

## **The Initiative for Violence-Free Families and Communities in Ramsey County: Fourteen Years of Innovative and Effective Strategies To Prevent Family Violence**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to provide information on two major efforts by The Initiative for Violence-Free Families and Communities in Ramsey County, Minnesota: The Men's Line, a unique resource developed in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota in 1997; and successful efforts to eliminate media campaigns and messages that condone or promote violence and disrespect against women, children and men. The article is organized as follows:

- Background in The Initiative for Violence-Free Families and Communities in Ramsey County
- History of the Men's Messages Action Team (a community partnership jointly sponsored by the Ramsey and Hennepin County Initiatives for Violence-Free Families and Communities) and The Men's Line
- Future Directions for The Men's Line
- Efforts to Eliminate Violent and Disrespectful Media Campaigns and Images

### **Background:**

#### **The Initiative for Violence-Free Families and Communities in Ramsey County**

During the mid-1980's Ramsey County convened a series of "Abuse Councils", whose charge was to examine and improve County intervention services and programs that respond to family violence (child abuse, elder abuse, and domestic violence.) Intervention services were improved and better connected, and the County Board became much more aware of the financial and human costs of family violence in the Ramsey County community.

In the late 1980's a 5-year old boy was kicked to death by his mother's boyfriend in St. Paul – while the family's case was open to County and community intervention and support services. This incident, in conjunction with the work of the Abuse Councils, led the Board to make a commitment to explore whether family violence could be *prevented*.

In April, 1990 the Minneapolis League of Women Voters published Breaking the Cycle of Violence: A Focus on Primary Prevention Efforts. (1) Research compiled in the League report helped to lay the groundwork for two key Initiative principles:

- The report identified **primary prevention\***, i.e. trying to reach the *entire population* with tools and resources designed to prevent violence *before it occurs*, as a central component to breaking the cycle of violence. "Primary prevention efforts encourage the development of healthy human beings and families...which in turn eliminates many of the causes of violent behaviors. Most efforts in social services, legal and educational fields...focus on intervention, that is programs that treat violent behavior after it has occurred."
- The report also provided the rationale for a **sustained, community-wide approach**: "Breaking the cycle of violence requires the cooperation of educational, business, religious, legal, medical, media, recreational, and community organizations. The

cooperative effort must focus on developing an understanding of how to prevent violent behavior, while at the same time moving forward with...public education programs that promote nonviolent behavior and support healthy, nurturing families.” [CITATION]

\* *In Public Health, we refer to **Three Levels of Prevention: Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary**. In Primary Prevention, no group nor individual is designated “high risk”; instead, we are working to bring a message or skill set to an entire population in order to prevent those individuals from ever beginning a risky behavior or practice. When we move to Secondary Prevention, we are now targeting our prevention messages and tools to individuals and groups who are already engaged in potentially damaging behaviors, but are not yet showing any ill effects as a result. When we move to Tertiary Prevention, or Intervention, we are working with people who are both engaged in risky behaviors and who are in need of treatment to address ill effects caused by these behaviors.*

*A simple analogy to illustrate these three levels is cigarette smoking: Primary Prevention efforts are designed to provide populations with information and incentives in order to convince people to not start smoking in the first place; Secondary Prevention campaigns target people who are smokers, but have not yet developed any smoking-related illnesses, with messages and tools to quit smoking before they become ill; while Tertiary/ Intervention efforts must convince and assist smokers to break their habit while simultaneously providing treatment for emphysema, lung cancer, and other smoking-related disease.*

*This analogy also points to the difficulty, and often seemingly poor results inherent in traditional approaches to intervening in cases of family violence (as well as other manifestations of violence, in the workplace, community, schools, etc.) Intervention systems by definition must wait until serious, documented harm has occurred in a family/school/workplace setting, and then come in to both break the cycle of violence, attempt to heal or undo the effects of violence to individuals, and provide consequences to “perpetrators” (while generally ignoring the effects on other people and community systems around them.)*

