

From the Ground Up

Strategies for Organizing in Rural Communities

DISCUSSION GUIDE



Praxis International

"Integrating Theory and Practice"

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From the Ground Up
Strategies for Organizing in Rural Communities

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*For more information on this guide or any other
technical assistance needs, contact:*

Praxis International

ruralta@praxisinternational.org
www.praxisinternational.org

206 West 4th St., Suite 207
Duluth, MN 55806-1604
ph 218-525-0487
fax 218-525-0445

179 Robie Street East, Suite 260
St. Paul, MN 55107
ph 651-699-8000
fax 651-699-8001

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From the Ground Up

Strategies for Organizing in Rural Communities



Social change movements are characterized by extreme dedication, commitment and hard work by organizers and workers. This series of videos and discussion pieces, designed *by and for* Rural grantees, offers insights and strategies to people organizing in rural areas on issues of violence against women. We hope to not merely illustrate the barriers to organizing, but to inspire advocates and community leaders with the innovations used effectively by other seasoned rural organizers.

The video series is organized loosely into five twenty-minute segments appropriate for use by groups of advocates who are creating local organizing strategies, or as a training tool for new rural advocates. This guide includes a synopsis of each segment as well as suggested discussion questions. We intend for you to watch a video segment then use the synopsis and questions as fits your purpose. You may use the discussion questions as they are, customize them to your community, or create your own. You may find, as we did, that conversations about organizing are made richer and more complex by the interaction between people and the finding of your group's (or even your community's) collective wisdom and spirit.

We extend our deepest gratitude to the women and men who generously donated their time, thoughtful inspiration, and historical artifacts to making this project possible: Debbie Bresette, Katharine Conover, Eleanor David, Jennifer Gibson-Snyder, Bobby King, Doris Lee, Ellen Pence, Jo Sullivan, Felecia Thomas, Mily Treviño-Sauceda, Tootie Welker and Tammy Young.

We are also grateful for the unique contributions of Ann Jones, Sue Sojourner, and Anne Breckenridge and her crew.

Part 1: Where is Rural?

After Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act in 1994, Praxis International joined the federal Office on Violence Against Women to provide technical assistance to those who receive grants under the program known then as Rural Domestic Violence and Child Victimization.

We knew that working on domestic violence in rural areas was bound to be different from working on the same problem in urban areas. But how? What's so different—what's special—about working for women and children in a rural setting?

To learn more, Praxis invited 10 women to Duluth, Minnesota, to talk about their work. All of these women have organized and provided services for battered women in rural settings—some of them for more than 30 years. What could they tell us about their work that would help others just starting out?

If you've watched Part 1 of their conversation, you know that the first thing to be learned from their discussion is this: There's "rural," and then there's "Rural." From the isolated communities of remote Native Alaskan villages to the upscale ski resorts of Jackson Hole, Wyoming, from a little community of Hmong refugees in the Montana countryside to encampments of Latino farm workers in California's rich agricultural valleys, from Slavic enclaves on the Iron Range of Minnesota to African-American towns in the Mississippi Delta—all of these communities are officially "rural." And they couldn't be more different, one from the other. We have to conclude then—considering the great variety of rural communities—that there can be no hard and fast rules for working in rural areas.

There are, however, some common problems. The first is distance—and the transportation problems it raises. Our House, the program with which Doris Lee and Felecia Thomas work, covers eight counties. Tootie Welker's Sanders County Coalition for Families covers only one county, but that county is nearly 3,000 square miles. Debbie Bresette's Family Crisis Center serves 4,000 square miles of Texas, while Tammy Young and Eleanor David face "all of Alaska." Given these big spaces, how do you provide safety for victims? How do you carry your services and educational activities to everyone?

Many rural programs tackle transportation problems with volunteers. Some have relay systems to cut the distance driven by any one staff member or volunteer. Some raise money to reimburse the volunteers for expenses. Our House raised money to buy two vans to make sure they could provide transport for victims and for staff members on outreach missions. Most programs study their records to make sure they are serving women in every part of their territory, and they design outreach programs accordingly.



