
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN MERCER COUNTY: INTER-AGENCY COLLABORATION TO SUPPORT LATIN AMERICAN IMMIGRANTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Latin American immigrants face heightened vulnerability to domestic violence due to gendered norms that perpetuate violence, cultural expectations about marriage, and the social, linguistic, and legal precarity of immigrant status. Going into the expected political battle over the 2018 reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, advocates face potential efforts to discontinue immigration protections for survivors (already seen in 2011), as well as an impact on funding for organizations that serve survivors. In combination with the current wave of anti-immigrant sentiment and policies, the stakes for immigrant survivors of domestic violence are high.

How can Womanspace and its partners adapt the referral process to better provide services to Latin American immigrants to ensure that this population receives support at a local level? Through semi-structured interviews with staff members from community organizations and agencies (Arm in Arm, Trenton Area Soup Kitchen, Latin American Legal Defense and Education Fund, Children's Home Society, Gente y Cuentos, and Princeton Human Services Commission – Immigration Committee), I analyze the current state of inter-agency referral between social service organizations in Mercer County that serve Latin American immigrants. Based on the findings detailed below, I propose **establishing a peer resource program, developing partnerships with arts-based resources, and increasing accessibility to Latin American immigrants through transportation, outreach to the loved ones of undocumented immigrants, and adjustments to referrals.**

"There is a lot of hesitation, even to come to LALDEF. Let's say if they're undocumented, the fear is just so inside their brains. They're just so afraid of seeking anything that to them is public, because they don't really know the concept of a nonprofit; they think [...] they must have some connection with the government. They just think, 'Are they gonna get my information?'"

– Latin American Legal Defense and Education Fund employee

FINDINGS

Organizations already utilize other organizations to expand the range of their services, but inter-agency collaboration could be tightened and streamlined, specifically regarding providing information and communicating trust to clients in a manner that reflects their cultural framework.

Recognizing abusive behavior, **identifying** trusted confidantes at nonprofit organizations, and **considering options** for services are crucial moments that determine how and whether survivors seek help in abusive situations. Latin American immigrants often disclose their experiences with intimate partner violence in the context of **casual conversations with trusted staff members** or when consulting with a staff member about another issue (for example, securing housing).

The **main barriers to accessing services** at Womanspace following a referral are: immigration status, language ability, transportation and financial concerns, stigma, distrust of resources, and lack of knowledge.

Immigration status impacts undocumented immigrants' sense of security interacting with new organizations for fear of deportation. In many cases, abusive partners hold a more privileged immigration status than their victims, which sets up an unequal power dynamic. This trend remains true for clients at the organizations interviewed. Limited **proficiency in English** hinders many immigrants' ability to interact with staff members, especially at organizations without many bilingual staff members.

Staff members describe pervasive **financial concerns** among their clients. Latin American survivors may face poverty, exploitative wages, medical costs from injuries, childcare costs, or inability to work due to gendered family roles or trauma. During referrals, survivors often ask about the affordability of Womanspace's services. **Transportation** was also a major barrier. Latin American immigrants in abusive situations may not have a reliable means of transportation to and from services or may not be able to evade a partner's monitoring.

Fear of victim-blaming and **social stigma** around abuse prevent many Latin American immigrants from seeking resources. One staff member observed that clients "**don't want to be identified as the person going to Womanspace.**" Despite staff members' trust in Womanspace, **transferring trust** to clients appears to be especially difficult for Latin American survivors, who may not be ready to seek additional support or may not believe that an unfamiliar organization would fit their cultural needs. Privacy is one of the main concerns voiced during referrals. Additionally, Latin American immigrant survivors, especially those who were undocumented, often lacked **knowledge** about therapeutic, legal, and other resources available to them.

Arts-based resources used by several organizations (for example, the literature discussion groups at Gente y Cuentos and Trenton Area Soup Kitchen's art group) address the cultural and emotional needs of survivors and their communities. These initiatives promote self-expression, healing, and agency.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Drawing from prior research on Latin American survivors' interactions with social services, as well as comments from my interviews with staff members at partner organizations, I propose several adjustments to Womanspace's existing programming to increase Latin American immigrant survivors' comfort with accessing services.

Peer educator and accompaniment program

Womanspace already provides training to volunteers who support survivors. Recognizing that Latin American immigrants are more likely to seek help from friends or family, implementing a peer educator and accompaniment program with an **emphasis on equipping people within survivors' social networks with the knowledge and resources to support them** would address several barriers discussed during interviews:

- ❖ This approach improves outreach through informal networks by **involving community members** in spreading information about available resources.
- ❖ Learning and receiving support from survivors with similar experiences could help **reduce stigma** and **alleviate doubts** about the cultural relevance of advocates at Womanspace.
- ❖ This program could provide long-term clients or survivors who are no longer experiencing abusive situations with **an opportunity to share their experiences** with peers in similar situations, giving support to others using the expertise they have gained through their lived experiences.
- ❖ Peer educators could help Latin American communities communicate feedback to Womanspace through **trusted intermediaries**.

