interact with other children from homes of domestic violence, which they believed would be healthy for the children.

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**SURVIVOR DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY TOTALS**

**Ages**

**18-24:** 12 voices - 12%  
**25-34:** 14 voices - 13%  
**35-44:** 24 voices - 23%  
**45-54:** 22 voices - 21%  
**55-64:** 18 voices - 18%  
**65 and over:** 14 voices - 13%

**Number with children under the age of 18 living in their households**

42 with - 55%  
34 without - 45%

**Relationship status**

23 single – 31%  
13 married – 18%  
15 divorced – 20%  
2 living with partner – 2%  
19 separated – 25%  
2 widowed – 3%  
1 single never married -1%

**Employment Status**

3 retired – 4%  
4 not employed- not looking disabled – 5%  
1 not employed- not looking – 1%  
35 not employed –looking – 48%  
2 students – 3%  
8 employed part time – 12%  
13 employed full time – 18%  
4 homemakers – 5%  
3 prefer not to answer – 4%

**Level of education**

14 some college – 20%  
5 bachelor's degrees – 7%  
2 associate degrees – 3%  
12 trade or vocational degree – 16%  
18 high school graduate or equivalent -25%  
6 Graduate or professional degrees – 8%  
4 prefer not to answer -5%  
12 Some high school – 16%

**Location**

21 rural – 27%  
30 urban – 39%  
26 suburban – 24%

## **Listening to the Voices of Advocates**

55 female, and 1 male domestic violence advocate, participated in the FCADV Listening Project. All were employed full time in domestic violence centers across the state.

Advocates identified housing, employment, and law enforcement/judicial system responses as the most pressing concerns for domestic violence in Florida. Advocates also identified concerns with immigration and transportation issues.

### **Housing Responses/Needs**

Advocates told us that survivors lack affordable housing; good credit is required for most housing; money for deposits on housing often forces survivors to relocate or return to abuser; many owe past due bills on utilities for various reasons such as batterer restricting funds and not allowing them to work.

Advocates also told us that public housing requirements such as the number of bedrooms in a unit are to match the number of "heartbeats" in the family, i.e., one bedroom per heart that beats; that priority for victims of domestic violence in public housing is given out randomly when given at all; the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has long waiting lists; there are problems with discrimination against survivors of domestic violence, i.e., landlords refuse to make repairs for damage caused by the batterer, and survivors may even be charged with destruction of property; in some cases there is no transitional housing available at all; and it is even more difficult for immigrant survivors without documentation to find housing.

### **Advocates Suggestions to Improve Housing Needs**

Advocates suggested contacting private apartment owners to give women a trial basis/time limit waiver on the good credit requirement in exchange for a guaranteed deposit and first month rent; give women shorter leases in exchange for a debt/credit counseling/plan and develop a fair process for referring survivors to these landlords; utilize Habitat for Humanity for referral information and the process for application for survivors working with the centers; develop specific fund raisers to meet the needs for deposits and rent; work with the state public service commission (or whichever state organization oversees utility rates) to enact a provision to waive deposits for victims of domestic violence (see Texas and LA model).

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Advocates also suggested that centers work with builders who have vacant units and/or foreclosed homes to arrange short term inexpensive leases for survivors; pass legislation to hold landlords accountable for discriminating against victims of domestic violence; provide legal counsel to survivors about their housing rights; research the possibility of accessing vacant FEMA trailers for temporary housing; and develop stronger housing laws/policies that provide domestic violence preferences on both HUD public and subsidized housing waiting lists.

### **Employment Responses/Needs**

Advocates told us that there is a severe lack of affordable living wage job opportunities in many areas of the state; there are no resources or referrals available for jobs; a lack of job skills, training, and education; lack of job seeking skills and /or knowledge; and a need of money for transportation and parking so survivors can seek jobs.

Advocates also told us that there is a lack of affordable child care and transportation for survivors to adequately job search and retain jobs once found; and that discrimination against survivors result in job terminations for arbitrary reasons after a supervisor learns of the abuse.

### **Advocates Suggestions to Improve Employment Needs**

Advocates told us that survivors could use assistance with applications to community colleges, universities, and trade/technical schools to help them develop skills that employers need in the area; and help with their FAFSA applications for school, work study opportunities, tuition and living expenses.

Advocates also see subsidized childcare as important; and work with the legislature and/or state workforce commission to include domestic violence as a justifiable cause to leave employment allow battered women to receive unemployment benefits after they have had to leave a job for safety; giving survivors information about resume writing and interviewing skills; and giving information on micro-enterprise development such as flea markets, jewelry making, etc.; help with relocation for jobs and support systems; find assistance, free tuition, for women to learn trades/skills that are marketable; find and/or develop scholarship resources with a priority to survivors; collaborate with large companies in the area like Wal-Mart and Walgreens to commit to employing survivors; and write grants for, or otherwise find secure funding to support co-ops, small businesses, and microenterprise development in local areas for survivors.

