

Victim Contact in Abusive Partner Intervention

The Importance of
Collaboration

by Brittany Davis and Glen Wu

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Introduction

Working within a coordinated community response, abusive partner intervention programs (APIPs), also known as battering intervention programs, can play a significant role in holding abusive partners accountable and keeping victims and survivors safe. Though APIP providers often work solely with abusive partners, it is crucial to center survivor voices and victim safety in all aspects of the work. Safe victim contacts¹ or victim notification processes are one way to do this. APIP providers, in collaboration with in-house victim advocates or external advocate partners (i.e., victim service advocate from independent, non-profit agencies), use victim contact for a variety of victim-centered reasons such as educating victims about what their program entails including its limitations; providing updates on abusive partners' general progress, such as attendance and participation; offering an opportunity for victims to provide input in an initial assessment or to discuss any safety concerns the program or advocate has, thereby informing the subsequent intervention; informing victims of risk of harm to them or their children; and connecting victims to relevant supportive services including safety planning.² This document highlights programs with victim contact processes, addresses safety challenges inherent in this work, and offers considerations and best practices for safe and effective implementation.

Implementation in Different Jurisdictions

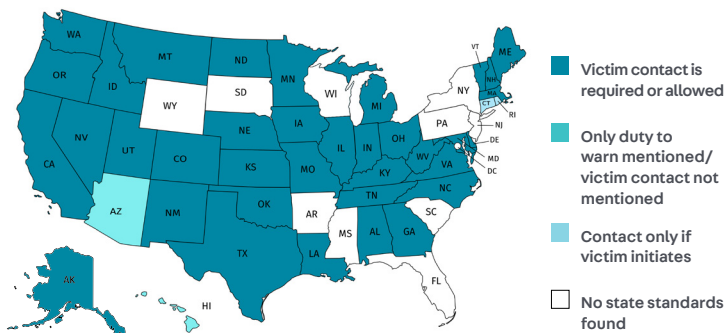
A 2008 study found that 93 percent of state standards for abusive partner intervention programs require some form of victim contact.³ Though jurisdictions vary in their approaches to victim contact, the major goals (e.g., notification of enrollment, compliance, completion; and duty to warn) and resources shared with victims (e.g., victim services, safety planning) are similar.⁴ Notably, advocates making contact with victims regarding AIPs use a victim-centered approach and focus on safety and victims' self-determination and needs.

« *The overarching goal is victim safety; if a victim says, 'I don't want to be a part of this,' we won't contact them again. It's all about victim-driven empowerment.* — Cheryl Davis, former program director, Colorado Domestic Violence Offender Management Board

State and Program Highlights

Highlighted below are examples of how states and individual programs have collaborated with victim advocates to create comprehensive and safe victim contact procedures.

Figure 1: Map of State Victim Contact Standards⁵



Colorado

The Domestic Violence Offender Management Board sets and reviews standards for the court-ordered treatment of domestic violence offenders; one such standard relates to victim contact and advocacy.⁶ All treatment providers are required to have an advocate working with their program. The advocate does outreach to the victim and serves on the multidisciplinary treatment team (MTT) representing victim perspectives, safety considerations, and education on victim issues in general. All members of the MTT must be consulted at certain points during treatment, such as initial placement

in treatment, changes to level of treatment, if there are safety issues, and prior to discharge. Victim contact is victim driven. If the victim does not want contact, it is not required. When victim contact occurs, advocates inform victims of the role of the treatment victim advocate and the purpose of offender treatment; discuss confidentiality limitations, safety concerns, and whether and how the victim wants to be contacted; provide psychoeducation about domestic violence; and offer supportive resources and referrals. While in programming and when safe, the treatment victim advocate may also inform victims of offenders' progress. All communication between the treatment victim advocate and the victim is confidential. The frequency of victim contact varies and depends on the victim's comfort (e.g., once a month, once every three months).

Georgia

The Georgia Commission on Family Violence's standards on family violence intervention programs also require victim contact.⁷ Victim contact is required when 1) a participant enters, completes, or is terminated from class; 2) a participant requests a leave of absence; 3) the program cancels class for any reason; and 4) there is a duty to warn situation. Below are two examples from programs in Georgia: first, a full-service intimate partner violence agency with services for victims, children, and abusive partners; and second, an abusive partner intervention provider partnering with external victim liaisons from a local victim services agency.

