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Specialists in Welfare Offices: Do Family Violence Experts Matter?

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ABSTRACT. In many welfare offices, a key component of the Family Violence Option (FVO) of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was the establishment of experts trained in domestic violence and the new policy. This study analyzes the effect an FVO expert has on three outcomes: domestic violence disclosures; administrative documentation of disclosures; and FVO waiver use. Findings show that the presence of an expert is not related to disclosures or documentation, but does have a statistically significant, negative effect on the likelihood of waiver use. These mixed results indicate that the presence or absence of an expert is not necessarily indicative of an agency's commitment to the FVO. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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A previous version of this paper was presented at the 4th Bi-annual Trapped by Poverty/Trapped by Abuse Conference on October 17, 2003. Some of the findings are taken from a larger study presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Maryland, College Park in July 2002 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The dissertation was completed by Andrea Hetling under the direction of William A. Galston, School of Public Affairs, University of Maryland, College Park. The research was supported by funding from the Maryland Department of Human Resources.

Administration in Social Work, Vol. 30(4) 2006
Available online at <http://www.haworthpress.com/web/ASW>
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Digital Object Identifier: 10.1300/J147v30n04_03

KEYWORDS. Family Violence Option, welfare reform, domestic violence

INTRODUCTION

While reforming federal welfare legislation in the mid-1990s, the United States Congress established the Family Violence Option (FVO) to prevent reforms from adversely affecting welfare recipients who were experiencing or had recently experienced domestic violence. The FVO requires that participating states screen and identify abuse victims, make service referrals, and offer waivers from any Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program requirements, such as time limits, work, or child support requirements, which may endanger or unfairly penalize current or former domestic violence victims. The Option does not limit states in the ways to implement any of these components. For example, regarding service referrals, the legislation simply states, “refer such individuals to counseling and supportive services,” and does not outline any requirements regarding who should offer such services, where they should be located, or when the referral should take place (P.L.104-193, 402(a)(7)).

Welfare offices faced a new challenge with little guidance and expertise to assist frontline workers in implementing the new policy. Following the recommendations of some domestic violence advocates, many states, including Maryland, decided to appoint in-agency violence experts to serve victims and to help frontline workers as well as program managers in fine-tuning the policy at the local level. This new role has a number of titles; some states call them specialists, others call them experts, and New York refers to them as domestic violence liaisons. Regardless of title, purpose and functions are similar. The experts were to have a background in domestic violence services or be trained intensively on the issue and work one-on-one with welfare recipients who disclosed domestic violence. The use of experts was based on the practice wisdom of advocates and the model of domestic violence service agencies, but there was no empirical evidence that the expert model would be effective in a public welfare setting. Moreover, little research has since been completed to evaluate their effect.

This paper presents findings from a multi-year project on domestic violence and welfare receipt in Maryland. Specifically, it focuses on the portion of the project that examined the relationship of the presence of an in-house domestic violence expert with three important individual level

outcomes: domestic violence disclosures, administrative documentation of disclosures, and FVO waiver utilization. The analyses use a client sample ($n = 4,335$) that includes domestic violence victims who received FVO services, those that did not, and non-victims. Multivariate statistical models explored factors associated with the three individual policy-relevant outcome measures: disclosures, documentation, and waiver usage; investigating whether observed differences were due to the presence of an in-house expert, variations in individual characteristics, or community differences. The findings have important implications for offices still struggling with effective FVO strategies and those considering the use of experts for other barriers such as substance abuse or legal problems as well as other social service agencies that use the expert model.

BACKGROUND

The Family Violence Option

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, commonly referred to as “welfare reform,” altered the traditional focus of cash assistance programs from income maintenance to self-sufficiency, forcing frontline workers to learn a new set of skills in addition to the detailed accounting and processing tasks they already performed. One critical challenge to the successful implementation of PRWORA is to train employees who were previously benefit assessment workers to be comprehensive case managers. This transition from primarily administrative tasks to a role that includes a degree of assessment and counseling is hypothesized to be a key component in successfully serving recipients and assisting them in the transition from welfare to work and self-sufficiency (e.g., Meyers, Glaser, & MacDonald, 1998; Charlesworth et al., 2001).

