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The Next Lap, What's In?

Presented by Ms Ang Bee Lian at the Closing Plenary, "Mobilising Community for Upstream Preventive Work" at the National Family Violence Networking System (NFVNS) Conference on 17 November 2016

Achievements from a Multi-pronged Approach



We have done much in the last two decades in systematically building a system for responding to family violence in Singapore. We chose, from the start of the journey, to adopt a multi-pronged approach based on the extensive research made in this area of work. We drew insights from the studies of individuals who had made significant contributions in advocating for services in the very early years. The research was clear. Victims needed protection and a responsive response from agencies. Victims would be better protected when agencies share a common perspective of their roles and minimise ambivalence and uncertainty when someone calls for help.

Victims in family violence situations experience a heightened sense of risk for their lives. This is particularly so for victims who are children because of the close proximity of the tension and escalation.

With the research in mind, we embarked on the challenging task of collaborative work. The family violence work and the systems approach in interventions that we see today were built on collaboration way back when the word was less heard of. That was what we probably did right with the strategic thinking behind the building of today's network of services and interventions.

Collaborative work, working with systems, communicating understanding and appreciation of situations and contexts are ongoing work. Our system is only as strong as the weakest link in the system. The system needs ongoing oiling and I shall talk about that later.



We have gone beyond responding to calls for help. We have, as a government and a social service sector, worked on preventing escalation in family violence situations and raised public awareness of this social problem. We have made improvements in these areas:

1. Increased public awareness on spousal/ family violence and dating violence;
2. Intervention for both victims and perpetrators mandated through legislation - the Women's Charter, and attended to by services in the community; and
3. Strong partnerships forged among the Courts, police, crisis shelters, health care sector and other professionals to provide safety, support and intervention for victims and perpetrators of family violence.



Pioneers in their Ground-Breaking Work in Violence

All these efforts would not have been possible without the pioneers who have done ground-breaking work in family violence management more than two decades ago. There were several individuals who advocated for services and they began by primarily deepening understanding that family violence is not a class-related social problem. It was not about the haves and the have-nots. It was about how relationships can escalate to violence when individuals are unable to manage their anger and their deep-seated beliefs about power and control.

To dare to put these on the table in the very early years in our context took courage, gumption and tenacity. These individuals challenged the system to respond to victims who were often powerless and depended on the system for help. They went one step further in advocating for the law to better protect victims. Children too were involved and that made a difference as it was no longer a problem affecting the adults. Family violence was a very uncomfortable subject.



One agency we wish to make special mention of is PAVE. Today, it has consolidated its years of research and practice wisdom to deliver services for the specialised needs of victims of violence and working with perpetrators. In its work with male perpetrators, the agency recognises that key issues such as the men's worldviews on gender roles and relationships, capacity for empathy, mental health and addictive behaviours influence how they will respond to intervention (Pang, 2010). PAVE has been running support groups for male perpetrators of violence with good outcomes. This is commendable as the work with perpetrators is challenging due to the clients' strongly held cultural and social beliefs as well as other underlying mental health issues.

Another agency that has honed its specialism in targeting intervention in the area of elder abuse is TRANS SAFE Centre. It has handled several landmark cases in elder abuse which was commendable in alleviating further physical and emotional turmoil in the elderly victims. It has been an active partner to the Ministry in the drafting of the Vulnerable Adults Bill in providing the ground realities for operationalising the principle of "policy is implementation".



Another agency that specialises in helping older persons and persons with disabilities who are victims of abuse is Care Corner Project Start. Their service has given a dedicated voice to the often invisible vulnerable persons.

Linking Systems and Galvanising the Community



It is useful in my mind to focus and reinforce three main areas in community mobilisation in the next lap of our work especially in holding back the tide if not reducing family violence.