- **Caminar Latino** is a culturally-specific provider that offers holistic services for families impacted by violence,

including separate services for victims, their children, and abusive partners. Advocates who work in Caminar Latino's victim services arm, contact victims to provide details about the abusive partner intervention program, inform victims of the process to report future violence and harmful behavior, set expectations for the program so victims do not have false hope regarding behavior change, and outline Caminar Latino's supportive services for victims and children.⁸ Throughout the program, victim advocates also provide general updates on the abusive partner's attendance and progress. Victim advocates always check in with victims before submitting progress reports to the court to see if the victim would like anything about the abusive partner's behavior to be included in the report. Aside from that, contact is guided by victims; some want frequent contact and others do not want any. Victims are entitled to these check-ins even if they do not enroll in victim services at Caminar Latino. With victim permission and abiding by confidentiality agreements, victim advocates and abusive partner intervention group facilitators share updates during weekly team meetings, which enables staff to have a full picture of what is happening in the relationship and proactively address safety concerns. This coordination ensures that staff meet duty to warn obligations and that group facilitators can address issues with participants in program in a broad manner, so as not to single out any one abusive partner.

- **Men Stopping Violence (MSV)**, another family violence intervention programs program, partners with the Women's Resource Center to End Domestic Violence

(WRCDV). Group facilitators communicate closely with Women’s Resource Center advocates, who serve as victim liaisons for all victims connected to the men in MSV’s classes, including victims staying in the Resource Center’s safe house or using their supervision exchange center. MSV compensates the Resource Center for this work. Initially, victim liaisons make “cold calls” to all of the victims. They provide them with updates regarding the progress of their partners in program and offer a space for victims to confidentially express any concerns or ask questions about the abusive partner intervention program. The Women’s Resource Center also operates a 24/7 hotline and offers supportive services on-site for victims. When MSV facilitators are concerned for a victim’s safety, they bring their concerns to the victim liaison’s attention, who can then raise the issue with the victim and make an appropriate safety plan. On the other side, victim liaisons can relay safety and behavior issues that the victim wants to share with MSV facilitators, who can then broadly address those issues during class, when appropriate and without revealing any confidential information. Aside from the required victim contacts, MSV facilitators often check in with victim liaisons before their mid-term or final reviews to gain additional perspective. The total frequency depends on the severity of the case (i.e., if any safety concerns arise throughout the program). Victim liaisons make a minimum of two attempts when reaching out to victims, but may attempt to make more contacts with the victims depending on the severity of the case. Notably, the victim contact process in Georgia was originated with MSV and the Women’s Resource Center and was later adopted as a state standard.

Massachusetts

Similar to other organizations, consenting victims are contacted periodically throughout an abusive partner's time in the **Emerge Program**. At the onset of the victim contact process, partner contact coordinators, who are trained advocates who work for Emerge, conduct a structured interview with victims to establish a connection and gather information for the program. This approximately two-hour interview covers topics such as the history of abusive, controlling, or violent behavior; child and parenting information; compliance with court orders or child welfare plans; alcohol and other drug use; mental health issues and history of prior counseling; the victim's future wishes regarding the relationship and the abusive partner's access to their children; as well as any ongoing concerns or issues from the victim that should be addressed with the partner in group. Advocates also use this initial contact as an opportunity to validate the victim's experiences, share the program's philosophy that violence is unacceptable and solely the abusive partner's responsibility, discuss safety planning, provide information for supportive services, and inform the victim that they can reach out with questions about the program or their partner's progress at any time. They also send victims a pamphlet entitled "What You Should Know About Your Abusive Partner" that includes common questions such as "can he really change" and "what happens at Emerge?" Partner contact coordinators provide a summary of this information to group facilitators, who can use this background knowledge to assess the abusive partner's honesty in group and to form specific follow up questions. After this initial victim contact, Emerge's partner contact coordinator maintains contacts with the victim and

contacts them every eight to ten weeks at a minimum, if the victim desires. They often ask specific questions from the facilitators to provide more insight about specific behaviors (e.g., parenting issues). They also inform victims about Emerge’s monthly participant progress reports, which victims are entitled to receive and discuss with the program. Advocates contact victims immediately if there is an explicit threat to harm them or their children. Within 10 days of program termination or completion, the victim advocate sends a letter to inform the victim.

« *I find that running an abusive partner intervention program without victim contact is like operating in the dark. Those who don't do it are often overly optimistic about their participants, but that's not a valid assumption. Someone can be a great group member and still abuse their partner. We can't just rely on participants' self-reports and our own observations, so having victim input is crucial. Additionally, providing victims with updates about their partner's progress is important as it enables them to make informed decisions about their relationship and children. I find that partners are very interested and appreciative of that information as they weigh their options.* — David Adams, Emerge

Caring Dads (Multiple Jurisdictions)

