

Starting a Family Violence Task Force

Starting from Scratch

While the development of each task force is different, there is a common pattern that most successful task forces have followed:

1. Identify steering committee of key stakeholders
2. Contact and recruitment
3. Holding the first meeting
4. Interim leadership and bylaws
5. Second task force meeting
6. Committees
7. Task force activities

1. Identify steering committee of key stakeholders

Domestic violence community task forces are effective because they bring together representatives of different agencies concerned with domestic violence, and individuals with the power and/or energy to get things done. Therefore it's important to include the relevant agencies and interested individuals. Be sure the task force is inclusive and not exclusive. GCVF is available to assist you with identifying and contacting key stakeholders.

List of potential members - Based on your work in the community, you will be aware of many individuals and agency representatives who need to be involved. Your community will have pertinent local agencies and important individuals that may not appear on this list. There is a suggested list on the website. It can be worthwhile to call some of the supportive individuals and ask for suggestions of people who might be interested. If you don't know of any individuals at an agency to invite, send the letter to the head of the agency and follow up to make sure the agency will be represented.

All task forces should include victims/survivors to ensure that the work of the task force is guided by the needs and experiences of domestic violence victims. The task force should also reflect the racial/ethnic, economic, and geographical diversity of the community, so that it can better reflect the needs of all victims and reach out to the entire community.

2. Contact and recruitment

Letters of Invitation - The letters of invitation are sent in the name of the community leader who has agreed to start the task force. Superior Court Judges are ideal candidates, however, you can use the DA, solicitor or another community leader. Many judges are reluctant to start a task force because they believe it is a conflict of interest.

In his State of the Judiciary speech in January of 2003, Justice Fletcher urged judges to participate in task forces saying:

“We are encouraging all judges to be involved in local efforts to end family violence and to coordinate the response of the courts with law enforcement, healthcare, prosecution, and other important community stake holders who have an investment in ending family violence. We must continue to rein in this most serious problem faced daily by family members.”

Chief Justice Fletcher, Georgia Supreme Court

The Judicial Qualification Commission (JQC) has issued a ruling that judges may be involved in domestic violence task forces. JQC ruling #201, as well as further information on judicial participation, are on the website. If assistance is needed in getting your judges on board, contact GCFV. GCFV can provide you with more information on judicial involvement and can also provide technical assistance for you in this area.

Many judges are willing to participate if you make it clear to them (and their secretary!) that they are not responsible for organizing the meeting. The judge only needs to sign the invitations for the meeting. There is a draft invitation on the website, which can be easily modified for your community. You can send out the invitations if the judge provides you with their stationary and envelopes. GCFV can assist with payment for postage and printing the invitations if needed.

It is not uncommon to invite 100 or more people to the first meeting. The number of people that attend the meeting depends on the size of the community and the amount of effort made to get people there.

Follow-up Contact - Potential members are more likely to attend a meeting if the letter is followed up with in-person or telephone contact. Indicate how important this project is and ask them to get involved. You may want to use the information on domestic violence statistics and successful task forces, called coordinated community responses, to help you prepare for conversations on task forces.

3. Holding the first meeting

The first meeting needs to be at least a two-hour meeting that introduces people to a domestic violence task force. GCFV can assist you and conduct the meeting for you. At this meeting the GCFV facilitator helps the community members identify specific goals and develop a strategic plan. It is important to have the community leader who sent the invitations do a short introduction. To encourage people to return for the next meeting, the meeting should end on time and you should set the time and place of the next meeting. It's a good idea to provide snacks. Tip: If you feed them, they will come!

Handouts on task forces, as well as shelter materials, and other resources should be made available.

The agenda for the first meeting needs to include the following items:

1. Welcome
2. Sign-in and introductions
3. Domestic Violence and Task Force 101
4. What is a task force?
5. What a task force is not!
6. What we have accomplished?
7. Needs/Goals for the task force
8. Subcommittees
9. Time and place for next meeting

This meeting is a good opportunity to make available the various shelter informational materials you have. You can also provide handouts about domestic violence or about a coordinated community response. Many good articles and handouts are included in this manual.

Welcome – Invite the organizer of the meeting and/or other appropriate community leader to welcome everyone and give a statement of interest and commitment.

Sign-in and introductions – It is important to obtain a record of who attends each task force meeting. You may use the sample sign-in sheet included in the appendix of this manual. Ask for email addresses on the sign in sheet. This way you will be able to send reminders for meetings etc. Make sure to have everyone introduce themselves at the meeting. This will help people to begin conversations and some of the most useful discussions happen before and after meetings. Tip: Have an ample supply of sign-up forms placed in more than one spot to avoid delays.

