Geese collaborate to make their journey. They create a structure through which all are supported, many have the chance to lead and everyone has a value and a critical role to play. Their collaboration, guided by a unity of purpose, ensures that everyone gets to the destination.

Like these geese, the Network seeks to create collaborative structures which are guided by a unity of purpose and through which all survivors are supported. In fact, the Network’s work is largely about collaboration. Sometimes we are the leaders, charting the course, spurred on by the encouragement of the rest. Often we fall back, supporting others to lead but contributing to the whole. Collaboration is so critical to the work of the Network, that we have articulated it as one of our organization’s core values. It is through collaboration that we learn and grow and can best represent the voices of Vermont’s survivors in our work on behalf of our Member Programs. We teach our new staff about what it means to collaborate on behalf of the Network: that we will fully participate with a goal of contributing to the purpose of the collaboration; that we will sometimes lead and sometimes follow; that we will offer our thoughts in a compassionate and helpful way; that we will follow through with our part, our responsibilities.

In this issue of the Network News, we are offering some insights into some of what we do through collaboration. Chani Waterhouse gives an overview of the ways in which we collaborate with our Member Programs to offer information and gain insights into the work of advocates and the lives of survivors. Auburn Watersong describes the ways in which our collaboration with State Agencies has utterly changed how state employees think about and work with survivors. Bethany Pombar reviews how collaboration within the prevention community in Vermont has resulted in changes in attitudes about sexual violence. Michele Olvera reviews our innovative collaboration with the Vermont Law School; and our guest writer and dear colleague, Ellie Breitmaier offers her insights regarding our decade’s old collaboration with the Department for Children and Families Domestic and Sexual Violence Unit.

continued on page 2
I like the idea of imagining that each of these collaborations is a flock of geese, filling the sky, flying along. Each collaboration a perfect “V” that allows leaders to rotate in and out. Sometimes the leaders are survivors and sometimes the leaders are other members. Each flock, moving in unity, not toward the warmth of the south, but toward the day when survivors are fully supported and when our communities and homes are safer. And of course, we are honking all the way! 😎

With thanks to Nan Stoops of the Washington State DV Coalition and the Move to End Violence for their geese slides.

Three Back At Us

Learning about ourselves through collaboration

Bethany Pombar, Prevention Specialist

In 2009, the Sexual Violence Prevention Task Force (SVPTF) was created under Act 1 (An Act Relating to Improving Vermont’s Sexual Abuse Response System) in order to support the educational system’s capacity to prevent sexual violence. The Task Force was a unique opportunity which brought together organizations and institutions working on prevention-related activities. Members of the Task Force included representatives from the Agency of Education, Department of Health, Department for Children and Families, Department of Corrections and community partners including the VT Network and Prevent Child Abuse Vermont. For many of us, this was the first time we had worked in close collaboration.

Over the course of our time working together, a little idiom I had heard began to resonate: “When you point a finger at someone else, there are three pointing back at you.” Here we were, the identified key stakeholders and experts, pointing our fingers at a system and saying “change.” Granted, we were trying to do this in a supportive and incremental way, but nonetheless we were initially looking only outward at our target audience. We dutifully went about our business together of fulfilling our mandate and creating resources and trainings to support schools’ sexual violence response and prevention programming.

As we began to engage in the collaboration with each other, we began a process of defining our shared vision, assessing the issue, hashing out concepts and clarifying best practices. Through this, we built incredible relationships with each other. We learned from and with each other and began to impact the way each of our individual agencies delivered our prevention services. The hidden gem of collaboration began to emerge — the act of coming together led us to examine our own collective practices.

Familiarity with each other’s programming grew, which allowed us to provide better resource and referral information and coordinate our activities. We learned more about where our work overlaps, where gaps existed, and we could work together to find solutions. In our efforts to create a coordinated response in Vermont schools, we ourselves became a coordinated response system — strengthened and reinforced by one another.

At the beginning of 2014, the legislative mandate that brought the Task Force together ended. Rather than allowing our work to end as well, the Task Force membership decided instead to use this as an opportunity to refocus and reinvigorate our work. We’ve expanded our membership and welcomed new voices from the disability rights, reproductive health and LGBTQ communities. We continue to build our technical assistance offerings for schools, but now we are also looking at how we can better support the community of practitioners working within the state.

