

# When money is at the root of domestic violence, financial literacy can be a lifesaver

The Clarifi Team 23 January 2013

When we think of domestic violence, disturbing images of physical and psychological attacks come to mind. We know that this kind of violence goes on in our community every day, but it tends to be more comfortable to believe it only happens to people very different from ourselves.

The fact is, more than a third of the women in this country – and more than a quarter of all men – have experienced rape, physical violence and/or stalking by an intimate partner. In Philadelphia and its surrounding communities, the numbers are just as alarming.

Domestic violence is becoming an all-too-common occurrence. It may be happening right now, in our own neighborhood, and maybe, even within our own families

It is a surprising fact therefore, that the city of Philadelphia has but one shelter for women affected by domestic violence. That shelter operates at near 100% capacity every day of the year. (Domestic violence knows no “special season.”) However, the amazing staff of an inspiring organization called Women Against Abuse (WAA) makes operations at the shelter possible day in and day

out.

These people include skilled and educated counselors, who work with women who have sought the anonymous safety of the shelter. It is a hard fact that one of the most common ways women are victimized by their abusive partners is through economic coercion. Far too many victims believe they must stay in destructive relationships because they simply can't afford to be on their own. Using the threat of withholding money, damaging credit or losing a home, many abusers can hold crippling financial sway over their partners.

It is this knowledge that enlightened the financial counselors of Clarifi, the region's foremost nonprofit financial-literacy agency. Recognizing an unmet need, Clarifi leadership came to forge a partnership with their counterparts at WAA. With funding that began in April 2011, the partners began exploring each other's capabilities, as well as what needs could be addressed on behalf of the survivors of domestic abuse.

"Clarifi was better prepared to resource our clients once they gained a thorough understanding of the particular obstacles for survivors of domestic violence," said WAA Executive Director, Jeannine Lisitski.

"And, our case managers are now better prepared to assist our clients in managing their personal finances on an ongoing basis, thanks to the staff training from Clarifi."

# Learning from each other, and learning to trust each other

Before any abuse victims could be assisted, Clarifi counselors knew they would need to offer financial education to WAA staff members. In turn the WAA staff would need to train their new friends at Clarifi about the disciplines involved in counseling WAA clients.

“This initiative was unlike anything we had done,” said Scott Karol, Clarifi’s Director of Program Evaluation & Technology. “It opened a door to a new group of people whose economic situation we weren’t used to. People who never knew money as an empowering force, but only as a weapon used to hold them back.”

As the old adage goes, trust must be earned. This is true for the counseling organizations themselves and their respective clients. WAA counselors are protective of their clients, and they’re understandably wary of anyone unknown outside the immediate circle created by client and counselor. When people have been subjugated by others in a position of power, trust takes time and effort to re-build.

Scott Karol knew that trust was worth earning. “I think our early partnership was unlike anything either of our organizations had done. It was a whole new way of looking at things on behalf of our clients, and a whole new opportunity to help people on an entirely different level.”

With newfound insights into one another's expertise, each agency could begin to diagnose when their own clients might need the help of the other agency. Someone who came to Clarifi for help with credit card debt, for instance, might be quietly identified as one possibly suffering from domestic abuse, and could be referred in confidence to WAA.

Conversely, when WAA counselors worked with abuse victims, they began to discover that physical attacks weren't the only issue to be addressed. A large number of domestic violence victims have been purposefully kept from gaining the financial literacy they needed to lead a safer, more independent life. For the first time, WAA counselors had the ability to offer programming and education about simple financial planning that could lead to overcoming one of the greatest barriers faced in leaving an abusive relationship.\

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At Clarifi, one of the most profoundly successful workshop programs offered is "FinanciallyHers." FinanciallyHers is a learning series geared completely toward women and their unique perspectives. Joy McManus, then the director of the Clarifi program, knew this was a great moment to bring the women's programming to a new group of women who needed it

most.

Four FinanciallyHers workshops were scheduled at the WAA shelter. They included a course to help women understand financial motivations and how to make smarter buying choices. Simple money management strategies – in other words, household budgeting – helped WAA clients understand that even the most limited incomes could benefit from strategic planning.

For the first time, many women who had sought the safety of a WAA shelter could see how their financial situation could be controlled and managed to their benefit.

“It was eye-opening for the client, and for the counselors,” remembers Scott Karol. “I think we earned the WAA counselors’ trust when they saw that our simple strategies could apply to their own lives, as well as their clients.

“And I know our own counselors learned to see the warning signals of domestic abuse among our Clarifi clients, and our own employees. This initiative was empowering on so many new levels.”

## **Working together strategically to enlarge capacities**

So often in the non-profit community, agencies work in unique silos and tend to concentrate on the matter at hand with a narrowly-focused vision. The partnership between Women Against Abuse and Clarifi, which seemed

unlikely at first, has proven that agencies can learn from one another and actually enlarge their capacity to serve their clients. This is evidence that perhaps one plus one doesn't always have to be limited to a total of two. Positive things happen when people join forces, and many lives can be changed for the better along the way.

Submitted by Clarifi, a nonprofit that has assisted nearly 600,000 local residents in improving financial literacy, capability and stability. Clarifi's programs help educate the community on the basics of personal finance and motivate them to take steps to improve or maintain financial health. Services are delivered through one-on-one counseling, education workshops and ongoing support.