Caring Dads is a group intervention program for men who have abused, neglected, or exposed their children to domestic violence.⁹ Though the program uses similar elements to abusive partner intervention work, Caring Dads focuses on fathering, specifically child-centered fathering after violence. Mother contact advocates, usually from a partner domestic violence service agency, are similar to victim contact advocates. The main goal of Caring Dads is to keep mothers and children safe, which is why the program requires reaching out to mothers. Mother contact helps to empower mothers by providing validation and support, realistic information about the Caring Dads program and possible outcomes, and referrals for useful resources. Mother contact advocates encourage and support mother's autonomy to make informed decisions about her life and inform mothers that they should continue to make their own observations about their co-parent's behaviors and trust their experience on if the program is increasing safety for her and her children. As a holistic program, offering mothers support in this way is helpful for addressing all aspects of the co-parenting relationship. Mother contact calls are made voluntary for the mothers and they can decline. For consenting mothers, calls are made weekly and are confidential. There is an accredited training process for organizations implementing the Caring Dads curriculum to ensure fidelity to the model and ongoing support. Typically, after an organization is trained on the curriculum and identifies who or what partner organization will perform mother contact duties, the mother contact workers receives separate training and resources from the Caring Dads training team.

Safety Considerations for Effective Implementation

Victim contact by abusive partner intervention programs is one way for programs to be victim-centered—ensuring that victims feel supported and empowered, and understand how abusive partner intervention programming works. At the same time, it can pose safety challenges, especially if the victim lives with their abusive partner or shares information about abusive behaviors. Victims may not want to be contacted, feeling that is either unsafe or an invasion of privacy. Other victims may have moved on and don't want to be involved in the participant's programming. Abusive partner intervention providers and their victim advocate/liaisons partners should collaborate to create policies and procedures that actively work to decrease risk of both future harm and lethality.¹⁰ Below are some strategies for programs and victim advocates to consider when implementing victim contact.

Abusive Partner Intervention

Program Providers

- Cultivate strong partnerships and a referral protocol with one or several local domestic violence victim service/advocacy organizations to ensure that victims have access to culturally responsive, trauma-informed advocacy and support services. These partners can provide perspectives on victims that program providers do not have.

- In collaboration with victim advocacy partners, designate specific staff to conduct victim contacts. These staff members can work for the APIP or an external victim advocacy organization.¹¹ They should have experience working in victim services and be trained on a variety of topics, including the dynamics of intimate partner violence, trauma-informed care, safety planning, risk and lethality assessment, and victim rights.
- To better equip external advocates making victim contact calls, programs can provide information about living arrangements and any other pertinent information.
- Invite local domestic violence victim service providers and victim advocate/liaisons to participate in cross-training and/or observe and offer feedback on your programming.
- Inform program participants that their ex-partner and/or current partner will be contacted. This can be done through a release if required by your state or program.¹²
- Keep written or electronic records of victim contacts in a secure, locked place. They should never be in a client's file.
- Never share information received from the victim directly to anyone, especially the abusive partner, without express permission from the victim. Always help the victim think through possible consequences or repercussions for sharing information.

- If a victim wants their information shared in group or directly with an abusive partner:
 - It is best to never directly state that the information came from a victim and to keep the information as general as possible.
 - Process the information you'd like to address in group with a victim advocate (and/or your multidisciplinary team) first who may help you see safety concerns and can help you brainstorm approaches that do not identify the victim as well as other possible ways to address the issue. There is likely other evidence of the problem that the provider or other stakeholders, such as probation, can use to address the issue (e.g., if there are complaints of substance use, do a random UA if the program or probation utilizes those).
 - Give the participant an opportunity to bring the information in on their own (i.e., through group check-ins or other conversations) and encourage participant self-disclosure.
 - Ask the whole group the question or make general statements about an issue (i.e., if one participant is struggling with jealousy and stalking, many might be, so open the question to the whole group to avoid singling anyone out).
 - Refer to hypothetical situations and change the details from the actual case or create a case scenario to discuss.

- Use the self-disclosures of other participants to go deeper on particular issues
 - Identify and use the classroom tools at your disposal (e.g., if homework is submitted early, use that to strategize about how to incorporate information about the victim contact)
 - Keep information in perspective—sometimes it is not good timing to address something immediately in class. Trust the group process and know that it is okay to spread this information out over time.
 - Be sure to have the advocate reconnect with the victim, safely, to let her/him/them know how the concern will be handled with the abusive partner and assure her/him/them that in no way will they be revealed as providing any information.
- In progress reports, use language that indicates that commentary about the abusive partner’s behavior comes from observation and not the victim, unless the victim has specifically requested to add the information and a safety plan is developed. In these cases, it is best to have a written release from the victim.
- « *Sometimes we take a long-term perspective. Facilitators want to address what they learn immediately, but many times, we have to encourage them to trust the class process. If the student doesn’t self-disclose and there isn’t a good content option, then we keep in mind that we’re engaged in a multi-*

week process. There are multiple opportunities to address the issue, more opportunities to talk with the advocate, and opportunities to strategize with co-facilitators and colleagues. A partner or past partner being connected to an advocate, in our opinion, increases safety much more than our attempt to effectively hold a man accountable. This perspective prevents us from pushing too hard and potentially jeopardizing victim safety. — Lee Giordano, director of training, Men Stopping Violence

Victim Contact Advocates/Liaisons

While victim advocates are trained to conduct safe and comprehensive contact calls with domestic violence victims seeking assistance, these practice tips are specifically for victim contact advocates or liaisons reaching out to victims for the purpose of discussing abusive partner intervention programming and may require these additional considerations.

