

Shifting From Social Service to Social Change

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Casa de Esperanza (Casa) is an influential domestic violence organization in St. Paul, Minnesota. Upon examining the changes that have occurred within the organization since its inception, we have struggled with returning to the original mission of addressing domestic violence only in the Latino/a community or remaining an agency that serves women from diverse backgrounds. Casa has decided to remain an organization dedicated to serving women from diverse backgrounds, but will now place the community, rather than the individual, at the center of the organization. Within the next ten years, Casa will shift from providing direct social services to working toward broader social change. Specific changes include phasing out direct services, mobilizing communities to fight violence against women as it intersects with other forms of violence, and advocating for legislative change.

AS PART OF THE INTEGRATIVE CAPSTONE PROJECT AT COLUMBIA University School of Social Work (CUSSW), we were assigned to evaluate a modified case study of Casa de Esperanza (Casa). Casa is an existing domestic violence (DV) agency located in St. Paul, Minnesota, that was struggling with the decision to either return to its original mission of addressing DV in the Latino/a community or to remain an agency dedicated to serving women from diverse backgrounds. All information regarding Casa in the paper is based solely on information provided in the case study (Casa Esperanza, 2009). This paper presents the changes that we propose the agency make, and is written from the perspective of Casa as it embarks on implementing these changes. In reality, none of the proposed changes have or will be implemented.

From its inception, Casa was guided by the mission to eliminate violence against women in the Latino/a community. In spite of this initial target group, increasingly diverse groups of women have sought our assistance. Upon analyzing data from organizational focus groups and surveys, our stakeholders have determined that gaps in services

provided by other organizations in the St. Paul, Minnesota area have positioned us to respond to the unique needs of women of color (Casa Esperanza, 2009). We have, therefore, decided to expand our focus in order to respond to women from all backgrounds, particularly women who are marginalized due to poverty, poor education, language barriers, and a fear of deportation, all of which increase the barriers to finding effective services (Women of Color Network, 2006).

Our first priority is to re-conceptualize the women we serve as the center of our organization, what Smith (2006) refers to as “re-centering.” Re-centering involves analyzing and organizing against DV in the context of its multiple layers of violence against communities of color (Smith, 2006). We aim to reject the mainstream concept of feminism that was created in response to the circumstances and needs of white women, and upon which DV organizations are often modeled.

By placing women of all backgrounds at the center of our organization, we are compelled to re-examine the division between social service and social change. According to Kivel (2007), social service work addresses the needs of individuals who have experienced violence, while social change work addresses the root causes of violence. Although we understand the need to provide direct social services, especially for those in crisis, we do not believe that these social services alone will eliminate violence against women. By working toward social change, Casa can help women challenge societal notions of violence rather than simply managing the individual trauma of DV.

The historic prioritizing of the individual over the community in traditional DV models has proven inadequate (Crenshaw, 1993; Bierra, 2007). Casa is committed to resisting and confronting all violence and oppression, including, but not limited to, racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and ageism. Intra-organizationally, we will adopt antioppressive language that brings attention to issues of power and privilege with our employees and clients, as well as with our stakeholders, funders, and other agencies with whom we collaborate. For instance, for as long as we continue to provide direct services, we will no longer assume that clients identify with traditional binary gender norms. Instead of asking whether clients are male or female on our intake forms, we will ask clients how they define their gender. The goal of this change is to avoid re-victimizing clients and to respect each client’s personal identity. In an effort to reorient and reorganize our focus to social change, our major recommendation is to place the community, rather than the individual,

at the center of our anti-violence work. Our revised mission statement and vision to reflect our focus on social change are as follows:

Mission Statement: The mission of Casa de Esperanza is to mobilize our communities to create a society founded on respect, equality, safety, and justice; a pursuit that requires the eradication of violence against women.

Guiding Principles: (1) We serve women from diverse backgrounds that seek safety and protection from domestic violence; (2) we put women at the center of our organization, taking into account the complexities of gender- and sexuality-based violence as experienced by communities of color; and (3) we are an organization dedicated to social change, complemented by sustainable social services.