Womanspace could recruit participants from its own clients as well as through partner organizations. The existing, 80-hour trainings for Womanspace's existing volunteer programs (Domestic Violence Victim Response Team and Sexual Assault Support Services Advocates) could be adapted to suit the needs of this program.

Partnerships with arts-based resources

Given the therapeutic benefits of engaging with art individually or in groups, Womanspace may consider increasing its partnerships with arts-based resources like Gente y Cuentos, the Trenton Community A-TEAM, and Homefront ArtSpace, among others. A sustained partnership would provide Womanspace's clients with **a regular space to process their emotions and connect to their cultural backgrounds** in new ways. For example, Womanspace could host sessions with Gente y Cuentos as a resource for Spanish-speaking clients.

An additional benefit to partnering with arts-based resources would be the potential to develop **culturally relevant, prevention-centered programs** that encourage bystander intervention. Arts-based approaches to prevention may be especially useful for immigrant communities because of barriers to accessing traditional support services given that many undocumented immigrants cannot safely access all available services.

Adjustments to community education

The documented family members of undocumented people sometimes serve as intermediaries to determine the trustworthiness of the organization or to secure services on their behalf. To this end, Womanspace and other organizations may consider targeting outreach to friends and family of undocumented immigrants. For example, organizations could hold educational workshops focused on ways to intervene in a loved one's abusive situation.

In efforts to reach survivors themselves, organizers should be mindful of the stigma associated with attending a workshop advertised as being about relationship violence. One staff member suggested **integrating healthy relationship education into more general workshops about wellness and health**, including topics such as nutrition, mental health, or managing stress. Holding trainings for community members during workshops focused on holistic wellness helps survivors evade the stigma of attending an event about relationship violence.

Transportation accessibility

Staff members at every organization mentioned the significant barrier that transportation can create for low-income or undocumented clients accessing services. Individuals in abusive situations might have extra constraints on their time or freedom of movement because of controlling behavior and stalking. There are several steps that Womanspace and partners could take to reduce the transportation burden:

- ❖ Making public transportation options clear on the Womanspace website and in publications may improve survivors' ability to **identify affordable transportation options**.
- ❖ **Posting a schedule** of the Bilingual Services Team's current off-site counselling hours may present survivors with more options for accessing services. Alternately, sharing this information with partner organizations would equip them to help survivors determine the best options for them.
- ❖ Counselors or peer educators could **travel to partner organizations to hold initial meetings** with clients. Having a meeting in a familiar space, potentially with a trusted staff member present, may ease the transition from informal advice from staff members to counseling from Womanspace.
- ❖ Additionally, holding **workshops during the daytime** is an effective way to reach mothers with children, who might have free time while children are at school and spouses are at work.

Creation of a bilingual resource guide

Womanspace staff members already have resource guides on hand during meetings with survivors, as well as pamphlets for distribution to clients. However, the phone numbers in the guide are general and do not denote Spanish-language resources. **Updating contact information to include direct connections to bilingual staff members** at partner organizations would reduce the time spent trying to identify whether bilingual services are actually available.

More opportunities for inter-agency staff connections

All interviewees discussed the importance of knowing and trusting staff members at other organizations as a vital component of maintaining a strong, collaborative network. Strengthening these ties can improve knowledge about the services offered in the county, increase trust between organizations, and increase the speed of the referral process. Organizations should develop more ways to **form personal connections, educate each other about resources, and work together to address challenges**. Given that community events and inter-agency staff trainings are already sites of networking, it may be most expedient to begin by using these events as opportunities to form stronger connections. Setting aside time before or after community events to network, brainstorm on common issues, and educate each other may provide an additional opportunity for advocates to develop new relationships and strengthen existing ties.

Referral guide for nonprofit partners

Compiling a brief guide for referrals may help partner organizations address gaps in knowledge and common concerns voiced by immigrant survivors. While no guide can fully substitute training, having a **readily accessible list of the services offered by Womanspace and other organizations** may help as a reference for staff members who have not been trained recently or at all. Such a guide would ensure that information is not forgotten or left out during referrals, and that staff members can feel more comfortable providing support.

FUTURE RESEARCH

- ❖ A small number of organizations were interviewed, and only one member of each organization was interviewed. Future research could place more emphasis on incorporating diverse perspectives within each organization and from different areas of intervention, especially healthcare and religious resources.
- ❖ This research was focused primarily on inter-agency coordination of service provision from the perspective of service providers. In the future, a more thorough study could gain valuable insight from surveying or interviewing survivors about their interactions with organizations. These perspectives could contribute to formulating strategies for improving the referral process, transferring trust, and improving interactions with Womanspace itself.
- ❖ An evaluation of the benefits and drawbacks of a formalized Coordinated Community Response team, as other municipalities have implemented, would provide insight into possible approaches to streamlining and deepening collaboration between agencies serving immigrant survivors.