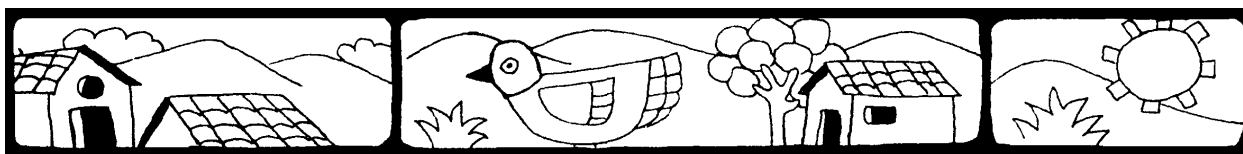
But distance affects more than the problem of getting from here to there. It influences decisions about policy and programs at every level. When Range Women's Advocates was invited to apply for funds to build a women's shelter, for example, they declined. Why? They knew that the women they serve in 21 little towns scattered across the Iron Range of Minnesota did not want to have to take their kids out of school and leave their home communities—their jobs and families and friends—to gain safety. Range Women's Advocates decided instead to maintain the system of safe homes they'd established years before within the various communities they serve. Similarly, Eleanor David and Tammy Young are trying to establish village-based programs in remote Alaskan Native communities. They believe that if Native Alaskan women victims of violence have to flee to faraway urban shelters run by non-Natives unfamiliar with Native culture, they will find no real help. On the other hand, the Community Safety Network of Jackson Hole, Wyoming, reached different conclusions about the needs of their community, and they worked hard to raise three million dollars to build a shelter.

Or take programs for children, which so many urban domestic violence centers provide at their offices or shelters. In rural areas, the children may not be able to attend because they have no way to get there, or to get there consistently. So some rural programs run children's sessions in outlying communities. Some work in the schools. Some visit children in their homes. Many have tried one way, and then another and another until they found what worked best for them. And some don't have children's programs at all—at least not yet—because they are working on other priorities.

How do you decide what to do? The women who participated in the Praxis video discussions make clear that their work depends on the people, the institutions, and the values of their communities. And most rural communities—make no mistake—have strong views and strong values.

It's clear that you can't transpose a successful urban program onto a rural area and expect it to work smoothly—or at all. Instead, in deciding questions of policy and program, these experienced activists are guided mainly by two considerations: What's needed *here*? What works?

And how do they know? Well, there's always the good old-fashioned method of trial and error. Everybody uses it. To make your tries more successful more often, these women advise that you get to know your community *before* you decide what's best for them. We'll talk more about that after watching the next video.



Part 1 Questions

1. The women in the video represent and describe several different kinds of rural communities. In what ways is your community similar to or different from those they described? Do you have needs or problems that these women didn't mention?
2. Several of the women represent ethnic or cultural groups they describe as misunderstood or even oppressed by the dominant culture. If you serve minority communities or minorities within a dominant community, what are your special concerns? What can you do if your community is—like the one Jo Sullivan describes—"closed"?
3. A big problem for all these women is transportation. What are your transportation needs, and how are you meeting them?
4. Tootie Welker says that one of the joys of working in a rural area is having time to spend with women in need so that you can help them with "other parts of their life" besides the violence—such as going back to school. Do you agree? Do you have the "luxury of time" in your program? And to what extent do you think you can and should help women with the "other parts of their lives"?
5. The women in the video say that you have to be more creative when meeting the special challenges presented by rural communities. What is the biggest challenge you face as a rural program? How are you meeting it? Can you think of different approaches that might work better?

Part 2: Starting from Scratch



More than twenty years ago, Debbie Bresette invited a small group of women to gather at her kitchen table in Bastrop, Texas, to talk about victims of domestic violence and how to help them. Soon they made an arrangement with the town's trash collectors to hand out a phone number to women who seemed to be in trouble. That was the beginning of the Family Crisis Center that still serves Texas women today. At about the same

time in Minnesota, Jo Sullivan was astonished to find in her kitchen a screaming neighbor with a recently broken nose, and she rallied other neighbors to get the woman to safety. That was the beginning of Range Women's Advocates, still serving 21 Minnesota communities. The Family Crisis Center and Range Women's Advocates were kitchen table enterprises, patched together over cups of good strong coffee to meet the immediate needs of women who lived next door or just down the road.