What is a task force? – A coordinated community response is an approach that government agencies, community-based agencies and professionals use to increase victim safety and offender accountability. A task force is a tool for implementing a coordinated community response. There are two questions that each potential member must answer for themselves “Am I safe?” and “Do I want to be here?” If the answer to these two questions is “No”, chances are they won’t come back. Establishing ground rules at the beginning will serve to insure your task force is a pro-active organization that is safe for all opinions.

What a task force is not! –Pointing fingers and laying blame does not make battered women any safer and it does not hold batterers accountable. It only serves to alienate members of your community. Make sure your task force stays focused on the primary goals of victim safety and offender accountability.

What have we accomplished so far? – Make a list of what has been done in your community thus far. Have there been DV Awareness events in October or poster campaigns in the schools, etc.?

Needs/Goals for the task force - It is beneficial to allow some time for people to discuss what is problematic or lacking in the community's DV services. This process helps people invest in the task force. If no one can think of any problems, asking about common problems (TPOs, dual arrest, effects of DV on children) usually get things going. Of course, it is important to have survivors be a part of this conversation.

The discussion may get sidetracked because people who are not familiar with DV or DV services, ask for explanations. Use this opportunity to point out that one of the first projects of the task force is to educate members about DV and available services. This discussion will yield a good preliminary list of task force projects or committees. ***Sign people up for subcommittees during the first meeting.*** There may be additional members needed to achieve the goals of the task force. Decide who needs to be at the table and which task force member is going to invite them.

4. Committees

Ad hoc committee for Mission Statement and Bylaws

One committee you need is an interim steering committee. This is an ad hoc committee but it is important. Bylaws and leadership are very important to the success of a new task force. When the task force is active and meetings are run effectively, people will return to meetings and get involved in task force activities. A mission statement and bylaws help clarify the goals of the task force, prevent conflicts over decision-making and control, and identify roles and responsibilities within the task force.

The interim steering committee should develop a mission statement and bylaws to propose to the entire membership. Sample bylaws and mission statements on the website. GCFV can supply these on disk or email for easy revision. Most bylaws have the same basic organizational structure:

1. Name and geographic area
2. Mission
3. Membership and meetings
4. Steering Committee / Board of Directors
5. Officers
6. Committees
7. Voting structure

Task force bylaws define a leadership group, typically called a Steering Committee or Board of Directors, consisting of officers and committee chairs. Often they establish committees for Public Awareness, Protocols, Teen Dating Violence, etc. and allow for additional or ad hoc committees. Most task forces meet monthly, though some meet quarterly. The bulk of work done in successful task forces occurs in committees, not at the actual meeting. Most task force meetings are only an hour long. The task force meeting usually consists of committees reporting on their progress. It is important to end the meeting on time. If issues come up that require more discussion, you can appoint a committee to address the issue or table the discussion to the next meeting.

The code in Georgia requires that each judicial circuit have a task force. Because of the size of some circuits and the differences in demographics, many circuits find that it is more effective to have a task force in each county and have the county task forces appoint or elect representatives to go to a circuit-wide meeting. It is best for circuits that are divided into county task forces to have one set of bylaws for the entire circuit-wide task force because each circuit has one DA and one Superior Court system.

Often the Interim Steering Committee is the source of elected leaders for the task force. The Interim Steering Committee finds task force membership, candidates for officer positions or recruits other before the next task force meeting. Finally, the interim steering committee plans the agenda for the next task force meeting.

Standing Committees

When committees are specialized, such as a law enforcement committee, it is beneficial to include committee members from a variety of disciplines. Committees keep minutes of their meetings for submission to the task force secretary. ***Committees will do the majority of the work of the task force, so it's important that they meet regularly.*** The task force decides whether committee chairs are elected or appointed. Volunteers with expertise need to serve on committees. The first assignment for each committee is to develop a description or statement of their mission and objectives. The first project needs to be achievable, such as a resource guide for victims.

