

Family Violence Prevention Webcast

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Mary Roberto

Hello, my name is Mary Roberto and I am a former Section Manager with the Colorado Department of Human Services in the state of Colorado in Denver.

Narrator

Welcome, and you just heard from today's National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families podcast guest – Mary Roberto. The goal of the Resource Center is to promote the values of healthy marriage and relationship education skills, encouraging their integration into safety-net service systems as a holistic approach to strengthening families through discussion with experts from the field.

Narrator

Today we'll be discussing family violence prevention. We spoke with Mary Roberto, former Section Manager with the Colorado Department of Human Services in the state of Colorado in Denver. She provided us some insight into the integration of family violence prevention at the state and county level.

Narrator

To start the conversation, Robyn Cenizal, the Project Director for the Resource Center, talked to Mary Roberto about her role with TANF in the state of Colorado.

Robyn Cenizal

Let's start a little bit with some more information about what that means when you talk about your role with TANF and it being state, I always get this mixed up, county administered. Explain how that works.

Mary Roberto

In Colorado like some other states, the block grant, the TANF block grant, is passed down to the state and in turn, the state appropriates a portion of that block grant to each of the county Departments of Human Services, and they have a lot of discretion around how they utilize the grant if they pay basic cash assistance and then use a portion for services in the other areas of TANF, the other three purposes are really covered in those areas like child welfare and the formation and maintenance of two-parent families, and the reduction of out-of-wedlock birth

Robyn Cenizal

Okay. So can you give me an example of how a policy might differ from one place to another?

Mary Roberto

So, one of the areas where policy is somewhat different is in the area of sanctioning. So, for example, some counties have high levels of intervention before that ever happens. So they'll have, like, three strikes, for example, before they ever actually touch the TANF grant for noncompliance. And they'll go through a lot of intervention work. Other counties just, you know, they might say, send out one letter that says "Hey, you're not in

compliance anymore” and then the second strike is, you know, it affects the grant all the way.

Other counties actually close the TANF case right away for noncompliance. If they feel like there’s no more that they can do. So there’s a lot of discretion in that area on the ground, and the way in which they assess people, so in those areas too it’s like some want them to look for work first. Others have more of a workforce development philosophy where they believe that investing in education first is the way to go, so those types of philosophical standpoints really are carried out in different ways in their policies.

Robyn Cenizal

Tell us a little bit more about your role when you were doing this work on the ground. What exactly was your role and how did you interact with the staff that you supported?

Mary Roberto

Prior to leaving the Colorado Department of Human Services, one of my major roles was administering the Domestic Violence program through the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act, so I administered funding from that act to service providers and the reason, the connection there is that there was a portion of TANF funding that was included in some of those dollars that went to the service agencies for domestic violence.

Robyn Cenizal

Wow, that does sound like a really comprehensive kind of interconnection of services. Tell us a little bit more about the domestic violence services. When you mentioned that there was funding available for that, what were those funds used for? What did that actually look like in the terms of a family coming for services?

Mary Roberto

So there were a lot of different ways that the particular funding that went to the domestic violence service providers were used just for emergency only, so shelter services. So we put the FVPSA money and the TANF money and whatever other general fund we might have had at that time into those types of services so just basically for a hotline, you know, emergency shelter and things like that. But where the connection came really close to TANF is when we started to work with the Family Violence Option as part of the TANF legislation. Colorado immediately elected the Family Violence Option as a part of the TANF legislation, and that was where the connection really became clear with all of the local Departments of Human Services

Narrator

Mary went on to talk to Robyn about how the passing of this legislation initiated an educational push. That push allowed emergency service providers, domestic violence providers, and county officials to train and work together, streamlining their education of domestic violence and how to help families.

Robyn Cenizal

Tell us a little more about the Family Violence Option for those who aren’t familiar with what exactly that means.

Mary Roberto

It happens that the state elects the Family Violence Option and allows; the first part of it is a lot of education and a lot of protocols that the actual worker needs to understand and sort of, you know, move through. One is screening and referral. So the Option requires that anyone doing assessments and development of work and education plans have some level of understanding of what domestic violence is and the cycle of violence, and it doesn't really dictate sort of a curriculum that they have to go by or a number of hours of training.

