



## **THE FUTURE OF SHELTERING IN FLORIDA**

By Linda A. Osmundson

Since we are in Florida, you'd know I was lying if I regaled readers with tales of trudging ten miles through the snow in bare feet to save a battered woman. I suspect, though, that my northern sisters could tell you a story almost like that. Nationally, we've been in the sheltering business in the US for going on three decades and I have been doing this work for over half of that time.

I can tell you about leaking roofs, plugged toilets, meatless meals (and not because we were all vegetarians!), cockroaches, termite invasions, forwarding crisis lines to my house, begging for donations of towels and sheets and running out of diapers. Some programs, especially in rural communities, still wage these struggles. But many of us, with the support of VOCA, VAWA, FEMA, HUD, FVPSA as well as state and local funding, have enough funding room that we no longer worry about paying the light bill. Times have changed from the early years.

But are we victims of our success? Are we becoming "nice girls against domestic violence" instead of radical advocates for battered women? Have we become so successful at coalition building with police that we fail to advocate for women battered by police officer husbands? Are we wedded to the prosecutors' office and cannot advocate for the defense of a battered woman who kills her abuser in self-defense? Do we forget to speak out when police don't arrest, prosecutors don't prosecute and judges don't grant protective orders?

Have we put all our eggs in the legal basket? Is there energy left for advocating to health care providers, employers, religious and community leaders. Are we losing our edge or just becoming tired and complacent?

Starting anything new is exciting. Facing the unknown, tilting at giant windmills and actually winning victories is an adrenaline rush. We women did this. We did this together. We caused the winds of change to blow in new directions. But the wind is fickle and I worry that our plan for the next three decades is not half as bold.

### **BATTERED WOMEN'S MOVEMENT: FLORIDA**

The herstory of the battered women's movement in Florida is a cautionary tale. Several of the earliest of our 38 domestic violence centers were born in the mid 1970's. CASA, the program where I now work, was established in 1977. Those early shelters formed a state coalition, Refuge Information Network. The founder of CASA, the late Sr. Margaret Freeman, was one of the three signers on the incorporation papers for RIN. Later the name was changed to the Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence. We have held

annual state conferences for more than 20 years though our coalition has had staff for less than ten years.

RIN was successful in passing one of the first marriage license fees that has funded domestic violence programs in our state since 1978. We learned to successfully exercise our collective, grass roots political muscles to win legislative support for issues and funding none of us could have won as a single program. **Now some of the larger domestic violence centers in Florida have forgotten the commitment to help all battered women and have used the political clout of their urban locations or relationships to powerful legislators to gain funding and legislation that may only benefit their area or program.**

FCADV committed to sending a representative to NCADV in the 80's. Elected as the second Florida representative to the NCADV Steering Committee, I served for six years. I learned powerful and painful lessons from my NCADV experience. The power was in influencing FCADV to institute task forces for women of color, battered and formerly battered women, lesbians, rural women and child advocates. **But, today we continue the struggle with our racism and homophobia. Few women of color come to state coalition meetings. Lesbians are still afraid to be out in some programs in our state and even afraid to attend caucus meetings.**

#### CLEMENCY

In the late 80's we received letters from women in Florida prisons. The Gainesville shelter where I worked then, began a support group in the prison. The FCADV Battered/Formally Battered Women's Task Force birthed the Women in Prison Committee. When the late Gov. Chiles' suggested we invent a process to help battered women gain clemency, we took him seriously. Candice Slaughter Warmke and I and others worked diligently for four years to gain clemency for nine women. We were volunteers with only a few thousand dollars to pay for phone bills and travel to women's prisons in far-flung rural areas of our huge state. **Then the FL Bar Foundation took over and funded the clemency effort. They would not fund advocates like us because we were only formerly battered women with a track record of success. But we were not lawyers. The first funded lawyers worked for two years, spent \$200,000, and did not free a single battered woman. A second group was more successful and more than 20 women finally received some form of clemency. When a new governor was elected, clemency for battered women stopped.** Two years later FCADV is attempting to revive the effort.

We knew we would never free all of the battered women in prison who deserved their freedom. But we also knew we were laying groundwork to educate the governor, the elected cabinet, judges, lawyers and the people of Florida about battered women. Women forced to kill to survive were the bloody red flags to the failure of our system to help battered women.