Organizational Changes

In order to develop an organizational structure that prioritizes survivors as potential community organizers, Casa will reconceptualize our organizational chart to reflect Helgelsen's (2005) web of inclusion, an integrated and organic structure that places leadership at the center of an interconnected web. We aim to disrupt hierarchical boundaries between Casa's staff and constituents by developing leadership among our constituents, hiring constituents as interns and staff, placing constituents on the Board of Directors, and organizing regular community gatherings to facilitate community building among various stakeholders. We are not suggesting the dissolution of all boundaries between staff and constituents. We acknowledge that staff must maintain some level of institutional power in order to effectively organize. However, we are developing an organizational structure in which our constituents feel empowered to become an integral part of organizational change (Bierra, 2007).

Restructuring our organization to become more integrated within our community will also require a number of human resource changes. Our staff must begin to reflect the diversity of the communities we serve with regard to race, gender, culture, language, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, and ability. A recruitment committee consisting of community members and volunteers will be central to our recruiting, hiring, evaluation, and retention processes (Fong & Gibbs, 1995). Before recruiting new staff, job descriptions must be reviewed, evaluated, and re-written to include the ideals of our new mission. Casa must implement activities to incorporate new

staff members into an environment in which they feel comfortable working with existing staff (Mor Barak, 2000). Evaluation of workers will be expanded to include feedback from other staff, survivors, and the broader community. Russo (2001) notes that the professionalization of DV work has encouraged a hierarchical organizational structure within agencies, resulting in services that are provided by individuals who are increasingly removed from the violence and grassroots activism that initially spurred the DV movement. Casa has been deeply impacted by the professionalization of our once community-based origins, and now aspires to shift away from such hierarchical leadership.

We must reorganize our budget and diversify our funding sources. Currently, 80 percent of our budget comes from state and federal revenue to provide social services (Casa Esperanza, 2009). The majority of government funding available is specifically for direct services. Within that constraint, we are unable to serve women who do not have legal residency as our funding requires proof of legal residency or citizenship for each individual we serve. We cannot rely on these funds as we transition to a social change organization. We aim to reduce our dependency on government funding by half over the next five years. Our revised fundraising plans include implementing small- and large-scale fundraising programs, fostering individual community-based donors, soliciting foundation funding from progressive sources, and applying for a broader range of federal and state government grants, including funding to work with individuals who are undocumented. In order to incorporate all of these fundraising activities, the development department, which includes representation from Casa's community constituents, must be strengthened. Fundraising efforts should be tied into community organizing strategies. Outreach should pursue both diverse communities and political, philanthropic, religious, and educational leaders.

We must re-brand and communicate our new identity to our stakeholders. Following Kotter's (1996) process of change theory, we will anchor our new mission and vision within the agency's culture by forming a Community Collaboration Board of three to five community stakeholders. The board will communicate our mission and vision internally (stakeholder meetings, staff development) and externally (annual reports, direct mail, email, newsletters, and media communications). Institutionalizing these innovative approaches into Casa's organizational culture will ensure that the new mission and vision are fully aligned.

Micro-Level Changes

Casa's programs will continue in the short-term to include comprehensive case management in which survivors are provided with shelter, information, and referrals to legal and medical services as well as public benefits. We envision a gradual phasing out of a significant portion of our direct services over the next five to ten years. Sokoloff and Pratt (2005) argue that the DV shelter system is often modeled similarly to the prison system. Women's activities are monitored and policed, and they are cut off from their friends and families. Sokoloff and Pratt write, "The shelter system mirrors the abusive patterns of control that women seek to leave in battering relationships and isolates women from their communities" (p. 145). We will continue in the short-term to conduct a needs assessment to ensure that we are addressing the needs of survivors by utilizing an empowerment approach to our direct services.

