

## **Best Practice Assessment of Criminal Justice System Responses to Domestic Violence**

### **Building a Team**

#### **Slide 1**

Welcome to this Praxis Webinar about the Best Practice Assessment Guides that help communities assess their 911 through Charging Responses to Domestic Violence. My name is Maren Woods. Our goal for this segment is to provide a starting point for putting together a team to engage in the best practice assessment process.

#### **Slide 2**

The domestic violence best practice assessment guides are a set of tools for a small, interdisciplinary group to review response to domestic violence-related cases in four key areas of criminal legal system intervention: 911, police patrol, investigation, and decisions related to charging.

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Key steps involved in the best practice assessment process include:

Step 1: Organizing and preparing for the process

Step 2: Mapping and analyzing case processing, and

Step 3: Developing findings and making recommendations.

#### **Slide 4**

This video will focus on building the team who will conduct a Best Practice Assessment. When a CCR or agency has decided it will conduct a Best Practice Assessment and determined the point of intervention it wants to examine, it's ready to decide who will be involved and who will organize and coordinate the process. It's ready to find a coordinator and a team.

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In many communities that have used the Best Practice Assessment, the coordinator has been someone from the community-based advocacy organization. Often this has been a legal advocate who has experience with the criminal legal system. When the assessment is led by non-governmental, community-based advocates, the team can more readily focus on victim safety and offender accountability. Community-based advocates are uniquely positioned to keep victims' experiences and needs central to the assessment. Without that anchor, it is far too easy for practitioners working in the criminal legal system to focus on the needs and efficiency of that system.

The coordinator may be someone working in the agency being analyzed, such as 911 or Law Enforcement. Gathering the agency's policies and files for review can be expedited when the coordinator is from that agency. This structure can also streamline the implementation of policy and practice changes recommended as a result of the assessment.

Where a more established coordinated community response group is initiating the Best Practice Assessment, the CCR Coordinator might fill this role.

Sometimes, the responsibilities of the coordinator are divided and shared between two or more members of the team.

The key is to find a coordinator able to provide leadership, structure, continuity, and management throughout the assessment process.

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The role of coordination begins well before the team itself is formed. The Coordinator

- Studies the Best Practice Assessment tools to become familiar with the process
- Works with policy makers, allies, and interested practitioners to explain and gather support for the assessment process.
- They secure the participation of practitioners and advocates who will serve as members of the assessment team.
- They determine how to access agency records, such as 911 calls or police reports.
- The coordinator is also the lead in assessing resources and funding for the assessment work.

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The coordinator also manages the assessment process overall, including:

- Proposing the structure and timeline for the process
- Convening, scheduling, & facilitating team meetings
- Managing the logistics of the entire assessment process, from securing meeting space to disseminating policies & case files for review
- The coordinator documents all discussions, themes, findings, recommendations...The coordinator's written record of the team's discussions and findings becomes a critical reference tool throughout the process.
- The coordinator also prepares findings & recommendations for team review
- And may present or co-present findings & recommendations to agency heads for approval and next steps

Organizing materials, scheduling, data analysis, and managing notes and records is a major part of this job. The coordinator is the mortar that holds the entire process together. The coordinator, in turn, needs a certain set of skills in order to guide the assessment through to completion: attention to detail and organization, experience with facilitating meetings and group process, and a deep knowledge of the criminal legal system's response to domestic violence.

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A primary responsibility of the coordinator is to recruit and establish the team that will conduct the assessment. Rather than relying on the limited perspective of a single person or department, the Best Practice Assessment team is a small set of experienced practitioners, made up of a core group that includes:

- The coordinator
- One or more community-based advocates to represent the voices and collective experiences of battered women
- One or more representatives of discipline(s) being analyzed
- Representatives of key disciplines that are closely linked to the agency that is the focus of the analysis

This combination of representation is designed to ensure that practitioners in specific systems, working alongside community based advocates, can pose the kinds of questions that explore how work practices are put together. Each representative brings a unique perspective to the team. We've already gone over the important role of the coordinator. Let's now look at the other team members and explore their role and contributions to the assessment process.

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We cannot overstate the critical role of the community-based advocates in a Best Practice Assessment of the criminal legal systems response to battering. This process, designed as a relatively quick review, does not provide for opportunities to hear directly from battered women about their experiences. An advocate will ask questions of the policies and case files that reflect concerns raised by victims about their safety and well-being, particularly victims from communities that are overrepresented and/or underserved in the criminal legal system response.

Advocates bring a unique perspective that can ask critical questions of longstanding practices that were not likely designed to account for the dynamics of battering.