The additional training and knowledge necessary to make the role transition are both especially challenging and important when considering how domestic violence victims are to be served. The FVO leaves much discretion to the states in both interpretation and implementation of the legislation, and in many cases, there was no previous policy regarding domestic violence. With regard to the FVO, in short, states have had to grapple with a new and complex area of involvement and focus. After adopting the FVO, many states, including Maryland, established the position of an in-agency violence expert or specialist at the local level. The purpose of these experts, trained in domestic violence issues,

knowledgeable about the new policies, and connected to local domestic violence services agencies, was to assist frontline workers in better serving welfare recipients who were experiencing or had experienced domestic violence.

Maryland Policy

In October 1996, Maryland enacted legislation requiring the presence of an in-house family violence expert in every jurisdictional office to assist victims and ensure proper implementation of the FVO. However, no specific funds were made available to hire a new staff member, and local welfare agencies have differed in their ability to fund, hire, and train experts. Notably, but perhaps not surprisingly, only seven of the twenty-four jurisdictions reported in 2001 that they had a specific person as the designated family violence expert. Of these seven jurisdictions, all reported this was a permanent position, but also that in addition to functioning as the family violence expert, all experts had other responsibilities such as general case management or supervision. Only one of the seven agencies hired an outside person for the job rather than appointing from within the agency. Date of hire or appointment ranged from November 1997 to December 1999. Within agency appointments were likely trained on domestic violence after assuming the role instead of bringing new expertise to the agency. All agencies with in-agency experts, however, were more likely to use locally designed, rather than State-designed, questions to screen for domestic violence. This relationship is likely indicative of the close ties between local service providers and the experts as well as the experts' knowledge of the issue.

Of the 17 counties that, as of spring 2001, said they did not have designated in-house experts, seven (41.2%) referred individuals with possible domestic violence issues to a service worker or other in-house social worker. Six counties (35.3%) had arrangements with their local domestic violence service providers for assistance in helping clients. One county reported that they had an expert in the past, but could no longer afford to fund that position. Only four counties (23.5%) reportedly had no specifically designated workers or firmly established protocol for dealing with difficult screening or cases. This variation makes Maryland an ideal case study for examining the impact of the in-house experts.

The In-House Expert

The impact of in-house experts on the ability of welfare offices to identify victims, develop a referral and service network, and ultimately promote or ensure the safety and self-sufficiency of victims has not been fully determined. A few studies concerning disclosure rates have addressed the large discrepancy between prevalence and disclosure by examining agency factors including the presence of an in-house expert. These studies focus on the question of which screening practices yield the highest rates of disclosure (Angelari, 1998; Burt, Zweig, & Schlichter, 2000; Raphael & Haennicke, 1999). This type of research is important for caseworkers and administrators interested in best service practices and effective FVO implementation, but they do not answer the question fully. These studies do not relate practices to individual circumstances or outcomes, and thus, do not determine the effect of the expert role while controlling for individual background characteristics.

Another group of studies sheds important light on the workings and results of particular programs (Burt, Zweig, & Schlichter, 2000; Hagen & Owens-Manley, 2002; Levin, 2001). Levin (2001) found that TANF caseworkers were not cooperative in referring welfare recipients to a pilot domestic violence program. Examining the perspectives of caseworkers, Hagen and Owens-Manley (2002) concluded that workers were resistant to serving victims of domestic violence. These qualitative examinations and case studies provide an intensive look at the impact of particular programs and the functioning of welfare agencies regarding the FVO. However, due to the qualitative nature of the data as well as the absence of comparison groups, the research cannot quantitatively assess the impact of certain program aspects.

Research on the use of issue experts in other social service agencies indicate that the integration and continuum of services from a variety of providers can aid in service provision to such at-risk populations as the homeless, the elderly, and child abuse victims (Burt et al., 2002; California Office of the Governor, 2002). For example, an evaluation of mental health outreach services for homeless youth indicated that the integration of experts improved child mental health problems (Tischler et al., 2002). Moreover, other research has indicated that trained social workers provided more accurate assessments and appropriate treatment suggestions for child abuse victims than laypersons did (Osimo & Benbenishty, 2004). Although related, this research does not address an important question pertinent to the FVO, that of eliciting disclosures, as the issues experienced by the study populations were already known.

