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SUPERVISED VISITATION AND SAFE EXCHANGE: THE PERSISTENT NEED FOR FUNDING

The Network: Advocating Against Domestic Violence

The Network: Advocating Against Domestic Violence is a collaboration of over 40 diverse organizations that provide gender-based violence-related services in the Chicago metropolitan and Cook County areas. The Network is dedicated to improving the lives of those impacted by gender-based violence through education, public policy and advocacy, and the connection of community members to direct service providers.
Introduction

Gender-based violence service providers are professionals trained in understanding and addressing the specific dynamics of domestic violence, sexual assault, and/or human trafficking. Programs serving this distinct population provide trauma-informed care to address the needs of survivors, people causing harm, and shared children in a safe environment. Among these critical services are supervised visitation and safe exchange programs. Parenting survivors may need to simultaneously navigate leaving their harmful relationship, seeking safety, and coordinating shared parenting with the person causing them harm.

Some survivors may want their child(ren) to maintain a relationship with the person causing them harm or may be mandated to share visitation and custody through a court order. Yet, shared custody and visitation can create an added risk for survivors during separation. Unsupervised visitation or child custody exchanges may leave survivors vulnerable to continued violence and abuse from the person causing them harm.¹ Research highlights survivors are at high risk for domestic violence-related homicide and child abductions during separation and shared child contact.² As a result, in the late 1990s domestic violence advocates called for programs to facilitate safe visitation and exchanges specific for families experiencing domestic violence.³ These programs are built off of services originally utilized in child welfare cases but are modified to address the unique safety concerns of survivors and their children while allowing people who cause harm to build or maintain relationships with their children.

Supervised visitation programs oversee visitations between a parenting person who causes harm and their child. Trained staff monitor the families’ interactions and ensure the child feels comfortable and safe.⁴ Safe exchange programs facilitate a safe location for survivors to drop off and pick up a child who has approved unsupervised visitation or parenting time with the person causing harm. The parents enter through separate entrances at different time slots to ensure there is no contact.
There are three organizations in the Chicago metropolitan area that provide free supervised visitation and safe exchange programs. All three organizations are members of The Network and provide additional gender-based violence services. Mujeres Latinas en Acción, Metropolitan Family Services, and Apna Ghar provided program information, client narratives, and recommendations to help inform this report. Accordingly, their programs and their needs will be primarily highlighted throughout the report.

This report demonstrates how supervised visitation and safe exchange programs meet the critical safety needs of survivors, people causing harm, and their children. In doing so, it demands increased investment in these programs to enable local organizations to expand services and better serve their communities. This includes funding sources that are flexible and enable programs to build and maintain service capacity, support staff, and expand wrap-around services for all members of the family.
**MUJERES LATINAS EN ACCIÓN**

**PROGRAM DESCRIPTION:**

Project Sanctuary is part of Mujeres Latinas en Acción's Parent Support Program. This component offers court-ordered supervised visitation for non-custodial parents and their children. The program allows children to maintain a positive relationship with their non-custodial parents. Project Sanctuary staff work to ensure that the safety of the participants and the needs of the children are a priority.

Mujeres Latinas en Acción also offers a safe exchange which ensures a neutral and safe location for parents to pick up and drop off their children for unsupervised visits.

**NUMBER OF CLIENTS SERVED IN 2021: 133**

**METROPOLITAN FAMILY SERVICES**

**PROGRAM DESCRIPTION:**

The Midway Connections program, located at Metropolitan’s Midway Center on Chicago’s Southwest Side, provides supervised visitation and safe exchange services for families that have experienced domestic violence. In supervised visitation situations, parents have a court order that mandates they must spend time with their kids under supervised conditions. Staff are not part of the visit, but they watch the families’ interactions, intervening if anything is said or done that is inappropriate, in terms of being threatening or violent.

Midway Connections also provides safe exchange for families. Metropolitan staff come between the visiting and custodial parents as the children are exchanged for the visit. The parents never see each other. Everyone’s safety is the priority.