As we launch into our next five years of collaboration with each other, the Task Force will carry this lesson forward with us. As we work to create systems change, we will continue to ask ourselves how we can embody the change we hope to create. 😎

Network Office Staff

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Michele Olvera ...................... Supervising Attorney
Dana Paull .................. Associate Director of Finance
Chani Waterhouse ............ Associate Dir. of Member Program Support
Alex Bottinelli ............ Clearinghouse & Resource Coordinator
Bethany Pombar .................. Prevention Specialist
Kelli Prescott .................. Legal Projects Coordinator
Anne Smith .................. Training & Tech. Assistance Coordinator
Auburn Watersong ............ Economic Justice Specialist
Working Together Within the Coalition

Chani Waterhouse, Associate Director of Program Member Support

The benefits of working in a coalition are many. One of the benefits we reap every day at the VT Network is rich and fruitful collaboration with our Network member programs. Network Director Karen Tronsgard-Scott uses the image of a bowtie to illustrate the very natural way in which this collaboration functions. The Network is represented by the knot of the bowtie – sitting at the nexus of our partners and stakeholders. On the one hand are our member programs and the survivors and communities they serve. On the other, statewide and national partners and policy-makers.

We receive critical information and guidance from our member programs. They tell us about local conditions impacting their work and what issues are most important for survivors and their families. They help us identify new trends and issues needing attention at the level of state or federal public policy. They also provide critical insights into how proposed initiatives may impact survivors and communities. The Network uses this information to define our priorities and inform our work with statewide and national partners and policy makers.

We also receive information and resources from national and statewide partners and policy makers. These inform our work with our member programs and make it easier for them to accomplish their own work at the local level. We benefit from participating in well-organized national networks of organizations doing similar work in other states. Often the most pressing issues in VT are also critical in other parts of the country. Through these networks we can access great ideas, cautionary tales and expert consultation, as well as a myriad of training opportunities and resource documents. We also have extensive connections with statewide partners whose work directly impacts survivors and their families and communities: law makers, policy makers, and other professionals working in criminal or civil justice, health care, disability rights, housing and economic justices, prevention, child protection, human services and more.

When people ask me what I do for work, I often tell them that I go to meetings and sit in front of the computer. Most of the time, I am somewhere on the bowtie – participating in the flow of information, resources and direct advocacy that results in systems change at the local, statewide and national levels.

Network staff regularly convene meetings with member program advocates to share information and resources and build capacity. Kelli Prescott recently joined the Network as the Legal Projects Coordinator. Prior to joining the Network, Kelli worked for the Network member program in Lamoille County, the Clarina Howard Nichols Center. She participated in the Network’s Court Advocates Task Force (CATF), which she now coordinates.

“Coming from a NW program, being able to attend the CATF was crucial”, explained Kelli. “I learned about anything that was up and coming. We discussed laws and how they could be applied in working with survivors involved with the criminal or civil justice system. We could ask questions, find out what was going on around the state, bounce ideas off each other and get feedback on how other programs were handling issues and building relationships with community partners.”

Now that she coordinates this task force, Kelli said she feels a great responsibility to make sure the information presented is timely, and responds to programs’ needs. Kelli also noted that she benefits from hearing directly from advocates working in local communities. “Programs give me perspective on what’s going on out there in the world,” she said, “including where they’re needing information, resources or technical assistance. This guides my work.”

The Network’s public policy work relies heavily on this exchange of information with our member programs. In 2006, the Vermont legislature created protection orders against stalking and sexual assault. This was the result of public policy advocacy by the Network, inspired directly by what staff heard from members of the Court Advocates Task Force. Vermont’s original Abuse Prevention Orders limit eligibility based on the relationship with the perpetrator, who must be a “family or household member” as defined by the law. Advocates talked about how difficult it was for survivors who were sexually assaulted or stalked by people who did not meet this definition.

In recent years, the Network has invested much more
Working Together within the Coalition
continued from page 3

in economic justice initiatives and related public policy advocacy. This also was a direct result of collaboration and consultation with member programs. Advocates repeatedly emphasized the barriers survivors face related to inadequate community resources for economic assistance, livable wage jobs and affordable housing.