It also allows if the states don't meet work participation rates, for the state to actually go back and apply waivers to certain situations or cases where actually participating in work activities would be harmful for a participant in the TANF program. So by electing the Family Violence Option, there is all these different things that states can do. One is education. Two is allowing for waivers, and three is allowing for some kind of work participation consideration if, in fact, the state doesn't meet and that, that could be attributed to the reason.

Robyn Cenizal

I like what you said about bringing together the workers and the domestic violence providers and having them spend time together sharing information about what each other is doing. When you think back to those educational opportunities, were there any "a-ha's" in the group.

Mary Roberto

Yeah. There was definitely a lot of "a-ha's".

Narrator

Thinking of the a-ha's, Mary recalled the emotional toll the training took on participants as they realized the effects of domestic violence.

Mary Roberto

It was very heartening to see people sort of come out and say, you know, "That happened to me" and be more empathetic to those that came in and have more of an understanding that abuse doesn't really happen in a physical way always. You know, it comes out in different ways, in emotional ways, in financial ways and even abusing an animal way.

Mary Roberto

There was a lot of tears in some of those venues and we, from the training standpoint, needed to be prepared, we found this out quickly that this is just not something that people in poverty experience. It's an over-arching issue.

Narrator

Let's take a moment to reflect: According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 1-in-4 women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime and 1.3 million women are victim each year. Additionally 60% of domestic violence occurs at home, so for Mary and the state of Colorado, educating providers was the first step to combat this over-arching issue.

Mary Roberto

And the other thing that happened was, you know, I would ask questions in the audience about, from the workers about what they felt their role was in helping a person who is experiencing domestic violence get out of the relationship. And most of them felt compelled, you know like, I need to get them out, I need to push them out, sort of, you know, saying you've got to get out, you just have to do this, and not understanding the dynamics of domestic violence and how, you know, pushing somebody to do something like that when they're not ready is more detrimental to them and could be fatal. So a lot of eyes opened all the way around in, in that regard.

Robyn Cenizal

That's good. It's interesting that is typically people's first reaction to learning about a domestic violence situation is the "why doesn't she just leave?" Or "he just leave" although we know primarily victims have been historically females, that does seem to be the focus is, "well why don't they just leave?" But as, as you mentioned, encouraging someone to leave, the most dangerous time in a domestic violence relationship is when she decides to leave, so it can be, can be very dangerous and I believe the statistic is typically, a victim will leave seven times, up to seven times before they actually make a decision to stay out of that relationship.

So, you mentioned that, as it relates to the waivers and work participation, that sometimes it is dangerous and it's difficult for families who are dealing with domestic violence to participate to the degree that they need to. How does that actually play out? Can you give us a scenario where those factors would come into play?

Mary Roberto

So one situation that comes to mind are situations is where, you know, I have somebody to watch my kids at night while I go to work, and I work down the street at 7-11, or another convenience store, but I don't feel safe, you know at night. My perpetrator lives somewhere else. And you know, just by virtue of somebody saying, "I don't feel safe in this environment" is key enough to amend their plan to, to do something different. So if they can't do 30 hours per week but they can do five and they feel safe online at home, sort of going through their GED online or something like that.

They know how to navigate it. They've been navigating it and they're very resourceful, even though you might think that they aren't. So, sort of go with their lead. If they say, you know, I can't do something, don't, you know, necessarily go to the fact that they don't want to, because that's not really true. I mean, primarily, most people on public assistance don't want to be there and especially those that are in these situations don't want to be there, and we need to listen to them and understand sort of their circumstances and be able to navigate.

Robyn Cenizal

Did you find that with your TANF workers who had been through the domestic violence training that they had a greater appreciation for that "I don't feel safe" conversation and understanding that, that is not the same as saying "I don't want to do something?"

Mary Roberto

For the most part, I do think that that education was a key to changing perceptions and

changing the way that we work with both people that are in violent situations right now or who have been in the past. Because one of the big things that we try to convey is that, even if you had a, you know, a violent situation or a traumatic event in the past, how that plays into your world today. You know, just because it happened five years ago and, and maybe the perpetrator's gone or in jail or whatever doesn't mean that you're still not traumatized and you still don't have sort of the effects of that weighing on your ability to participate and be self-sufficient.

Robyn Cenizal

Can you talk a little bit about child-only TANF and how it might relate to children who have been placed either in relative or non-relative placement, kind of in a *loco parentis* situation, because perhaps there was, it was unsafe at home for whatever reason, and how those benefits can be applied?