Starting a domestic violence program today is a different matter. There are precedents and training manuals and conferences and grants of public money to help you. These days you can start with an idea—to provide safety for women, to end violence in your community, to promote wellness in families—even if you're not personally acquainted with the woman next door, the one with the broken nose. Getting started is different now, but not necessarily easier. Faced with a battered woman, bleeding, in your own kitchen, you'd figure out pretty quickly what to do next. But beginning with an idea, a concept, a desire to help, a lot of energy, and a raft of good will—well, what exactly should you *do*?

To figure that out, you have to know your own community—the people, the institutions, the culture, the beliefs and aspirations. Keep in mind that small towns tend to be more homogeneous than cities. People in rural communities tend to think and act along parallel lines, to vote for the same party, to practice the same faith—especially if they share a common ethnic background, like the African-Americans of the Mississippi Delta, the Native Alaskans of Alakaket or Sitka, or the Slavs or Finns or Germans of the Iron Range. In a city, you're likely to meet all sorts of people with all sorts of beliefs, but in a rural community the limits of acceptable thought and behavior usually are narrower. And the minute you suggest the slightest change, you'll be seen as the outsider spouting outside ideas.

That's why it's your job first to get to know this community from the inside. How do people here feel about things in general and domestic violence in particular? What are they already doing about it? Who are the responsible individuals and agencies? How do they work and why do they work that way? Who's working together and who's not? And then the crucial questions for your program: What's needed *here*? What works?

Getting to know your community is no small job. Tootie Welker says that when the Sanders County Coalition for Families was getting underway, she spent the first full year driving around the county, meeting and talking to people, learning how they thought and how they did their jobs, getting them used to her, building trust, figuring out how to work together. Even if you're working in your own hometown, you'll find some people and agencies completely new to you. But in the end, if you've done this job right, you'll know the community—its operations, its relationships, its beliefs and values—better than some people who have lived there all their lives.

To be able to work effectively in the community, you also have to examine yourself and the limits of your learning. And when it comes to providing leadership in a community, Jennifer Gibson-Snyder offers an important reminder: "We may know a few things about violence and how it works and kind of, sort of, how to provide services for victims, but we don't know everything. And we don't know how it works in other people's communities... As an outsider organizing, I think that the first number one thing is to be humble."

The women who participated in the Praxis conversations unanimously agreed that a good organizer meets people "where they are." That is, the organizer identifies a common interest—What's needed *here*?—as a baseline, a starting point from which to go forward together. In the end, you want your program to be a good citizen. You want your work to be not just accepted but valued by the community and nurtured, supported, protected, honored. That's the goal. But the end is in the beginning—not in what you start, but in how you do it. The long process of getting to know your community and yourself is absolutely essential to launching a successful program. Wanting to help is not good enough. First you have to want to learn.

When you know your community inside out, you're ready to organize. That will be the subject of the next video.

Part 2 Questions

1. Jo Sullivan describes how Range Women's Advocates got started by helping one neighbor in need. How did your program get started? Did it also arise in response to immediate needs? How did the origins of your program shape its goals? And how do you think the origins will affect the way the program develops?
2. Ellen Pence notes that advocates are often seen as "outsiders," while Tootie Welker describes the work she did during her first year to win the trust of the community. How do you think your community views you and your program? What steps are you taking to establish trust and win their support? Do you have to approach different officials or agencies differently? Why? And how do you know?
3. Both Eleanor David and Mily Treviño-Sauceda describe the "institutions, agencies, law enforcement officials, the judicial system" and so on of the dominant white culture as completely unfamiliar with the cultural beliefs and practices of such minorities as Alaskan Natives and Latinos. "Total disconnect" are the words Mily Treviño-Sauceda uses to describe the situation. Do you see such a disconnect in your program or community (don't forget the gap between "the haves and the have-nots" that Katherine Conover mentioned earlier in Part 1)? If so, on which side of the divide are you and the people you're trying to help? Whose responsibility is it to try to bridge that gap? What are some specific things you could do that might help?



Part 3: How Did You Learn to Organize?



As an organizer, part of your job is to help people in your community come to understand domestic violence and to feel a common bond with abuse victims. Often people lucky enough to live violence free lives think that “victims” are people very different from themselves. They say, “I’d never put up with that.” Activist Ellen Pence sees herself as “someone

who tries to show people the connections” between themselves and abused women. When people understand and feel those connections, they’ll be much more likely to help battered women—and you.

