

The City of Chicago Mayor's Office on Domestic Violence  
&  
Loyola University Chicago Center for Urban Research and Learning

**From the Perspective of Diverse Users:  
An Evaluation of the  
City of Chicago Domestic Violence Help Line**

***Executive Summary***

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25 E. Pearson  
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***The full technical report is available at  
[www.cityofchicago.org/domesticviolence](http://www.cityofchicago.org/domesticviolence) and [www.luc.edu/curl](http://www.luc.edu/curl)***

Michelle Fugate, Ph.D.  
Coordinator of Research and Evaluation  
Mayor's Office on Domestic Violence  
City of Chicago  
333 S. State Street Suite 550  
Chicago, IL 60604-3955

Christine George, Ph.D.  
Senior Research Fellow  
Center for Urban Research & Learning  
Loyola University  
820 N. Michigan Avenue 10<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Chicago, IL 60611

Natalie Haber, MA  
Graduate Fellow  
Center for Urban Research & Learning  
Loyola University Loyola University  
820 N. Michigan Avenue 10<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Chicago, IL 60611

Sarah Stawiski, MA  
Graduate Fellow  
Center for Urban Research & Learning  
Loyola University Loyola University  
820 N. Michigan Avenue 10<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Chicago, IL 60611

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In January 2004 the Mayor's Office of Domestic Violence (MODV) and Loyola University Chicago Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) initiated a two-year collaborative evaluation of the City of Chicago Domestic Violence Help Line. The National Institute of Justice funded this study to assess the effectiveness of the Help Line's operation in meeting the needs of diverse victims of domestic violence.

The evaluation accomplished three main goals: 1) it assessed the effectiveness of the Help Line's operation in serving domestic violence victims from Chicago's diverse populations; 2) it described the unique needs of diverse populations and their experiences using the information, referrals, and linkages received; and 3) it examined key features of the Help Line model.

The Help Line, inaugurated in 1998, is a unique telephone service functioning as a clearinghouse for all domestic violence victim services in the Chicago metropolitan area. This innovative public-private partnership service is toll-free, multi-lingual, confidential, and operates 24 hours, 7 days a week. The primary purpose of the Help Line is to connect domestic violence victims to specialized services through direct referrals and three-way phone linkages. The Mayor's Office on Domestic Violence contracts with the Chicago Metropolitan Battered Women's Network to staff the Help Line. Domestic violence trained Victim Information and Referral Advocates (VIRAs) answer calls received through the Help Line and provide general domestic violence information, referrals, and linkage between domestic violence victims and domestic violence service agencies both community based and public responders.

## Methodology

Researchers from Loyola University Chicago Center for Urban Research and Learning interviewed and surveyed four key groups who use the Help Line: victims, domestic violence service providers, police, and community residents.

First, focus groups were conducted with the Victim Information and Referral Advocates (VIRAs) to solicit information about their experiences staffing the Help Line and to inform the development of the victim interview instrument.

Second, follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with 399 domestic violence victims after they called the Help Line over the course of one year. Reflecting the ethnic and racial diversity of Help Line victim callers, 60% of the victims interviewed were Black, 20% were Latino, 20% were White and 3% were of other races/ethnicities. Ninety-four percent of the interviewed callers were women and 6% were male. Nine percent of the interviews were conducted in a language other than English, predominately in Spanish.

Third, telephone interviews were conducted with 74 staff members from 55 domestic violence service agencies in the Chicago area. The response rate was 83%, with 55 out of a possible 66 agencies participating. Fourth, as the largest referral source into the Help Line, 1,200 Chicago Police Officers completed a written survey about their experiences with the Help Line. Finally, to explore the general awareness of the Help Line in Chicago communities, a total of 326 community members from each of the 25 local Police District Advisory Committees (DAC) across the city were surveyed.

## Key Findings

### **The Help Line was useful to all users**

Overall, the users--including domestic violence victims, service providers, and the police--gave very high ratings to the Help Line. This positive assessment across users of the Help Line underscores its value as a useful service.

#### *Domestic Violence Victims' Assessments of Help Line*

- Victims highly rated the usefulness of the Help Line. The mean usefulness rating was 4.41 ( $SD=1.13$ ) on a 5-point scale with 5 as the highest score. Latino victims rated it the highest ( $M=4.59$ ,  $SD=.97$ ) and White victims rated it the lowest ( $M=4.28$ ,  $SD=1.17$ ), although this difference was not statistically significant.
- Victims also highly rated the usefulness of information, referral or linkages they received with a mean of 4.27 ( $SD=1.35$ ). Latinos once again rated it higher ( $M=4.58$ ,  $SD=1.1$ ) than Black or White victims; however, this was not statistically significant.