1 First, we need to build on the strengths of existing system linkages to respond and prevent escalation in family violence. We need to continue to review whether our current National Family Violence Networking System is meeting its initial objectives and whether there are areas which require further reinforcement. Our system is as strong as its weakest link and we need to, while maintaining the overview and vision, keep an eye on the weakest link. The weakest link can be at anywhere in the system and unfortunately it is often in communicating and sharing information which has to be our ongoing effort.



Research has shown that there is an approximately 30% - 60% of cases which saw both domestic violence and child maltreatment co-occurring in families (Appel & Holden, 1998; Daro, Edleson, & Pinderhughes, 2004; Edleson, 1999). We must draw on these findings to inspire us to do better in seeing linkages to better protect children.

Another cluster of research has shown a strong association between witnessing domestic violence and childhood mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, becoming a victim in teenage dating violence, low performance at school, and being bullied. Accumulated research by the Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child showed that early childhood exposure to family violence, amongst other high risk circumstances moulds the children's brain development resulting in them displaying hyper-responsivity to adversity.² At the Center, insights from these studies and cutting-edge science are used to challenge us with the opportunity to affect the trajectories of children and minimise the adversity that disrupts the healthy development of children and build their resilience. Here in Singapore, we too should seize the opportunity of using research findings to strengthen the engagement of the community and community agencies to better help children in such situations.

To develop effective responses to families victimized by domestic violence, it is imperative that we continue to forge close linkages among the three primary systems:

1. Child welfare system;
 2. The Courts; and
 3. Domestic violence service organizations, such as our Family Violence Specialist Centres, Child Protection Specialist Centres and the network of Family Service Centres.
- (Malik, Ward & Janczewski, 2008)

These systems have their individual goals and it is often necessary to invest time and leadership to pull and knit them in a healthy tension to respond to those who depend on them for protection. Partnerships are not static and we need to constantly remind ourselves that these bonds, linkages and relationships and clarification of roles in the system are part of the work that builds the safety net of services for the victims. The partnerships are equally important in the work with perpetrators.



2 Secondly, we should encourage the community to play a pro-active role to detect and prevent the escalation of violence in families that they know of. First and foremost, in designing community-based violence prevention programmes that are sustainable and effective, these factors should be considered:

- Violence prevention programmes should be integrated into the community;
- Strengthen community ties and resources; and
- Mindful of individual and familial factors, social norms and legislation.

(Sabol, et al., 2004)



We can consider how pockets of “community” – eg. Residents’ Committee/grassroots leaders, neighbours, volunteers, parent-support network in schools, parent volunteers can be active promoters in preventing violence including bullying behaviour. We can adopt a pro-social approach in educating the communities through education to raise their understanding of the issue and thereafter learn how to respond as neighbours, friends and grassroots volunteers. As part of the education, we should open up discussion on how to maintain privacy for the family while safeguarding the safety of vulnerable persons.

Let me share one example of how this can work. A member of public, say a Mr Lim, called TRANS SAFE Centre to report on a concern. Mr Lim had seen a young man shouting loudly with vulgarities at an elderly woman, and pushing her aggressively. This elderly woman was working as a cleaner in a hawker centre. Mr Lim saw the young man demand money from the elderly woman and later found out that he was her son.

Mr Lim offered to show the social worker where the woman was and shared some of his observations. Due to Mr Lim’s detailed description of the woman, the social worker was able to identify her almost immediately. Several stall owners whom the social worker spoke to had already observed that the elderly woman’s son was aggressive towards her for over a year. The stall owners perceived the incidents as private family matters and as such did not want to interfere although they often served her food. They were able to provide additional observations that helped the social worker to plan how to help the woman.

Mr Lim’s action is about how the public can play a part to prevent the escalation of potential hurt and harm to vulnerable persons. It does require taking the additional step to note observations and details and to call an agency.

The Ministry has engaged various community groups through awareness raising sessions that aim to help Singaporeans from all walks of life to recognise the signs and symptoms of family violence and how to refer individuals for help. Groups are trained in a simple and easy to remember 3-step process using the acronym A.C.T – A: Acknowledge the abuse; C: Comfort someone in need; and T: Tell someone how and where to get help.