Organizing, then, is a kind of translating. Forging relationships. Building bridges. Weaving webs. You can think of it as an extension of the hard work you’ve already done to get to know your community. It’s more of the same: meeting, talking, making connections, fostering trust. But now you’re putting your own program into effect.

Your first concern probably will be to provide safety and services for victims of domestic violence. There will be specific services—a hot line, transportation, safe home or shelter, support group, advocacy—to get up and running. Then you’ll have to think about all the community institutions and agencies that deal with domestic violence, and how to get them working together to do a better job. Here’s where what you’ve learned about your community comes into play and those chats with the sheriff and the county prosecutor begin to pay off.

And what about the community institutions and agencies you’ve identified that are not responding adequately to domestic violence or working to prevent it? Mily Treviño-Sauceda says, “What I call organizing is not just about bringing consciousness to those who need the help; it’s about bringing consciousness to those who should provide the help.” That consciousness, and some assistance from you, should stimulate those providers to get to work. As Jo Sullivan cautions in the video, don’t make the mistake of thinking you have to do all the work yourself. Instead, as an organizer, you want to provide those other agencies, institutions, and individuals an opportunity to do their fair share. Perhaps it’s time to identify leaders in the health care profession and bring them together to talk about the issue. Perhaps it’s time to get the clergy together. Perhaps it’s time for battered women’s advocates to meet with child protection workers. Perhaps it’s time to start working with the schools. Maybe you want to set up regular lunch meet-

ings, informal coffee hours, or some similar mechanism to bring together people from different agencies who should be talking to each other. Maybe you want to establish a task force or a team. There's no end of things you could do. But you'll know what to do—and what to do first—because you've learned what your community needs, and what's likely to work.

Just be careful *how* you do things. Unlike a big, impersonal city, a rural community is a fishbowl. What you do—and the way you do it—is noticed and sized up. Offenses given are remembered and not easily repaired. In a city you can find a person you'd like to work with in law enforcement or social services. In a rural community, you can't pick and choose. For the sake of the women you want to help, you need to get along.

Of course, you will make mistakes. You will put some people off. And you will try things that don't work. Every one of the highly experienced organizers and activists who joined the Praxis discussion has done so. But then what do you do? That's easy. You try again. You try something else.

Providing safety and services for battered women is only part of your job. Even more important is working for social change—though this goal means different things to different people. Some would say that you've created social change when law enforcement in your community gains a better understanding of domestic violence and works more effectively to help victims and hold offenders accountable. Others would say that outcome is only one small step in creating a more just, equitable, and violence free society. Consider Debbie Bresette's opinion that domestic violence work is ultimately about peace and about clearing away all those obstacles that stand in the way. Speaking of the work of the Family Crisis Center in Bastrop, Texas, she says: "That's why working toward ending oppression, working toward ending hatred and racism and poverty and injustice is so important to us." Some programs set aside a certain percentage of their time—certain hours or days of the week—to work for social change. Others try to build a social change component into every aspect of their work.

But are there enough hours in the day? And what if you, like Eleanor David, are the only advocate in your community? Isn't working for social change too big a task? As Tootie Welker points out in the video, if you only provide direct services, you're simply building job security for yourself—for without social change, there will be no end to the parade of battered women in need of help. Unless we somehow make the time to work for social change, Tootie Welker says, "We are never going to really root out what is causing this violence in our communities." You'll know you have truly succeeded as an organizer when you put yourself out of business.

Finally, think about organizing within your organization, among your own staff and volunteers. Clearly, you and your coworkers have to know what you're talking about if you are going to explain domestic violence to your community and advocate for victims.