- The few victims who rated these aspects of the Help Line services with lower scores were most likely to have reported having difficulty connecting to the agency they were referred to.
- Most victims would refer someone they knew to the Help Line ( $M=4.68$ ,  $SD=.89$ ), and the more useful victims perceived the Help Line to be, the more likely they were to refer someone they knew to the Help Line.
- All of the non-English speaking victims said they would be highly likely to refer a friend to the Help Line while the English speakers were slightly less likely ( $M=4.65$ ,  $SD=.03$ ).

#### *Domestic Violence Service Providers Assessment*

- Eighty-two percent (61) of the domestic violence service provider respondents stated they referred victims to the Help Line and some referred as many as 300 individuals per month.
- On a difficulty scale of 1 = no difficulty to 5 = very difficult, provider respondents rated the referral process as not difficult ( $M= 1.23$ ,  $SD=.46$ ).
- The respondents who worked in a domestic violence service agency prior to the creation of the Help Line reported that referrals are easier to make now than before the Help Line was established.
- Similarly, providers reported that receiving referrals from the Help Line was not difficult and indicated that referrals made to their agency from the Help Line were appropriate.
  - Only 15 respondents (20%) thought they had ever received an inappropriate referral.

#### *Chicago Police Officer Assessment*

- Ninety-five percent (1131) of the officers surveyed had responded to an incident of domestic violence in the past 6 months, giving the Domestic Incidence Notice (DIN), which included the Help Line number, an average of 26.74 times ( $SD=10$ ). Beyond providing the DIN, 82% (901) of the police officers often or sometimes suggested to the

- victim to call the Help Line and 11% (111) reported often calling the Help Line for the victim.
- Of the 717 officers who completed the survey, 64% (462) thought the Help Line was a useful or very useful resource for domestic violence victims.

*District Advisory Committee Community Members Assessment*

- Of the nearly one-quarter (69) of DAC members who had either used the Help Line themselves or recommended that someone call the Help Line, 83% (57) thought it was useful.
- Seventy-four percent (206) reported that they would refer someone to the Help Line in the future.

**The Help Line model of coordination and accessing existing services is effective.**

The Help Line provides a single point of access to all domestic violence services in the Chicago metropolitan area through one telephone number, which maintains continuously updated referral information. This single point of access allows for coordination of both the community and public responders and provides 24-hour, seven-days-a-week accessibility for all victims. The availability of a citywide number that is staffed around the clock and provides information in one location eased the victim's access to domestic violence services.

Police Officers and Providers who had worked with domestic violence victims before the advent of the Help Line in 1998 reported an improvement in ease of referrals with the use of the Help Line.

- Of the 400 officers who reported having tenure on their job prior to the inception of the Help Line, 74% (297) found it easier to give a referral to a domestic violence victim now than before the inception of the Help Line.
- Of the 42 providers who had worked in the system previous to the Help Line, 83% reported it is easier to make referrals now than before the Help Line was inaugurated.

#### Users valued access to services.

- On a 5-point scale with 5 as the “most useful,” victims gave some of their highest ratings to the Help Line being available 24 hours a day ( $M=4.82$ ,  $SD=.68$ ).
- Domestic Violence Service Providers had a positive assessment of making referrals to the Help Line, reporting they found the referral process easy. When asked how difficult it is to make referrals to the Help Line on a scale from 1 = “not difficult at all” to 4 = “very difficult,” the vast majority rated the process not difficult, with a mean rating of 1.23 for this item ( $SD=.46$ ).
- The comments of service providers gave us some indications of why there was such a positive assessment of the Help Line. Some comments focused on how the Help Line had more resources available than any one agency and therefore could provide up-to-date information about a wide range of services. Others concentrated on the easy accessibility of the Help Line, its 24/7 staffing, and the easily remembered phone number.
- Over half of the providers reported using the Help Line to augment their referral capacity.
  - They used the Help Line as a centralized and updated source of information on citywide domestic violence shelter bed availability.
  - They obtained general information about services throughout the city, their requirements and their location.
  - They used the Help Line’s translation services.
- Of the 927 officers who responded to the survey, 77% (717) thought having a single citywide phone number was useful to them when referring domestic violence victims.

