

# Cultural Competency in California's Domestic Violence Field

Ensuring Access to DV Services for All Californians

*Executive Summary*

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## Executive Summary

This report outlines how a cultural competency framework could offer a more viable and useful approach to domestic violence (DV) service provision, advocacy and prevention efforts. Available data suggests that many women have experienced violence at the hands of an intimate partner and that certain groups of women may experience higher rates of such abuse. In particular, African Americans, American Indians, and, in some cases, Latinas and immigrants may experience higher rates of DV than White women. In spite of the sexual and physical abuse they may suffer, survivors from these groups may be less or unlikely to access available services. The information provided in this report identifies ways that organizations can continue to effectively engage and support those within their communities who are already seeking services, while also working to engage others who may be experiencing DV but may not be seeking support.

## Purpose and Methodology

In October 2010, RDP Consulting reviewed available literature and conducted confidential interviews with 16 domestic violence experts — direct service providers, coalition leaders, directors, consultants, funders and advocates — to explore culturally competent ways to end domestic violence. The goal of this research was to understand and highlight how direct services could be made more accessible and effective, especially for high-need, underserved populations. In the full report, a definition of culture and culturally competency is offered along with a brief review of the DV field's origins, followed by a summary of the field's major successes, a review of the known data on DV in California (specifically among certain demographic groups), and a discussion of why these communities may not access services — and how a cultural competency framework could help address issues of accessibility.

## Key Recommendations and Findings

We found that organizations that successfully provide culturally competent DV services use a *multi-level approach* to address needs at the community, organizational, and individual levels.

- At the *community* level, cultural competency involves understanding the social context in which services are being provided, for example, the social norms in a particular community around communicating about DV.
- For *organizations*, cultural competency involves a commitment to assessing, supporting, and evaluating an agency's ability to effectively meet the needs of the community in which it works. This may include identifying communities that may need services, but are not seeking them, and gathering data on the effectiveness of the services being provided.
- At the *individual* level, cultural competency requires being sensitive to and aware of the differences between the provider's and the client's cultures, so that any service provided is appropriate and more likely to be well received. This may include being aware of the power dynamics at play when a provider is first engaging with a client seeking services.
- For *practitioners*, field experts emphasized that it is absolutely critical that DV providers and advocates are "*negotiators*" of *cultures*. This will necessarily involve centering the client as expert on her situation, and asking her what she would like to happen, and how the agency can be helpful.

Since cultural competency is an ongoing endeavor, DV leaders and experts recommend the following three strategies to strengthen and broaden cultural competency practices.

***Supporting staff in a way that promotes and rewards self-reflection***

In culturally competent organizations, supervisors create safe environments where staff can and are expected to step back and examine their practices.

***Supporting survivors holistically — as long as they need help***

Once physically but temporarily safe, many women and their children are faced with rebuilding their lives. Rebuilding can require a holistic set of supports: mental health counseling, legal advocacy, job placement, vocational training, and transportation assistance, among others.

***Creating and supporting partnerships***

The complexity of culture and the challenges facing survivors lead many agencies to work collaboratively with others organizations and agencies to offer the breadth and intensity of support that survivors may need.

## Recommended Next Steps

For DV leaders and experts who were interviewed, cultural competency was viewed as a required component of effective outreach, prevention, advocacy and direct services for all survivors, especially for those with the greatest needs. To do their best work, organizations and their staff should be open to...

- Embracing cultural competency as a way of being — to integrate it into its core organizational DNA — so that all planning, approaches, services, staffing decisions, trainings, and assessment respond to the specific needs of their clients;
- Recognizing on a continuous and ongoing basis the various hurdles to accessing services or seeking help for high-need populations;
- Improving outreach to meet potential clients where they are, and to ensure they know that services are available and will be delivered in a culturally sensitive manner;
- Asking the questions that allow for new types of services — beyond shelters and criminal prosecution; and
- Providing a platform for DV organizations and non-DV partners to collaborate on a committed, sustained effort to offer culturally competent, relevant, and sensitive prevention, practice, and advocacy.

The research conducted as part of this report suggests that a greater understanding of and commitment to cultural competency will lead to improved services, best practices, and, ultimately, less domestic violence.