

Emily Shaw

Professor Sorensen

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Program to Empower Women- Mujeres de Coraje

With the growing number of Latino citizens and immigrants in the United States, I believe it is essential to provide more services in which Latino victims of crime feel they can safely and easily seek help. Many women (though men are victims too) who make up the majority of victims of crime committed by intimate partners or close family/friends in the United States encounter barriers to seeking help. For Latinas, they face additional barriers due to cultural differences. I will describe some of these barriers in the next paragraph. In an article titled, Cultural Influences on Domestic Violence, Susan Chaney, NP, and Letty John, RN discuss some of the issues “Hispanics” face in regards to domestic violence. They note, “One of the most important advancements in our understanding of domestic violence is the acknowledgement that culture affects a woman’s experience with violence and her perception of abuse” (Susan Chaney). In an attempt to provide services to Latinas who are victims of crime I have created a program called Mujeres de Coraje (Women of Courage) which I will discuss in great detail in this paper.

The reason I believe my program, Mujeres de Coraje, is in need of implementation is to provide assistance to the many Latina women who are suffering but do not seek help due to; fear, shame, embarrassment, lack of economic resources, lack of education about legal rights, lack of trust of authorities, lack of knowledge about confidential/safe resources, prior experience with culturally incompetent providers, and language barriers. As mentioned above, Latinas are often victims of crimes such as assault, rape, and abuse. According to Alianza, “It is apparent the Latino population’s need for domestic violence services is growing” (Alianza—National Latino Alliance

For The Elimination of Domestic Violence). In order to address this problem it is necessary to understand and be sensitive to the cultural beliefs and many barriers that prevent crime victims from seeking help. “A strong sense of culture keeps Latinas from ‘betraying’ long-standing values. They believe their family obligations always come first no matter what personal animosities may exist” (Alianza—National Latino Alliance For The Elimination of Domestic Violence). Chaney and John describe a huge barrier victim’s face, “In the limited studies that have been published, Hispanic women report that a primary reason they do not seek help for domestic abuse is fear of deportation.” Other barriers to accessing help that they describe are, “loss of economic stability, lack of transportation and inability to understand English.” Chaney states, “Research shows that many women do not know that resources are available in venues that do not threaten their family unit” (Susan Chaney).

Further, the cultural beliefs and values about what abuse is and whether it is acceptable varies among Latinas depending on different generation’s levels of acculturation in the United States. According to Mujeres Latinas En Accion, there is a law in Mexico called “abandon de hogar.” “Abandon de hogar,” punishes women who leave their homes, even to flee violence.” “Women convicted of “abandoning the home” often lost custody of their children” (Mujeres Latinas En Accion). It is not surprising then that Mexican women who are recent immigrants would view abuse very differently than acculturated Americans. They may be accustomed to victimization and not view it as abuse. If they do feel victimized they may have given up hope of change. They may falsely believe they still have no rights in the United States. They may love their machismo and do anything to please him. They may believe that God would not give them anything they can’t handle. The website, Mujeres Latinas En Accion, describes the following difficulties Latinas face in regards to abuse:

A Latina who can't keep her family together is considered a failure. She may stay with an abusive husband or not disclose her situation to relatives in order to keep up appearances. Family members may be particularly unsympathetic when a Latina tries to leave her abusive marriage. Women who are deeply religious may believe a violent spouse is their "cross to bear." Community outreach in Spanish around domestic violence is almost non-existent. Latinas without economic resources must rely on public service providers yet they are seldom culturally sensitive or Spanish language assistant (Mujeres Latinas En Accion).

These often overlooked or ignored cultural differences and barriers, as well as the growing number of Latina immigrants who are undocumented is my inspiration for creating a program that can assist Latinas in healing from trauma and abuse in a safe, affordable, culturally competent environment. In speaking with Rocio Gonzalez, BIA from Holy Cross Ministries, she was very supportive of my idea. She told me that she views a lack of affordable resources for immigrant victims as a big problem because they "frequently encounter immigrant victims who have nowhere to go for help because they don't have insurance, Medicaid or victims reparations" (Rocio Gonzalez). My strategy for Mujeres de Coraje encompasses three main objectives: 1) To Support and Empower Women, 2) To Make Safe, Affordable, Culturally Competent Referrals and Advocate for Immigrant Victims Rights and 3) Educate Victims and Families about Violence. I would also offer a child care program to accommodate women who could otherwise not attend.