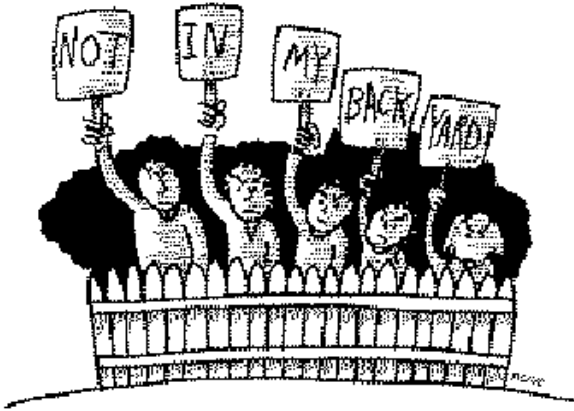
Yet today many paid advocates and volunteers enter this work with professional backgrounds rather than personal experience of domestic violence. Many know little about the extraordinary history of the Battered Women's Movement that first brought this issue out of the closet and into public concern. Their hearts are in the right place, but their heads contain some empty files. Think about regularly setting aside time for discussion of basic issues, as Jo Sullivan suggests. Think about reading the classic books in the field and discussing them together. Do your homework. Expand and refresh your knowledge. Then carry that knowledge out of the office into community education.

Part 3 Questions

1. The women in the video describe listening to the women they serve; meeting and talking with church women; talking with influential people at dinner parties; giving trainings jointly with police officers, nurses, or clergy; talking to people at bars, laundromats, supermarkets, and parties; having public meetings; meeting with community elders and leaders; and working with legislators. All of these are ways of organizing the community for safety and/or social change. What's the difference? And why is it important to organize on both fronts? What other specific organizing strategies have you tried or do you hope to try? Which of them are aimed at safety, and which are aimed at social change? What if you don't have enough time or personnel to do both?
2. Ellen Pence speaks of a "natural way of being an organizer" — when you identify so completely with others who've suffered an injury or injustice that you feel the injury or injustice has been done to you too. She says, "I never thought of myself as coming to work with battered women. It was always as a woman working on this issue of how women are held down." Why have you chosen to work on this issue? How do you see yourself in relation to battered women? In what ways is your motivation like — or different from — Ellen Pence's? Can you think of other motivations for being a community organizer on this issue?

3. Mily Treviño-Sauceda talks about the importance of sharing knowledge and leadership — “the importance of understanding that you are not the only one who has good ideas.” And Jo Sullivan talks about giving “the power of knowledge to other people” by involving them in your work. Tammy Young and Doris Lee talk about involving men and teenagers in their programs, while Eleanor David works with village elders and council members. Who do you hope to engage in your work? How would you go about doing this? Do you think there’s a danger in losing control of your program? What if you “let go” of the ball and nobody else picks it up?
4. Jo Sullivan sees a need for some internal organizing: setting up opportunities for program personnel to discuss issues fundamental to domestic violence work. Off the record she tells the story of a hard-working volunteer at Range Women’s Advocates who came up with the “great idea” of providing training for law enforcement personnel — something the organization had already been doing for 21 years. Do you think internal organizing is important? What provisions do you plan to make for staff and volunteer education and discussion of basic issues? What if everyone is too busy?

Part 4: Educating Your Community



Organizing and educating the community go hand in hand. If the community is uninformed or misinformed about domestic violence —if, as in so many communities, people think “it’s not a problem here” —organizing will be just that much more difficult. Why should people spend their precious time on something that’s “not really a problem” where they live? Why should they care about abuse victims who “probably brought their troubles on themselves”? Why should they bother with some-

thing that’s so unpleasant and so out-of-place in their nice town? What in the world does it have to do with them?

Part of your job is to turn those attitudes around. A good public awareness program will wake people up. It will offer them a broader and better definition of domestic violence, a greater understanding of its dynamics, and some idea of what they can do about it. It will create empathy for victims by helping people see the connections between battered women and themselves. It will promote a desire to act against domestic violence by showing the damage it does to the community and its values. And—critically important—it will let victims know that help is at hand.

Organizing and educating build upon one another. As people learn, many of them will want to do something to help. Growing community awareness will make your organizing easier, as people begin to make time for this “new” problem. Some people may even begin to organize themselves. As Katherine Conover says, a public awareness campaign “smokes out” people who will come forward with offers of help. When you organize meetings for newly aware people in your community —people from law enforcement or the helping professions who haven’t had much chance to get together before—they’ll be ready to talk and to get to work. Think about educating for prevention, too, and carry the education program into the schools.