#### GOVERNOR'S TASK FORCE ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

In 1993, then Chief Judge Rosemary Barkette appointed four women judges, a woman prosecutor and me as an advocate to represent Florida at a State Justice Institute conference in San Francisco. In addition to hearing great speakers, we were assigned to form a plan for our state. It was a heady experience to spend a week with powerful

women judges. We argued incessantly and we were invigorated. We returned and wrote a brief to the Chief Judge and the Governor recommending a domestic violence task force. The ground was already fertile from our earlier clemency work. In 1994 the Governor appointed 13 doctors, judges, lawyers, psychologists, social workers, professors, the president of FCADV and me to represent battered women on the Governor's Task Force on Domestic Violence. In a few short weeks we wrote a 150-page report that included 225 recommendations on improving the state's response to domestic violence. Over the ensuing four years the Governor's Task force, led by Executive Director Robin Hassler, was singularly successful in passing legislation and improving public policy for battered women. However, the task force rarely had more than two voices of battered women. Even with my loud voice, it was hard to be heard over the traditionally powerful voices of lawyers, judges, doctors and professors. As only one person, I could not participate on all of the committees so some committees made crucial recommendations without a battered woman's voice.

**The Governor's Task Force became even more powerful as a funding body when VAWA passed. But when a new governor was elected, the Governor's Task Force no longer answered directly to the Governor. New political appointees on the Task Force had even less representation from the battered women's movement.**

With the growing power of the Governor's Task Force, there was sometimes thinly veiled competition with FCADV. While VAWA heavily funded new projects for FCADV, it also funded a rural project for the Governor's Task Force that nearly duplicated FCADV's already successful rural organizing project. The 38 domestic violence centers in the state who were under funded and overworked received very few VAWA dollars. During the OJ years we nearly drowned by the numbers of women asking for help. Meanwhile, **VAWA funded a new wave of "victim advocates" employed by police, sheriffs and prosecutors. Battered women received more service but, these new "victim advocates" sometimes compromised the safety of battered women. Their goal was successful prosecution, though prosecution was dangerous to some surviving battered women.** These "victim advocates" did not have legal privilege of confidentiality that was legislatively awarded to battered women's advocates who work at shelters. But battered women did not always know the difference between advocates from shelters and those who worked for police and prosecutors.

Currently the power balance has seesawed back to FCADV. But, even FCADV has suffering growing pains.

SETTING STANDARDS: ARE WE DOING GOOD WORK?

Many of our shelters are great programs, but some continue to struggle internally. Boards still fail to understand their responsibility for fund raising. Executive directors who are poor managers, run programs whose services are substandard where battered women are "treated", their autonomy disrespected. Some have stopped listening and being accountable to battered women. Shelter rules may be demeaning and disrespectful to the women we serve. Some shelters are near-jails where the women refer to themselves as inmates. Some expect women to give up all autonomy, dignity and privacy. Can we still expect women to feel safe in dirty, run-down "better than nothing" buildings? Some shelters have not remained viable, learning organizations. We have not begun to discover how to serve difficult battered women with problems

such as substance abuse and mental health issues. Some shelters may be better closed.

**We have difficulty agreeing on basic standards for all of us. Yet, if we do not set standards, will the state step in and do the job for us? When we set standards, how and who will hold us accountable to them? What will the consequences be for shelters that fail to meet the standards? Who will enforce the consequences? What role should funders play in this difficult dance? What should shelter residents expect from shelter?**

#### STAFF CERTIFICATION

Many who have been doing this work for a long time are painfully aware that we have little credibility with judges, lawyers, mental health professionals, doctors, and university professors. All of these professionals may believe they have more expertise than ours, by virtue of their professional degrees. We want credentials and acknowledgement in some officially recognized, formal way for the work we have invented. But we are a motley crew of formerly battered, lesbian, rural, women of color. Our diversity is our strength. A few of us have academic degrees and some of us just have what my father called "horse sense". We started this movement. We perpetuated our movement. We earned our "credentials" with black eyes and bruises from our abusers and long hours and dedication to our programs.