Collaboration with member programs can also be narrowly focused and intensive. Over the past two years, I have had the opportunity to work with Deaf Vermonters Advocacy Services (DVAS – which became a project of the Network in 2011) and two member programs, HOPE Works of Chittenden County and Voices Against Violence of Franklin & Grand Isle Counties. Our goal has been to build capacity within local domestic and sexual violence advocacy organizations to reach and serve survivors who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. Representatives from each group worked together to build an organizational assessment tool. Keri Darling of DVAS worked with the two programs to test the assessment tool and process.

Members of the work group have committed to continuing to work together to refine the organizational assessment process based on what we are learning together. The representatives from HOPE Works and Voices will also support their sister organizations to replicate this process in other regions of Vermont.

We are fortunate to operate within a highly functioning coalition. The Network's success depends largely on our ability to collaborate with our member programs. We come together with our member programs to ensure we are advocating effectively to make things work better for survivors of sexual and domestic violence. At the same time, as in any meaningful collaboration, all parties evolve, transform and grow through the process of working together and learning from each other.

Policy Puzzles
Collaborating To Create Change
Sarah Kenney, Associate Director of Public Policy

Since its inception, the Network has prioritized public policy advocacy as one of the core tenets of our mission. This advocacy takes many forms: working with dozens of state agencies and statewide organizations to help them work toward policies that reflect best practice in accounting for the needs of survivors of sexual and domestic violence; sitting in many policy forums and advisory groups; and advocating at the legislature for laws and policies that support survivors and hold perpetrators of violence accountable. In each of these arenas we strive to insure that our policy positions are fully considered, grounded in the practical experiences of survivors’ lives, and mindful of possible impact on historically marginalized communities.

This is no small undertaking, and it means that our policy priorities and legislative agenda include a lot more than criminal sanctions for perpetrators. We do look at criminal legal interventions, working to make sure that police, prosecutors and courts have the tools they need to intervene in criminal behavior and hold perpetrators accountable. And we focus on family court interventions, analyzing custody laws, improving relief from abuse orders, and always asking whether the laws in this state can be improved to protect victims and their children.

Increasingly, however, when we craft our policy priorities and legislative agenda, the experiences of survivors and advocates leads us to a focus outside of the criminal system and often outside of the courts altogether. When we ask what victims need to maintain freedom and safety for their children and themselves, three things come up over and over again: money to regain stability; a safe, affordable place to live; and attorneys to advise or represent them in family court. These needs cannot be easily met by adjusting criminal statutes. So much of our advocacy at the Statehouse in recent years focuses on collaborating with other nonprofit organizations to work for stronger economic supports, housing, and civil legal resources. Advocating for earned sick time for employees, emergency housing supports, and innovative Reach Up (TANF) programs that offset the benefits cliff may not be glamorous, but it’s vitally important work that addresses the immediate needs of survivors of sexual and domestic violence and their children. If survivors don’t have money to pay rent and buy food, clothing or back-to-school supplies for their kids, and if they don’t have a safe, stable place to live, then their safety is so much more precarious. When we listen to the voices of survivors and the advocates who work on their behalf, our policy advocacy becomes much more diversified (and in many ways more complicated) than if we were focusing exclusively on the criminal legal system. However, it’s the only way to insure that we are fulfilling our mission and advocating on behalf of all survivors.
In December 2005, the Report on Domestic Violence Policy and Practice at the Vermont Agency of Human Services: Recommendations for Systems Change was released by the Vermont Agency of Human Services (AHS) Domestic Violence Task Force. It was the culmination of two years of collaboration between AHS, the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence and the Vermont Council on Domestic Violence. The report recommended strategies to improve and institutionalize effective domestic violence response throughout the Agency.

In March 2006, the AHS Domestic Violence Steering Committee was established. The Steering Committee continues today and includes representation from the Vermont Network and each AHS department. It was originally charged with the development and implementation of an agency-wide domestic violence policy. In 2008, the Domestic Violence Steering Committee published the new policy and established standards and guiding principles for the development and implementation of effective domestic violence response throughout all AHS Departments.

The policy provided the framework for articulating the Agency’s role in the prevention of domestic violence, offender accountability, victim safety, and supporting an effective coordinated community response to domestic violence. Over the years the policy has helped increase consistency and provided AHS the means to more effectively coordinate internal responses and collaborate with external partners.