GCFV recommends each task force have the following committees:

1. Protocol and Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)
2. Public Awareness
3. Teen-dating violence prevention
4. Fatality Review Committees (FRC)

Protocols and MOUs

Protocols, although time consuming, are a crucial in your community's task force. Protocols serve as the "road map" for the processes by which systems/agencies will operate. Protocols require feedback from the system/agencies affected and several revisions may be necessary. It is best for circuits that are divided into county task forces to create one protocol for the entire circuit, particularly with the Prosecutorial Protocol and the Judicial Protocol. Model protocols for Law Enforcement, Prosecutors, Health Care Providers, and Judges can be downloaded from the GCFV website. Each member of the task force signs the completed protocol. By signing the protocol, each agency/system commits to operate as indicated in the protocol.

Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) are tools that help you establish a formal relationship with agencies/companies. This leads to consistent participation by the agencies. An MOU may be the spark needed to get many agencies/companies to develop a DV policy. Model MOU's are on the website.

Public Awareness

There are many ways to raise public awareness about domestic violence in your community. Below are a few ideas.

- Develop a speaker's bureau. Rotary Clubs, Kiwanis, and faith-based groups are always seeking speakers.
- Make a flyer and post it in WOMEN'S restrooms or laundromats, which have the 1-800-33-HAVEN (800-334-2836) hotline number to call for assistance. The restroom or Laundromat is often the only place battered women can obtain a crisis line number safely.
- Collect teddy bears and other stuffed animals for law enforcement. Law enforcement officers often have to go into homes and interview small children that witnessed one parent battering another. A teddy bear or other stuffed animal can be a great icebreaker. The toys need not be brand-new, but should be in good condition. This is a great project to combine with education in high schools. After going in with a presentation on dating violence and DV, have one high school compete against an arch-rival to see who can collect the most stuffed animals! Some of these schools are really competitive. You may need a truck to bring home your loot.
- Hold "Lunch and Learn" seminars on DV with local agencies/businesses such as DFCS, Mental Health, hair salons, etc. This is a great way not only to educate but also to increase your membership!
- Write articles on DV and submit them to your local newspaper. Many papers often need "fillers" and writing it makes it easy for them.

- October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month. There are many things that you can do in October to raise public awareness. Some activities that have been done in the past are candlelight vigils, memorial services, and balloon releases.
- Silent Witness Project – Silent Witnesses are free standing, life-size, red, wooden figures of victims whose lives have been lost as a result of domestic violence. Each one bears a plaque with the victims name and the circumstances of their death. Silent witnesses can not only be displayed together during October, but can also be placed individually throughout your community to promote awareness year round. Places to display them are places of worship, the police department, city hall, the library, etc. For further information go to www.silentwitness.net as well as articles in the appendix of this manual.

Prevention programs are designed to teach teens to be aware of different types of abuse and how they can seek help if they are in an abusive relationship. These programs teach students the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships. GCFV can assist you with developing a teen-dating violence prevention program for your community.

Fatality Review

A fatality review is a multidisciplinary team that examines fatalities in an effort to identify trends and patterns. The goal of a fatality review is not to assign blame, but to look for opportunities to improve services within the community. In order to have an effective fatality review team you must establish trust among the task force members. Contact GCFV for training when your task force is ready to begin a fatality review.

5. Second task force meeting and forward

The agenda for the second task force meeting is typically:

1. Presentation and vote on bylaws and mission statement
2. Election of officers
3. Report from subcommittees

Task force meetings are primarily for subcommittee reports on goals and progress. If you are getting into lengthy discussions on topics, appoint an ad hoc committee and have them report at the next meeting.

6. Moving Forward with your Task Force

- Set a specific time, date and location for your task force meetings. Determine a time that works for the majority of people. If you want to

get specific leaders in the community, judges for example, a mid-afternoon meeting is probably not a good time.

- Stay focused on domestic violence and what you as a community can do to make services more accessible to victims. Don't turn your meeting into a "gripe" session. Be proactive! If members believe they are accomplishing something they will keep coming back.
- Don't let a lack of funds, or working to get funding, dominate your task force. For most task force activities, funding is not important. Local agencies and businesses will often donate food and materials needed for task force meetings and projects
- Education is important, however it is difficult for a task force to keep its momentum or to achieve structural changes with lectures alone.
- Avoid activities that involve some members of a task force dictating changes in the actions of an agency, especially if that agency is not currently involved in the task force. A useful task force activity is to identify important groups or agencies not represented on the task force and develop a recruitment strategy.
- Send your minutes to community leaders. This will serve two purposes. First, it will let them know that members of their community are actively taking steps to end domestic violence. Second, it will help educate them on domestic violence and the overlaps with many areas of concern in the community. (Example: Child abuse and DV)