Outcome measures for our study were chosen to reflect the intent of the Family Violence Option legislation and derived from the available data in the administrative systems. Domestic violence disclosures are a critical measure of the number of individuals being reached by and potentially served by the FVO. Screening for domestic violence is the first mandate of the FVO and a large concern of advocates. Similarly, administrative documentation reflects the number of those individuals who are being served by the FVO; those whose abuse is formally noted by caseworkers and thus are being considered as experiencing a potential barrier in meeting TANF program requirements. Lastly, the number of individuals with an FVO waiver is a straightforward measure of waiver use, a key component of the FVO and also the most specific provision of the legislation.

Based on the original motivation for the FVO and findings from current studies, hypotheses on the expected relationships between the presence of a domestic violence expert and the three outcomes of interest were developed. First, it is hypothesized that the presence of an expert will have a positive effect on domestic violence disclosures. Empirical research has shown a high prevalence of domestic violence among cash assistance recipients (See Tolman & Raphael, 2000), but preliminary studies of welfare program administrative data indicate that very few women have disclosed domestic violence to welfare caseworkers (Lennert, 1997; Raphael & Haennicke, 1999). Previous research partially attributes this discrepancy to the experience and knowledge of the interviewer. On one hand, welfare caseworkers may not be as well trained or sophisticated in case management and clinical work as counselors (Bane & Ellwood, 1994). In addition, caseworkers may not consider screening for domestic violence as part of their job responsibilities or may be skeptical of claims of domestic violence that are not accompanied with clear documentation (Hagen & Owens-Manley 2002). FVO experts, in theory, should be able to overcome some of these obstacles.

Second, in-house experts are hypothesized to have a positive impact on the administrative documentation of domestic violence disclosures. If experts are trained more extensively in the TANF policies surrounding domestic violence as well as specific agency protocols, then one would expect that experts would be able to assist caseworkers in properly documenting domestic violence in the automated system. Similarly, caseworkers struggling with the procedure could turn to the expert in jurisdictions with that position.

Third, expected relationships between the expert and the utilization of FVO waivers were not as clear. On one hand, it would seem that experts would facilitate and perhaps even encourage granting waivers given their knowledge of how domestic violence may act as a barrier to self-sufficiency. However, findings from qualitative studies have found that victims often refuse waivers if other more appropriate services are available (Lein et al., 2001). While one study found that victims who met with domestic violence liaisons were more likely to be told about the waivers, many chose not to be exempted from program requirements (Postmus, 2002). Similarly, another Maryland-based study reported that jurisdictions with few domestic violence resources and those with poor socio-economic indicators seem to be using waivers as a blanket solution for individuals disclosing abuse (Hetling-Wernyj and Born, 2003). Thus, the direction of the relationship is hypothesized to be negative, but perhaps weak.

METHODS

Sample

Three domestic violence victim samples and one non-victim sample were identified as the analytic groups of interest. All four groups are comprised of households whose adult female head received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in Maryland for one or more months between March 1998 and June 2000. March 1998 was chosen as the beginning date for the sample because conversion to a new administrative data system was completed during that month and the previous system did not record any information on domestic violence.

First, the universe of Maryland welfare recipients who were administratively marked as domestic violence victims between March 1998 and June 2000 was identified ($n = 554$). Administrative markers include: a yes/no field for "domestic violence," a shelter field with a value indicating that the individual was living in a domestic violence shelter, and three program exemption fields with values indicating that the exemption reason was domestic violence. Women with administrative markers were then divided into two groups: waiver holders ($n = 261$, exempt from at least one of the three program requirements: time limits, work requirements, or child support requirements with or without the other administrative fields marked) and waiver non-holders ($n = 294$, those with only a domestic violence mark or domestic violence shelter value).

Second, a five percent, random, proportionally stratified sample ($n = 3,781$) of all other welfare recipients from the same time period was drawn, ensuring a representative sample of the seven regions of Maryland, the six regions defined by the Maryland Department of Planning and Baltimore City which, due to its size, was treated as a separate region. Individual case narratives, an ongoing documentation by a customer's caseworker kept in the administrative system, were read and coded to identify abuse within this sample. Cases with narrative indication of abuse were flagged and comprise the third victim sample ($n = 184$) and are referred to as narrative disclosers. For comparison purposes, all other cases in the random sample were kept as a fourth analytic group ($n = 3,597$). While members of the comparison group were not marked in either the administrative system or in their case narratives as having disclosed domestic violence and are referred to as "non-victims" in the paper, it is important to recognize the possibility that they did experience domestic violence but decided not to disclose the experience or that their caseworker did not take note of it. Table 1 presents the description and size of the four samples, which, together, constitute a total study sample of 4,335 cases.