**NUMBER OF CLIENTS SERVED IN FY 2021: 51**

**APNA GHAR**

**PROGRAM DESCRIPTION:**

Apna Ghar provides supervised visitation and safe exchange services in an environment that is safe for children with a goal to facilitate healthy interactions between children and visiting parents. Apna Ghar staff also ensure the safety of the residential parent, and maintain the safety and confidentiality of all involved. Supervised visitations are an opportunity for relationships to form and develop in a safe, comfortable, conflict-free environment.

Safe exchanges offered at Apna Ghar are a safe alternative location for parents to pick up and drop off their children when the visiting parent has unsupervised visits. The safety, and other needs of all parties are prioritized by providing separate waiting rooms, staggered arrival and departure times, as well as staff members who can escort and accompany.

**NUMBER OF CLIENTS SERVED IN 2021: 123**
Supervised visitation and safe exchange programs are imperative for safe interactions between survivors, people causing harm, and their children. Programs within comprehensive gender-based violence service providers often offer more trauma-informed practices than private centers. Gender-based violence-focused services support survivor economic empowerment, facilitate child-parent relationships, serve as a restorative justice-focused practice, and prevent future violence.

**SUPPORTING SURVIVOR ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT**

Survivors may disproportionately be from low-income backgrounds due to economic abuse and the impacts of experiencing domestic violence. They may also be overrepresented in publicly funded programs due to their income status. In 2021, 42% of survivors served by domestic violence service providers in Illinois reported an income of $500 or less per month. WomenEmployed further highlighted this finding in their 2022 Intersecting Barriers report that found that 52% of survivors reported annual incomes less than $20,000, while 25% earned under $10,000 respectively.

Research highlights that approximately 99% of survivors experience economic abuse. This abuse can occur through taking money from survivors, forcing a survivor into debt, damaging property, limiting or prohibiting employment, and other manipulative/controlling behaviors related to a survivor’s financial health. Economic abuse and experiencing domestic violence commonly negatively impact educational attainment and employment. In a survey by the Institute For Women’s Policy Research, 66% of survivors noted that the abuse they experienced had disrupted progress toward their educational goals. Educational disruptions manifested in the form of not being able to enroll in school, dropping/retaking classes, losing financial aid, and delaying graduation. Similarly, 70% of survivors reported they were not able to have the job they wanted or needed and 53% reported losing their job of the abuse.
People who cause harm may also have more financial resources to request supervised visitation and safe exchange services through hiring private attorneys to ensure they do not lose parenting privileges. Disparities in socioeconomic status between survivors and the person cause them harm are highlighted by the client incomes provided by Mujeres. A majority (67%) of custodial parents, often survivors, had incomes of less than $1,000 per month versus just 18% of non-custodial parents. Twenty-two percent of custodial parents reported being unemployed and relying on other forms of income such as child support or public benefits.

With child care being a primary work-related need for survivors, supervised visitation and safe exchange programs can facilitate a safe, long-term child care relationship between survivors and the person causing harm. Without affordable and flexible care options, survivors may be forced to leave their child alone with the person who caused them harm in an unsafe environment. Utilization of supervised visitation and safe exchange services may allow survivors to maintain/seek employment and/or achieve their educational goals.

CENTERING THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN

Supervised visitation and safe exchange programs can effectively support children by balancing the child’s needs and preferences while building a relationship with the parent who has caused harm. Children who have witnessed violence in their home or have a parent in a harmful relationship may experience complex and conflicting feelings regarding their parent causing harm. Children are often “caught between feeling that violence is wrong, damaging, and frightening and feeling love and attachment to the [person causing their other parent harm].”

SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN BUILDING HEALTHY PARENT RELATIONSHIPS

Children with a parent who causes harm often experience compounded trauma of witnessing violence and parental separation. Supervised visitation and safe exchange programs can foster a healing environment with critical elements to aid children in this process.

Experts identified several elements crucial to the creation of this environment: a sense of physical and emotional safety, structure, and adequate protection during contact with the parent who caused harm. The programs at Mujeres, Metropolitan Family Services, and Apna Ghar embody these characteristics in the facilitation of their supervised visitation and safe exchange services.