As you organize your community, you’ll learn quickly how much—or how little—people in the various agencies and institutions know about domestic violence. If they aren’t well informed, they may be defensive. But if you’re lucky, you’ll find certain concerned and well-informed individuals—perhaps a member of the clergy, a lawyer, or an emergency room

nurse—who can become important resources for your educational program. Doris Lee of Our House found that law enforcement officers weren't about to take instruction from a service provider—and an outspoken woman at that—who seemed to want to tell them how to do their job. So Our House enlisted a police officer to deliver the same message to his peers, and the training was a success. “He said the same thing I said,” Doris Lee explains, “but he said it in a different way and they could hear it from him.” A smart organizer finds peer educators—cops, judges, nurses, doctors, clergy, social workers, ex-batterers, local celebrities—and relies on them to help bring their colleagues up to speed.

Almost everybody in rural areas turns to the local newspaper and radio station to keep up with events. And small town papers and radio stations are always looking for news. Tootie Welker says, “They love anything you give them.” Her group sends ads and articles that always include a message about social change. “Every ad and article,” she says, “has some kind of little piece of education to it, a little seed that we keep planting about how we could treat people, about how we could be different in this world.” Doris Lee reports, “We always contact the newspaper. We contact T.V. stations. We set up meetings and appointments and we invite the media to the meetings. Whenever we do something we always make sure we put it in the media, because that's where other people learn about it.” In a rural area, the local media can be your best educational platform.

The local media are also very important in getting the word out to the victims you want to serve. The victims, after all, are your most important target audience. If they don't know about your services, they can't use them. Most of the promotional items the women spoke about in the video—the buttons, cards, stickers, and fans—carry an anti-violence message, and more importantly they carry a phone number. There's a built in educational component in the best of these items—like the anti-violence T-shirts or the house-shaped donation boxes produced in design competitions by high school students. But every item also serves one basic purpose: getting the phone number out to victims. On pens and pencils, posters, notepads, baseball caps, billboards, and helium balloons at the county fair—that contact number should be everywhere. And to get it safely into the hands of women in danger, other people might be enlisted to help—like the doctor mentioned on the video who wrote the crisis number on the back of his own business card.

Educational activities and information should aim to reach every community—and every victim—in the area served. For many rural domestic violence programs, especially those that cover a lot of territory, that's a big challenge. It calls for creative thinking about outreach and careful recordkeeping to determine if the outreach programs are working. Smart organizers look for peer educators in every community, far and near. They find the places women normally go—the laundromat, a clinic, a library, a Wal-Mart, a church—places where women might feel safe to pick up information or to talk. Tammy Young reminds us in the video that there are “probably more women than we even realize” who, for

one reason or another, are cut off from the resources and support of the community. And we know that many batterers treat their victims like hostages, deliberately isolating from other people. No public awareness program will reach everyone, but every program has to try.

Knowledge is powerful. Educating people gives them the power to help others and to help themselves. Eleanor David reminded the group that education can be threatening to certain people who prefer to hold power over others. A batterer won't be pleased when his victim gains information that sets her on the path to independence. Similarly, professional social workers or domestic violence workers whose job is "helping" others may not be pleased when the "others" begin to help themselves. Eleanor David described a struggle for power and control between Alaskan Natives and non-Native representatives of the dominant culture; but that struggle can take place anywhere and anytime established power relationships begin to shift under the pressure of education. When people catch on, they see things differently, and they begin to act differently. It's as simple as that. The educating you do may not be universally welcomed in your community, but it can be a powerful force for good.