Location is of the utmost importance in creating a safe environment, in recruiting Latinas, and in finding a place that will be affordable. Therefore, I decided that, at least in the beginning I would find a Catholic church who would allow me to use their facilities a few evenings a week. When interviewing Nora Gockeritz and Alba Garcia-Cabrera from Centro de la Familia de Utah they agreed that my idea of asking a Catholic church to use facilities is a good idea. They

commented, “It would be a safe place for Latinos because many of them are Catholic” (Garcia-Cabrera). They did not think the church would charge me to use their facilities. If I could not find a Catholic church I would look into other churches and/or schools. Nora Gockeritz and Alba Garcia-Cabrera were very supportive of my project and felt there is, in fact, a need for such a program.

The first objective, to support and empower women, I would accomplish by offering free or sliding-scale weekly support groups in which Latinas can create trust, empowerment, hope, confidence and healing. I would probably start with one or two groups which lasted 1.5 hours one night a week. I would search for a bi-lingual, culturally competent, Latino therapist or other qualified individual, who has had similar experiences and/or training and experience with trauma and abuse to lead or co-lead each group. In best of circumstances I would be able to find someone who would be so dedicated to the cause they would be willing to volunteer their time.

The second objective, to make safe, affordable, culturally competent referrals and advocate for victims rights, would be a large part of the program because I’m sure, due to lack of resources, we could not accommodate many of these women’s and perhaps men’s needs. And because so many Latinos who are victims of crime fear seeking help, especially if they are undocumented and fear deportation, it would be crucial to be a trustworthy source for them to come to for referrals. Latinos may not be aware that there are organizations who offer Spanish-speaking counseling that is free or on a sliding scale. One such organization that does is the Rape Recovery Center. Unsure myself, I called and spoke to an employee who assured me that the RRC holds support groups in English and Spanish and they are available to help ANY victim of rape or sexual assault. She assured me that, “immigration status is not obtained and if it were it would be kept strictly confidential” (Center).

Besides counseling, I would want to be a resource for other referrals. Referrals to crisis lines may be extremely important. Some women may choose to leave abusers and thus need referrals to shelters that are: safe, will not report their immigration status, accept children and speaks their language. Other women may have husbands or partners who are aware of their problems and desire counseling. In such cases, it will be important to know culturally competent treatment options for Latino men, such as El Hombre Noble (Garza). Some Latinos may lack resources and therefore connecting them to competent employees at Victim's Reparations or Workforce Services could be very beneficial. Referrals to immigration attorneys may be desired by some undocumented victims of crime once they become aware of certain laws designed to protect them. However, I'd probably refrain from making referrals regarding immigration options until I know how much risk is involved. I do, however, see the value in knowing what laws are designed to protect these victims so that I may be educated about all available options.

To gain more insight I contacted Mark Williams, Immigration Attorney & Co-Director of Immigration at Holy Cross Ministries to obtain some information about undocumented victim's rights. He informed me that, "Utah doesn't really have any specific laws regarding immigrant victims, but the U.S. Supreme Court issued a decision in 1997 stating that it is unconstitutional to deny public services like police protection to undocumented persons" (Williams). He stated further, "Federal law does provide several different types of legal status for immigrant victims of crime, and our agency specializes in helping such victims with these legal processes. They are called the VAWA Self-Petition, the U Visa (U Nonimmigrant Status) and the T Visa (T Nonimmigrant Status)" (Williams). He stated that the U Visa, passed by Congress in 2000, is most relevant to the majority of crimes, as well as the most common cases he sees.

The website for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) described the U Visa as, "Provides immigration protection to crime victims who have suffered substantial mental or

physical abuse as a result of the crime. The U Visa allows victims to remain in the United States and assist law enforcement authorities in the investigation or prosecution of the criminal activity. (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services- Victims of Human Trafficking & Other Crimes)” For undocumented domestic violence victims the law that is designed to protect them is called the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). According to the USCIS website, the VAWA allows, “Victims of domestic violence who are the child, parent, or current/former spouse of a United States citizen or a permanent resident (green card holder) and are abused by the citizen or permanent resident may be eligible to apply for a green card themselves without needing the abuser to file for immigration benefits on their behalf” (Immigration Options for Victims of Crimes StatusM-779).