#### The information and/or referral needs of the interviewed victims were met.

- The majority of callers reported that they got the specific information or referral that they were seeking from the Help Line. For example, among those reporting that “they got what they were looking for” were:
  - 60% of the 109 individuals wanting shelter
  - 84% of the 67 callers requesting counseling
  - 71% of the 42 people inquiring about legal service

- 90% of the 85 individuals calling for information on Orders of Protection
- 87% of the 62 callers seeking information on safety tips and planning

## **Having a trained domestic violence advocate, the VIRA, is pivotal to the Help Line Model’s success.**

Based on feminist and empowerment models, the Help Line is predicated on the premise that a victim knows what is best for her or his own situation. The victim is not only capable, but is the most appropriate person to make the decisions. The Help Line’s function is to provide information so a victim can make informed decisions. The role of the VIRA (Victim’s Information Referral Advocate) is central to this model. The VIRA is a trained domestic violence advocate, not a generic information line operator.

While not specifically solicited during the interview, almost all of the victims made some positive reference to the importance of the specific VIRA to whom they talked. There are 3 key attributes the victims identified in the interaction with the VIRA: 1) an experience of strategizing together; 2) a strong sense of personal connection; and 3) the supportive nature of the interaction. The victims’ experiences illustrate the importance of the VIRA being a trained professional as well as the advocacy approach embedded in the Help Line model.

### The Help Line increased victims’ knowledge and helped them strategize and take action.

- Two-thirds (67%, 264) reported that their experiences with the Help Line resulted in increased knowledge or awareness, as articulated in comments such as, “I know now what my options are and what I need to do” or “ I understand what an Order of Protection is now and how it can help me.”
- Thirty-eight percent of the victims interviewed (151) reported that their interactions with a VIRA resulted in immediate “action.” Comments by the victims regarding action ranged from matter-of-fact statements such as, “I knew I wanted an Order of Protection. So I went and got it” to “I called the counselor and talked about what was happening.”
- Victims’ describe an active dynamic when getting information from the Help Line. For example, the victims strategized with the VIRAs regarding their specific situations.

Victims learned about the domestic violence service provision system, about their options, about ways to make their situations safer, and about details they need to consider in accessing specific services. Victims associated a positive emotional effect with this learning and interaction. Often the victim's discussion with the VIRA would move the victim away from a sense of powerlessness (or hopelessness). The strategy and problem-solving interaction with the VIRA and the emotional boost from this interaction with the Help Line are key factors in understanding the utility of the Help Line for the victims.

Victim callers reported developing a strong personal connection with the VIRAs.

- Victims reported overcoming feelings of distrust and insecurity:
  - “I was mistrustful to call at first but the VIRA really made me feel like I was talking to a friend. She made me feel secure.”
  - “The VIRA was really on my side. She reminded me how much courage it took to call. It was someone who really got what I was saying.”
- This special connection often counterbalanced the negative response to the unavailability of services in the community. For instance, of the victims who could not connect to the referred service due to unavailability, 79% (26) indicated they did not blame the VIRA for limited availability to services and felt the VIRA would help them if they could.

Victims reported a positive emotional impact as a result of their interaction with the Help Line VIRA.

- Just over half (53%, 210) reported emotional responses to their experience with the Help Line. These effects varied from simply feeling better about oneself after calling to confronting their situation and rejecting the denial of abuse. As one victim lamented, “I realize now what a roller coaster I have been on and I stopped letting myself cry. Even though I cried to the VIRA, it still felt very good.” While VIRAs do not provide counseling services, and their focus is on short interchanges of information and resources, victims often described the comfort and support they received from the VIRA.

- For instance, one victim stated, “Sometimes I am not too sure of myself when I call the Help Line, and the VIRAs give me the support I am looking for.”
- The VIRAs not only provide victims with services but they act as a buffer against the fears of reaching out for help:
  - One victim described, “I felt comfortable with the VIRA, she was a listening ear for me.”
  - The VIRA is available anytime of day and the victims expressed, “just knowing someone was there at 2 a.m.” made them feel better.
  - Other victims made comments such as, “Who else can you call in the middle of the night?” or “The VIRA was there to just calm me down and let me know I did the right thing. I didn’t know what I wanted, but she made me feel better.”
- Consistent with the comfort received from interacting with the VIRA, victims viewed VIRAs as a resource that was not impersonal:
  - As one victim stated, “I didn’t just get information, I got someone who knew what it was like to be where I am. The VIRA understood and she didn’t judge me. She was there, when I couldn’t be there for myself.”
  - Another said, “Life, it’s hard, you often (are) in denial. The VIRA was there for me, the Help Line was there for me.” She later noted she “would have given up or something” if they (VIRA) had not been there for her.