*While acknowledging and respecting the need to maintain and continually work to improve intervention approaches to family, workplace and community violence, The Initiative is based on a Primary Prevention model. Our efforts have been built on the premise of providing messages and tools to entire populations in order to change the context and messages received by people in our communities/schools/workplaces and prevent acts of violence from occurring in the first place.*

Finally, The Initiative borrowed a communication strategy used in successful marketing campaigns as well as Public Health public awareness and social change efforts: **multiple messages, from multiple messengers, over time**. Our Primary Prevention efforts are built on a model, articulated in the League Report, of all parts of our community, e.g. schools, faith communities, workplaces, media, etc. being engaged through Action Teams (with the support of staffing and other County resources) in creating and institutionalizing positive, respectful messages and strategies to promote nonviolence, while simultaneously identifying and removing negative messages and incentives that can increase the likelihood of individuals or groups turning to violence.

Since 1990, Initiative Action Teams have had a number of significant accomplishments that have made Ramsey County a more peaceful community, including:

- Development of policies, tools and strategies to assure violence-free respectful workplaces

- Creation of a broad range of resources promoting peaceful parenting, including the Wakanheza Project, borrowing the Dakota word for Child, which translates as “Sacred Beings”, as well as the Welcoming Places campaign, setting up health care and other public facilities as respectful, welcoming places for families and children and assuring that children are not treated harshly in those public places
- Partnership with schools (K-12 and higher education) on tools promoting peaceful classroom and school environments and student athlete/coaches codes of conduct to assure respectful and peaceful sporting events
- Partnership with the Hmong Community on creating and implementing a broad range of peace promotion tools
- Collaboration between faith community leaders, family/domestic violence advocates and musicians/playwrights on creation of musicals about root causes of family violence and building respectful, healthy relationships. (The most recent outcome of this work is the musical “Change”, which will be filmed by Twin Cities Public Television in April, 2003 and broadcast initially on June 1.)

Staffing and core resources for the work of The Initiative have been provided by Ramsey County principally through the Saint Paul – Ramsey County Department of Public Health. During the initial planning and building phase of The Initiative, a full-time planning and administrative position was “loaned” to The Initiative; as of February, 2003, three full-time positions are dedicated to staffing and supporting the work of Initiative Action Teams. The role of these positions has been described as *Community Systems Organizing*, working with faith communities, health care systems, schools, media, etc. to create and integrate primary prevention tools and messages into the fabric of the Ramsey County community.

Unlike other local Public Health Departments who have dedicated staff to violence prevention, the staff positions dedicated to Initiative work have not been funded by grants, but rather through local tax levy and other more stable sources, allowing for significant continuity in staffing and effort. At the present time County - wide budget cuts are looming due to significant state deficits. It is our hope and belief that the credibility and impact of The Initiative on the Ramsey County community as well as within Ramsey County government will assure that these efforts will continue into the foreseeable future.

Further information on The Initiative for Violence –Free Families and Communities in Ramsey County can be found at the Saint Paul –Ramsey County Department of Public Health website: [www.co.ramsey.mn.us](http://www.co.ramsey.mn.us)

### **Background: The Men’s Messages Action Team and The Men’s Line**

In July, 1997 the Men’s Messages Action Team The Initiatives for Violence-Free Families and Communities in Ramsey and Hennepin County started *The Men’s Line*. (The Minneapolis-St. Paul Twin Cities area is comprised of seven metropolitan counties; the two largest are Hennepin County [pop 1,116,000] and Ramsey County [pop 511,000].) The Ramsey and Hennepin Initiatives work together in a number of areas, including the Men’s Messages Action Team and The Men’s Line. *The Men’s Line* is the first, and to our knowledge the only resource of its kind in the United States. *The Men’s Line* is a free, confidential 24-hour phone line for men, answered by trained counselors at the Crisis Connection, the Twin

Cities' primary 24-hour crisis line/resource. (As of September, 2002 Crisis Connection assumed responsibility for ongoing funding and operation of The Men's Line, with the Men's Messages Action Team remaining a partner in promoting and expanding the Line.) The Men's Line was modeled after pioneering work done in the 1980's-90's by Dale Hurst and associates in Melbourne, Australia. The Line was designed to give men a resource to break isolation and address issues of stress, anger and depression. From July, 1997 through December, 2002 the Men's Line received over 3,000 calls; in 2002 the Line averaged over 65 calls per month, with 85 calls per month in November and December alone.

