

Meagan Sanders

HSP 402: Kincaid

November 17, 2009

### Womencare Shelter

Womencare Shelter is an emergency shelter service for women trying to flee domestic violence. It is one of only a few emergent shelters in Whatcom County that can bring women into shelter within hours of the first crisis call. There are many things that make this agency unique: the shelters location is confidential and has remained that way, it has been run by all women and for the first time in its history has two male board members, and it has been a part of the county for 30 years. These things are simply just the beginning of what makes this agency so interesting. Many of the internal workings are somewhat contrary to how other community agencies perform their services. To understand better just how this agency works one must look at the underlying methods and policies that make up how Womencare runs.

It is important to first look at where Womencare Shelter started because it has helped shaped the way the agency runs today. Two women from Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) and two advocates from YWCA's Battered Women's Project (BWP) began Womencare Shelter. During the winter of 1978, BWP worked with Rape Relief and Sun Crisis to start Whatcom County Crisis Services. It was during this time that it was decided a permanent shelter was needed. On May 22, 1979 Womencare Shelter opened its doors. There were only three beds and it was run entirely by volunteers until that fall when Womencare received a donation that allowed them to hire one paid staff. The next year they received grants that gave them the opportunity to hire ten more part time staff: however, with in a year the grant dried up and eight were laid off. This caused the shelter to go back to being run by volunteers and during

this time the first board of directors was formed. In 1984, the shelter almost had to close its doors for good but the volunteers came together to raise money to keep it open. This was also the first time the City of Bellingham had helped with the funding. From 1983 to 1988 the shelter had to be moved four times. In the 1990s things began to settle down, and in 1996 at the Annual Collective Meeting it was decided that a permanent shelter should be built. It took about three years for the organization to get funding and find a piece of property. In 2000, the shelter opened its doors despite the opposition of many in the neighborhood. Within just two years the shelter had given over 500 women and children a place to stay during a very difficult time in their lives (Retrieved from <http://www.womencareshelter.org>).

In 2009, Womencare has expanded their services tremendously. Their priority is to offer a 24-hour crisis line, confidential shelter and community education; they now also are offering more services to former residents and walk-ins and are providing seminars around financial planning. Womencare has been recognized for their services to their community. They have received a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and have received the 2009 Bellingham Chamber of Commerce Non-Profit of the Year award. These awards show the community that Womencare is successful but the women who receive their services directly can tell one how helpful this agency is.

“Domestic violence is a specific strategy used to subjugate the victim for the gain of the abuser” (Anderson et. al., 2000, p. 151). The cycle of violence has three stages to it; the first being a tension building stage with something triggering an incident. The final stage of the cycle of violence is remorse, where the abuser says they are sorry and promise never to do it again. Through the use of power and control an abuser convinces the victim that there is no way to leave. When discussing the topic of domestic violence the question, “Why doesn’t she just

leave?” often comes up. Domestic violence can effect a diverse population and a woman encounters many barriers to leaving. In The Barriers Model by Grigsby and Harman there are four concentric circles with the victim at the center. The circle closest to the victim represents past abuse and neglect, the next circle shows the perceived consequences of leaving. The outer two circles are family and social roles, and environmental barriers. (Anderson et. al., 2000, p. 154-155). Each of these circles represent different types of blockades women can face when trying to leave their abuser. Womencare Shelter works to break down the barriers and help end the cycle of violence.

Womencare’s Mission Statement says, “Womencare Shelter is an empowerment based organization working to end domestic violence by providing 24-hour crisis support services, emergency confidential shelter and community education” (Womencare Shelter brochure). As you enter the shelter it is very apparent that it is a home first and fore most. One of the first spaces you enter into is the kitchen. This space is shared by residents and advocates; in fact many times you will see advocates sitting with a woman or a child just relaxing and talking. Staff members are called advocates because they are there to support women in their choices regarding services and direction for life during and after their shelter stay. Any time an advocate refers to someone staying in shelter they call her or him residents; the reason behind this is that while the resident is staying at the house it is their home. These terms move way from the traditional idea of client and worker. It helps to balance the power between both resident and advocate.

There are two things that really separate Womencare from other agencies: the attitude of the organization and the use of consensus. In “Flawless Consulting” by Peter Block, he talks about the idea of being authentic with one’s clients; “Authentic behavior with a client means you put into words what you are experiencing with the client as you work” (2006, pp.385). The

attitude of the staff at Womencare is not only displayed with the residents but with each other. Modeling positive interaction to residents is key. Women coming out of domestic violence often feel powerless and are struggling with what a health relationship is. In accordance with their mission statement, Womencare employs methods to empower women to receive services they deserve.

Advocacy Based Counseling is a main focus for the rigorous 30 hour training all staff and volunteers must go through before stepping foot in the shelter. Through the idea of advocacy, advocates give women the tools to help them on their new path. While in shelter there is at least one general advocate always available to the residents. In addition there are also certain staff that have received extra training in areas such as: housing, legal, children and women's support. Whenever any advocate enters an interaction with a resident, the advocate understands that they are there to present options because Womencare does not mandate services. Once the woman reaches a decision, the advocate then supports that decision. This system helps empower the women to take control and responsibility for the direction of her life. An advocate is similar to what Roger Schwarz describes a facilitative coach to be.