Data

Three State automated administrative data systems were used to gather individual demographic, cash assistance program, and employment data. These are: CIS, the Customer Information System; AIMS/AMF, the Automated Information Management System/Automated Master File; and MABS, the Maryland Automated Benefits System. Included in the CIS, which contains data on individual demographics and public assistance program participation, are case narratives. These narratives are typed notes written by the welfare caseworker. In the automated system, caseworkers can access a free-form space in which they can annotate an ongoing narrative on each welfare case and their interactions with caseheads. The narratives were read and coded for the presence and extent of domestic violence.

In order to control for important socio-economic community characteristics in the analyses, data on Maryland's 24 jurisdictions were compiled from a variety of sources. Data on socio-demographic and economic variables were gathered from the Maryland Departments of Planning; Human Resources; Labor, Licensing, and Regulation; and Health and Mental Hygiene, as well as the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis and the Uniform Crime Report of the U.S. Department of Jus-

TABLE 1. Description of the four Samples

Group	Definition	Type	Size	Percentage of active caseload
Waiver holders	Victims who are administratively marked and hold waivers	Universe	n = 261	0.31%
Waiver non-holders	Victims who are administratively marked and do not hold waivers	Universe	n = 293	0.35%
Narrative disclosers	Victims who are not administratively marked as victims but whose narratives indicate violence	Sample	n = 184	Represents 5.12%
Non-victims	Welfare recipients with no indication of domestic violence	Sample	n = 3,597	Represents entire caseload

tice. These data contain information on housing, crime, vital statistics, and human capital in each of Maryland’s 24 jurisdictions.

Because of the number of variables and the extent of multicollinearity among them, the creation of more succinct and manageable meta-indicators was deemed necessary (Hetling-Wernyj and Born, 2002). Based on the results of correlation analyses, two meta-indicators, called socio-demographic risk and economic risk, composed of the socio-demographic and economic variables respectively, were constructed and used to assign each jurisdiction to one of three overall risk categories (high, medium, or low). If a jurisdiction fell in the “worst” third of values on the majority of the variables (e.g., top third for unemployment rate, bottom third for median household income), it was classified as high risk. Likewise, jurisdictions in the “best” third were assigned to the low risk category, while those with the majority of values around the state mean or median or with mixed values were assigned to the medium risk category. Using these two measures, a meta-risk indicator was then created.

County-level data on community resources related to domestic violence were gathered from a variety of domestic violence hotline data and information clearing houses. These domestic violence community service variables were analyzed and used to create a domestic violence service indicator. A four-tiered categorization was created based on whether an agency existed in that jurisdiction, the number of shelter beds per 1000 residents, and the number of domestic violence arrests per 1000 residents. Jurisdictions with an in-county agency, over 0.1 shelter beds per 1000 residents, and over 4.0 arrests per 1000 residents

were classified as having a very high level of domestic violence services. Jurisdictions meeting two of these three criteria were considered to have a high level of services. Medium level jurisdictions met the cut-off value on only one criterion, and low level ones met none of them.

Analyses

Multiple regression techniques, specifically probit models, were used to investigate whether outcomes at the individual level were due to the presence of an in-agency expert, variations in individual background, or community differences.

Variations of the following probit models were constructed and tested:

1. Disclosure = $\alpha + \beta X_{\text{Dem}} + \beta X_{\text{Agency}} + \beta X_{\text{Juris}} + \varepsilon$
2. Administrative marker = $\alpha + \beta X_{\text{Dem}} + \beta X_{\text{Abuse}} + \beta X_{\text{Agency}} + \beta X_{\text{Juris}} + \varepsilon$
3. Waiver = $\alpha + \beta X_{\text{Dem}} + \beta X_{\text{Abuse}} + \beta X_{\text{Agency}} + \beta X_{\text{Juris}} + \varepsilon$

The first equation attempted to explain who discloses domestic violence. "Disclosure" is a dichotomous dependent variable where the value of one indicates that the individual disclosed domestic violence and zero indicates that the person had not. Of the total number of sample members ($n = 4,335$), 738 or 5.87 percent had either administrative markers or case narrative notes indicating a domestic violence disclosure.

