



A Brief Conversation about Social Capital

A Casa de Esperanza staff member explains social capital

Why do you believe that social capital is critical in Casa de Esperanza's work to end domestic violence?

What's so revolutionary about our work is that we recognize and value the natural connections between people—neighbors, friends, family members—that result in a tendency to want to support one another, help each other be successful, and share resources. We believe these connections—social capital—are a powerful force that is unrecognized and untapped by social service agencies, government institutions, etc., in their traditional responses to social issues.

So what do you do? How do you put social capital to work at Casa de Esperanza?

We use the potential of social capital in a variety of ways. In our direct service work—advocacy with women in the community and at our shelter, conversations with people at our Information and Resource Centers—we start by encouraging individuals to explore their existing strengths, resources, and support networks. For the most part, they are informal connections—neighbors, relatives in another state that provide emotional support, daycare centers, etc.—and we hold them up as the foundation for realizing goals. Then we support people in setting goals. We explore together the resources they already have to reach those goals and other resources that are available to them. These supports and resources may be formal or informal—becoming involved with a church group, getting on welfare, obtaining an OFP, having a conversation with in-laws—anything! We know that families do not live in a vacuum and we recognize the complex and interconnected realities of families experiencing domestic abuse.

Is that the only way that Casa de Esperanza puts social capital to work?

Not at all, we believe that building social capital is an important way to prevent domestic violence. For example, we recruit and train community members to promote and model healthy relationships among their peers. One of our initiatives trains Latina teens to facilitate conversations with others about healthy relationships and teen dating violence. We know that teens are greatly influenced by their peers, so a teenage Latina can have a real impact on her friends' attitudes and expectations about relationships. Employing the strategy of social capital in this way is directly related to our mission of mobilizing more and more individuals to end domestic violence.

It's informal but very intentional. It's the day-to-day interaction with our neighbors, friends, cousins, etc., that changes our attitudes and norms. Once people learn about and understand domestic violence (that's Casa de Esperanza's role—to train and teach), they integrate that understanding into their goals and expectations about life. They communicate it to others very naturally; it influences families' interactions with one another; and it influences whether dating relationships are supported by friends. This type of influence occurs in trusting relationships, and the trust factor is critical in culturally-specific communities, such as Latino communities. Systems and organizations send in professionals to provide a message, but it is much more believable and accepted when it comes from your friend, your cousin, or your aunt. The potential for impact in one's life is much greater when the message comes from a trusted individual rather than a professional, an agency, or a court.

But that means, then, that Casa de Esperanza is not controlling the message. Is that OK with you?

Absolutely. That's the point. We firmly believe that our organization will not end domestic violence—the community will. We want to put the work of ending domestic violence in as many hands as possible. What could be better than to put it in the hands of people who care about one another and have each other's best interests at heart?

Copyright © Casa de Esperanza 2008. All Rights Reserved.