Acknowledge the abuse

Comfort someone in need

Tell someone how and where to get help

To further engage community stakeholders, we have in May this year reached out to 75 participants from companies, social service professionals, and groups in the arts, sports and grassroots to gather inputs on how the community can be involved in preventive work. The inputs will be used to plan and work with communities for early detection and prevention.

As more community groups, both formal and informal, become better informed that everyone can play a part in helping victims of family violence, they will be more effective in reaching out and providing early alerts and referrals for help.

3 Thirdly, we should explore more targeted, one-to-one outreach, such as having rehabilitated perpetrators with violence issues, and encouraging non-perpetrators to reach out and influence their acquaintances, family and friends, to prevent and stop violence.

Overseas studies have shown that approaches of outreach are effective in educating and generating changes in behaviour and attitudes. More specifically, male perpetrators do choose to adopt healthier and more positive communication patterns and relationships with their loved ones with help.



We should also pay attention to educating youths. Several examples are worth emulating, especially for their messages that evoke empathy and inculcate values on building healthy relationships at a young age. Here are some examples.

- Looking through the eyes of male perpetrators' daughters- "how do you want your daughters to be treated?"
- Providing mentoring to youth on healthy relationships in schools or youth organisations
- Parenting programmes that address the needs of children and spouses using non-violent methods of resolving conflicts
- Community education and training in schools (Douglas et al., 2008; Tolman et al., 2016; Casey, et al., 2016)



In Singapore, there was a recent Futsal tournament which aimed to emphasize father-son bonding. Helmed by the Centre for Fathering and Home United Football Club, the activity generated a lot of interest with key messages of building healthy parent-child relationships. Such efforts should be more widespread and reach out to more families and perhaps on a more systematic, timely and regular basis.

Build on What Worked and Expand the Reach



For the next lap, we can do three things. Firstly, we need to build on the strengths of existing system linkages to respond better by embarking on regular reviews to ensure the National Family Violence Networking System continues to be an effective network.

Secondly, to develop effective responses to families caught in domestic violence, it is imperative that we continue to forge close linkages among the three primary systems:

- child welfare system;
- the Courts; and
- domestic violence service organizations, such as our Family Violence Specialist Centres and the network of Family Service Centres

To strengthen alerts, we can leverage on existing pockets of natural community groups to prevent the escalation of violence and early referrals for help.

Thirdly, we should explore more targeted, one-to-one outreach, such as having rehabilitated perpetrators with violence issues, and survivors of family violence reach out with their testimonies to influence their acquaintances, family, friends and the public to prevent and stop violence.

To strengthen alerts, we can leverage on existing pockets of natural community groups to prevent the escalation of violence and early referrals for help.

Effective community mobilisation provides the frontline support to prevent and reduce incidents of family violence at an early stage. Working together in partnership, the government agencies and the community play a critical and complementary role in promoting healthy positive relationships in our families.

Sense of Safety

Let me end by leaving us all with a motivation to continuously be mindful of why we do what we do, what do we do and how we do what we do. We can appreciate that systems must have objectives and we need to do what we do. In a climate where we are continuously constrained by resources, we need to remind ourselves about where we place our priority when we make decisions, especially about deploying resources. Let us be guided by the notion that our system needs to attend to the victims' sense of safety, and that they can depend on the system. In working with parents, we need to help them know and feel that they are safe and their child is safe. Only when they feel safe, can they make informed decisions for themselves and in the interest of their children. In the case of the elderly and persons with disabilities, we can also be challenged to communicate in a way to help them feel safe to exercise what is possible to work on a plan for their safety. This must be the ongoing challenge that keeps us awake.



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(1) <https://www.socialworkhelper.com/2014/04/17/domestic-violence- witnessed-children- far-know/?shared=email&msg=fail>

(2) Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University Applying the Science of Child Development in Child Welfare Systems (October 2016)

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