The goal of the second equation was to explain the administrative documentation of victims. Of the 738 recipients who disclosed domestic violence, this variable indicates whether or not the individual was administratively documented in the automated system as a victim. On this dichotomous variable, 554 women (75.07%) were coded as 1 for having been administratively marked; the remaining 184 women were coded as 0 because there was no mark in the administrative system.

The last model was designed to explain who uses waivers. This outcome variable is also dichotomous, measuring whether or not a victim held an FVO waiver. Of the 738 victims, 261 or 33.37 percent received at least one type of waiver and thus were coded as 1. The remaining 477 women were coded as 0.

All three sets of models represent an effort to integrate and account for the distinct impacts of a variety of individual and macro level variables. The equations investigated the effect of the presence of an in-agency expert, individual demographic characteristics, and community indicators

on each of the three outcomes of interest: disclosures, documentation, and waivers. The choice of individual and community level variables as controls in the model was based on past studies related to TANF outcomes (for a review, please see Grogger, Karoly, & Klerman, 2002). The individual demographic variables included in our models were age, age squared, race, marital status, language, citizenship, disability, pregnancy, and age at first birth. Case level demographic variables included number of children on the case, age of the youngest child, and number of adults on the case, specifically two adult cases, one adult cases, and cases with no adult recipient, commonly referred to as child-only cases. Important individual TANF and employment history variables added to the models were: months of TANF receipt out of previous 60 months and previous 12 months; number of quarters employed during lifetime and in the past year; number of employers during past year; and earnings over past year. Community level variables included average monthly TANF caseload per 1000 residents, population size in thousands, residence in Baltimore City, and a risk meta-indicator and a domestic violence service indicator, as explained earlier. The presentation and discussion of the results focuses on the policy variable of interest (the presence of an expert), the individual level variables for which statistically significant differences existed among the sample groups, and community measures of critical demographic and economic indicators.

FINDINGS

The results from the three probit models are presented in table 2. Standard errors are in parentheses and marginal effects are in brackets. The outcome variable for the model in column (1) is domestic violence disclosure. Administrative documentation is the outcome of interest in column (2). And, column (3) presents results from the model of FVO waiver usage.

Disclosures of Domestic Violence

After controlling for individual and community differences, the presence of an in-house family violence expert did not have a statistically significant effect on the likelihood of a disclosure. The estimated coefficient was 0.031 with a standard error of 0.114. The marginal effect of having an expert in the jurisdiction of residence increased the likelihood

TABLE 2. Multivariate Models Explaining Individual Outcomes

	Disclosures	Documentation	FVO Waiver Use
FVO expert	0.031 (0.114) [0.005]	0.407 (0.229) [0.115]	-0.442 (0.195)* [-0.160]
Age	0.137 (0.032)*** [0.023]	0.121 (0.055) [0.035]	0.068 (0.048) [0.025]
Age-squared	-0.002 (0.000)*** [-0.000]	-0.002 (0.001) [-0.000]	-0.001 (0.001) [-0.000]
African-American	-0.305 (0.060)*** [-0.055]	-0.108 (0.136) [-0.031]	-0.205 (0.123) [-0.075]
Separated	0.163 (0.073)* [0.030]	0.112 (0.138) [0.031]	-0.001 (0.126) [-0.001]
Non-citizen	-0.188 (0.198) [-0.028]	-0.673 (0.342)* [-0.234]	-0.270 (0.324) [-0.093]
Pregnant	-0.212 (0.103)* [-0.032]	0.141 (0.207) [0.038]	-0.190 (0.187) [-0.067]
Child-only case	-0.841 (0.130)*** [-0.099]		0.455 (0.275) [0.177]
Two adults on case	-0.603 (0.211)** [-0.068]	-0.837 (0.417)* [-0.299]	-0.626 (0.433) [-0.193]
Living together (not separately)		-0.916 (0.269)*** [-0.328]	-0.263 (0.278) [-0.091]
Living status unknown		0.929 (0.293)** [0.204]	-0.178 (0.186) [-0.064]
Current abuse (opposed to recent)		0.237 (0.167) [0.063]	0.092 (0.145) [0.034]
Past abuse (opposed to recent)		-0.473 (0.152)** [-0.151]	-0.413 (0.151)** [-0.142]
Other individual /case	Yes	Yes	Yes
Employment and welfare experiences	Yes	Yes	Yes
Low risk jurisdiction (compared to medium)	-0.069 (0.134) [-0.011]	0.358 (0.252) [0.096]	-0.031 (0.242) [-0.012]
High risk jurisdiction (compared to medium)	-0.480 (0.133)*** [-0.089]	-0.098 (0.275) [-0.028]	0.155 (0.248) [0.058]
Very high/ high level of dv services(compared to low/ medium)	0.295 (0.122)* [0.055]	0.437 (0.230) [0.122]	0.429 (0.220) [0.158]
Population and caseload	Yes	Yes	Yes
Baltimore City	Yes	Yes	Yes
Log-likelihood	-1439.1	-349.8	-452.1
Pseudo R2	0.272	0.156	0.057
Sample size	4,335	738	738

