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### **PILOT STUDY TO AID COUNSELING OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS**

Domestic violence shelters typically have only a few days to determine the best course of action for their clients: Are they safe going back to the hands of their abusers or should they establish a new life away from their partners?

The Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, in conjunction with four state domestic violence shelters, initiated a pilot project effective July 1 that will help counselors better make such decisions. The study measures “stages of change” in victims who seek shelter at the department’s domestic violence contract facilities, said Julie Young, deputy commissioner for domestic violence/sexual assault services.

The assessment tool to be used in the project, based upon five stages of change, was designed by Dr. Jacqueline Dienemann, associate professor of nursing at Johns Hopkins University.

“Nationally, this type of domestic violence assessment is pretty rare,” said Young. “When shelter counselors only have contact with victims for a short period of time,

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typically two weeks maximum, it's difficult for them to determine the victim's true emotional state. This tool will help us determine, from the start, if the victim is still in denial about the abuse or if they're ready to leave the relationship."

Initially, two rural shelters – **Action Associates in Clinton** and **Community Crisis Center in Miami** – and two metropolitan-area shelters – **YWCA Crisis Services in Oklahoma City** and **Domestic Violence Intervention Services in Tulsa** – are participating in the pilot project, said Young. If the assessment proves effective, the project will be expanded to the state agency's more than 30 domestic violence contract facilities statewide.

"The whole concept of the assessment is based on the 'theory of change' – the idea that we go through certain stages or processes when making changes," Young noted. "With each stage, we do different things – we may question the situation or we may commit to a certain action, but still question it.

"Many times, for instance, clients will leave an abuser and come to one of our facilities seeking only temporary shelter," Young said. "They think they're going back home. They don't believe the abuser meant to harm them and they still believe they can change the abuser. Denial and a commitment to continuing the abusive relationship is the first stage."

Ensuing stages of change for domestic violence victims include: Stage Two – staying committed to the relationship, but questioning it; Stage Three – considering change; Stage Four – breaking away from the partner or the partner curtailing abuse; and Stage Five – establishing a new life, either separately or with the partner.

Victims who enter domestic violence shelters can be at any of these stages and

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counseling should reflect their current stage, Young said. In the first two stages, counseling should focus on helping victims become aware of the danger to their safety, identify abusive behaviors and help them realize they aren't to blame for abusive behavior. At Stage Three, victims are aware they're being abused and are probably motivated to preserve themselves and their safety. Counseling should focus on safety and change planning, seeking appropriate assistance and examining feelings, self-identity and mental health issues. At the last two stages, clients are typically seeking help to safeguard the changes they've made in their lives.

“The key issue for all of our clients is safety,” Young added. “Sometimes a person who's still in denial will come in and, after evaluating the situation, our counselors may believe a protective order is needed for matters related solely to the victim's safety. If the assessment shows the person isn't ready for that, though, we can suggest alternatives so they can make needed changes internally. Self-empowerment is vital before domestic violence victims can make effective change. Many of our domestic violence advocates promote self-empowerment, and this tool will allow them to do that even more efficiently.”

As part of the assessment, clients will be asked to select from among five responses to such questions as: What starts verbal or physical or sexual abuse incidents by your partner or spouse? How do you manage to avoid abuse or defuse it? Have you ever asked for police or court help against your partner? How attached do you feel to this relationship? How would you describe your relationship with your partner? Do you think you should be loyal to this relationship? Have you gotten help to deal with your partner's

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violence and verbal abuse? How do you see your “true self” and your own needs? Do you see yourself as able to take care of yourself and live without your partner?

Additional questions concern the severity of emotional/verbal abuse, and the severity and frequency of physical violence. The assessment also includes a “safety behavior checklist” that calls for the victim to choose five safety acts she will do in the near future, with a one-month follow-up visit to make sure she carried through with the actions.

“This assessment is a win-win approach – it helps our counselors better target their services, while at the same time allowing our clients to receive the best possible care, based upon their stage of change,” Young concluded. “Oklahoma is one of the few places in the country pursuing this approach to helping victims of domestic violence lead safer, more empowering lives.”

The Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services also operates a “Safeline” hotline 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for victims of sexual assault who need support or counseling services. The number is **1-800-522-7233**.

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