By 2009, as the AHS Domestic Violence Initiative grew, each Department in AHS had developed a Domestic Violence Advisory Group (DVAG). Today, each departmental DVAG includes a representative from the Vermont Network who participates in the group as a consultant and expert in the field of domestic and sexual violence. In the Dept. of Corrections DVAG, for example, Network representatives have worked closely in the development of policies and procedures involving offender supervision, intervention and programming for offenders.

The Network worked in collaboration with the Dept. of Health DVAG, to support the development of the Department’s web pages on domestic and sexual violence. Additionally, as a consequence of increased capacity brought by the AHS DV initiative, the Department of Health secured funding to collaboratively work with the Network to design and provide a Domestic Violence 101 training for the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program staff. This work was then converted into an online training and is now used by each AHS Department to train direct service staff, supervisors and new employees. This training resource is currently available online to all collaborative community partners via the AHS website as well.

In 2012, Network staff, via the Department for Children and Families DVAG, collaborated with Reach Up leadership to help foster a deeper understanding of the challenges domestic violence victims face when engaging public benefits programs. This resulted in the revision of work deferment rules for victims and the creation of advanced systems training to Reach Up workers. The DVAGs at the Departments of Mental Health, Aging and Independent Living, and Vermont Health Access also continue to work with representatives from the Network to improve their services to victims of domestic and sexual violence.

By 2013, every AHS Department had successfully completed the development of a domestic violence protocol outlining best practice procedures for staff who work with service users who are victims and for how to respond to Department employees who may be experiencing or perpetrating violence. These are all giant steps in the right direction. The AHS Domestic Violence Steering committee continues to work with the Network in developing a coordinated and comprehensive response to domestic violence, transforming our communities to create safety and support for all Vermonters.
Improving Systems Collaboration for Adult and Child Victims of Domestic Violence
The Legacy of the Rural Grant Partnership between the Vermont Network and Vermont Department for Children and Families

Ellie Breitmaier, Director of DCF, Family Services Division, Domestic and Sexual Violence Team

Research involving co-occurring domestic violence and child maltreatment surfaced during the mid-1990’s. In the United States, estimates of the number of children exposed to intimate partner violence average 6.5 million children per year (Edleson, 1999). Fast forward twenty years. The 2013 Vermont Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission Report sheds light on the current impact to children and the scope of their exposure to domestic violence in Vermont. The report has sobering data:

- 347 children were housed in Network shelters or safe homes in 2013.
- 1,085 children received services other than shelter from Vermont Network programs
- Network Programs served 286 child victims of sexual violence.
- The Vermont Department for Children and Families, Family Services Division received 2,756 calls where co-occurring domestic violence and child maltreatment were identified at initial intake.
- 886 of these reports were accepted for a child safety intervention.

In 1997, Vermont received its first federal Rural Domestic Violence and Child Victimization grant. An original and ongoing goal of the Rural Grant — and perhaps its most important legacy — is the development of a strong sustaining collaboration between its two main partners: the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence and the Department For Children and Families (DCF), Family Services Division. Prior to this partnership, domestic and sexual violence programs and state child protection offices were not only not collaborating, but often at odds with each other. So, how did we get to where we are now? Relationships, relationships, relationships....

The first monumental tasks of our collaboration included defining what language to use when referring to children exposed to domestic violence and how to identify best practice roles and responses for both the child protection system (DCF Family Services) and domestic violence advocates. Next, we convened partners and extended stakeholders such as police, court personnel, and children’s mental health experts, to develop policies, protocols, and training tools. The goal was to help guide the rest of Vermont toward best practice responses to children and families where child abuse and domestic violence coexists. These early conversations and processes were always rich and rarely easy. They took time and paid careful attention to all voices. The outcomes were profound and continue to provide a strong foundation for our work here in Vermont as well as other parts of the country.

Our collaboration has hit rough patches over the years, as collaborations of this kind always do. Our response has been to navigate through these difficulties with facilitated processes that include all of us. In the end, each system has built enough trust and respect for one another to be able to honor both its own and each other’s unique philosophies and mandates and commit to working jointly on the broad goal of safety and support for adult and child victims of domestic violence and child maltreatment. We found that collaboration doesn’t mean compromising the principles of our organizations; rather it allows for difficult discussions to occur and each system to create understanding.

