

# Defining State Domestic Violence Coalitions

## ESSENTIAL CRITERIA



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**National Network to End Domestic Violence**

The National Network to End Domestic Violence,  
a social change organization representing state domestic violence coalitions,  
is dedicated to creating a social, political and economic environment  
in which violence against women  
no longer exists.

# PREFACE

*The National Network to End Domestic Violence serves as the membership organization for the nation's state domestic violence coalitions. In 2005, NNEDV began working on criteria to describe the essential functions of state domestic violence coalitions. NNEDV assembled a committee of coalition directors, and this group examined the core functions, missions and values that have guided the development of state domestic violence coalitions throughout the country. This document will be disseminated to state and federal agencies, funders, shelters, community-based organizations and others who work with state domestic violence coalitions in order to enhance their understanding of these organizations.*

# INTRODUCTION

State coalitions have played a unique role in our nation's response to domestic violence. Their history is rooted in the battered women's movement and the values that define this movement, including working towards social justice, self determination and ending the oppression of women. These core values have informed the principles, structure and functions of state domestic violence coalitions and are woven throughout this description of their work.

This document examines the history of state domestic violence coalitions, as well as their principles, structure and scope of current work. The purpose is to define state domestic violence coalitions by describing their essential functions and developing a common understanding of what it is they do within their states and local communities.

Recommendations for partnering organizations and state coalitions to use in considering the essential criteria are included. The vision of this initiative is to strengthen the movement to end domestic violence at the local, state and national level.

# I. HISTORY AND CHARACTERISTICS OF STATE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COALITIONS

Every state has a statewide domestic violence coalition (SDVC), and each SDVC has a unique history within its own state. Collectively, the coalitions play a critical role in the enactment and implementation of social change at both the state and federal levels. The vision of early leaders from state domestic violence coalitions created options for survivors across the nation, and SDVCs continue to guide communities in their quest to end violence against women.

## **Roots in Social Justice and Grassroots Efforts**

The first SDVCs, and the local domestic violence programs that created them, emerged from a long history of social justice organizing, in particular the women's, civil rights, and anti-war movements in the U.S. in the 1960s. These early SDVCs were formed by grassroots activists working in their local communities to establish shelters and hotlines and to raise awareness about violence against women. Budgets for statewide coalitions in these early days were meager, and shelters were still informal organizations taking women into their own homes. These activists began meetings throughout their states with few resources but with a strong commitment to sharing information and developing strategies for social change.

In one state, for instance, in 1978, five women sat on a floor, came up with a plan, and began to lobby for funding, education, and changes in public policy. Many state coalitions can trace their founding to similar grassroots efforts. Support and the exchange of ideas among each other in developing programs and policy typically motivated advocates in the formation of SDVCs. The experiences of battered women at the local level formed the basis for developing legislative and policy goals.

## **Analysis of Oppression of Women**

The earliest SDVCs embodied the analysis of the battered women's movement. The work was not just about helping individual women escape violence, but about changing the conditions in

society that allowed violence to continue. These conditions included sexism and inequality in relationships and society at large. Battering was seen as the result of a society that demeaned and dehumanized women, and was integrally linked to other societal oppressions such as racism and homophobia. As tools of power and privilege used to dominate others, these oppressions also served to support violence against women.

Domestic violence was identified as a pattern of abusive and intimidating behaviors used by men to control and dominate women in intimate relationships. Battered women themselves described a range of tactics used to enforce this control, including physical abuse, economic coercion, sexual violence, verbal abuse, threats towards children and threats of homicide. The goals of the movement focused on assisting victims, challenging male violence and improving the position of women in society. Like any movement, participants had diverse ideologies, but all shared the desire to end abuse.

### **Peer Support and Policy Change**

Initially, SDVCs focused on two central purposes. The first was to support each other in working through the difficult challenges they were facing in their own communities. These early advocates faced apathy, lack of awareness and even hostility towards their efforts to address violence against women. The peer support provided through the state coalition helped break this isolation and created a supportive environment where they could learn from each other and continue to develop their services.

The second function of state coalitions was to create policy, legislative, and social change beyond the provision of services to individual victims of domestic violence. This dual approach, focusing both on supporting organizations providing immediate, lifesaving services, and on systems and social change, continues to this day. It is one of the unique and important features of SDVCs.

### **Expanding Leadership Role**

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, SDVCs became more formalized and structured. Incorporated as 501(c) (3) non-profit organizations, SDVCs sought funding, hired staff, and

broadened their efforts. Passage of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) created specified and discretionary funding streams for both direct services to victims and the macro-level work most commonly conducted by SDVCs. Increasingly, a wide array of systems, public and private, looked to SDVCs for leadership in policy creation, state planning, and resource allocation. This leadership role and the establishment of a myriad partnerships evolved with input and participation from local domestic violence programs and the women with whom they work.