## **Law Enforcement Responses/Needs**

Advocates told us that the positive aspects of law enforcement are that there are some good officers who go "above and beyond", and that some police departments now will escort the advocate and survivor to their cars after court, will meet at survivor's home to assist her, and that there are now victim advocates in some departments.

Advocates also told us that there are often serious problems with police response such as minimizing the violence and revictimizing the survivors; not holding batterers accountable; making the situation more dangerous by giving guns back to the batterer; making dual arrests; making inappropriate comments to the survivor; not filing reports or when they do, the information is often incorrect or biased against the survivor (women reported being denied relocation because police have written domestic disturbance instead of violence on the report); survivors are threatened with the loss of their children if they insist that the batterer be arrested.

Other problems that advocates told us about law enforcement response were that they do not separate the batterer from the victim at the scene and they tell the batterer that she was the one who called them; officers discriminate against a woman if she is emotional and/or has no obvious marks or wounds; a woman will be arrested if batterer has marks and self defense is not considered; batterers are rarely arrested at the scene; officers who are abusers are supported by other officers; officers are often more interested in drug charges than the needs of the survivors; they do not acknowledge male victims (or ridicule them); and injunction violation reports are not being enforced.

Advocates suggested improving law enforcement responses in several ways: by getting copies of the local police and sheriff's policy/protocols on responding to domestic violence and reviewing them; if policies need something, then work with sheriff and chief to try to get them to implement safer policies/protocols; network and socialize with law enforcement to develop a good working relationship and mutual respect and trust; provide sensitivity and appropriate response training on issues related to domestic violence from the "top down", and training should include both police and advocate facilitators and a formerly battered woman; begin an Advocate Ride-A-Long Program: victim advocate should accompany police on all domestic violence calls; set up a domestic violence task force to investigate cases; and pass legislation that allows survivors to get free police reports involving the survivor.

## **Judicial/Legal Assistance Responses/Needs**

A positive about the judicial response is that legal aid assistance for survivors is available in the courthouse.

However, advocates told us that all judges need training and sensitivity on issues related to domestic violence and that some judges do not know the statutes pertaining to domestic violence; that new family custody laws give a lot of rights to the father which is often to the detriment of the battered woman and children, i.e., shared parenting plan is a requirement and only extreme domestic violence cases are exempted from this requirement.

Advocates are also concerned that batterers bond out of jail almost as a matter of course regardless of how dangerous they are to the survivors; dependency court (with the Department of Children and Families) blames the victim and fails to hold the batterer accountable; courts do not order or enforce orders of child support; batterer is not arrested even when bench warrants are active against them and they are in the courtroom on other matters; there is no accountability for judges; in some cases, the batterer and the victim are in same place while waiting for injunctions; there is a huge unmet need for quality, affordable (or pro bono) legal services; in some counties, judges award custody to whomever arrives at the courthouse first; a punitive attitude toward survivors with other issues such as substance abuse and mental health; and ex parte temporary restraining orders are being denied consistently in some jurisdictions, even with documentation of the abuse.

Immigrant survivors' concerns were also highlighted by the advocates, especially the recently created arm of law enforcement named Immigration, Customs and Enforcement (ICE). Advocates told us that ICE raids labor pools and gas stations and other places where immigrants seek work, and has caused great fear among immigrant survivors who are afraid to reach out for help anywhere outside their own immigrant communities.

## **Advocates Suggestions to Improve Judicial/Legal Services Response**

Advocates suggested that the court attach child support court orders to IRS tax refunds and Social Security payments; there should be mandated judges training on domestic violence sensitivity, awareness and the law; there should be mandated law school training for all attorneys on in-depth issues related to domestic violence and the law; passage of legislation to change new custody laws; and special court monitors for domestic violence cases.

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Advocates also suggested that coordinated community response teams across the state should include a wide array of organizations and people, not just court, prosecution, and law enforcement personnel; and include in local area trainings the stories/examples of real life actual consequences that survivors have experienced with the judicial system.

And finally, advocates suggested that provisions be added to the federal Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) for single immigrant survivors to be able to get help; to add language to VAWA that will speed up the documentation process, especially the provision of emergency, temporary IDs for immigrant survivors; and for advocates to go into the fields and workplaces of immigrant people to connect with them to find out what to do to help survivors within their own communities to help break the "conspiracy of silence" that keeps oppression of immigrant peoples in place.

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**ADVOCATE DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY TOTALS**

**Age of Advocates**

**18-24**

7 participants

**25-34**

13 participants

**35-44**

13 participants

**45-54**

5 participants

**55-64**

8 Participants

**65 and over**

6 participants

**Advocates with Children (under18) Living in Household**

31 yes

30 no

**Marital Status**

15 single

18 married

2 divorced

10 living with partner

1 separated

1 prefer not to answer

**Levels of education**

11 some college

13 bachelor degrees

8 associate degrees

2 trade or vocational degree

6 high school graduate

8 Graduate or professional degrees

**Locations**

11 rural

32 urban

13 suburban

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