- Encourage patience. Be mindful that the abusive partner may be in the room when you make victim contact calls, especially if you rely on information provided by the abusive partner during intake or old police reports.
- Always prioritize victim safety in all choices and decisions. Assess victims' tone and ask if it is safe to talk and what times work best for victim contact calls. Consider making victim contact calls during program time to increase the likelihood that their partner is not home, but consider that they might have missed that particular group.

- Similarly, ask victims if it is okay to leave messages or mail documents. Only leave careful messages if the victim does not pick up; do not disclose sensitive information that can be used to harm them and consider using discrete packaging if mailing documents.
- Explain and respect confidentiality so victims can make informed decisions about what they share.
- Do not push victims to give you information; let them lead the process. Give them the freedom to choose their level of involvement and work collaboratively with them.
- Validate their experiences and provide information about domestic violence.
- To avoid giving victims false hope, inform victims that participation in and completion of the program does not guarantee changed behavior.
- Manage expectations about what the court system can and cannot do.
- Take extra precautions before asking questions about the abusive partner's behavior.
- Help victims plan for their safety and remember that safety planning is an ongoing process.
- Share information about relevant supportive services (e.g., local domestic violence organization) and coordinate warm handoffs for long-term support.

- If you believe the participant in your abusive partner intervention program is the victim in the relationship and contacting their partner may cause harm, consider only contacting the partner once to provide resources only.

Conclusion

The victim contact process can be a useful tool for abusive partner intervention program providers to ensure survivors' voices are included in the work with abusive partners. It can provide facilitators with a more holistic picture of the abusive partner's behavior and can help increase accountability in the classroom. At its core, however, victim contact should be a victim-driven process and should prioritize victim safety at all times. By applying the aforementioned safety considerations and working closely with your local victim services and culturally-specific advocacy providers, you can develop a victim contact protocol that meets the needs of your community.

Endnotes

1. This article uses the term victim contact because that is the most common terminology in state standards and programs across the country.
2. Supportive services may include crisis intervention, emotional support, resources and referrals, information on legal rights, support navigating systems such as the legal system, and safety planning (i.e., creating an individualized plan with victims to think about ways to stay safe(r) in their current circumstances. It is an ongoing process).
3. <https://www.domesticviolenceintervention.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/MaiuroEberle2008.pdf>
4. Id.
5. Information current as of May 2020. Note that states marked as “no state standards found” either have no official state standards or standards that were not easily accessible. For example, Florida’s statutes have some general guidance around programming, but there are no official standards or a monitoring body.
6. Colorado DVOMB Standards for Treatment with Court Ordered Domestic Violence Offenders, pg. 59. <http://cdpsdocs.state.co.us/dvomb/Standards/standards18.pdf>
7. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1BDE3wjg9nBBDo-DyzAuTnTEgQm-qdpZPSF4N5jm8VIU/edit>
8. If there is a temporary protective order in place, victims/survivors are prioritized for services and abusive partners are referred elsewhere.
9. Caring Dads, Ontario, Canada. <https://www.caringdads.org/> This organization created a curriculum that is used across the world and focuses specifically on fathers and families. Fathers do not need to be living at home with the victim in order to participate in this program, but they must have contact with at least one of their children.
10. Many programs may use validated domestic violence risk assessments as part of their comprehensive intake process or rely on information on risk from other stakeholders, such as the court or probation. Victim advocates

may use a lethality assessment when working with victim/survivors. It is important for programs to understand the research behind domestic violence specific risk and lethality, know what information is gathered by their community stakeholders and create policies for safely sharing information to ensure victim safety. For additional information on domestic violence risk and lethality, see the Center's national clearinghouse on abusive partner intervention.

11. It is best practice for victim advocacy partner agencies to be compensated for their work supporting the APIP.
12. If a participant does not agree to this, many programs will not allow a participant to enroll. Importantly, do not force a participant to provide victim contact information, especially if they have a temporary restraining order or does not have the information. If a victim/survivor is in hiding, this can give them an excuse to find them. Try alternate means of finding former/current partners.

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