* p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Note: The above are probit models with standard errors shown in parenthesis and marginal effects in brackets. Standard errors have been corrected for heteroskedasticity. The dependent variables are binomial and equal one if the welfare recipient disclosed domestic violence (column 1), was marked as such in the administrative fields (2), and received a waiver (column 3).

of a disclosure by 0.5 percentage points, but again this impact was not statistically significant.

Certain individual and community characteristics, on the other hand, did have a statistically significant effect. Age had a positive, yet at a decreasing rate, impact on the likelihood of a disclosure. Being African-American as opposed to Caucasian decreased the likelihood of a disclosure by 5.5 percentage points. Separated women were more likely to disclose abuse than never married women. Pregnant women were less likely to disclose abuse by 3.2 percentage points. Child-only cases and cases with more than one adult were less likely to disclose abuse than single adult cases.

Community variables also had a statistically significant effect on domestic violence disclosures. According to the model, although women residing in low risk jurisdictions were not significantly different in their likelihood to disclose domestic violence than those in medium risk jurisdictions, women in high-risk jurisdictions were 8.9 percentage points less likely to disclose. Separate from this effect, women residing in jurisdictions with high or very high levels of domestic violence services had a 5.5 percentage point increase in the likelihood of a disclosure.

Administrative Documentation of Victims

In order to explain the documentation of victims in the automated system's administrative fields two adjustments were made to the disclosure models. First, the sample members used in the documentation models were limited to the three victim groups since documentation of abuse is only applicable to them. Second, these models include variables measuring experiences with domestic violence because that information was available for all victims. Specifically, the timing of the abuse and the living situation as gathered from the case narratives were included in the models.

According to the results from this model, presented in column (2), the presence of an expert led to a 11.5 percentage point increase in the likelihood that a victim had an administrative marker, but this estimate was not statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

In comparison to the model explaining disclosures of violence (column (1)), fewer individual level variables were statistically significant. Non-citizens were 23.4 percentage points less likely to be administratively marked. Cases with two adults were 29.9 percentage points less likely to be marked in comparison to cases with just one adult on the case. The dichotomous variable indicating whether or not a case was a

child-only case predicted an administrative marker perfectly so that variable had to be dropped from the models. Variables accounting for individual violence (living status and timing of abuse) were more powerful explanatory factors. First, individuals still living with their abusers were 32.8 percentage points less likely than those living apart to have a mark in the administrative fields. Second, individuals whose abuse occurred more than twelve months ago were less likely to be administratively marked (by 15.1 percentage points) compared to those more recently abused. However, those who were currently being abused were not statistically more or less likely to be marked. Finally, community variables were not significant predictors of administrative documentation of abuse.

Waiver Use

Column (3) contains the results from the model constructed to explore the impact of individual and macro level variables on individual waiver usage. According to the model, the presence of an in-house expert had a statistically significant, negative effect on waiver usage. Specifically, the presence of an expert led to a 16.0 percentage point decrease in the likelihood of waiver use. None of the individual and case level variables from the administrative data were statistically significant. The only individual level variable with explanatory power is timing of the abuse. Victims whose abuse occurred over twelve months prior were 15.0 percentage points less likely to have a waiver than were victims whose abuse was recent (within the past twelve months). Moreover, none of the community characteristics were statistically significant.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Establishment of an in-agency family violence expert was originally believed to ensure proper implementation of the FVO and is also an easy and straightforward measure for evaluations. As a result, the presence of an expert is frequently assumed to be a positive indicator of local agency commitment to the policy. However, this study suggests that, as is often the case in human services, front-line practice reality is complex and does not completely or neatly match pre-implementation assumptions.