“A facilitative coach jointly designs the learning process with the client instead of assuming that she knows how the client can best learn. She also models mutual learning by exploring with the client how her coaching methods are helping or hindering the client's ability to learn. Facilitative coaches and clients explore the coaching relationship itself as a source of learning for both the client and the coach” (2006, pp.413).

Although different advocates have different use different strategies, the attitude behind it is the same. They approach each woman where she is at, and work specifically on her situation and terms.

Womencare staff work as a team. This is displayed in the way physical space is set up, as well as the way decisions are made. The office at the shelter is built with three parts. There is a large open space with two smaller more private office areas on either end. The workspace is shared and with no one person getting their own desk. This requires the responsibility for how the office is organized and the cleanliness to be shared. It also allows people to communicate easily. This is especially important because Womencare uses the idea of consensus for much of its decision-making.

Consensus is the idea that there is a general agreement. What this means for an organization is that when decisions are being made, all team members are given an opportunity to voice their opinion on the matter but are also willing to compromise. In the end everyone supports the outcome (Parker, 2006, pp.667). This use of consensus has been used at Womencare since it was founded. In the beginning all things were decided by consensus but with time Womencare has had to change that policy. The underlying idea is still very much alive and used. In advocacy team meetings, when something is being decided about a woman or family, the consensus process is used. A simple example of this is deciding if a woman has broken confidentiality and what should happen. Womencare has a strict confidentiality policy. If someone were to be suspected of breaking confidentiality it would then be up to the team as a whole if she should be labeled Not Welcome. As times it is clear the policy has been broken and the decision is made easily; however there are times when there needs to be further discussion. John Kline lists ten steps to achieving consensus. Three of these are important are: “orient the group with facts and suggestions,” “seek differences of opinion and remain open to other opinions,” and “insist on true consensus” (Kline, 1979, pp. 33). Orienting the group requires asking clarifying questions; this allows the group to dig deeper regarding the true issue. In the

example of a woman who broke confidentiality, one might ask what the circumstance were in which she made that choice. By exploring this as group and challenging each other it brings up other possibilities for consequences. Finally insisting on true consensus can be difficult. It is easy to take a vote and over rule other but “if a policy decision is reached without consensus, morale and unit satisfaction both may suffer” (Kline, 1979, pp. 30). An argument that is often made against consensus is that it is time consuming (Parker, 2006, pp. 667). Womencare has two meetings each week. One is a regular team meeting where every advocate and volunteer is welcome to come and discuss issues that might be arising or upcoming events, this meeting is given an hour. The other meeting is for the advocacy team. This meeting runs about two hours. Its main focus is to discuss each woman and family individually; regarding what services to provide and generally how things are progressing. By leaving this much time, it allows for discussion. By building in enough time to adequately go over each resident, services can be provided better and all advocates are on the same page.

Womencare is an agency that has been effective in helping women leave the cycle of domestic violence. Within the past year they have gone through so much change and growth that they are now in the process of maintaining it. As they enter 2010 – like many other agencies – they are in a budget deficit. The new programs are being mainly funded by grants but there are some overhead costs that will need to be picked up by the agency. At a recent team meeting the executive director said that she is looking to diversify funding sources. In an economy like this it is a wise move. Funding is not the only challenge facing Womencare in 2010. Communication is extremely important to any agency. As Womencare integrates new programs and new staff communication between the shelter and business office has become more difficult. Getting a system into place during this early stage is important so that it can be consistent from the

beginning. Finally, there is always a tough place regarding abusers. Although it is widely accepted that abuse is never allowed, there are many studies that show those who abuse now have been abuse in their past. Womencare Shelter is there to serve victims of domestic violence, so they do not offer any programs for abusers. However, maybe at some point an opportunity will present itself for them to look at working with abusers as well. There is no way to say if this will every happen but it would be an interesting possibility.

As Womencare says in their mission statement, they are working toward ending domestic violence. Those that abuse keep the system of domestic violence in place; Womencare Shelter continues to serve women in Whatcom County and provide them with an alternate option to the abusive partnership. With continued effort from Womencare and other agencies like them, more and more women are finding empowerment to change their lives.

## References

- Anderson, M, Gillig, P, Grigsby, N, Malloy, K, & McCloskey, K, Sitaker M., (2003). "Why doesn't she just leave?": A descriptive study of victim reported impediments of her safety. *Journal of Family Violence*, 18(3), Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.library.wvu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=10074461&site=ehost-live>
- Block, P. (2006). Flawless consulting. In J Gallos (Ed.), *Organizational development* (pp. 385-396). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kline, J. (1979). Practical techniques for achieving consensus. *Journal of Applied Communications Research*, 7(1), Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.library.wvu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9923481&site=ehost-live>
- Parker, G. M. (2006). The Facilitator and other facilitative roles. In J Gallos (Ed.), *Organizational development* (pp. 656-680). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Schwarz, R. (2006). The Facilitator and other facilitative roles. In J Gallos (Ed.), *Organizational development* (pp. 409-432). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.