

# Survivor Voices on Accountability for Those who Cause Harm

## A Brief Report on Survivor Survey and Focus Groups

The Accountability Workgroup of the Fairfax County Council to End Domestic Violence (CEDV)

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### Introduction

Regarding domestic violence, “accountability” is defined as the process by which those who cause harm acknowledge abusive behaviors and their impacts with remorse and effort to repair harm and prevent similar further abuse. Accountability differs from punishment. Punishment is imposed by authority and does not target improvement for any party or for the community. Like behaviors that cause harm, accountability is the choice of the person who causes harm. Communities and their systems are responsible for promoting individual accountability with efficacy and justice, including safety and autonomy for survivors/victims<sup>1</sup>. A primary goal of the CEDV Accountability Workgroup is to center the voices of survivors/victims. To this end, the Accountability Workgroup engaged local domestic violence service providers and other professionals to invite survivors/victims to participate in focus groups and a survey to learn about their experiences and preferences for how accountability is addressed in those who cause harm. Participants were offered modest compensation for focus group participation, their identities were kept confidential, no services were made conditional on participation, and it was acknowledged that no survivor/victim has no obligation regarding the accountability process.

### Focus Groups

Two focus group sessions were held, April 26 and June 17, 2023, each with a single 90-minute session. Focus group facilitators were affiliated with the Accountability Workgroup, were trained to facilitate, and signed an agreement to maintain confidentiality of participants. The focus group and survey centered around the topics of:

1. Victim service providers
2. Intervention services for participants’ current/former partners
3. Police and legal systems
4. Community systems

Participants were invited to describe their experiences with each of these entities and their preferences and suggestions for how these entities might support accountability in those who cause harm in a way that supports the safety and interests of those who have been harmed. Seven participants, all women, participated in the focus groups. Their ages were between 33 and 50 years (average of 41 years). Two were White/Caucasian, two Black/African-American, one more than one race (Black and Asian), one an “other” race, and one declined to identify race. Two of the women were Hispanic/Latinx, four were not, and one declined to say.

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<sup>1</sup> “Exploring Harm and Accountability”, Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance Membership Meeting, November 16, 2021.

## Survey

Twenty-one women participated in a survey administered anonymously via SurveyMonkey between June 2 and July 14, 2023. There were 19 questions taking an estimated nine minutes to respond. Responders were all women between the age range of 35 to 64 years. Responders were found through the same methods as for focus groups, including from among focus group participants. Twelve survey responders identified as White, three as Asian, two as Black, three as an “other” race, and one as American Indian or Alaskan Native. Five identified as Hispanic/Latinx and 16 did not. The same topics were addressed in the survey as in the focus groups, with a combination of multiple choice and write-in response questions. Many of the participants responded richly to open-ended questions, which provided quality data.

## Summary of Focus Group and Survey Responses

Several themes emerged across responses of focus group participants. None of these themes should be taken to represent the experiences and preferences of every survivor/victim, but each is important for the community to consider in its accountability response:

- Not feeling heard by the criminal justice and child welfare systems
- Accountability for harm not being promoted by these systems
- Over-reliance on the criminal justice system and a lack of other options such as:
  - Access to professional services relevant to accountability
  - Peer-led networks for support
  - Public awareness and education
- Systems and communities being easily manipulated to compound harm to victims and the need for education and safeguards to prevent this
- Lack of protection for survivors/victims within systems of accountability, resulting in further harm
  - Victim blaming
  - Dismissing danger
  - Professionals/officials intimidating
  - Forcing survivors/victims into compromising positions

While the survey sample is too limited to generalize findings, several statements emerged repeatedly among survey responders:

- Survivors/victims want to be believed when they reach out for help.
- The current legal system is not sufficient alone to promote accountability.
  - Improvements are needed to the legal system.
  - Options outside the legal system need to be equipped to protect survivors/victims.
- No intervention should keep a survivor/victim in a relationship when they prefer to leave.
- Conversely, no intervention should require a survivor/victim to cut off contact with a partner before receiving support.
- The entire community and its systems must become better informed about domestic and sexual violence to better understand, believe, and support survivors and to promote accountability for those who cause harm, not become a vehicle for perpetuating harm against survivors/victims.
- Survivors/victims turn suggest a variety of community and system solutions to promote accountability (varied widely across participants):

- Jail time for the person who caused harm (12 participants)
- Individual therapy for the person who caused harm (12)
- Divorce (10)
- Arrest (10)
- Support from family, friends, mental health or substance use treatment providers, or a domestic violence intervention program for the person who caused harm(8)
- Solutions suggests by few participants included (i.e., neither to be overused nor overlooked):
  - Supervised visitation
  - Mediation
  - Court-ordered restitution
  - Faith community support
  - Couples' counseling
  - Child Protective Services involvement

