



# U.S. Department of **JUSTICE**

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## **The President's Family Justice Center Initiative Best Practices**

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In October, 2003, President George W. Bush announced the creation of the President's Family Justice Center Initiative. The \$20 million Initiative created specialized "one stop shop," co-located, multi-disciplinary service centers for victims of family violence and their children. The centers, commonly referred to as "family justice centers," are based on the San Diego Family Justice Center model ([www.familyjusticecenter.org](http://www.familyjusticecenter.org)); they are designed to reduce the number of places victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and elder abuse must go to receive needed services.

After a reduction of nearly 95% in domestic violence homicides over the last 15 years, the San Diego Family Justice Center is hailed as a national and international model of a comprehensive victim service and support center. Since 2004, the President's Family Justice Center Initiative has opened 15 family justice centers in urban, rural, suburban, and tribal communities across the United States. In February 2007, the United States Department of Justice announced the commitment of up to \$3 million in funding to support the development of a comprehensive, co-located family justice center in the City of New Orleans based on the President's Family Justice Center Initiative.

Congress recognized the importance of the family justice center model in Title I of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA 2005). Family justice centers are now identified as a "purpose area" under VAWA 2005. Using a "wraparound" service delivery model, the family justice center concept seeks to marshal all available resources in a community into a coordinated, centralized service delivery system with accountability to victims and survivors for the effectiveness of the model. As stated by Mary Beth Buchanan, Acting Director of the Office on Violence Against Women:

"The family justice center is, at its core, a concept that increases community capacity while also providing diverse, culturally competent services to victims and their children from a single location. It is common sense that such an approach, if executed properly, will provide greater assistance to those in need."

The family justice center model is identified as a best practice in the field of domestic violence intervention and prevention services. The documented and published outcomes have included: reduced homicides; increased victim safety; increased autonomy and empowerment for victims; reduced fear and anxiety for victims and their children; reduced recantation and minimization by victims when wrapped in services and support; increased efficiency in collaborative services to victims among service providers; increased prosecution of offenders; and dramatically increased community support for services to victims and their children through the family justice center model.

(See Casey Gwinn, Gael Strack, *Hope for Hurting Families: Creating Family Justice Centers Across America* (Volcano Press 2006).

The family justice center model is not considered appropriate in communities where various government and law enforcement agencies have no history of collaboration and specialization in addressing family violence matters. It is not recommended where law enforcement agencies do not prioritize thorough investigations, early intervention prosecution strategies, increased offender accountability, and heightened victim safety in partnership with community-based domestic violence organizations.

During the President's Family Justice Center Initiative, and in subsequent evaluations, focus groups, client feedback surveys, and national promising practices conferences, the following best practices have been identified:

**1. Co-located, Multi-disciplinary Services for Victims of Family Violence and their Children Increases Safety and Support**

In the family justice center model, partners to be co-located include: law enforcement officers; prosecutors; probation officers; military advocates (if applicable); community-based victim advocates; civil attorneys; medical professionals; and staff members from diverse community-based organizations. Other partners, such as a Chaplain's Program, are strongly encouraged and meet the expressed needs of clients experiencing trauma from family violence.

**2. Pro-arrest/Mandatory Arrest Policies in Family Justice Center Communities Increases Accountability for Offenders**

Each family justice center community has law enforcement and prosecutorial agencies that emphasize the importance of arrest, prosecution, and long-term accountability for domestic violence offenders.

**3. Policies Incidental to Arrest/Enforcement Reduces Re-victimization of Victims**

Each family justice center community should have a demonstrated history of addressing common problems in communities such as dual arrest and mutual arrest. No jurisdiction has policies that require a victim to pay costs for obtaining a restraining order if the victim is financially unable to afford such costs. This includes policies related to dual arrest, mutual restraining orders, charging costs to victims for restraining orders or related services.

**4. Victim Safety/Advocacy Must Be the Highest Priority in the Family Justice Center Service Delivery Model**

Each family justice center site has readily identifiable processes and staffing to assess and provide for victim safety during the intervention process. All family justice center sites have policies in place to ensure, to every possible extent, security for staff and clients at the planned family justice center. Site security and victim safety policies and procedures should be considered.

## **5. Victim Confidentiality Must Be a Priority**

All family justice center sites have policies and procedures that provide for victim confidentiality to the extent required by law. No private, non-profit victim advocacy or shelter organization should be required to compromise their own victim safety and confidentiality procedures in order to have staff on-site at a family justice center. Victim information can be shared among agencies working in partnership to protect the client but only after informed consent procedures are implemented.

## **6. Offenders Must Be Prohibited From On-site Services at Centers**

No criminal defendants should be provided services at a family justice center. Family justice center sites are oriented towards victims and their children. Off-site services to offenders should be central to any community's response to domestic violence; but no domestic violence offenders should be offered services on-site at a family justice center. Domestic violence victims with a previous history of violence or with a current incident in which the victim is the alleged perpetrator are assessed on a case-by-case basis for eligibility for services at a family justice center site. Identifiable procedures have been created to ensure availability of off-site services for victims in the event a current or prior criminal conviction prevents receiving services at a family justice center site.

## **7. Community History of Domestic Violence Specialization Increases the Success of Collaboration in the Family Justice Center Model**

Every family justice center community should have a history of specialization of services in their community. Specialization generally refers to specially trained advocates, police officers, prosecutors, judges, court support personnel, medical professionals, and other similar domestic violence expertise. In the absence of such a history, family justice center planning should include intensive training for all proposed partners and staff, with an emphasis on victim safety and victim advocacy and collaboration in the co-located services model.

## **8. Strong Support from Local Elected Officials and Other Local and State Government Policymakers Increases the Effectiveness and Sustainability of Family Justice Centers**

All new family justice center communities should demonstrate strong local support from those in positions of authority within the community. The President's Family Justice Center Initiative did not anticipate indefinite federal funding for any family justice center site. Thus, each site was required to seek strong support from local elected officials or other influential policy makers to increase local support at the conclusion of federal funding.

## **9. Strategic Planning is Critical to Short-term and Long-term Success in the Family Justice Center Service Delivery Model**

Each family justice center site should demonstrate a strategic planning process to ensure sustainability of the program, development of the program, and local funding options for future operations. A history of local funding is strong evidence of possible future support. Local revenues to fund specialized intervention professionals demonstrates the commitment of local elected officials and policymakers to the importance of domestic violence intervention and prevention work.

#### **10. Strong/Diverse Community Support Increases Resources for Victims and their Children**

All family justice center sites need strong, diverse community support. Strategic planning efforts that include developing and maintaining support from local government, state government, business, labor, diverse community-based social service organizations, and faith-based organizations increases the resources available to victims and their children at a family justice center and thereby increases safety and support.

United States Department of Justice

Office on Violence Against Women

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