Mary Roberto

There are situations where, you know, children have been placed with relative caretakers or into foster care because of situations like this, like the violence. There are more reasons, of course, that exacerbate, you know, the reasons why they are placed out of the home.

Mary Roberto

Originally, some of the leadership at the State said you know, that doesn't fit here, it fits with the Department of Public Health or the Department of Education or some other arena. And I beg to differ a lot with that because I felt like we can really impact kids that are placed out of the home in foster care and in other relative caretaker situations through education, and changing that trajectory around how they think about relationships and how they think about violence. Of course, the first thing is are they safe and, you know, what kind of services and supports do they need to sort of deal with their own trauma related to witnessing domestic violence. But the prevention part of that in their world is really around education and seeing, being exposed to information and situations that are healthy.

Narrator

Mary went on to discuss the controversial use of evidence-based relationship education curriculum in schools. Particularly, their inclusion in comprehensive sexual education, teaching children how this aspect plays a role in relationships, and how they can deal with them in certain situations.

Mary Roberto

But this huge part about relationships that I think have, you know, it's been absent from those conversations. It's sort of like, this is how, you know, make sure you don't have a child or, you know, this is the abstinence part but this over-arching theme about healthy relationships just, at least from my time in school and my kids' times in school, was absent. So, you know, danger patterns in relationships and managing stress, reducing the negative effects of stress, decision making, you know, brain science behind love and how to enjoy and thoughtfully navigate decisions while you're in love. So all of that plays such a, in my eyes, a big part of, you know, sort of where they go and what they do next if they, you know, repeat patterns that they've seen before or not. So, yeah, I feel so strongly about education from day one and it just isn't about the sexual ed. part. It's

about just, you know, these skills that kids need to have and, and understand what's healthy.

Narrator

As the conversation wrapped up, Robyn asked the question we're all curious about...how would you fix it?

Robyn Cenizal

Thinking back, if you could change anything as it relates to serving families who are dealing with these specific issues, what would you recommend from a policy perspective be done or from a process perspective be done different?

Mary Roberto

Boy, there's a lot there.

Mary Roberto

I think a lot of, there's a lot of evidence about home visitation programs. And I think more resources need to be put in those arenas to sort of go out and really look into those situations and be mentors to these kids that, you know, the government says I need to live with this person because they're, you know, they're my parent or they're my relative caretaker, when, in fact, those situations are not necessarily the best for kids raising kids or kids in general.

Mary Roberto

I know in Colorado, there are areas of the state, like I said, there is a lot of local-level control and there are pockets of places where the local elected officials really feel like abstinence-only education is the way to go and I don't think that there is evidence that says that that is necessarily the best for kids, that we need some comprehensive education. And math, science, reading is all important, but the areas of relationship education really need to, it needs to start early and, recency and repetition for kids is good, because at some point it might stick. That these are healthy attributes in relationships and, you know if that's not talked about at home and it's not talked about at school, we're going to continue to see family violence.

Robyn Cenizal

One of the comments that you made earlier referencing basically that domestic violence isn't just a low-income, TANF population issue, but one of the, and we see it in the news all the time, we see that domestic violence as well as child maltreatment, cross socioeconomic lines. So it's not a, it's not a poverty issue, although in poverty situations, it's often more difficult to deal with because of the lack of resources. How do we encourage, as a society, how do we encourage families who are dealing with these issues but are low-resource? How do we help them understand that turning to TANF programs as a resource can help them?

Mary Roberto

I think one of the policies or one area that we really need to work on more is outreach. Outreach in terms of through all of the venues that we have about TANF being a resource, and I really want to know, as somebody who's experiencing violence or who has experienced violence in the past that I'm not going to be looked at like "hey, you didn't protect your kids" or, you know, that automatically being the assumption rather

than something that's investigated is a true issue. I do think that outreach and clear messaging in those areas would likely bring more people to the resources that they need.

CLOSING

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic violence, you can seek assistance. Check out the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families' website for information at, www.HealthyMarriageAndFamilies.Org.. Or, reach out to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, at 1-800-799-7233 or go online at www.TheHotline.org.

Thanks for joining us - we hope you enjoyed today's podcast. To find more about healthy marriage and relationship education, key skills, and more available trainings and resources, visit the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families at www.HealthyMarriageAndFamilies.org.

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