In sum, according to these data, the current functioning of the in-agency violence expert in Maryland, at least, appears to have mixed results. Considering individual outcomes, we found that the presence of an

expert is not related to disclosures of domestic violence and the administrative documentation of abuse. However, the presence of an expert does have a statistically significant, negative impact on the likelihood of waiver use by individuals.

The complicated reality of FVO implementation and, specifically, the role of the expert, does limit our ability to interpret some of these results definitively or make broad-sweeping policy recommendations. First, the differences among the experts in arrangements, responsibilities, and backgrounds make it difficult to attribute any statistical impacts to the effectiveness of a specific expert role. That is, we are unable to tease out the effects of certain abilities or tasks or to say that an expert with this skill functioning within these guidelines is optimal. However, controlling for these differences would be impossible given the small sample size. Moreover, interpretations regarding the presence of an expert as a general solution to FVO implementation are valid when taken in context. Second, it is possible that the choice or ability of a jurisdiction to have an expert and how that role is structured are endogenous. Perhaps the jurisdictions with the greatest needs or problems are the ones who pursued the option of establishing an expert position. On the other hand, perhaps jurisdictions with the most resources and knowledge are the ones able and interested in hiring experts. While it is impossible to determine these motivations, controls for community socio-economic and domestic violence service indicators are included in the models to address this concern.

A third limitation, not related to the intricacy of policy implementation, but to the complexity of individual circumstances surrounding domestic violence, is the lack of data on clients' experiences with cohabitation, previous help-seeking efforts, comfort-level in disclosing domestic violence, and other personal characteristics and attitudes. While the inclusion of such variables would strengthen the present analyses, the time and effort required to gather and verify such data made it impossible. While future research on the role of individual decision-making is needed in the field, the present analyses fills a gap by focusing on agency-level implementation strategies and by serving as a starting point for future research.

In addition, based on the findings presented in this paper and keeping the previous discussion in mind, we are able to conclude that the mere presence or absence of an expert is not necessarily indicative of an agency's commitment, awareness or knowledge regarding domestic violence. The findings seem to suggest that the mandate to have a designated on-site expert may not have fully met original expectations. Experts do not affect disclosures or administrative documentation, both

of which are critical steps in the ability of agencies to serve welfare recipients who are or have been victims of domestic violence.

In order to address identification of domestic violence victims, the position of expert may either need to change or be complemented with a different strategy. Perhaps instead of a mandated family violence expert, a better strategy for guaranteeing a minimal level of domestic violence support and expertise would be to establish a different type of support system. One suggestion is to mandate that a certain percentage or cohort of the frontline staff be intensively trained and be available for consultation or referral if the need were to arise.

All staff, however, should be familiar enough with the policy to describe the waivers and conduct an initial, but not superficial, screening for abuse. Even though this study included both administratively marked victims and women with only case narrative indications of abuse, the numbers so identified are strikingly low in comparison to the prevalence estimates reported by researchers in the field (Tolman & Raphael, 2000). Considering that our estimates are in line with those reported in other welfare departments, this study adds to the evidence suggesting that further developmental work or enhancements in screening, identification, and recording of domestic violence in public welfare agencies are needed. Improved screening and documentation would assist in identifying all victims, serving victims better, and eventually evaluating the impact of FVO services on women's self-sufficiency outcomes.

One could also conclude though that development of improved screening practices and further caseworker training should not replace the in-agency experts. The presence of an expert is related to a decreased likelihood of waiver use. Although perhaps surprising at first glance, the result of decreased waiver use may indicate that Maryland experts are able to offer other more appropriate services besides FVO waivers. The expert most likely does play an important role in directly serving domestic violence victims and providing important referrals.

The findings presented in this paper offer empirical evidence on the mixed effect of in-house FVO experts and may also be helpful for program managers considering the use of specialists for other barriers such as substance abuse and criminal records. Contrary to expectations, disclosure rates of domestic violence and waiver use by TANF recipient women remain low even, as we found, in local offices where experts are present. This does not mean that the idea of specialists should, necessarily, be abandoned. This is particularly true in social service agencies that focus on service provision as opposed to problem assessment or disclosures. In these cases, experts may serve an important role in coor-

dinating care, making referrals, and providing services. Mixed results do suggest, however, that the expectations of new issue experts should be carefully considered and analyzed in conjunction with the functioning of the position to ensure a better match between intentions and outcomes.

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