Advocates also are in unique positions to anticipate the potential for unintended consequences of findings and recommendations made as a result of the Best Practice Assessment.

In short, we cannot do this work without the presence and perspectives of advocates.

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Of course, representatives of the discipline being assessed - 911, police patrol, police investigators, or prosecutors in charging – must be included. These representatives will be the most familiar with how their work is organized and the policies and protocols that apply at each particular point of intervention. Participation by experienced practitioners will ensure the thoroughness and accuracy of the findings and credibility in building recommendations and commitment to implementation activities within their home agency.

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Representatives from other departments or agencies help examine work practices in relation to how they impact what happens before or after each step under review. For example, an assessment focused on police patrol would try to include representation from 911 and prosecution. A prosecutor involved on such a team brings their perspective of what is missing and can make proposals for change that would improve the prosecution response. Interagency involvement also helps to pave the path for analysis of other points of intervention in the criminal legal system's response to battering. If a prosecutor has a positive experience with the assessment of police investigations, he or she may be more likely to be an ally for building support to analyze the prosecution response to battering.

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Here is a snapshot of suggested team configurations for two different assessment processes...the first is an assessment that is just looking at 911's response to domestic violence calls...this team would have one or more 911 call takers and/or dispatchers, one or more police patrol officers, one or more community based advocates, and of course, the coordinator, or whoever is fulfilling that role. In the second example, the focus of the assessment is both 911 and police patrol response to domestic violence. The team that analyzes both of these points of intervention would include one or more of each of the following: 911 call taker and/or dispatcher, patrol officers, possibly a police investigator, a prosecutor, a community-based advocate, and again, the coordinator.

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Regardless of the scope or team configuration, there are several qualities to look for in pulling together a team to implement the Best Practice Assessment. You will want to find team members who:

- have a deep, intimate knowledge of the system within which they work and are familiar with their agency's policies and practices. It is helpful for them to have enough experience that they are able to talk about what the "standard response" should look like in their agency and why.
- Team members should be open: to change, to looking beyond their individual agency or job, and open to others looking at their policies and practices.
- Team members should be committed to improving the outcomes for women & children
- The best team members have connections to decision-makers within their own agency who have the ability to create change.

Because the BPA is completed over a relatively short period of time, it is important to find team members who are able to:

- Prepare for meetings by reading materials provided by the coordinator
- Attend all scheduled meetings, to complete mapping and case processing activities.
- Complete all assignments and take notes on each policy, protocol, and case file they review.

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There are also traits you want to avoid as you're establishing a team. We've found that...

- Those who feel the need to justify or defend every action of their agencies are not helpful.
- Similarly, advocates or practitioners who use the Best Practice Assessment to criticize practitioners can miss the opportunity to do what the community assessment method does best—locate and change systemic organizational practices (not individuals) that are problematic.
- The BPA is a time intensive process and it may be a challenge to find team members who can commit the required time.
- Finally, especially in smaller communities, some practitioners are looking for ways to bring in local histories of interagency mistrust or negative power dynamics...this type of attitude or hidden agenda can completely derail and undermine the important work in a best practice assessment.

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One of the distinctive features of the Best Practice Assessment is that it avoids pointing fingers and blaming people or individual practitioners. It is designed for system practitioners and community advocates to work together to examine how the response is organized around concepts, policies, and practices; how different workers, and systems are linked together.

Among other group guidelines, including whatever agreements you have developed to ensure confidentiality, you will want to your team to agree to several guidelines for the duration of the assessment.

- First, the team should agree to openly share information, describe, explain, and teach without defensiveness. It is very important to a successful interagency process that team members can provide honest critique in a respectful way ... and can accept critique.
- Second, team members should show deep respect for information about real people's lives contained in case files and respect for the work it took to produce them
- And finally, teams need to stay focused on how workers are organized to talk about and act on cases, rather than on the individual actions and idiosyncrasies of individual workers. It is with this focus that we can identify and propose solutions for concrete and lasting change.

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In closing, the best practice assessment guides, found on the praxis website contain many of the tools you will need to pull your team together:

- Sample confidentiality agreements
- Sample team structures depending on the scope of your assessment
- Sample timelines and schedules
- The tools include a step-by-step guide for the entire process.

If your community is ready to pull together a team to conduct a best practice assessment, following the information included in this session will greatly contribute to the strength of the team and it's ability to

identify findings and create recommendations that will improve outcomes for victims of battering and their children.

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For customized assistance in pulling together your team, or for more information about the best practice assessment process, please contact Praxis:

Thank you for your time and attention.

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