Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

https://www.vera.org/blog/checking-our-own-pulse-why-we-must-not-ignore-stress-and-trauma-inherent-in-victim-centered-work

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The recent murder ofLara Sobel,an employee of the Vermont Department for Children and Families,who was killed by a parent who had lost custody of her child, reminds us of the inherent risk associated with contentious custody battles. Unfortunately, fatal encounters involving estranged parents have occurred inMaryland,New York,Washington State, and other regions throughout the country. Such traumatic events not only affect the families involved but also service respondersthose helpers who may also experience depression and anxiety as a result of these tragic outcomes.

As a former foster care worker for Baltimore City Department of Social Services in the late 1990s, I observed firsthand the animosity that indeterminate separation from children can surface in parents. At times, I also experienced stress as a result of working directly with families in conflict. Today, as a national technical assistance provider who supports supervised visitation and safe exchange center service providers nationwide, it is clear to me that job-related stress persists for those supporting families with a history of domestic violence. Conflicts involving child custody and domestic violence transcend race, culture, and economic class and require justice advocates charged to help these families to consider meaningful strategies to address both these conflicts and the mental health effects they can have on staff.

TheU.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women (OVW)created theSafe Havens grant program(now under theJustice for Families grant) to assist communities in the development of supervised visitation centers that are operated based onguiding principlesthat promote a humanistic philosophy of treating all persons with respect and safety. It also created security protocols aimed at reducing the risk of future harm for families accessing services. These centers afford physical, visual, and auditory separation between parents and are a safer alternative to visitation exchanges otherwise occurring in unsupervised environments that lack security personnel, such as convenience store parking lots and the homes of relatives.

Despite the relative safety that supervised visitation settings offer, however, staff still operate in the midst of a storm. At any moment, violence may resurface during a visitation or exchangea reality that staff face on a daily basis. The constant balancing of the safety and interests of the victimized parent, children, and abusive parentall of whom may be indifferent towards staff or refuse to adhere to center guidelinescan make the job very difficult for those staff persons and volunteers who are there to help. They must constantly monitor families, particularly the parent who has a history of violence, and work to develop a healthy rapport over time with them as a strategy to maintain safety. Staff may also put their wellness second, which can lead to burnout on the job and in their own personal lives; I know from my own professional experience that taking care of clients can be distracting from prioritizing personal self-care. Thus, stress and anxiety levels of staff should be routinely assessed.

According to one staff member at a supervised visitation program, [The work] can be [stressful], depending on the situation the family is dealing with, the extent of the familys trauma, and the attitudes of each parent and child towards the visitation or exchange process. This perspective was also echoed in a recent practitioner questionnaire administered by VerasCenter on Victimization and Safetyand theSupervised Visitation Network (SVN)to a diverse group of supervised visitation and safe exchange providers throughout the United States. Respondents also shared that, in addition to administrative duties, they must often intervene in visits due to critical incidentsviolent or potentially dangerous encountersor a parents actions, such as asking questions concerning the other parents whereabouts, which can put him or her in potential danger.

Its important to note that visitation and exchange centers are in a unique position to provide services to all family members during the same time frame and support all parties in having a safe and positive visitation experience. Yet serving the entire family can also be overwhelming if the center leadership and staff fail to check in with each other routinely to assess the effect that the daily challenges might have on their own well-being.

I applaud the U.S. Department of Justices efforts, particularly OVW, in acknowledging the challenges that such work presents andidentifying vital resourcessuch as trauma-informed care and self-care resources for victim services providersfor organizations that provide victim-centered services. Its important to investigate the resources and strategies that address burnout and secondary trauma, such as creating a safe space to conduct conversations specific to staff health and wellness; establishing routine check-ins and following up with staff to assess their well-being; and tapping into local resources specific to wellness to address individual need. We can best support families in conflict by making sure we also take care of ourselves in the process.

This blog has beencross-postedon the Supervised Visitation Network website.

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