To align services with Casa's revised mission, we will use as the primary practice modality a constructivist empowerment approach asserting that women are the experts in their own lives (Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000). Advocates will be trained to defer to the choices that women make with respect to whether or not they leave abusive relationships and to focus on helping women gain resources and support. Shelter care will be phased-out over the next five to ten years and the continued need for shelter care will be addressed through capacity building with other DV organizations that serve women in the St. Paul area.

Mezzo-Level Changes

Historically, violence against women has been viewed as a private issue and women alone have been held accountable for protecting their children and rebuilding their lives. Violence is a public issue that the entire community must be responsible for eradicating. Sustainable violence prevention is contingent on a community's willingness to challenge normative behaviors and attitudes. Therefore, we are pursuing community organizing as the focal point of our struggle against DV (Bowen, Gwiasda, & Brown, 2004). Such an approach operates across underlying systemic issues that create inequalities in the distribution of power and resources that directly contribute to violence against women (Crenshaw, 1993).

To begin this process, we will conduct a thorough needs assessment of our community's understanding of DV and its ability to respond to it. Following Hardina (2002), we will conduct semi-structured interviews and focus groups. These interviews will assess community resources, as well as community members' understanding of the nature, causes, and potential responses to violence against women. Focus groups will include women who have previously sought services for DV, and service providers and professionals in allied areas, such as the family and criminal court systems, hospitals, and schools. We will also involve stakeholders such as representatives from the media, local businesses, academics, and representatives from other groups who have not traditionally been active in the anti-DV movement.

Following an analysis of the needs assessment, Casa will mobilize toward community activism. Community outreach programs should be expanded to include programs for children, adolescents, women, and men about issues of DV. Community organizing efforts will be two-fold. The first strategy is to raise awareness within communities about violence towards women, its intersection with other forms of violence, and the impact DV has on individuals, families, and communities. The goal of this strategy is to break the silence and stigma surrounding DV and underscore that this is not just a "women's problem" but a human rights issue that affects and oppresses all of our communities.

The second strategy is to organize around specific community issues that hinder DV survivors and communities at large from overcoming cycles of violence. Housing, financial security, and immigration are significant concerns. Casa intends to address these issues through building coalitions with other anti-DV, human rights, and anti-oppression groups to spread awareness about these rights to members of the community. We will facilitate letter-writing campaigns, protests, rallies, and meetings with legislators and executive directors of non-profit organizations to bolster support. We will have a visible presence at community events, and we will provide educational awareness through public service announcements, radio and TV interviews, as well as presentations at schools, adult education centers, and community centers.

Macro-Level Changes

In order to complement our community organizing approaches and to promote larger, systemic change, Casa will join the movement that reframes DV as an international human rights issue. We will advocate for legislative changes that push beyond the current

limits in U.S. policies. The goal is to connect individually experienced DV to community violence, state-led violence, and other systems of oppression that perpetuate violence (Bettinger-Lopez, 2008).

Casa will unite with other human rights coalitions. In doing so, we will draw on our strengths and local experiences to inform national and international strategies for combating violence against women. We will also assist in leveraging the work of local, national and international organizations to bolster media coverage, educational outreach, and policy changes.

Casa will benefit from and contribute to advocacy efforts focused on social change at the individual, local community, national, and international levels. By connecting women's experiences with DV at the local level to broader systemic issues, the injustices faced by the women we serve becomes the basis for bringing impact litigation, developing testimony for congressional hearings, lobbying for legislative change, and highlighting the systemic issues that exacerbate violence against women.

Conclusion

The challenge Casa faces with regards to leadership in the field of DV prevention lies in balancing the constant demands of direct social service provision with the rapidly changing macro-level contexts. We have provided a framework for implementing changes at each of the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of social work services. Reconsidering and restructuring Casa's mission will enable us to create an organization that truly addresses violence against women as it intersects with other forms of violence and impacts communities. Community organizing to end DV entails active participation and the articulation of the clear message that all people have the responsibility to end violence (Hart, 1995). By transforming from a social service to a social change organization, we can empower our community to eliminate violence against women.

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