

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROTOCOL

THE REGIONAL HEALTHY MARRIAGE COALITION (RHMC)

***NOTE:** This site-specific protocol was developed for a multi-county coalition organized for several key purposes: a) identify and publicize scholarly research regarding the value of activities that produce safe, successful family relationships, including marriage; (b) increase the accessibility of those sources of marriage education and family support that are already available; (c) increase the quantity, variety, and quality of sources; and (d) increase couples' interest in accessing these supports. The Healthy Marriage Coalition itself does NOT provide marriage education or other services directly, but motivates and supports others to do so.*

This protocol describes how they will work with their coalition partners to ensure that each addresses domestic violence issues appropriately, and the kinds of tools and resources that they will provide to them. Identifying information has been removed.

Core Partners

***NOTE:** In this section of the protocol, the RHMC listed their key partners, which consisted of local marriage education programs, county and state government agencies, 2 universities, and other community organizations, including their domestic violence partner, which was the state domestic violence coalition, and the name and contact information for the liaison with each partner.*

Purpose, Mission, and Principles of the RHMC

Grounding all activities of the RHMC are the following values and principles:

- ◆ Healthy marriages are based on free choice; the RHMC is not interested in forcing marriage on anyone and does not support trapping individuals in abusive relationships.
- ◆ We believe that marriages thrive in an environment of rich community support that emphasizes marriage preparation, prevention or resolution of marital problems, relationship healing, and skill development.

- ◆ At the heart of healthy marriages are love, acceptance, forgiveness, lifelong commitment, unconditional devotion to the well-being of one's partner, and regular time for authentic communication and marriage enrichment.
- ◆ Marriages thrive best when spouses—individually and as a couple—take excellent care of themselves physically, socially, and spiritually.
- ◆ A thriving, healthy marriage is based on realistic expectations.
- ◆ Healthy marriages increase the likelihood that children will benefit from responsible, nurturing relationships with both their mothers and fathers.
- ◆ When a healthy marriage is not a practical option for two parents, their children flourish best in an environment of cooperative parenting, where both parents remain connected and involved with their children's lives, recognizing that the safety of the adults and children involved is of utmost concern.

Scope and Purpose of Protocol

RHMC is a coalition of community organizations—social services, education, government, religious, and health care—who recognize and affirm the vital importance of strong and healthy marriages. In a professional and respectful manner, RHMC seeks to foster love and trust among married and potentially married people of every ethnicity, faith, and socioeconomic status.

RHMC recognizes that domestic violence is a complex problem and that physical and emotional abuse are serious obstacles to stable and healthy relationships. An important message to convey in all aspects of this initiative is that individuals involved in healthy relationships do not engage in violent, abusive, or coercive behavior.

This protocol is designed to ensure that domestic violence issues within families targeted by RHMC are safely, routinely, and consistently identified and appropriately addressed and that adequate supports and safeguards are in place for families dealing with domestic violence.

Shared Principles, Shared Concerns

- ◆ It is the express intent of RHMC that all healthy marriage activities and programs be provided in a manner that does not compromise the safety of any family member.
- ◆ In promoting healthy marriages and co-parenting relationships, care will be taken not to disparage or compromise the efforts and successes of single parents.

- ◆ RHMC recognizes the diversity of the community we serve and the importance of providing culturally sensitive approaches to supporting the development of healthy relationships and families.

Defining Domestic Violence

For the purpose of this initiative, the term “domestic violence” describes a pattern of abuse and coercive behaviors used to gain power and control over an intimate partner. Another commonly used term is “intimate partner violence” (IPV), which captures abuse in all intimate relationships (married, cohabiting, dating). For the purposes of this document, the terms will be used interchangeably.

According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, “Abuse is physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure or wound someone.”

The Region being served has alarmingly high rates of IPV. The work of domestic violence awareness advocates and healthy marriage educators is deeply affected by such rates.

Lifetime Prevalence of IPV	National	Region
Physical abuse by an intimate partner*	22.1%	34.9%
Sexual abuse by an intimate partner	7.7%	9.4%
Stalking and very frightened by an intimate partner*	4.8%	14.8%

Source: (state study, cite provided)

* Statistically significant.

NOTE: The protocol also included county based data on the rates of Protection Order filings, domestic violence arrest rates, cases reported to Adult Protective Services, numbers of victims receiving emergency shelter.

Regional Efforts to Address Domestic Violence

NOTE: The protocol provided brief descriptions of recent efforts to raise awareness of domestic violence in the region and enhance intervention and prevention efforts.

Raising Awareness Among Participating Partners

As previously mentioned, RHMC is a coalition of community organizations—social services, education, government, religious, and health care. The organizations that self-select to be most actively involved with RHMC are called Participating Partners.