All three programs prioritize the needs and safety of child clients through thorough intake procedures and active listening. Children are able to tour the center and speak with a supervisor to address concerns they have.
PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM BEING USED TO CONTINUE ABUSE

Children are often used as means by people who harm to continue exerting power and control over the survivors. In a recent study, survivors reported that the person causing them harm used their children to stay in their lives (76%), intimidate them (72%), keep track of them (72%), harass them (71%), or frighten them (69%). Survivors also reported the person causing harm attempted to turn the children against them (62%), or used the children to convince survivors to take them back and resume the relationship (45%).

As a result, survivors and their children involved in shared parenting time and visitation agreements are at risk of experiencing these harmful behaviors. Supervised visitation and safe exchange programs can address these coercive behaviors through their programming. The child’s and survivor’s safety are given precedence at all times to reduce any risk of continued abuse. Through services fostering open communication and strong relationships with clients, survivors and their children feel comfortable expressing safety concerns. If there is an indication of child manipulation and continued abuse, the service provider can adjust programming or provide referrals to modify agreements. Moreover, people who cause harm are monitored and guided in their interactions with their children to promote healthy, non-violent, and non-controlling relationships.

IMPLEMENTING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PRACTICES

Restorative justice is an alternative response to wrongdoings or crime that emphasizes human connection, accountability, and relationships. It seeks to repair harm through addressing root causes of violence and centering survivor experiences. It is a community-based approach that can reduce harm from the legal system while fostering improved relationships and community safety.

The Restorative Justice Exchange utilizes three core elements within restorative justice practices: encounter, repair, and transform.
The three elements work collaboratively to support a journey toward the well-being and wholeness of survivors, people who cause harm, and community members. While supervised visitation and safe exchange programs have close connections to the legal system, they can still implement and utilize restorative justice practices. Supervised visitation and safe exchange programs share restorative justice principles of relationship repair and accountability. These services assist families in repairing child-parent relationships through acknowledging the needs of survivors, the person causing harm, and their child. It does not force reconciliation but provides an opportunity for those that cause harm to meaningfully interact with their child to break the cycle of violence. Moreover, these services develop healthy parenting skills for those who cause harm that highlight the impact of their harmful behavior. Client stories provided by Mujeres, Metropolitan Family Services, and Apna Ghar demonstrate that families can undergo a form of transformation in their ability to share custody safely and free of violence.

After one family's court order was revised to unsupervised visitation with the child’s father, both the survivor and the person who caused harm felt comfortable and confident in their ability to continue the relationships they built through their time at a supervised visitation and safe exchange program.

“They were able to build a healthy relationship with us, and the protocols we have in place for visitation, also helped her to feel safe and more comfortable about having contact with the father.” - Service Provider

These services teach children that violence is inappropriate behavior and model how to maintain healthy relationships. Through integrated restorative practices, families progress toward accountability and transformation.

**PREVENTING FUTURE VIOLENCE**

Supervised visitation and safe exchange programs play an important role in avoiding dangerous interactions between survivors and the person causing harm and fostering violence-free relationships. These services can also address the impacts of witnessing violence in childhood. Domestic violence in the home is considered an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) that can lead to negative social, academic, and emotional development in children.\(^\text{20}\) According to a 2010 study, observing intimate partner violence in childhood also increases the risk of later perpetration in men by an estimated 56% or 63%, depending on severity.\(^\text{21}\) Enabling families to continue their relationships without the presence of violence can prevent further trauma for children and end the cycle of violence.
As noted in the introductory section of this brief, separation often marks a time of increased risk for survivors. The person causing harm may engage in escalated, violent behaviors and manipulation including stalking and harassment.

**Informal Exchanges**
These risks are demonstrated by the danger of informal child custody exchanges. Families often conduct these exchanges in front of police stations, business parking lots, and other public areas. While these may be accessible options for many families, they may leave parents and their children vulnerable to violence. This may be especially true for families with a history of domestic violence and other high-conflict behaviors. Fifty-three percent of survivors utilizing family/public custody exchanges saw continued minor to moderately serious psychological abuse and threats. Similarly, police precinct transfer also yielded higher rates of continued abuse at 67%.

There is also an increased risk of physical confrontation during these exchanges. While there are no statistics on fatalities at child exchanges, experts such as the Executive Director of the Supervised Visitation Network report it is a growing issue. In 2019, a child custody exchange in a Rolling Meadows, Illinois, Walmart parking resulted in gun violence. A simple Google search of gun violence at child custody exchanges reveals confirmation that these incidents are pervasive.