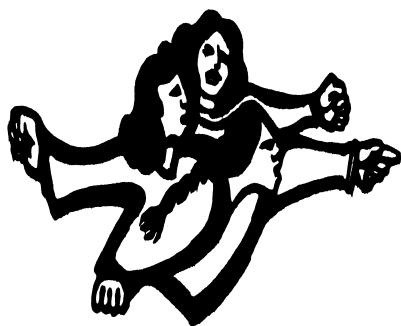


Part 4 Questions

1. Tootie Welker says the people of Sanders County, Montana, used to think that domestic violence happened only in other places. She reports that the Sanders County Coalition for Families had to expand the community's understanding of domestic violence and let them know it happened right there. How well do you think domestic violence is currently understood in your community? If local people were asked to define "domestic violence," what do you think they would say? Would that be an adequate definition? What is the actual incidence of domestic violence in your town or county, and do you think people are aware of those figures? If you were to start educating your community, what are some of the first things you'd want them to know?
2. Doris Lee speaks of the importance of all sorts of advertising in letting people know what services you have available. What steps will you take to make your services known to those in need? What form will the information take? Where and how will you distribute it? Could you enlist the help of other individuals or agencies who might be able to get information more safely to women in need? How would you go about doing that?
3. Noting that battered women often disclose abuse to a friend or a doctor rather than to a domestic violence program, Katharine Conover says: "So the whole community becomes the EMTs of domestic violence." If that's the case in your community, what individuals, groups, agencies, or institutions do you think you'll have to educate to make them responsible "EMTs"? Where would you start and why? What techniques would you use? What resources could you enlist to help with community education?
4. Tootie Welker says that every year the Sanders County Coalition for Families' crisis response team sets a focus for its educational activities—such as educating school personnel about the impact of domestic violence on children. Felecia Thomas talks a great deal about educating and working with the churches. Considering what you know about your own community, what educational focus would you set annually for the next five years and why?

5. During the video discussion the participants describe all sorts of projects and promotions they've used to educate their communities. But several women point out that what works in one community might not work in another (Katharine Conover's program puts stickers on Domino's pizza delivery boxes, for example; but Tootie Welker later lamented that there's no pizza delivery in her county). You certainly can't do everything. But to decide what to do in your own community, Jennifer Gibson-Snyder points out that "you need to know how to think it through." So how would you think it through? In planning a public awareness campaign, what aspects of your community do you have to think about? Of the projects or promotions mentioned in the video, or any others you can think of, what are some that would work well in your community? And what wouldn't work at all?

Part 5: Being Effective, Being Yourself



Tammy Young says that working on domestic violence is not just a job, but a way of life. This is especially true when you work in a rural community. In the first place, you have to know how to do every possible task. There are no specialists here, such as you might find on a large urban staff. And before long, everyone in the area knows who you are. You can't leave your work at the office. Wherever you go in public—grocery shopping, a party, a high school football game—someone may want to talk to you. Maybe it's an offer to volunteer or maybe just curiosity. Maybe it's a cry for help. Or some words of thanks. You don't want to cut anyone off, so

your work hours effectively extend around the clock.

Being so well known, you are also at risk. You may become the target for gossip or harassment or petty vandalism—or even a more threatening attack, as happened to Eleanor David. It's well known that batterers are most dangerous when they sense the victim slipping free of their control. Their rage may focus on anyone who offers the victim help. That's why it's important, as Jo Sullivan points out in the video, for staff members and volunteers to make safety plans for themselves as well as for the victims they serve. Doris Lee says that when she runs into certain people in her community, she doesn't turn her back. Working in this field you assume a certain amount of risk, but armed with street smarts and safety plans, you just go—as Debbie Bresette says—and “do what needs to be done.”

In a small rural community, your clients may also become known. People may spot them with you at your office or the courthouse or the emergency room, and people will talk. You can't guarantee your clients anonymity, but you can reassure them that you will keep their business confidential. That pledge may be hard on you, for it restricts your expression of feelings about your work. In a big city, you can talk freely about your job to your best friend or your family. In a small town, you can't.

It's that fishbowl again. You have to mind your manners, or as Debbie Bresette puts it, “set your ego aside.” But what about being yourself? Where is the line between good manners and manipulation? Between compromise and caving in? Between losing an ally and losing your self-respect? Ellen Pence confesses in the video that every action she regrets was done in anger, although she says she's done many other things in anger about which she feels just fine. This issue is worth examining because many people—especially women—have trouble with anger. Many bend over backwards to avoid expressing, or even feeling, anger; and many feel badly about themselves when they do.

As Tootie Welker suggests in the video, however, the real problem may be how you direct your anger. Venting anger at individuals may alienate them and leave you feeling disappointed in yourself, while getting angry at the system may fire you up to work harder. Trying to see things from the other person's point of view can ease anger with compassion, and compassion always gives you a bigger picture. Then, instead of either swallowing your anger or going up in smoke, you have a better chance to figure out the smart thing to do.

This is not to say that anger, confrontation and conflict are “bad” and must be avoided. Confrontation is a tactic, like any other in the organizer's toolbox; and it is sometimes very useful. And, as Tammy Young points out, conflict is probably inevitable in any work for social change. In any system, the people who hold power and privileges are unlikely to give them up without a struggle. Engaging in that struggle, thoughtfully, strategically, and courageously, is the organizer's job. But how you behave—the tactics you choose—takes on greater importance in a small community where everybody knows you and nobody forgets. As Ellen Pence points out, you are the one standing between the battered woman and the system.