Today, state coalitions work closely with policy makers in responding to domestic violence at the state and federal level. They often hold positions of influence on governmental commissions and task forces addressing domestic violence, and use these positions to bring the voices of survivors and advocates into the policy arena. Working through NNEDV, state coalitions play a major role in advocating for federal legislation and ongoing funding. State coalitions are looked to by policy makers, local programs, individual activists and allied organizations for their leadership role in addressing emerging issues on both program and policy levels.

## II. PURPOSE OF ESSENTIAL CRITERIA FOR STATE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COALITIONS

Defining the essential criteria for state domestic violence coalitions will serve to raise awareness about their work and strengthen their core functions. The criteria are useful in:

- expressing the expertise and experience of state coalitions;
- informing and guiding their work as unique organizations;
- making others aware of the role of state coalitions;
- presenting a unified voice and increasing effectiveness; and
- preserving the integrity of the movement to end domestic and sexual violence

The essential criteria will be part of strengthening the local, state and national response to domestic violence. The experiences of survivors will remain central to ongoing efforts to further develop the essential criteria for the work of state domestic violence coalitions. The essential criteria can assist policy makers, funders, governmental agencies and allied groups in understanding the role of state coalitions.

# III. ESSENTIAL CRITERIA

## FOR STATE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COALITIONS

State domestic violence coalitions are non-governmental, non-profit membership organizations that work with their members and allies to:

- promote quality services for victims that focus on safety and self-determination;
- advocate and educate on behalf of survivors, their children, and their advocates;
- facilitate partnerships among victim advocates, allied organizations, and state agencies;
- mobilize a statewide voice on domestic violence;
- connect local, state and national work; and
- engage in prevention and social change efforts that challenge the social, economic and political conditions that sustain a culture of violence in which domestic and sexual violence is condoned.

SDVCs must:

- be a non-governmental organization and a not for profit;
- be an organization that is self-determining and not under the auspice of any government office, private entity or umbrella organization;
- have a mission statement that includes the previously described components;
- have a history of involvement in the movement to end domestic and sexual violence; and have a membership representing a majority of organizations whose primary focus is domestic and sexual violence.

Coalitions involve at least a majority of the domestic violence service providers in the state, as well as advocates for Native American/Indigenous survivors and for those marginalized on the basis of race, color, religion, ethnicity, national origin, ancestry, citizenship, gender/gender identity, sexual orientation, physical/cognitive ability, age, marital status, class, or legal status.

## IV. PRINCIPLES

Core values emerged from the collective experience and expertise of state domestic violence coalitions, advocates and survivors. While the mission statements of state domestic violence coalitions vary in length and language, common elements can be found in all, demonstrating a strong, nationwide commitment to those core values of the battered women's movement. These values include survivor safety and self-determination and perpetrator accountability.

In addition to mission statements, many SDVCs have vision statements, principles of unity, or guiding principles that expand and clarify the purpose of their coalition work. Members of SDVCs are often asked to sign on to these principles as part of their commitment to the values of the coalition.

## V. STRUCTURE

State domestic violence coalitions have diverse and distinct histories, constituencies, geographies, politics, funding, and program priorities. These factors influence the uniqueness and strengths of each SDVC within its state. Consequently, SDVCs have developed board and membership structures that will best facilitate their productivity and effectiveness in working to end domestic violence.

### A. Board

Board structures vary in size, composition and governance but typically reflect consideration of and may include any of the following:

- Member program representation
- Regional representation
- Survivor representation
- Diverse representation



- Representation from the community at large
- Representation of organized task forces or caucuses

## **B. Membership**

The criteria for and categories of membership in state coalitions vary widely, but typically consider any combination of the following:

- private, non-profit domestic (and sexual) violence programs;
- gradations of membership with corresponding benefits and responsibilities;
- allied organizations that are aligned with coalition mission;
- individuals; and/or
- diverse representation

## **C. Common Elements**

Even with very different board, staff and membership structures, state domestic violence coalitions have in common:

- primary constituencies of private, non-profit community-based domestic violence programs;
- commitment to provide an array of services to these programs;
- involvement of these programs in the development of coalition services; and
- accountability to these programs.
- survivor driven, inclusive of survivor leadership
- diversity in board and membership that reflects survivor diversity

## VI. SCOPE OF CURRENT WORK OF STATE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COALITIONS

The scope of the work of state domestic violence coalitions is intentionally broad because they are responsible for the leadership that integrates local, state and national programs, laws, and policies to end domestic violence. That scope includes:

### A. System Change and Reform

State domestic violence coalitions work to create social change and to reform systems that are not responsive to the needs of survivors. Systemic reform occurs at many levels. SDVCs work with institutions at the local and state level to develop and implement policies that will improve their methods of responding to domestic violence. Such institutions include the criminal and civil legal systems, law enforcement agencies, child protective services, public and private workplaces, social service agencies, health care providers, public assistance programs and many others affecting the lives of battered women.