**Unsupervised Visitation**
When survivors and their families cannot access supervised visitation services, they may be forced to utilize unsafe visitation measures such as unsupervised visitation or supervision by a family member/friend with the person who caused harm. Unsupervised visits or family supervised visits may be linked to higher rates of continued psychological abuse and threats. In a follow-up with families with various visitation situations, 76% of survivors utilizing unsupervised visitation and 59% utilizing family supervised visits reported minor to moderately serious psychological abuse and threats. Usage of visitation centers significantly decreased experiencing continued abuse at 48%. Supervised visitation can also minimize potential harm to children who also experienced abuse by the person causing harm.

At the insistence of a Guardian Ad Litem, a child was forced to have unsupervised visitation with the visiting parent despite their refusal. During that visit, the child was physically abused and hospitalized due to the injuries. Despite the history of abuse, the visiting parent was granted supervised visitation. Metropolitan Family Services took this into account when facilitating visits and allows the child to adjust or refuse to participate in visits.
The program is working to permanently change the court order to audio-only Zoom visits to protect the wishes and safety of the child.26

**LONG-TERM SHARED PARENTING TIME**

Survivors may experience changes in their court orders that allow for unsupervised visitation or transition to safe exchange that necessitates improved communication, trust, and confidence in safety between both parents. Supervised visitation and safe exchange programs can facilitate long-term successful, safe shared parenting relationships.

“[These services] help them build towards the next step after supervised visitation.” - Child Relief Expeditier, Domestic Violence Division of Circuit Court of Cook County

A Latinx family with a history of domestic violence by the father of the survivor’s child experienced a transformation in their family dynamic. After incarceration for several years, the father who caused harm participated in the supervised visitation and safe exchange program to re-connect with his daughter. After months of creating a relationship with his daughter in the program, a change in the court order allowed him visitation under the survivor’s supervision. The survivor felt comfortable with this transition because of the change she witnessed as a result of his participation in the program. She noted the relationship and connection built during the supervised visitation instilled this confidence to continue shared parenting time in an informal environment.27

As child care is a top need for survivors, supervised visitation enables survivors to feel comfortable allowing the person who caused them harm to care for their child. Supervised visitation equips people who cause harm with valuable parenting skills that are essential to long-term shared parenting and child care. Survivors also know that their child is in a safe space with dedicated staff who prioritize their well-being. The structure of these programs enables both parents to take the initial steps to foster healthy child-parent relationships outside of formal programming.

**PREVENTING FUTURE VIOLENCE**

The inception of domestic violence-specific supervised visitation and safe exchange programs through the Safe Havens grant program included six principles to guide service providers.28 Among these principles is valuing multiculturalism and diversity to support culturally competent services. It recommends standards and practices that enable intersectional individuals to engage in programming that makes them feel heard and understood.
Survivors and persons who cause harm may have different cultural understandings of gender-based violence, help-seeking, accountability, gender roles, and family structure. Without recognition of these cultural values, survivors and those who cause harm may be disempowered from seeking or fully participating in services. Mujeres Latinas en Acción and Apna Ghar provide culturally-specific services to marginalized and immigrant community members and families.

Mujeres Latinas en Acción focuses its services on the Hispanic/Latinx community. A 2019 study in the Journal of Family Violence found that trauma-informed and culturally specific practices at Latina-serving community-based organizations contributed to survivors’ experiences of subjective well-being and trauma-informed outcomes (e.g., relational self, emotional well-being, and self-confidence). Mujeres’ supervised visitation and safe exchange services integrate the highly important Hispanic/Latinx cultural value of familism. Visiting parents are allowed to bring family members or co-visitors when safe and available to do so. Additional visitors follow the same requirements of visiting parents and complete similar assessments. The inclusion of the whole, extended family structure recognizes the various relationships in a child’s life and helps cultivate these relationships safely.

