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Domestic Violence in Child Welfare Preventative Services: Results from an Intake Screening Questionnaire

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This paper describes the results from a domestic violence screening questionnaire implemented in neighborhood-based child welfare preventive service agencies. The goal of these preventive service agencies is to avert the unnecessary placement of children into foster care as well as preventing child maltreatment. The purpose of the project described in this paper was to systematically change the manner in which child welfare preventive service agencies identified and worked with battered women. Components of the project included recruitment of participant agencies; training of the workers in domestic violence identification; and the use of a new screening questionnaire during intake interviews with women clients. Findings indicated that training enhanced identification; women appreciated being asked about current and historical abuse; and that women felt better able to protect themselves and their children after disclosure of domestic violence to the worker. A secondary effect of the project was that child welfare agencies developed specific services for batterers, battered women and their children.

In child welfare the term, "wrap around services" (McGowan & Meezan, 1983) is used to describe the continuum of services from preven-

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tion to family preservation to foster care and reunification programs. The few programs across the United States, which have focused on the nexus of child maltreatment and domestic violence,¹ have been directed at narrow segments of the child welfare continuum. For example, the AWAKE program in Boston works with maltreated children and battered women who are identified in a hospital setting (Schechter & Edleson, 1995). Other efforts have focused on child protective service investigations (Beszterczey, 1994; Magen, Conroy, Hess, Panceria, & Simon, 1995). This paper reports on an effort to identify and serve battered women with children "at risk" of maltreatment--children who have entered the child welfare system at a time of less imminent danger than either a hospital admission or child maltreatment investigation. This is the first report from a child welfare setting that has focused on the coexistence of domestic violence and potential child maltreatment in a population of children "at risk".

Programs designed to assist families where children have been identified as being at risk of maltreatment are known within the child welfare system as preventive services. These are typically voluntary not-for profit, long-term, community-based or specialized programs that work to ameliorate the conditions that might lead to child maltreatment. In New York City preventative services are referred to as Purchased Preventive Services (PPRS) because the agencies operate under contract with the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS), the state designated child protective service agency for New York City. Families can be referred to PPRS agencies by ACS, by other sources, or families can make self-referrals. Annually, over 25,000 families receive preventive services in New York City (Citizens Committee for Children of New York, 1997). In 1996 about 30% of the PPRS caseload was comprised of referrals from ACS (Protecting the Children of New York, 1996).

Barriers to Serving Battered Women

¹ We use the term "domestic violence" rather than the more awkward "woman abuse" or the less precise term "family violence." The term "battered woman" while preferable to the gender neutral "spouse abuse" is problematic due to its focus on the woman rather than the male batterer. For a further discussion of this issue see Stordeur & Stille (1989) or Mahoney (1991). By "domestic violence" we utilize the Centers for Disease Control (1995) definition of violence against women, "Violence against women is the threatened or actual use of physical force against a woman that either results in or has the potential to result in injury or death. This type of violence includes the physical, sexual, or psychological assault of women by partners, intimates, family members and acquaintances.

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