

**“Surviving Abuse: Hope for the Future”  
Domestic Violence Educational Series  
Field Test  
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**Setting:** The initial field test was conducted in the county jail of an affluent county near Chicago. The correctional facility houses 988 inmates with approximately 10 to 15% of the housing units allocated to female inmates. Most of the female inmates at the facility face charges stemming from substance use and/or abuse; few are considered violent offenders.

The field test was conducted under the auspices of a faith-based non-profit organization operating within the correctional facility. The NPO provides education, recovery and spiritual services to all inmates housed in the facility at no cost to the county. In 2009, 50,000 service hours were donated by the volunteer pool of the NPO in serving the needs of the inmate population.

**Proposal:** The initial plan was to provide a six-week educational series to women incarcerated in the facility. The class was limited to only 10 participants due to the security policy of the facility. Additionally, as a safety net for the participants, a counseling services program was designed and offered for approval. The purpose of the program was to provide qualified volunteer counselors to meet with participants and help them process difficult emotions or memories that the course triggered.

**Participants:** Of the ten individuals who were selected by the NPO to attend the class (selection criteria was based on first come, first served), 8 were present at the first session. Less than perfect attendance is not unusual at this facility since many factors can prevent an individual from attending a class (i.e. a visit from family or attorney, disciplinary actions, court hearing or not being called for class by the deputy). Also, the class met on a Saturday afternoon, which conflicted with visiting hours at the facility.

Three of the eight initial participants were African American, three were Caucasian and two were Hispanic. The youngest participant was 18; the oldest was 40. Seven of the eight were awaiting disposition of their cases; one was returned to the county jail from prison for another court hearing.

A major concern expressed by all participants during the initial session was that it did not feel safe to talk about domestic violence while incarcerated. This phenomenon is substantiated in the literature because the experience of incarceration triggers Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms for women who have a victimization history. After discussing ways to make the experience safer, the group concluded that not admitting new members would help make it a safer experience as well as allowing time at the end of the session for participants to regroup emotionally before returning to their units.

Attendance was quite consistent, given the unique challenges of a jail as opposed to a prison. Fifty percent of the initial participants were either released or transferred from the facility during the six weeks (three were released to the community; one was released to

the Illinois Department of Corrections). Of the four that were released, three attended at least three sessions and one was released after the first week. Three of the four that remained incarcerated attended the class at least three times (one attended all six sessions; two attended five sessions and one attended three sessions).

A Self-Efficacy Scale (see below) was administered during the first and final sessions. Three participants took the inventory twice and their scores indicate some movement towards greater self-efficacy. There was not as much movement on question E (control of own life), which is understandable considering their incarceration.

Degree of self-efficacy:

	<b>Week 1</b>	<b>Week 6</b>
Always	0	3
Often	3	5
Sometimes	10	7
Rarely	6	8
Never	5	2

**Curriculum Evaluation:** During the curriculum planning stage, domestic violence educational curriculum currently offered by a local agency to survivors of domestic violence in the community was examined and used as a reference point of what should be included for domestic violence education within a correctional setting. It was felt that the topics should be expanded to provide a more comprehensive approach to surviving abuse because of the extensive victimization histories of incarcerated women. There was more material than could be adequately covered in the given time allotment of each session (an hour and a half). However, much of the material was provided as handouts to the participants for future reference.

Minor revisions of the curriculum occurred throughout the implementation process. However, major revisions should not be undertaken until the course has been taught several more times. Course evaluations were completed by the three participants who were in the final session (one will be mailed to a participant who was returned to prison but her feedback is unavailable at this time). All were quite positive with very few changes suggested in the content of the course.

Participants provided the following comments on the course evaluation:

- “I would absolutely recommend this course to a friend. I already have told everyone on my pod to sign up! The fact that it is supportive and confidential and that it is a closed list and the same people every week make it a safe environment in which to talk.”
- “Yes I would recommend this program to every woman. There was information that was true eye-openers. Very helpful tools and information.”
- “Yes, I would recommend this program to other women. It is so informative as to identifying many of my issues as to why I am the “way I am” in adulthood! I am not

alone!! And I've never really known which direction to go to help myself, and this class has provided me with a wealth of information for a healthy future!!"