**Community awareness campaigns have had a positive impact, but need to be ongoing.**

Community awareness and outreach includes widespread public awareness campaigns, developing community information materials, and providing training/education for concerned stakeholders (i.e. community businesses, health care) and community residents so they may take a stand against domestic violence in their communities. The findings from this study show some of the positive effects of this outreach and reinforce the need for continued outreach and advertising campaigns.

### Evidence of Outreach

- Nearly one-third of the victims who called the Help Line cited their referral source as either from advertising or from other community members.
- 82% (243) of the community DAC respondents said that leaflets and billboards on domestic violence were displayed and available within their specific community.
- 54% (134) of the community respondents who were employed reported seeing leaflets, posters and other advertisements on domestic violence at their places of employment.
- 34% (112) of the community respondents who attended religious services reported seeing various forms of advertisements on domestic violence in their church, mosque, temple or synagogue.
- 49% (159) of the community respondents indicated seeing posters on domestic violence in their community in a language other than English.
- 73% (218) of community respondents were aware of somewhere to go to receive domestic violence services and resources.

### Need for ongoing community awareness campaigns

While these findings show the success of advertising, there are indications that even more advertising is needed.

- Victim callers rated the advertising feature of the Help Line somewhat lower than other features of the Help Line. Victims made many comments about this feature—more than any other feature of the Help Line—saying that they personally had not seen advertising, more advertising was needed, or continued advertising is necessary.
- While the Help Line is advertised in many languages, only one-third of the victims who used the Help Line in another language reported knowing prior to their call that the Help Line could deliver services and information in their language.
- Only 16% (47) of the residents attending DAC meetings reported having seen the Help Line number on an advertisement.

## **There are challenges to service connection beyond the Help Line.**

In the victim interviews we found that following the Help Line call, some victims did not always get their service needs met, at least not immediately. There are many reasons for this, including the capacity of the current domestic violence service network, the distribution of these services through the city, and the particular needs of the victim caller.

### A majority of victims reported trying to connect to the referred service agency with varying outcomes.

- We have follow-up information on 302 callers who received a referral or linkage from the Help Line to a community based agency.
- Approximately two-thirds (64%, 194) of these callers had tried to connect to the service.
- Of those who we know tried to connect, nearly half (48%, 93) were able to get the service they wanted.
- The most common reasons for not connecting to a community service included:
  - Service was unavailable (23%, 57)
  - The victim was unable to get through due to the phone line being busy or being put on hold (11%, 26)
  - Ineligibility for the service (5%, 13)
  - The service was too far away (8%, 19)
  - The victim decided on another non-Help Line referred service (2%, 5)
- Some services are harder to access than others. For example, victims had more difficulty obtaining shelter, housing and legal services than Orders of Protection or counseling.

This difference was significant, (a chi-square test,  $\chi^2(72, 398)=369.53, p<.001$ ).

### Four types of challenges to connection

Looking at the reports of the victims, providers and police, we identified four reasons that victims had difficulty accessing the services they were seeking in their call to the Help Line.

- The service exists, but cannot always meet the demand. Sometimes, often with shelter, the service is just not available at the time of the call. Victims reported being told that

- shelter space was not available on that particular day. Providers also commented that shelters often do not have adequate space for victims with large numbers of children.
- The service does not fit the particular needs of the victim. For example, some victims reported not being able to meet the income requirement to access legal assistance programs. Others mentioned that services were too far away from where they live. Others could not find domestic violence shelters willing to accept older boys.
  - Often there is just no, or very limited services, available to which the Help Line can refer a victim. Some examples include emergency shelter for male victims, shelters for actively substance abusing victims, dental care to replace or fix the victim's teeth, and counseling for children who witness their parent being abused.
  - There is not one dominant service need. Victims called for a wide range of services, and no one service need dominated. Rather victims needed an array of services, the most prominent of which are shelter, counseling, general information about the domestic violence system, safety strategies, Orders of Protection, and legal services. When seeking to connect to the referral agency, the caller is challenged by varying hours of service, locations in diverse areas of the city, differing patterns of availability and distinct eligibility requirements.