The substance abuse field is a good object lesson for this concern. Most of the original workers in the movement were recovering addicts and alcoholics. They founded treatment facilities, twelve step programs and halfway houses. Today, most of these founding mothers and fathers would be hard-pressed to work in their own movement because they are unable to afford to go to school to gain the credentials required for their old jobs. Today in our own movement battered women are already being pushed away from the center with arbitrary rules that they "must be out of their relationships for six months." We are told not to disclose who we are. We are already moving towards the medical treatment model with some shelters that call their supervisory staff "clinical directors. We are already labeling battered women sick or crazy. **Do formal credentials spell the end of a movement and the beginning of a clinical profession? We should be careful what we wish for. Should we certify our founding mothers out of their own programs?**

#### TRANSFERRING KNOWLEDGE: TRAINING NEW PEOPLE TO TAKE OUR JOBS

Some programs in our state have had the same director for as long as twenty years. These founding momas have grown with their programs, developing the administrative and political savvy to survive and thrive in a changing environment. Small programs and tiny budgets have grown to large, sophisticated organizations. As our programs grow and our salaries increased, have we brought our younger sisters along with us? Are we teaching them the philosophy and the mission along with the fiscal, staff and program management skills? Are we ensuring that our Boards understand that philosophy, mission and vision are at least as important as management skills. Are we taking responsibility to mentor talented young women to prepare them for our jobs or the jobs of directors around the state?

In Florida at least one third of the directors turn over every year. Only a few programs have been able to hire new leadership with experience working in the battered women's movement. **It is vital that local programs, state and national organizations begin to think about our future. Can we risk that new directors will have MBAs without the heart and soul of movement?**

#### ARE WE RETAINING OUR VISION/PHILOSOPHY IN OUR WORK?

Not only is it imperative for directors to understand the movement, but it is vital for each woman's advocate, child advocate, legal advocate, night and weekend advocate to understand the vision and philosophy that drove us to start the battered women's movement in the first place. How do we teach this passion for vision and philosophy? What can we do to make sure the governing Boards understand the urgency of investing in transmitting our knowledge in an orderly, planned way before we lose our founders to age and exhaustion. We must make sure that staff members all understand the feminist principals that are our roots. We must be willing to teach and mentor those who are new to the movement. We can no longer hire staff on Monday and expect a seasoned shelter worker by Tuesday. We have learned a lot. We should be figuring out how to transmit our wisdom and knowledge. Some of our lessons were learned with great pain. Our younger sisters deserve to know these lessons so they can go forward to lead us in new directions.

**We must also be conscious of our philosophy as we sign contracts and commit our programs to outcomes. Does every objective further our vision, the vision of battered women or only the vision of the funder?** Do our Boards and staffs refuse to accept money that insults our vision? Are our VAWA collaborations with police and prosecutors making us more conservative and less safe, less empowering for battered women?

#### STRUCTURING AND MANAGING LARGE ORGANIZATIONS

Many of us started as collectives with consensus decision-making until staffs grew larger than ten or fifteen. Few who have grown as large as CASA, where I work, with over 65 staff operate by consensus. But we can still manage with feminist principals. We can use spider web-like organizational structures, team decision-making and commit to information sharing that empowers staff to make informed decisions about their work. We can flatten our salary scales. We can commit to mentoring and funding training for workers to develop their skills and abilities to participate in decision-making. We can commit to significant investment in technology to improve our communication. We must continue to be mission driven programs of and by and for battered women and their children.

**We must recognize that a well trained, stable, smoothly functioning staff is our most valuable commodity. We can no longer expect women to work for us with no health benefits for themselves and their families. We must invest in retirement plans, employee assistance programs and learn to take vacations.** We can only expect staff to work eight hours. Then they should be encouraged to go home and refuel for tomorrow. We must also develop our own internal domestic violence policies so we can do more to assist the women who may become battered while they work for us. We can expect to become places where people want to work. Providing decent pay for the battered women who are employed by us should be part of our philosophy.

## HOLDING ON TO OUR SURFBOARDS

We are cresting a long wave of popularity and success at raising interest in our cause. Whether we can hold on to our slippery surfboards is up to us. We must set and raise standards of service and expect all of our programs to meet higher standards. We must make a concentrated effort to transmit our knowledge and philosophy to the next generation of leaders. We must not stray from our commitment to diversity and our roots in the battered women's movement. We must treat all battered women with respect in our programs and on our staffs. We must honor all the paid and unpaid workers in this movement as the future. We are about social change for all women. Indeed, that is a revolutionary idea. To remain a movement we must draw on our unique herstory, but to be a radical, revolutionary movement, we must not forget to MOVE or change will pass by us.

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