

Working With Elected Officials

Elected Officials And Domestic Violence

Elected officials can play an integral role in efforts to end domestic violence through supportive legislation and funding appropriations. Lawmakers set public policies and funding priorities that affect domestic violence services, research and prevention programs. Across the country there are federal, state, and local laws designed to protect battered women; and a majority of battered women's services and domestic violence prevention organizations depend on funding from federal, state, and local governments for survival.

For most of our nation's history, the federal government gave little support to programs serving battered women and invested little in domestic violence research and prevention. Over the past few years, many lawmakers have increased their commitment to addressing domestic violence. At the federal level, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994 and VAWA 2000, among other measures, allocated critical funding for services for battered women. Advocates can help ensure that lawmakers' commitment to the issue continues and increases by taking time to educate lawmakers about the issue and keeping them informed of new developments.

Most advocates agree that there is much more that local, state and national elected officials can do to help stop domestic violence. It is important that advocates work with their elected officials to continue improving their response. The more advocates stay in contact with their representatives, the more likely it is that those representatives will take the issue seriously and support measures to fund domestic violence programs, prevention and research.

DVAM Opportunities

During October, and year round, battered women's advocates should work with their elected officials – city council members, judges, sheriffs, mayors, state legislators and Members of Congress – keeping them informed on the issues and alerting them to work that programs do in the community. Let your local, state and national representatives know what issues are vital to battered women, as well as to your program. Advocates should contact their representatives, when appropriate, and urge them to support legislation that funds domestic violence programs, prevention and research.

Domestic Violence Awareness Month (DVAM) offers advocates and elected officials a unique opportunity to work together to raise public awareness about the dangers of domestic violence. It is important to remember that you are the officials' eyes and ears in the community. Your role is often to serve as educator to your elected officials. By keeping them informed about what is happening in the community, elected officials are better able to serve their constituents. Involving them in DVAM events is one such way to increase their awareness.

The following are ways advocates can work with elected officials to involve them in DVAM activities.

- Invite local, state and national representatives to speak at a news conference or participate in some way in DVAM activities. Ask a policy maker to make a short statement in support of your organization's efforts to stop domestic violence. If the policy maker is unable to attend the event in person, see if she or he will issue a statement that can be read at the event and handed out to members of the media. (Fill-in-the blank letters of invitation have been included at the end of this chapter.)
- Congratulate your elected officials on a job well done, if they have demonstrated commitment to the issue. Elected officials are often bombarded with complaints about things they have done wrong and needs that are not being met. It is important to recognize them when they are doing a good job, even if there is more that can be done. This simple act demonstrates our recognition of all the hard work that they have done on behalf of battered women, as well as an acknowledgement that we realize that they have more than one issue on their plates. Present your elected official with a certificate already framed and ready to be hung or an award, during one of your DVAM events to symbolize your appreciation. Also, follow up good legislation, court rulings and law enforcement efforts with phone calls and letters to the elected official, letters to the local paper and public statements of support.
- Schedule a meeting with a local, state or national elected official or one of her or his staff members to brief her or him on domestic violence in your community and the issues faced by your program. If there is a piece of legislation concerning domestic violence that is up for a vote, discuss the bill with her or him. If possible take a survivor, someone who can offer a personal testimony to why support is needed and/or appreciated, including the positive impact your agency has had on her life. (Discussion tips have been included in the next section.)
- Invite local, state and national representatives to tour your program's facilities. Present the elected official with information on your program and the services it provides. Allow her or him to meet with your program's staff and volunteers. If possible, set up a time for the elected official to speak with survivors of domestic violence who have used the services offered by your program. Make this a photo opportunity and invite the press, if the survivors agree to do so.
- Include local, state and national representatives on your regular mailing lists and send them information on what your program is doing for DVAM and all year long. This will keep your lawmakers up-to-date on the issues that affect your organization, as well as educate them on domestic violence.
- Ask your Members of Congress to highlight DVAM in their constituent newsletters, either with an article or a listing of events, and on their web sites. Through the Congressional newsletter, you will be able to reach members of your community, alerting them to DVAM and the services offered by your program. When your program issues news releases and other press materials, send copies to the editor of your Representative's and Senators' newsletters and to the person who manages their web sites. (A fill-in-the blank newsletter article follows at the end of this chapter.)

Discussion Tips

- **Be On Time** – Although elected officials or their staff may not be able to see you at the appointed time, they will expect you to be on time. Since their schedules are hectic and unpredictable, they (or their staff) may not be able to be on time for your meeting. However, if you are late, you risk losing the opportunity to meet with them, since their schedules are likely to be jam-packed with other meetings, hearings, votes, etc.
- **Be Brief** – As advocates for battered women, you may spend all of your time thinking/working/researching issues connected to domestic violence. Elected officials often have a myriad of issues that they are charged with handling, one of which is “women’s issues” – the category under which domestic violence falls. As such, time is stretched very thin. They appreciate people who are concise and to the point, as it is an indication that you respect their time.
- **Be Effective** – When asking elected officials to support legislation that requires additional expenditures or to continue funding legislation, they want to know two things: 1) how the money was successfully spent in the past and 2) why you need more. Tell one or two success stories, indicating how VAWA enhanced services, etc., and then give one or two examples of where gaps in VAWA funding result in a significant shortfall in services in their district or state.
- **Tell Constituent Stories** – Elected officials are responsible to their constituents and are often held accountable when running for re-election. This makes elected officials necessarily interested in how the programs they vote for and fight for are positively affecting their constituency. A personal story of how a program has helped a woman or women or community in that official’s district or state can go a long way in winning support. It also gives her/him a story to tell in press appearances or debates. It personifies the problem.

– Karma Cottman, National Network to End Domestic Violence, contributed to this information.