

The ongoing resources subcommittee recently wrote a report about the experience of women going through the Violence Against Women Act self-petition process. Below is the executive summary and the final recommendations. If you would like a full copy of the report, please contact Montserrat Caballero, Pima County Taskforce Coordinator at 520-434-0195 or mcaballero@arizonaschildren.org.

Executive Summary

Background: Domestic and sexual violence is a major threat to the health and safety of women in the U.S., regardless of ethnicity, economic status, or country of origin. For women without legal immigration status in the U.S these obstacles are exacerbated by the fact that they may be isolated in a foreign country, in constant fear of deportation, and feel at the mercy of their spouse to gain legal status.

Purpose: This participatory action project documents the experiences of women who have filed VAWA self-petitions in two communities on the U.S.-Mexico border. The project investigated personal and systemic barriers to the VAWA process through twenty-one interviews with Mexican immigrant women living in two border counties. It is hoped that the results of this project will contribute to the efforts of service providers and policy makers in considering how to assure the safety of this vulnerable population.

Results:

In the VAWA (Violence Against Women Act) Process:

- ❖ Women often find out about VAWA through an informal network of family and friends. Community presentations by trusted community agencies are also a source of information.
- ❖ Women decide to apply for VAWA to escape abuse and gain independence from their spouse, to be able to work and support children, and to create security and stability for their children.
- ❖ Victim advocates, legal services, and school services have all helped women in the VAWA process by providing information, counseling, legal advice, assistance with paperwork, financial assistance, and help with problem solving. Collaboration between legal services and victims advocates facilitated their ability to respond to client needs.
- ❖ Qualities of providers that helped participants through the VAWA process include their professional experience and expertise as well as personal characteristics such as being humane, respectful, empowering, caring, and trustworthy.
- ❖ Major barriers in the VAWA process include having to give written testimony about the abuse resulting in "reliving the experience", having to recount the abuse to people they do not know or who are not sympathetic, emotional trauma because of the abuse, confusion about the process and what will happen when, the amount of paperwork required to document eligibility, and aspects of immigration law that does not allow them to include their children in the self petition or let them travel to see their family.
- ❖ During the application process, women's anxiety was increased because of ongoing trauma and fear of abuser or fear that the abuser would find out, concern about the future of their children or being separated from them, waiting times related to stages of the application process and fear that they would not be approved, and basic survival issues such as waiting for the work permit, finding a job, or qualifying for services.

The Future

- ❖ VAWA was a transformational experience for women who had been in an abusive relationship.
- ❖ Women regained a sense of personal freedom.
- ❖ Women hoped to be able to provide for themselves and their children and be better mothers
- ❖ Women hoped to be able to fulfill their career dreams, return to school, help others, and give something back to the community.
- ❖ Women hoped to be able to provide more opportunities for their children.

Recommendations

- ❖ For Providers
 - ◆ Ensure that victims understand VAWA and related issues; providers may find that they need to repeat information many times due to the emotional state of clients.
 - ◆ Provide emotional and tangible support beyond the VAWA application process. Interviewees benefited greatly from assistance in problem solving around issues related to family, finances, health, employment, and education.
 - ◆ Rely upon the informal networks of immigrant women to create public awareness of domestic and sexual violence and opportunities afforded under VAWA. Community talks and presentations at schools and Head Starts were frequently cited as sources of information.
 - ◆ Ensure that all staff is trained generally on VAWA and immigration rights, as well as how to respond to clients in a culturally competent therapeutic manner.
- ❖ For Research:
 - ◆ Future research should focus on the understanding the impact of racism on intimate partner violence and on the ability of immigrant women to access and utilize resources and services designed to help them end the violence.
 - ◆ Additional research in understanding the impact of family could be beneficial in helping agencies build awareness in the community at large so that families do not become an instrument of oppression for women in violent relationships.

- ❖ For Policy:
 - ◆ Establish mandatory VAWA training for local law enforcement agencies and the border patrol. Create official protocol for the identification and treatment of potential victims.
 - ◆ Reduce the financial burden on VAWA applicants by creating a 90-day time frame for adjudication of VAWA petitions and approval of work permits. A temporary work permit could be provided in those cases that cannot be adjudicated within 90 days.