The following are some direct quotes from participants:

- *I have lost a lot of family members, because they have more faith in the courts than in me. My support team is really my friends. I find certain organizations' services helpful. I go to those places for help.*
- *Is there a platform for DV survivors to be part of the community, not just by sharing our experiences with leaders but with each other? I would like there to be a peer network that addresses the needs of survivors, not just a support group but a community peer leadership group.*
- *Waiting for a person to change who was not going to change did not serve me and added to my danger.*
- *Abuse is emotional, and the community does not come into play until well after that fact, when things become physical.*
- *The process I had to go through with the system was more traumatizing than the actual abuse.*
- *We both wanted help... and we could not find [a couple's therapy provider to address domestic violence accountability]. Some people would want to address things individually, some as a couple, and some would want a partner to be ordered to a program. That was not even ordered, even though there was a place on the form to request it and we both wanted it.*

Some participants offered suggestions how the Fairfax County community can support accountability in those who cause harm:

- Education provided across the criminal justice system, social services, and the whole community on how to identify victims of domestic violence and what actions are helpful or unhelpful in promoting safety and accountability, delivered by outside experts not embroiled in the current system and including the topics of:
  - Domestic violence patterns
  - Believing survivors/victims

- Affirmation and empathy
- Upholding autonomy
- Labeling abusive behaviors
- Overcoming taboo
- Advocacy on behalf of survivors/victims
- Peer support groups, mentoring, and networking forums by survivors with lived experience
- Frequent contact and support available to survivors/victims throughout accountability process
- A variety of community-based options, including those that do not rely on courts
- Prevention and early intervention with families at the first signs of distress
- Addressing unresolved trauma in those who cause harm

### Limitations

The results of the focus groups and survey should be interpreted carefully. The Workgroup made every attempt to reach and include a larger number of adult voices from a more diverse range of participants in regard to gender, race, and ethnicity. Flyers and the survey were made available in eight languages, and potential facilitators were identified to hold focus groups in other languages. While the distribution of participant race and ethnicity was not greatly different from that of the Fairfax County population, the fact that there were relatively few non-White, non-female, non-English-proficient, young adult, or older adult participants limits the generalizability of the results. More information is still needed regarding how to support accountability within specific marginalized communities. For brevity, anonymity, and privacy, participants were not asked if they were cisgender or about their sexual orientation, health information, income and education, or region of residence. However, these are likely important factors in survivor/victim preferences. Because of the relatively small and homogeneous participant sample and the wide range of responses, no central tendencies can be interpreted for most of the data. However, that wide range of responses does clearly illustrate one important fact—that there is no single system or single approach to accountability that is generally preferred or even acceptable. Survivors/victims who participated asked for a wide range of resources across a wide range of systems. According to these data, it seems that no vehicle of accountability should be dismissed.

### Comparison to Another Sample

To confirm consistency of data, the results of the focus groups and survey were considered alongside the prior dissertation research of Workgroup member, Dr. Brenda McBorrow, "Developing a More Holistic Response to Survivors of Family Violence," conducted in 2017. Her research included in-depth interviews/conversations with seven survivors in Northern Virginia who collectively had experienced every form of domestic violence and, in many cases, encountered multiple generations of family violence. Her sample was demographically complementary to this Workgroup's sample, with six African American women and one Hispanic woman, ages 36 – 75. The focus of Dr. McBurrough's project was on the need to break the silence on family violence and transform the church's responses. Her results were consistent with several themes from the inquiry of this Workgroup. Specifically, Dr. McBorrow's participants also cited the need for:

- Centering survivor voices, as well as engaging survivors in viable responses
- Increased community awareness, education, and prevention

- Alternative options for accountability beyond legal systems
- Increased accessibility to resources

Concerning support for alternative sources of support and accountability, only one of the seven participants had engaged the criminal justice system. Three had disclosed to church leaders, but the leaders' responses were not helpful.

### Implications

It was evident that some survivors/victims want more community involvement in accountability, and others fear being pressured by the community, such as to stay in a harmful relationship or to take responsibility for moderating the behavior of the person who caused harm. Survivors/victims felt similar pressures with the criminal justice system. Survivors/victims varied in how much confidence they placed in the community for accountability, but they agreed that the current criminal justice system response is insufficient alone to promote accountability. Some survivors/victims want a greater variety of methods for accountability, while others find it risky to stand by in the hope that a partner will change. No single approach is safe and effective in all cases. However, survivors/victims do generally want all entities involved in accountability to be educated about domestic violence and attuned to the needs and safety of survivors/victims. Points of contact for accountability are varied and need to be better equipped and coordinated in how they support the survivor/victim and promote accountability for those who cause harm.