Today, we have not only created new policies and practices, but we have institutionalized many of the philosophies we have come to agree upon within the state human services system response. This continued dialogue, evolution of practice, and ongoing collaboration among our Rural Grant partners will assist Vermont families experiencing domestic and sexual violence to hopefully feel more supported and encounter fewer barriers to achieving safety and well-being. 🌸
The Vermont Network News

Interns from the Vermont Law School

Michele Olvera, Supervising Attorney

The Network serves 14 separate local programs, each serving many survivors every day and each having their own legal, housing and children’s advocacy projects. The number of legal questions generated from all the work of the Network Programs is substantial. Though the Network has both a Supervising Attorney and a Legal Projects Coordinator, our wish list of legal research projects is always long. That is why we at the Network feel so privileged to collaborate with the Vermont Law School (VLS) in South Royalton.

I am currently in my third summer of hosting interns from Vermont Law School. Three years ago I received a letter from Shelly Parker in Vermont Law School’s Career Services department inviting me to participate in their spring interviews for law students seeking summer internships. She made it clear that public interest organizations, such as ours, were not required to offer paying internships. However, students were interested in getting solid legal experience in a field that interested them in order to further their education and assist them in getting a job after law school. I was so pleased to discover that there were many students at VLS interested in having an internship in the field of domestic and sexual violence.

My first two interns during that first summer were so fantastic they truly motivated me to continue having VLS interns. One of those interns is now working as a prosecutor in Vermont and another is intending to work as a criminal defense attorney. I would like to think that whatever direction the students take with their careers, through their internships they not only enriched their legal education but also came to understand more about how the realities of victims’ lives interact with our legal system, its challenges, and especially the opportunities to help bring safety to the victim and their family.

Snapshots

2014 Annual Network Luncheon and Art for Shelter Project

Clockwise, from top left: Keynote speaker, Kit Gruelle, advocate featured in Private Violence; interns from VT Law School; program advocate from Clarina Howard Nichols Center; recipient of Visionary Voice Award, Andrea Jones (center); staff from Voices Against Violence and WomenSafe; featured artist, Sally Black (left).

Executive Director Karen Tronsgard-Scott joins Vice President Joe Biden at the 20th anniversary of the Violence Against Women Act.
Addison County & town of Rochester
WomenSafe
P.O. Box 67, Middlebury, VT 05753
Hotline: (802) 388.4205 or 1.800.388.4205

Bennington County
PAVE*
P.O. Box 227, Bennington, VT 05201
Hotline: (802) 442.2111

Caledonia, Orleans & Essex Counties
The Advocacy Program at Umbrella*
1222 Main St. #301, St. Johnsbury, VT 05819
Hotline: (802) 748.8645

Newport Office
93 E. Main Street #1, Newport, VT 05855
Hotline: (802) 334.0148

Caledonia, Washington, & Orleans Counties (of Hardwick area)
AWARE, Inc.
P.O. Box 307, Hardwick, VT 05843
Hotline: (802) 472.6463

Chittenden County
H.O.P.E. Works
P.O. Box 92, Burlington, VT 05402
Hotline: (802) 863.1236

Women Helping Battered Women*
P.O. Box 1535, Burlington, VT 05402
Hotline: (802) 658.1996

Franklin & Grand Isle Counties
Voices Against Violence*
P.O. Box 72, St. Albans, VT 05478
Hotline: (802) 524.6575

Lamoille County
Clarina Howard Nichols Center*
P.O. Box 517, Morrisville, VT 05661
Hotline: (802) 888.5256

Orange County & Northern Windsor County
Safeline
P.O. Box 368, Chelsea, VT 05038
Hotline: 1.800.639.7233

Rutland County
Rutland County Women’s Network and Shelter*
P.O. Box 313, Rutland, VT 05701
Hotline: (802) 775.3232

Washington County
Circle*
P.O. Box 652, Barre, VT 05641
Hotline: 1.877.543.9498

Sexual Assault Crisis Team*
4 Cottage Street, Barre, VT 05641
Hotline: (802) 479.5577

Windham County & Southern Windsor County
Women’s Freedom Center*
P.O. Box 933, Brattleboro, VT 05302
Hotline: (802) 254.6954 or 1.800.773.0689

Springfield Office
Hotline: (802) 885.2050

Central Windsor County & towns of Thetford & Fairlee
WISE*
38 Bank Street, Lebanon, NH 03766
24-Hour Crisis Line: 603/448.5525 or toll-free 1.866.348.WISE

* Indicates Shelter