### B. Improved Laws

SDVCs historically have played a critical role in legislative advocacy. In many states, SDVCs helped pass statutes creating domestic violence protection orders, strengthening the penal code, creating civil rights and remedies, reforming family law statutes and providing funding for domestic violence programs. Many of the legal reforms focused on bringing considerations about victim safety into the civil and criminal legal systems.

Without the work of SDVCs over the years, many of the legal protections that now exist for survivors would not have been enacted. Today SDVCs continue to be involved in reforming statutes and seeking additional remedies for victims of domestic violence. While most states have enacted basic protections for victims in their civil and criminal statute, lessons continue to be learned from survivors about their experiences with these systems, and ongoing efforts to amend and enhance statutes are part of the work of many SDVCs.

In addition to reforms in the legal system, more recent efforts have focused on expanding protections in the workplace, public housing and other systems that come in contact with survivors. The range and scope of the legislative work of SDVCs varies according to their resources and priorities for the state, but at a minimum most SDVCs track legislation and keep their members informed about issues of importance to their work. Some SDVCs employ fulltime policy staff who are more directly involved in the development of legislation.

### **C. Legislative Advocacy at the National Level**

Working primarily through the National Network to End Domestic Violence and using private, non-federal funds, SDVCs were instrumental in the initial passage the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 1994 and its reauthorizations in 2000 and 2005. VAWA represents a significant commitment of federal resources to combat domestic and sexual violence and institutes a comprehensive and coordinated response at the community and systems level. Coalitions have also been active in securing reauthorization of the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act (FVPSA), which provides essential funding for community-based domestic violence programs, and are involved in shaping and securing passage of other federal laws impacting the safety and well-being of survivors.

Building on their successes with legislative advocacy at the state level, SDVCs help identify gaps in services that require a federal response and assist in drafting federal legislation and commenting on administrative rules implementing federal laws. SDVCs mobilize survivors, advocates, and other community allies to educate Congress and the Administration about the need for legislative change or administrative action. At the state level, SDVCs continue to serve as the primary advocacy group working to ensure that implementation of VAWA, FVPSA and other federal laws and rules remain focused on the needs of survivors.

### **D. Work with Local Programs**

SDVCs work intensely with their member domestic violence programs. Their functions include providing training, technical assistance and dissemination of promising practices. They

focus on bringing local programs together in a variety of forums to share information, dialogue about challenges and develop new strategies.

In some cases, SDVC help local programs troubleshoot community relationships and promote coordinated community response teams. In others, they help member programs manage the growth that has come with increased public awareness and funding, and keep focused on their missions and core goals. SDVCs assist member programs in educating their funders and community partners about critical safety issues such as privacy, confidentiality and data collection. SDVCs interact with each other at the national level, and share information about promising practices and emerging issues with their member programs.

### **E. Accountability to Survivors and to Community-Based Domestic Violence Programs**

Due to their diverse roles, state domestic violence coalitions have multiple constituents to whom they are accountable. First and foremost, SDVCs seek to empower battered women and help them get what they need from systems and providers. Coalitions also are accountable to member domestic violence programs. At minimum, this responsibility includes ensuring that programs have enough funding to keep their doors open and the support they need to provide quality services to survivors.

### **F. State Domestic Violence Coalitions and Anti-oppression Work**

SDVCs recognize that domestic violence affects all communities, but that some communities – subject to societal prejudice, oppression, isolation, or systemic poverty – are more negatively affected by the experience of violence and less able to access community and institutional response systems. SDVCs also recognize that such systems may negatively impact marginalized communities and reduce the willingness of victims to access or cooperate with that system.

SDVCs strive to build sensitive and culturally appropriate alliances with immigrant communities, communities of color, faith-based organizations, and sexual orientation/gender identity advocacy and support organizations, among many others. This work is often

conducted through caucuses, task forces or other efforts to focus resources and attention on those most likely to be isolated by mainstream efforts.

## CONCLUSION

This description of the core values, functions and roles of SDVCs has attempted to capture the essential aspects of their work. From their early days as grassroots networks to their current status as leaders in their respective states, SDVCs have evolved in response to the changing needs of domestic violence survivors. SDVCs vary in size, structure and priorities, but they share common goals of responding to the needs of survivors, serving their member programs and creating social change on the local, state and national level.

SDVCs continue to evolve today and to serve as a dynamic force for social change. Most recently, state coalitions have focused on expanding their efforts beyond the criminal and legal systems to creating a broader response within states and local communities. SDVCs continue to hold themselves accountable to their member programs and most importantly, to survivors.

SDVCs work in partnership with policy makers, local programs, community-based organizations, funders, allied organizations and individual activists. The essential criteria put forth here may be useful to these partners in understanding the work of SDVCs. It may also be used by coalitions themselves to strengthen their core functions and enhance their efforts to address violence against women.

# SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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