

# Community Engagement

Putting the Work of Ending Domestic Violence into the Hands of More and More People



According to the U.S. Department of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control, nearly 25% of women report being abused by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Those who know domestic violence work are familiar with this shocking statistic that represents women in all strata of life--ethnic, racial, economic, educational, etc.

Over the years, the domestic violence field has responded to battered women and their children primarily through systems—supporting the women to be safe by leaving their abusive partners and establishing new lives. A national shelter system has been established; and judges, law enforcement officers, health providers, clergy, and teachers are being trained in domestic violence and are applying their learning in their work.

These responses are important, but this fact--1/4 of women report abuse--calls us to think more deeply and question our methods. Is what we currently do reaching and supporting all women (1 in 4) who are battered at some time in their lives? What about the women who lack access to systems or fear them? Is leaving the abuser the only option that women and children have to be safe?

We at Casa de Esperanza believe that a woman should have an option in addition to leaving her partner—staying with the partner because the abuse has stopped, there is accountability for the abuser, and she finds safety within her own community. This second option may seem to be “pie in the sky.” However, unless we—in the domestic violence field--truly believe that domestic violence can end and move beyond our current systems, we have no business claiming that our mission is to end it.

## Casa de Esperanza

Several years ago, Casa de Esperanza realized that our service model followed mainstream assumptions--we had merely added linguistic differences and cultural flair to our work. In conversations with many Latinas from our communities, we heard them say, “We don’t want to leave our families and stay in shelter. We just want the violence to stop!” They were telling us that our mainstream domestic violence model wasn’t enough!

So we listened to our communities and stepped onto Latina ground. It took courage, introspection, and truly allowing Latinas to lead us. We recognized the centrality of the community and family to Latino life and that domestic violence will come to an end only with the involvement of communities. Our focus, direction, and mission changed. Our journey led us to an organizational approach that we call Community Engagement--putting the work of ending domestic violence into the hands of more and more people.

Our Community Engagement work is based on these core beliefs:

- Ending domestic violence in Latino communities--or any community—will only be accomplished by community members.
- Battered Latinas live in communities, not in systems--where most of the domestic violence investment and services are.
- Latinas are both agents of change and beneficiaries of change.
- Most people--when given information, knowledge, tools, and access to support--will do what is in the best interest of their families, their communities, and themselves.

- There are tremendous untapped strengths and assets in communities.
- Casa de Esperanza’s role in ending domestic violence is catalyst, facilitator, connector, and mobilizer of the community’s talents and resources.
- Systems serve as allies to communities.
- Casa de Esperanza’s approach is to
  - » LISTEN/LEARN (from the collective voices of Latinas)
  - » ACT (respond)
  - » ANALYZE (with Latinas)
  - » ADJUST/CREATE
  - » and repeat the process: LISTEN.....ACT.....ANALYZE.....ADJUST/CREATE

These beliefs (principles) are not Latino-specific; we believe they can be applied in all communities. (Casa de Esperanza’s manual—Fuerza Unida: A Manual for Engaging Communities—provides the specifics for Casa de Esperanza’s listening and community engagement process.)

Today our domestic violence work is embedded in communities, and we increasingly address issues that impact on people’s daily lives. Example: Listening to immigrant Latinas, we heard the tremendous sense of isolation they felt--not knowing where to get vital, reliable information. In response, Casa de Esperanza established information and resource centers (Centros de Información y Recursos) in Latino marketplaces. At these centers, Latinas/os access any and all kinds of information they need for daily living. The information and support is trustworthy and provided in Spanish. The centers have, in fact, reduced isolation and decreased stressors—which contribute to abuse--in people’s lives.

Casa de Esperanza’s Community Engagement work comprises other areas. We prepare peer educators—Latinas and youth--to train others on domestic violence; we work with and through congregations; and our Family Advocacy is done in community as well as in shelter. We are in communities--working with community members on neighborhood agendas like workforce, business, and housing development (all of which are negatively impacted by domestic violence).

Although our primary work is within communities, we continue to work within systems, such as the police department, Hennepin County’s Domestic Abuse Service Center, and Ramsey County’s Child Protection system. This presence within systems enables Casa de Esperanza to connect systems to communities and to affect policy in ways that have greater relevance and benefit to members of communities.

## **Benefits of Community Engagement**

So what is to be gained by doing Community Engagement work? Ultimately, the benefit of a community engagement approach is that it invests in everyday people to effect change (for the better) where they live--their communities. People are engaged in creating communities that are nurturing and safe for women and children.

Community Engagement derives from Casa de Esperanza’s mission--Mobilize Latinas and Latino communities to end domestic violence. Putting the work of ending domestic violence into the hands of community members reaches further than we ever could as an organization. As a result of our Community Engagement approach, Casa de Esperanza has a growing reputation within Latino communities and among majority culture organizations--locally, regionally, and nationally--as a highly responsive, innovative organization. We are “out in front” as funders are taking a heightened interest in assets-based, civic and community engagement work. Our educational tools are being distributed nationally. We are positioned for the future.

## **Suggested Reading:**

Preventing Family Violence: Community Engagement Makes the Difference (September 2002) <http://www.casadeesperanza.org>

endabuse.org

Preventing Family Violence: Lessons From the Community Engagement Initiative (October 2004) <http://www.endabuse.org>

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