



## A Diocesan Model for Establishing a Ministry to Victims of Domestic Violence

### I. Training/educating priests (and possibly deacons) about domestic violence

Priests and deacons tend not to preach about domestic violence for various reasons and these should be addressed.

- They don't see much of it, and consequently think it is not a big problem in their parish. This lack of experience stems primarily from their not speaking about it. Victims sense if a priest will be compassionate and understanding, and if they suspect he is neither, they often do not approach him or do it in such a guarded way that he does not discover they are victims.
- They don't want to promote or be seen to promote divorce. This position reflects more of a concern for the Catholic model of marriage, indissoluble, than for the safety and health of the victims and their children. The U.S. Bishops have written in their pastoral letter on domestic violence (*When I Call for Help*), "No one is expected to stay in an abusive marriage." This is the position of the Catholic Church.
- It is too controversial a topic to preach about. Once a priest preaches about domestic violence, he will receive much appreciation if not applause for his homily. People want to hear about it, especially women. A few criticisms will not compare with the gratitude his congregation will lavish on him: "It's about time the Church speaks about this", "I never thought I would hear this in the Catholic Church", "I never had any idea it was so prevalent."
- Being overloaded, they don't want more work. Creating a ministry in a parish could take some initial time but the work could and should be done by concerned parishioners. It also should not cost any significant money. What little expenses can be raised by the parishioners involved.
- The Sunday readings don't lend themselves to preaching about domestic violence. In fact, almost any reading, with some creativity, can be connected to domestic violence, because they deal with related topics, such as love, compassion, hope, God's presence, service, faith, etc.



- It is too difficult or complicated to talk about. In fact, domestic violence is not complicated but it does require some learning about what is involved and the proper way to respond to victims and even perpetrators.

To train priests and deacons, organize a 2 to 3-hour workshop for them in which they will learn

- the prevalence of domestic violence
- its nature (definition and different forms – physical, emotional, economic and verbal)
- how to respond to victims and perpetrators pastorally
- how to refer them to appropriate services
- how to create an awareness of the problem and a system of pastoral response to victims in their parishes
- how to find resources about domestic violence, e.g., USCCB pastoral letter on domestic violence “When I Call for Help,” homilies about domestic violence, and more at Archdiocese of Chicago website, scroll down home page to lower right hand corner, and click on Domestic Violence Outreach for many resources.
- Hear the testimony of a victim about how she/he suffered and how she/he viewed the response or lack of response from the Church

## II. Form parish ministries on domestic violence

In the homilies, priests and deacons invite those interested in learning more or working on domestic violence to come to a meeting on the following Monday evening.

- In the meeting, participants are asked to give names, length of time in the parish, and why they came to the meeting. Thus, people hear the interest each has in the issue.
- The priest, deacon or someone else prepared explains that the local parish ministry involves
  - Creating awareness about domestic violence in the parish
  - Connecting victims to domestic violence services
  - Working to prevent domestic violence

Each of these categories (awareness, services, prevention) is explained. Ideas for each are available in the manual on creating a parish ministry at the Domestic Violence Outreach site on the website of the Archdiocese of Chicago: [archchicago.org](http://archchicago.org), scroll down homepage to bottom right Domestic Violence Outreach.



**Awareness:** Ideas include cards about services in women's washrooms, posters, a monthly prayer of the faithful, bulletin inserts, a weekly bulletin notice about how to access services, creation of a brochure, prayer services, speakers, films, panels with local police, etc. In addition, the new ministry should organize a training for its members, parish staff, and anyone else interested in the parish, which can be conducted by a local domestic violence advocacy agency. Special events should be conducted during October, Domestic Violence Awareness Month. The Chicago Domestic Violence Outreach website has three pages of ideas for parish awareness efforts.

**Services:** Local advocacy agencies are very interested in supporting parish ministries and receiving their referrals. The parish ministry should invite them to explain their services and develop an ongoing relationship. Catholic Charities should also be contacted to assure it is responding appropriately (i.e., have certified training in domestic violence) to victims and perpetrators with counseling and possibly support groups.

**Prevention:** Knowledge about domestic violence and the proper responses to it should infuse the marriage preparation (pre Cana) program, religious education programs, youth ministry and parochial schools. Curricula are available at the Chicago Archdiocesan website.

### III. Diocesan promotion and coordination

An existing diocesan agency should be assigned to promote, support and coordinate local parish ministries as they are developed.

This model emphasizes the importance of the priest and deacon because it is important to get the topic of domestic violence in the pulpit. It is possible to address this in another strategy, e.g., having someone other than a priest speak about it after communion and then hold the meeting on Monday night. Fewer people will come if the priest does not speak about it. Another model is to start in one parish with an understanding priest and then have him speak to his fellow clergy until there is a number of them who then ask the bishop to support it for all parishes.

In the Archdiocese of Chicago, 86 parishes have heard sermons at all weekend Masses at least once and 70 of them have formed parish ministries to victims of domestic violence.

For more information, contact

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