Suggestions for Improving Military-Civilian Domestic Violence Collaborations

Though separated from surrounding communities in many ways, military installations are not islands. Service members and their families regularly visit these surrounding communities and often live in them, rather than in the installations. Any domestic violence (DV) incident that occurs off installations is under the jurisdiction of local civilian authorities. In fact, civilian authorities may also have jurisdiction over (and be first responders to) incidents that occur on installations. Thus, a number of the recommendations of the Defense Task Force on Domestic Violence (DTFDV)—which conducted a comprehensive review from 2000 to 2003 of how the military could most effectively prevent and respond to DV by and against its service members—centered, either directly or indirectly, on improving collaborations between military and civilian authorities on DV cases.

While increased collaboration could bring a host of benefits, implementing such collaborations is a considerable challenge for both installations and communities. RAND conducted two case studies to better understand how the process of implementation is progressing and offered some suggestions for improvement.

HOW THE CASE STUDIES WERE CONDUCTED

The case studies were conducted in two localities—Anchorage, Alaska and San Diego, California—that were the first recipients of funds from the Department of Defense (DoD) under an incentive program intended to promote DV collaboration between installations and surrounding communities (see the box). Researchers visited each site and conducted interviews with key informants both in civilian communities and on neighboring military installations. For all interviewees, they used a semi-structured interview protocol that covered a range of topics specifically developed for each agency and position type, including, for example, challenges encountered in forming collaborative relationships.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE CASE STUDIES

Collaborative relationships can be strengthened by formalized memorandums of understanding (MOUs). Key here is the notion of “formal” MOUs. Most of the interviewees noted that the existing relationships had begun informally and that such relationships needed to be formalized to ensure that they did not depend on individual personalities and relationships and thus be jeopardized by turnover in personnel.

Civilian-military liaison positions can facilitate collaboration. Interviewees universally saw such positions as vital. One concern is that the DoD and/or military services need to determine the size of installations that warrant such a position. For smaller installations that do not warrant one, the DoD might consider expanding victim advocate positions to include a liaison component. For larger installations, the DoD might consider pairing a victim advocate position with a separate community liaison position.

DV collaborations should be viewed as a high priority by both high-level military commands and civilian authorities. This is harder in the civilian community than on military installations. On the civilian side, there are many decisionmakers in different agencies at different levels of government. Targeting DoD incentive programs toward encouraging collaborations would provide a catalyst for individuals in key positions in civilian agencies to support collaborative relationships. On the military side, having installation commanders communicate to the civilian community that DV will not be tolerated can help

How Our Sites Used DoD Incentive Grant Funds

The two military installations that neighbor Anchorage, Alaska—Elmendorf Air Force Base and the Army’s Fort Richardson—applied for and received DoD funds. The project, entitled “Joining Forces: A Coordinated Community Response to Domestic Violence,” sponsored a series of joint training sessions, a three-day conference featuring presentations by both civilian and military representatives, and the development of a Web site for posting community and military information and resources.

In the San Diego area, three neighboring installations—Navy Region Southwest, Marine Corps Recruit Depot, and Marine Corps Air Station Miramar—were awarded funds to sponsor the addition of a military liaison position to San Diego’s Family Justice Center, a single location in San Diego intended to serve as “one-stop shopping” for DV victims. It houses 24 different agencies that provide services to DV victims, including police, prosecutors, victim advocates, and civil attorneys.
encourage the civilian community to approach the installations.

Payment should not be seen as a barrier to participation in civilian batterer intervention programs for military personnel required to attend. Generally, military benefits do not cover civilian DV programs. If the abuser and victim share finances, making the family pay for such programs could inadvertently penalize the victim.

Providing materials explaining installation services and victim’s rights within the military would be helpful. This includes providing materials to military spouses about services available to family members on local installations; ensuring that such materials contain information oriented toward civilian spouses (not service providers) about their rights and protections within the military; and widely disseminating these materials to the surrounding civilian community.

Information about the military implications of the federal gun control law might reduce confusion and inconsistency. This includes developing a consistent military policy and response on removing firearms from service members in DV cases and making both the military and civilian communities aware of that policy.

Formal procedures for civilians to identify DV cases and notify the military can promote information-sharing. When DV incidents occur in the civilian community, military affiliation may not be discovered (sometimes because of deliberate attempts by service members to conceal it), and military commanders may not be notified of an arrest, prosecution, or even conviction. One suggestion is that the DoD and/or military services issue a directive requiring service members to inform their command of an arrest and providing sanctions for not doing so.

Agreements are needed to address victim confidentiality. The military views DV as a “fitness for duty” issue and thus feels that commanders must be made aware of DV incidents, regardless of the victim’s wishes. This view may discourage civilian service providers from referring victims to military services and keep both abusers and victims from seeking such services on their own. Having military counterparts to civilian victim advocates who could provide confidentiality and refer victims for military-specific support and services without triggering victim fears about notifying the command is one way to address this issue.

DV collaboration conferences and participation in DV council meetings can provide benefits. Regular participation in such venues—by both civilian and military representatives—is a key strategy for developing and strengthening DV collaboration by keeping it on the “front burner.” While national collaboration conferences are useful, local conferences are vital.

Training may be needed for both civilian and military personnel on DV and the role of collaboration. This includes training about the potential partner’s orientation toward DV, organizational structures, and the roles and responsibilities of organizational units/agencies that handle DV cases.

Working through issues arising on installations that have shared civilian jurisdiction may require special attention. In both case study communities, civilian authorities share jurisdiction on one of the neighboring installations, presenting unique challenges. Training by civilian DV service providers, victims advocates, and representatives of civilian criminal justice agencies (particularly law enforcement) for military law enforcement personnel could help increase their understanding of critical issues in DV response and of civilian practices and procedures. Because of the variation in DV laws across states and the enforcement of DV laws at the local level, instruction by local representatives is the best way to train military personnel at neighboring installations.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

While the case studies provide useful suggestions for improving collaboration, they are far from adequate to fill the gulf in knowledge about military-civilian collaboration. Research must be undertaken in a number of localities representative of the range of collaboration experiences and community and installation characteristics. Such research could both significantly increase the DoD’s chances of success in promoting collaborations and could also assess the outcomes of such collaborations and provide information on what forms of collaboration might be most effective in reducing DV incidents and promoting victim safety.

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