When we work on behalf of domestic violence victims, many of us try—as we should—to make people understand abuse victims and feel a common bond with them (see Video 3). But sometimes we're overly afraid of offending people with the power to help—the sheriff, for example, or the director of social services. Uncomfortable or unfamiliar with our own potential power as organizers, we try instead to be “nice,” hoping that those with the power to help will be “nice” in turn to the victims we serve. Sometimes being nice gets us what we want. But sometimes it doesn't. Being nice, like being confrontational, is only one tactic in the organizer's toolbox.

As a practical matter, how do you know what tactics to use? Most of us are better at one approach than another. Tammy Young, for example, feels comfortable with conflict because she believes that standing up for her people is her cultural duty. Doris Lee also describes herself as a fighter. She's the person Our House is likely to send to handle a confrontation, while Felecia Thomas takes care of situations that require a gentler diplomacy. This division of labor, recognizing the individual temperaments and skills of staff people, works well for many organizations. But if you're running a program on your own, you may have to be more versatile. Either way, you're bound to spend time thinking and rethinking your tactics, and sometimes regretting choices you've made. That comes with the job of being an organizer. It's not easy, especially for domestic violence workers with the twofold job of serving victims and working for social change. Tootie Welker gets angry at injustice. Debbie Bresette envisions a peaceful world. Tammy Young remembers her ancestors and elders. Doris Lee tells herself, “This is not about me. It's about the victim, and the victim always comes first.” In your domestic violence work, your own core values will carry you through.

Part 5 Questions

1. During the video conversation, many of the women talk about how their domestic violence work has changed their lives. They all seem to agree with Tammy Young when she says that this work is not just a job but a way of life. Do you agree? How is your life changing as a result of doing this work? Is this what you expected? How do you feel about the changes? How are you handling them?
2. In a small town or rural area, it's hard to keep secrets. Yet we know that domestic violence victims seeking help must trust us to keep theirs. What steps can you take to ensure confidentiality for the victims you serve? In the video, the participants distinguish between anonymity, which you can't guarantee, and confidentiality, which you can. How would you explain that difference to women seeking your help? And why is it so important? Looking at "the other side" of "the confidentiality problem," Jennifer Gibson-Snyder says that sometimes there can be "real strength" in the fact that people know what's going on in the community. Can you think of instances when "the confidentiality problem" might work to your advantage?
3. Several participants in the video speak of being harassed or threatened and we know that some batterers pose a danger to others as well as to the victim. Do you think that your work puts you at risk? How do you feel about that? And what specific dangers do you see? Have you made safety plans? Do you think you should? What steps can you take to make yourself and your co-workers safe and comfortable in your work?
4. Many rural domestic violence programs are small. Consequently, staff members and volunteers have to fill in for each other and do whatever work needs to be done. How is your staff organized and trained? What reorganization or additional training does your staff need to be prepared for whatever comes along? Apart from being able to handle the work, what other advantages do you see in having a staff full of generalists?
5. In small rural communities, people know who you are, and they'll notice the way you do things. Consequently, all the women in the video have thought long and hard about their behavior and the tactics and strategies they use for accomplishing their goals. They are particularly concerned with the relationship between the emotions they feel and the behavior they act out. Ellen Pence, for example, expresses regret for some things she's done in anger, while Debbie Bresette regrets that she often has to "put a cork in it." What's your experience with anger? Are you happy with the way you handle it? Does it serve a useful purpose? How do you feel about confrontation and conflict? In deciding how to act in any

particular situation—say, for instance, a conflict with the sheriff—what sorts of things would you have to take into consideration? Doris Lee and Felecia Thomas of Our House talk about making the best use out of each of their personalities. If your organization assigned certain tasks on the basis of staff members' natural personality and skills, what role would you be assigned? Is that the role you want?

6. The participants talk a lot about anger, conflict and compassion. Where do you fall in the discussion? Did things that Tammy Young or Debbie Bresette or Ellen Pence said ring true for you? What role does it play in your own organizing?



From the Ground Up

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