The third objective of my program would be to educate victims, their families and the overall Latino community about violence and related subjects. I would do this by holding weekly or bi-weekly meetings ran by guest speakers. Topics I would want to educate about would be U.S. laws pertaining to child abuse, cycles of violence, trauma and effects of violence, learning how to support crime victims, gaining support from family, learning techniques to deal with stress and anger, teaching boundaries, parenting resources, community resources, etc. One area I would want to focus on eventually is educating youth and giving them tools in order to understand the importance of respecting and valuing themselves and others. I would love to incorporate summer camps for youth once funds were established. For my guest speakers I would recruit Latino social workers, violence/trauma survivors, educators, volunteers from other organizations, etc.

The costs involved in this program would vary greatly depending on how many volunteers I could recruit, whether or not I had use of free facilities and the number of clients served. In the best case scenario, but probably unrealistic, I would not be charged for building use and I’d have volunteers leading/co-leading my support groups, speaking at my weekly or bi-weekly meetings,

and working in the daycare. If this were the case I would probably only need to hire two or three part-time employees to help me run the program. Annually labor would probably cost close to \$90,000. However I would probably need to hire two full time therapists to run my support groups and offer counseling services, which would cost an additional minimum of \$120,000 a year. If I had to pay for facility fees, say at \$2,000/month it would add approximately \$24,000/year.

After speaking with the ladies from Centro de la Familia de Utah I was surprised when they said I definitely need to provide food because it is typically expected (Garcia-Cabrera). Therefore, I would need to pay for snacks for the children in the daycare. If there were two support groups each week with 15 members and each member brought 5 kids that would be 150 kids to buy snacks for each week. If I spent only a dollar on each snack that would be \$150 a week for daycare snacks, for a total of \$7822 a year. In addition, I would need to purchase paper and crayons, and other miscellaneous supplies for the daycare. If I reached out to the community for donations for toys, games, books, furniture and supplies I could probably budget \$100.00 a week on supplies, for a total of around \$5,200/year. I'd also provide snacks and water/coffee for the weekly or bi-weekly meetings, but not the support groups. If 200 attended weekly, which is a fairly high estimate, and I spent \$4.00 per person on drinks/snacks it would cost me \$41,600/year on food for parent/family meetings. A total, minimal estimate for food costs would be about \$49,422/year.

Adding up these expenses I estimate the total cost of running this program to be between \$140,000 and \$284,000 a year. In order to run such a program I would need to apply for grants through private foundations and government programs. I would also need to find financial support in the community and raise money through annual funds and fundraising events. A target population, perhaps, could be members of the Catholic Church who see the value in assisting Latinos in their community who could benefit greatly by their generosity. Because of the poor

reputation the media has given the Catholic Church in regards to sexual assault, perhaps members would be passionate about helping victims of crime. Without funding it is difficult to implement a program with need for professionals. However, with enough work and determination I do believe a program such as this could be successful, perhaps at a much cheaper cost.

I expect to have a lot of resistance to this program, particularly from Latinos in the community who are very traditional and do not believe support should be sought outside of the family. The cultural beliefs and barriers I described earlier may be too difficult for some victims to change or overcome. Because so much violence occurs within families, I expect there will be resistance from victims who want to participate but fear they would be betraying their families or would be at risk for further victimization. Perpetrators of violence will most definitely be resistant to the program if they become aware of family members attendance. Parentesco, the role the extended family has in the Latino culture, may create resistance for a crime victim if he/she is hiding abuse and does not want the entire family to find out about it. Another area for resistance will probably be from foundations and other sources of funding due to discrimination against Latinos and the harsh feelings some people will have towards the undocumented individuals I will be committed to serving.

Despite all of the potential for resistance, I believe there will be many victims of crime who are desperately seeking resources within a safe, familiar Latino culture. To help counter resistance to my program I would create safety through taking a non-judgmental, culturally competent and educational stance in regards to domestic violence and crime. Additionally, I feel offering education and resources to men who may struggle with the dark side of machismo could help Latinos feel less threatened and more empowered. Overall, I believe enough people will benefit from *Mujeres de Coraje* to make any resistance manageable.

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