Apna Ghar is a multicultural organization that serves individuals from all around the world but has a historical focus on Asian, particularly South Asian, immigrant communities. Their services can address the specific needs of Asian and African immigrant and refugee survivors and their families and the cultural barriers they face in help-seeking. Apna Ghar advocates and staff take into account the intersectional identities such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, and language that come together to create challenges in achieving safety. The Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence highlights that Asian/Pacific Islander community organizations can provide an analysis of patriarchy within their culture that is understanding rather than stereotyping. Survivors may feel more understood as their culture and its gender roles and values are not being belittled or criticized but rather staff believes and support them. Apna Ghar can serve as a “powerful and inspiring connection to the community” along with other culturally-competent organizations.
Survivors with limited to no English proficiency experience additional challenges when accessing services. Without language accessibility, survivors may be unable to utilize needed services essential to achieving safety and stability. In 2021, the Illinois Domestic Violence Hotline (IL DV Hotline) received requests from 177 contacts across Chicago for services available in languages other than English. Contacts sought services in 12 different languages with a majority requesting services in Spanish.

**2021 IL DV Hotline Languages Needed for Services**

Mujeres Latinas en Acción, Metropolitan Family Services, and Apna Ghar help bridge the gap for immigrants and non-English speaking survivors with life-changing services. Mujeres Latinas en Acción provides bilingual supervised visitation and safe exchange services that enable Hispanic/Latinx families to engage in services in Spanish. Similarly, Metropolitan Family Services also offers bilingual services in English and Spanish. Apna Ghar offers services in over 20 languages including Spanish, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Tagalog, Azerbaijani, Turkish, Russian, and Amharic. Language accessibility is especially crucial in supervised visitation and safe exchange programs as their goal is to facilitate communication, safety, and relationship-building. Survivors, people causing harm, and their children may feel more comfortable engaging in services as their experiences and emotions can be communicated in their preferred or native language.
**CURRENT FUNDING STREAMS**

The Chicago Department of Family and Support Services Division on Domestic Violence allocates funding awards to supervised visitation and safe exchange programs. This funding restricts providers to only serving the Chicago area by requiring at least one parent to be a Chicago resident. Survivors residing outside of the Chicago metropolitan area in suburban Cook County and collar counties are barred from accessing the free services. In 2021, the Illinois Domestic Violence Hotline received 10,868 contacts from Cook County (outside of Chicago) and the collar counties. This accounts for 34% of all contacts in Illinois. Despite the high number of contacts from these areas, there are few free domestic violence-specific supervised visitation and safe exchange programs available to their residents. The free programs at Mujeres Latinas en Acción, Metropolitan Family Services, and Apna Ghar would be able to meet the needs of suburban survivors with less location-restrictive funding. Funding levels also limit service availability. Programs do not have the capacity to offer extended hours, weekend availability, and multiple facility locations that would enable more families to access and utilize their services. Furthermore, flexible and increased funding is critical to support program staff and supervisors. These programs noted an increased need for regular training on safety planning for survivors and their children in conjunction with best practices to support and work with those who cause harm.

**OTHER FUNDING MODELS**

**THE VICTIMS OF CRIME ACT (VOCA) VICTIMS ASSISTANCE GRANT**

The Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) is a formula grant program awarded by the Office for Victims of Crime, a part of the U.S. Department of Justice. One of the two grants helps fund victims’ assistance programs. These programs provide direct services for survivors of crime, including experiences with gender-based violence. While not explicitly earmarked for supervised visitation and safe exchange programs, VOCA Victim Assistance funds can be utilized to support these services. The main requirement for allowable activities and projects is that they are related to supporting or providing services to crime victims. The Office of Victims of Crime clarified that supervised visitation and safe exchange programs are allowable under VOCA. VOCA Victim Assistance funds thus serve as a viable source of additional funding to support and expand supervised visitation and safe exchange services.
Wisconsin currently funds several supervised visitation and safe exchange programs through its federal VOCA allocation. It frames these services as supportive of survivors and their children who have experienced or been exposed to emotional, physical, or psychological harm to meet VOCA funding criteria. Under the Wisconsin five-year funding cycle, three supervised visitation and safe exchanges receive an average of $524,703 in VOCA funding. While the award represents the total funds these organizations received through VOCA, funds can be used for personnel, benefits, training, and operating & supplies costs location. The programs funded through VOCA reported being able to continue their programs and add additional staff as a result of the funding they received. The Wisconsin Rapids Family Center, a VOCA-funded program, offers supervised visitation and safe exchange services Monday through Sunday at no cost to survivors and their families. The utilization of VOCA funds may contribute to their ability to service several communities and provide weekend availability. While VOCA funding cannot be used for specific services for those who cause harm, they still benefit from access to these supervised visitation and safe exchange services. If a program wants to expand to include services for those that cause harm, it can utilize VOCA funding if those individuals disclose prior victimization. Wisconsin serves as an example of how VOCA funds can be utilized to meet survivors’ diverse needs, including safe options to facilitate shared parenting time.