Participating Partner Coordinators

Participating Partner Coordinators (PPCs) serve as their organizations' primary liaisons with the RHMC staff. PPCs make a personal pledge to be responsible and responsive, interacting with RHMC staff to accomplish many varied tasks of the initiative's research and education implementation. They attend an orientation session and represent the organization at the quarterly coordinators' roundtables, designed to promote the exchange of information and ideas between Participating Partners. PPCs also identify representatives from the organization to attend RHMC-sponsored activities as applicable, such as training for a particular marriage education curriculum.

New PPCs can obtain domestic violence awareness training by a local domestic violence professional at quarterly RHMC roundtable events. Should such a training not be scheduled before the PPC would attend a marriage education event, a personal meeting with RHMC's Coordinator will be arranged. The protocol will be discussed in detail, and a one-on-one interactive education session in domestic violence awareness will be conducted.

NOTE: The RHMC's Internal Relations Coordinator is a Licensed Professional Counselor whose graduate training included internships with the (state domestic violence coalition).

Providing Safe Opportunities to Disclose: Self-Screening for Domestic Violence

- (1) When each Participating Partner organization publicizes its upcoming class, activity, or program, whether via flyer, bulletin insert, poster, newsletter, e-mail, or letter, RHMC will ask the organization to include the following section of text. The text will also be published on RHMC's Web site.

“We fight all the time. Is this class for me?” All couples fight, right? Sure. And this class will likely teach you how to speak your mind in healthy ways, even how to “fight fair.” But if you are in an abusive relationship, this class may not give you the kind of help you need. If your partner embarrasses you with put-downs...controls what you do, who you see or talk to, or where you go...takes your money or refuses to give you money... intimidates you with a weapon...shoves, slaps, or hits you...acts like the abuse is no big deal, that it's your fault, or even denies doing it? Answering yes to any of these questions may mean you're in an abusive relationship, and a marriage education class may not give you the help you need. But you are not alone! For support and more information, please call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). All calls are confidential.”

- (2) Prior to class, copies of the brochure entitled “Domestic Violence Personal Safety Plan: You Have the Right to Be Safe” will be placed in the women's restrooms closest to the classroom. Copies of this brochure will be provided by the RHMC.

- (3) Five to ten copies of the resource list “Community Contacts” from RHMC, containing contact information for community classes, activities, and programs, will be placed at the back of the classroom.
- (4) During a gathering before the marriage education/activity class takes place, all potential participants will view a 10-minute video titled *Building Bridges: Marriage Education and Domestic Violence Awareness*. The video script was written by RHMC staff and reviewed by professionals in the local domestic violence community. The video advises participants what to expect from class, explains the goals of the program, describes the course content and its limitations in addressing violent and abusive relationships, and defines domestic violence and safety planning.

If the group cannot view the video prior to class, participants will view it during the first 10 minutes of their first marriage/relationship strengthening class.

- (5) Following the video, each class participant will be physically handed two items by the educator or PPC:
 - a. The National Domestic Violence Hotline brochure titled *No matter what I do, it's never right*. This tri-fold brochure is written in English on side 1 and Spanish on side 2. It contains a short quiz that helps the reader determine whether she or he is in an abusive relationship and gives the hotline's information.
 - b. A card providing emergency resource contact numbers for the RHMC services area and the National Domestic Violence Hotline.

As the PPC hands out the materials, she or he will use the following script as a guide to aid in the smooth transition from the video to class content and make it safe and comfortable for everyone to take the information without feeling targeted

“Thanks for watching the video. You might be wondering why we’re bringing up the issue of Domestic Violence in a marriage education class. Unfortunately, a recent study showed that as many as 35% of women in this state will experience some form of domestic violence in their lifetime. So while you may not have ever faced it, you very well may know someone who is living with domestic violence.

The postcard has local contact information for help with issues of domestic violence. And these numbers aren’t only for people in abusive relationships -- if you have questions about how to help someone you know – a sister, a friend, a co-worker -- you can call too.

Also, in the back of the room I’ve put several copies of a resource list. It lists community classes and support groups in our area that relate to couples and families. You might decide that the timing isn’t right for marriage education classes right now, or, you may just be interested in gathering some community contact information. There are lots of good opportunities listed -- everything from parenting skills to money management to personal physical health.

Thanks for reading these. And remember, that if the video or the reading materials have sparked a question or concern for you, you are welcome to talk to me either during a break tonight, or some other time. OK! Let's take a quick break, and then we'll come back together and get started with class."