- "I found out that I am not alone that it is ok to go through the healing process and it is not my fault about the things that happened to me."
- "Yes, I would recommend this class because it has helped me to really identify with the abuse and I've learned healthy and safe ways to get out of an abusive situation."
- "It was so helpful to be able to talk and relate and hear that I am not alone."
- "The information was the most helpful because what I thought I knew wasn't helping me."

**Program Evaluation:** As originally conceptualized, the program would have consisted of an educational course with counseling services available to participants if needed. The counseling services program has yet to gain the final approval from the facility's legal department so was not implemented during the program. Several of the participants were members of another class that the facilitator teaches at the jail. As a result they were able to check in during the week. Participants urged the creation of a Support Group so that they could continue to process the abuse they have experienced as well as the triggers that incarceration evokes. Due to major staff transitions at the NPO, new classes have been suspended thus it is impossible to begin the Support Group at the pilot facility at this time.

Ideally, a domestic violence program within a correctional institution should consist of three legs: psychoeducation, counseling and/or mentoring for participants, and participation in a support group for those completing the psychoeducation class. Since neither the support group or counseling services is in place at the current time, the decision was made to suspend the domestic violence program until at least one of the other two legs can be added to the "stool."

**Implications for future use:** Within a few hours of notices being sent out about the new class, the NPO was inundated with requests to be added to the class list. In the future it is suggested that an additional session be added at the beginning of the program. This session would be used as an orientation to what the program involves and for preliminary screening to select participants who will be in the facility for the duration of the program. It seems unfair to reserve a seat for the six weeks when a person may only attend one session, as was the case in the pilot. Attendance probably will not be as much of an issue in a prison setting as it is in a jail because of the stability of a prison in comparison to a jail.

It is also recommended that the sessions be at least two hours in length. This was originally requested of the facility but approval was not provided for a longer class time. Participants expressed frustration that the group always ran out of time. Additionally there is a need to plan for a time of decompression so that participants can return to the living units safely with emotions under control,

Time to decompress is essential to the safety of inmates during this program. The facilitator added funny movie clips or stand-up comedy routines to the last ten minutes of the session to assist with this. It seemed to help the participants "zip up" their emotionally vulnerable self and prepare to return to the living units. Participants expressed concern

during the first session over the facility's suicide watch protocol and the possibility that if they were observed crying, they would be placed on suicide watch.

It also became very apparent during the pilot study that it is essential to have a safety net in place prior to initiating this program. Participants need options for care between sessions. The three-legged stool seems even more appropriate after completing the field test. A psycho educational class, a support group and counseling/mentoring are all essential elements of a holistic care plan for incarcerated survivors. It is also important to provide participants with a list of community agencies that can assist them when they are released to obtain ongoing support and crisis intervention, if needed.

### **Surviving Abuse<sup>1</sup> Self-Efficacy Scale**

#### **How often are the following statements true for you?**

For each statement in rows "A" through "H", please circle one number.

- | <b>1 = Never</b>  | <b>2 = Rarely</b> | <b>3 = Sometimes</b> | <b>4 = Often</b> | <b>5 = Always</b> |   |
|---|-------------------|----------------------|------------------|-------------------|---|
| A. I have someone I can turn to for helpful advice about a problem.             | 1                 | 2                    | 3                | 4                 | 5 |
| B. I have someone who would help me in times of trouble.                        | 1                 | 2                    | 3                | 4                 | 5 |
| C. I trust my ability to solve difficult problems.                              | 1                 | 2                    | 3                | 4                 | 5 |
| D. I am confident about the decisions that I make.                              | 1                 | 2                    | 3                | 4                 | 5 |
| E. I feel like I am in control of my own life.                                  | 1                 | 2                    | 3                | 4                 | 5 |
| F. I have ways to help myself when I feel troubled.                             | 1                 | 2                    | 3                | 4                 | 5 |
| G. I know the abuse was not my fault.   | 1                 | 2                    | 3                | 4                 | 5 |
| H. I am able to talk about my thoughts and feelings about the assault or abuse. | 1                 | 2                    | 3                | 4                 | 5 |

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<sup>1</sup> Family Shelter Service, 2010.