OFFICE ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN (OVW)

Justice for Families Program
The Grants to Support Families in the Justice System program (Justice for Families Program) was authorized in the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act (VAWA) of 2013 to improve the response of the civil and criminal justice system to families with a history of sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking, or in cases involving allegations of child sexual abuse. Among the supported court-based or court-related activities are supervised visitation and safe exchange. States, local governments, courts (including juvenile courts), Indian tribal governments, nonprofit organizations, legal services providers, and victim services providers are eligible to apply for and receive funding.
The Circuit Court of Cook County received funding in the 2020 Fiscal Year to support Chicago supervised visitation and safe exchange programs to participate in management working groups and training but not programming or operating funds. The three-year grant is mainly being utilized to create a new supervised visitation and safe exchange center at Loyola University Chicago to serve in-need suburban areas. Several non-profit agencies providing supervised visitation and safe exchange have successfully received funding for their programs in recent years. In the 2021 Fiscal Year, four organizations throughout the country that offer supervised visitation and safe exchange programs received funding through the grant program. These programs serve multiple jurisdictions in Wisconsin, Louisiana, Missouri, and New York. The Justice for Families grant program may serve as an additional source of funding for supervised visitation and safe exchange programs through an allocation from the county or as direct grantees.

"Additional flexible funding will allow us to continue to provide a space that is safe and supportive for both the children and parents.” - Shatna Osorno, Director of the Parent Support Program at Mujeres Latinas en Acción
INCREASED FUNDING TO SUPPORT SURVIVORS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Support for these programs is directly linked to survivor and family safety. Survivors, people who cause harm, and their children can interact in an environment that prioritizes their well-being and security. When survivors are unable to access these services, they may be forced to turn to unsafe options such as utilizing family members or public spaces that leave survivors at risk for harm.

“Folks are choosing family members over [supervised visitation and safe exchange] centers because lack of availability [due to funding] so they choose the less safe options” - Child Relief Expeditor, Domestic Violence Division of Circuit Court of Cook County

Increased funding would enable service providers to offer extended hours during the work week and on the weekends to meet the schedule demands of parenting survivors and people who cause harm. Moreover, programs would have the capacity to increase the frequency and length of visits to facilitate more, long-term relationship building for families.

FUNDING SERVICES FOR THOSE WHO CAUSE HARM

Services for those who cause harm are severely underfunded and limited in scope. Funding for these programs often requires carceral system participation to engage in services and cannot meet the additional wrap-around needs of those who cause harm. In the 2022 Fiscal Year, twenty-nine organizations offering Partner Abuse Intervention Programs (PAIP) were awarded $87,000 each through the Illinois Department of Human Services.¹⁰ This funding totaled only $1,073,000 for PAIP programs throughout the state. The 2023 Fiscal Year state budget allocated only $250,000 to the Domestic Violence Abuser Services Fund. Increases in funding would allow service providers to expand service areas to address the needs of people who cause harm more effectively while emphasizing accountability and support.

Supportive services for those who cause harm would foster increased community safety and healthy family relationships. These services allow people who cause harm to learn the impacts of their behaviors on their partners and their children and work towards a violence-free approach.


[7] InfoNet Data provided by ICJIA, February, 2022


[17] Ibid.


[23] Ibid.


[27] Ibid.


[31] Ibid.


[34] Counties Bordering Cook County: DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry, and Will Counties

[35] Author analysis of Illinois Domestic Violence Hotline Data obtained through the internal database, iCarol, June, 2022


[38] Ibid.


[40] https://govappsqa.illinois.gov/GATA/CSFA/AwardList.aspx?CSFA=653