Providing Safe Opportunities to Disclose: Interaction and Response

The decision to disclose domestic violence is a difficult one for many domestic violence victims. Survivors have identified a number of important factors that affected their decisions to tell someone about the abuse they were experiencing. (See Appendix A.) Domestic violence victims are more likely to disclose abuse when they:

- perceive that the individual asking is actively listening and truly concerned;
- understand the reason they are being asked about domestic violence; and
- feel assured that the disclosure will not be reported to the abuser or make their situation more complicated or dangerous.

After reading the provided domestic violence self-screening brochures or after viewing the video, a participant may decide that she or he no longer wishes to participate. If the attending PPC is notified of this decision during a verbal exchange, she or he is encouraged to ask the following (taking care that the conversation is private):

"I am sorry you won't be able to stay. I know this particular class is not for everyone. I hope you find another community class you are interested in.

You don't need to answer this question, but because violence is so common in lots of relationships, and yet there's so much help out there, I make it a habit of asking this of anyone who approaches me about leaving class. Do you think you might be in an abusive relationship?"

The PPC may observe other indications that abuse might be occurring, such as jumpiness or nervousness around a partner, signs of controlling or abusive behavior by one of the parties, or indications of distress or injury. If such indicators are present, the PPC may say the following (again, taking care that the conversation is private):

"I noticed [you seemed very uncomfortable earlier/the bruises on your arms/your partner speaking harshly to you before class/other indicator]. I am concerned about you, and I wonder if there is something I can do" or "If you'd like to talk about anything now, or at some other time, I'd be happy to listen."

When disclosures of domestic violence occur as a result of screening or at any point during participation in a healthy marriage program or activity, an appropriate response must follow. The purpose of screening for domestic violence is twofold: to ensure that referrals to and participation in marriage and relationship education activities are appropriate, and to identify and provide assistance to abuse victims.

If current abuse is disclosed, these follow-up questions should be asked to assess whether the person is in immediate danger:

- “Are you in danger right now?”
- “Are you afraid that your partner will hurt you today?”
- “Are you afraid to go home?”
- “Does the abuse seem to be getting worse?”

If yes to any of the above, “Do you have somewhere safe to go right now, or do you need help finding a safe place?”

If no, “Do you want to talk to someone about all this and help you figure out ways to keep yourself safe?”

If the participant is in immediate danger (e.g., the perpetrator is on the premises or the victim cannot safely return home), the PPC should call the local Division of Police.

For any participant who has disclosed abuse (whether or not she or he is in immediate danger and whether the abuse is past or current), the PPC should do the following:

- Inform the victim that the Domestic Violence Program provides victim support services, including crisis counseling and safe housing, 24 hours a day. Give him or her contact information.
- Let the participant know in more detail what the courses will cover if she or he remains interested in participating to improve the quality of a co-parenting relationship or an intact relationship. This will help to ensure informed decision-making and safe participation.
- Provide assistance in determining whether any of the services or programs available through RHMC would be more helpful in improving the quality of the victim's future relationships.

PPCs should practice the following at all times as they respond to disclosures of domestic violence:

- Be knowledgeable about intimate partner violence and its risk factors.
- Talk with the victim privately. Asking about domestic violence in the presence of the perpetrator, or in a way that alerts the perpetrator to the conversation, can put the victim at risk.
- Explain why you are exploring the issue of abuse and tell the individual being screened that she or he does not have to answer any of the questions being asked.
- Pay attention to the language of the screening questions and explain any terms that may not be easily understood.
- Listen patiently; be open to what is being said, and do not appear judgmental or apathetic.
- Help victims and survivors understand their situation and the options available to keep them safe, providing written materials when appropriate.

- Be knowledgeable about community service specialists (e.g., Department for Community Based Services, spouse abuse and rape crisis centers) and connect victims with them, consistent with laws, regulations, and policies, when it is safe and appropriate to do so.

Providing Regional Cultural Sensitivity

Salient cultural issues for the public health arena in the region, and thus for both marriage education efforts and domestic violence awareness programs, include the following:

- Ethnicity
- Literacy level and educational attainment
- Religious affiliation
- Socioeconomic status

RHMC values sensitivity to these issues. To ignore diversity is to risk developing programs and activities that fail to meet the needs of the regional population.

Maintaining Confidentiality

Perpetrators who discover that a victim has told someone about their abuse may retaliate with further threats and violence. For this and other ethical reasons, it is important that information related to disclosures of domestic violence be handled with utmost care and that victims' privacy and the confidentiality of their information receive the highest priority.

Review of Protocol

A 6-month protocol review meeting, with RHMC and local domestic violence professionals, will be conducted to assess implementation strengths and weaknesses and make modifications as necessary. A RHMC staff member will contact PPCs and for input prior to the meeting.