**There are diverse patterns of circumstances and needs between diverse victims.**

We interviewed a sufficient number of Black, Latino, and White callers, as well as male callers, to examine diverse patterns of circumstances and needs between these groups. In addition, we were able to compare differences between English speaking and non-English speaking callers.<sup>1</sup> While there are some differences between groups of victims, it should be emphasized that rarely did a particular group have a circumstance that was not shared, though perhaps not to the same degree by another group. For example, the range of services and information that all groups of victims requested were similar. Also, no set of circumstances was

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<sup>1</sup> Since all but three of the victims who were not interviewed in English were Spanish speaking there are just a few issues in which non-English speakers differ from Latinos.

exclusive to one group of victims. Some of the most significant areas in which there were differences were in employment status, housing, living arrangements, dependent children, the victim's relationship to the abuser and services requested.

#### Employment

- Of the victim callers to the Help Line who were interviewed (respondents), Black respondents had significantly lower rates of employment (43%) compared to Latinos (53%) and Whites (61%).

#### Stable Housing

- Black respondents were three times more likely to not be permanently housed (14%) compared to Latino (5%) and White (8%) respondents.
- Black respondents requested referrals to shelter at twice the rate of other ethnicities/races.
  - Since the need for shelter was among those most likely to be unmet, Black respondents were more likely not to be connected to service, and more likely to report not having their needs met by using the Help Line.

#### Living Arrangements

- White respondents were significantly more likely to be living alone (26%) than Latino (10%) or Black (13%) respondents.
- Latino respondents were more likely to be living in household with more people (3.13 average) than Black (2.56) or White (2.43) respondents.
- Men respondents (67%) were less likely than women respondents (87%) to be living with someone.

#### Dependent Children

- Latino respondents were most likely to have minor children in their household (82%) than Black (66%) or White (51%) respondents, and to have more children (2.42 average) than Black (2.25) or Whites (1.77) respondents.
- Only 25% of men respondents lived with minor children, and in those households there was only 1 child.

- White respondents were significantly less likely to have older boys between 12 and 17 (11%) than Black (22%) or Latino (18%) respondents.

#### Relationship to Abuser

- In most cases, the victim respondents were in heterosexual relationships. Male (25%) respondents were more likely to be in same sex relationships than female (2%) respondents.
- Latino respondents (47%) and White respondents (43%) were more likely to be married to their abuser than Black respondents (23%).
- White (22%) and Black (23%) respondents were more likely to be abused by an ex-spouse or partner than Latino respondents (15%).

#### Significant Differences in Service Needs

- 35% of Black respondents requested shelter, as compared to 18% of White and 16% of Latino respondents.
- White (21%) and Latino (21%) respondents were more likely to request counseling than Black respondents (14%).
- Latino respondents were more likely to request Orders of Protection (34%) than White (16%) or Black (19%) respondents.
- Latino respondents were also more likely to request legal services (18%) than White (13%) or Black (6%) respondents.
- Non-English speaking victim respondents were almost twice more likely to request general information (42%) than English speaking respondents (23%).
- While five of the 36 Non-English speaking respondents requested information about divorce, only one of the 263 English speakers requested such information.
- Women respondents (29%) were more likely than men respondents (8%) to request shelter.
- Women respondents (18%) were more likely than men respondents (4%) to request counseling.

- Men respondents were much more likely (46%) to request Orders of Protection than women respondents (20%).

## **Conclusion**

The Help Line model is predicated on 3 components: 1) to provide a streamlined system for victims to easily access resources; 2) to empower victims; and 3) to increase community awareness of domestic violence and available support. The purpose is to provide a more efficient system for linking diverse victims to the services and resources in the Chicago area and to illustrate and document the needs of those victims to inform service delivery. The findings of this evaluation all point to:

- the effectiveness of the Help Line in meeting the needs of diverse victims;
- the effectiveness of the Help Line as a model of service delivery; and
- the effectiveness of providing the service as intended.

Four challenges were identified in the domestic violence service provision system beyond the Help Line. These include: 1) when a domestic violence service exists but cannot always meet the demand; 2) when the service does not fit the particular needs of the victim; 3) when no services are available; and 4) when one dominant service need does not exist.

Interviewing victim callers to the Help Line not only provided the opportunity to assess the Help Line from the perspective of the victim, but also allowed us to explore the needs, experiences, and actions of victims as they sought a safer life. One purpose of the Help Line is to illustrate and document the needs of the diverse population of domestic violence victims. This evaluation helps to meet that goal and provides valuable information about victims who have called the Help Line. The findings indicate that there are differences in circumstances between different groups of victims, but rarely did a particular group have a circumstance that was not shared, though perhaps not to the same degree, by another group. The similarities and differences among racial/ethnic groups provide valuable information for further research and the development of domestic violence services.