An assessment of The Men's Line completed in February, 1999 broke calls received by the Line into the following categories:

- Men who are depressed and need to talk and/or need resources and referrals to deal with anger, financial, legal and/or medical issues
- Men seeking advice on relationships, communication skills and dealing with their children, as well as how to deal with an abusive wife/partner or other family member
- Women calling for resources for male partner, other family member or friend
- General information requests about the Line

Other significant information is collected on each call, including a "lethality Index", which attempts to measure whether there is an immediate threat of physical violence. The 1999 assessment found that approximately 7% of calls were documented as indicating a "medium" level of lethality, while 2% were documented as "high".

In reviews of records of calls each month to the Line, as well as interviews with phone counselors, one word sums up the core issue addressed in the vast majority of calls to The Men's Line: **isolation**. The men who call in have questions and concerns and a general sense of loneliness and disconnection from family and community that the Line appears to in part be successfully addressing in the Twin Cities community.

### **Future of The Men's Line**

Funding for The Men's Line has been a constant struggle since its inception in 1997. While the cost of operation is quite modest, it has been difficult to secure stable, ongoing funding. Over the years the Men's Line has been funded by a variety of community partners, including 3M, the Minnesota State Bar Foundation, Health Partners and Allina (two Minnesota health maintenance organizations), the Minnesota Department of Health, and Ramsey and Hennepin Counties. Senator Paul Wellstone was working to secure federal funding to expand the Men's Line to be a statewide resource and national model/demonstration project at the time of his tragic death in October, 2002.

Crisis Connection and the community partners who make up the Men's Messages Action Team are committed to continuing and expanding the reach and effectiveness of The Men's Line. Most recently, a partnership with Health East (a metropolitan area health care system comprised of three hospitals and numerous clinics) has developed a new campaign focused on expectant and new fathers. This effort was inspired by recent JAMA articles citing homicide as the leading cause of death for pregnant and postnatal women, as well as difficulties Health East staff have witnessed couples experiencing in their OB programs and facilities.

This effort is built on a central premise borrowed from Rollo May: that “Deeds of violence...arise largely out of powerlessness”. In analyzing why men might act out violently toward wives and partners around the time of childbirth, the group planning this effort returned to the themes of isolation learned through operating The Men’s Line, as well as this central notion of powerlessness from Rollo May. This new effort, expected to begin in Spring, 2003, will reach out to men in prenatal education programs and on OB floors and clinics with a simple “Quick Guide To Being a Dad.” In addition to providing tips on what to expect and how to care for themselves, the guide will give men referral information to Health East educational programs, as well as to The Men’s Line, to provide “help and advice to men who may just need to talk to someone.” We believe that by focusing the Men’s Line and accompanying messages in a positive manner for men during the time of pregnancy and childbirth that we may begin to reverse the terrible trends cited in JAMA and seen across our nation.

### **Discussion of Successful Efforts to Eliminate Violent and Disrespectful Media Campaigns and Images**

The Media Action Team is one of the eight original Initiative Action Teams formed in 1990. From its inception the Team identified two principal roles: Developing images and messages that promote respect and nonviolence in relationships (The Men’s Messages Action team in fact started as a “subgroup” of the Media Action Team); and identifying and respectfully working to remove images that promote or condone violence against women, children and men.

Over the years the Media Action team has successfully convinced businesses and advertisers to remove dozens of violent images from our community, including a major University’s “Pain Suffering and Brutality – All For \$8.00” ad campaign for its football team and a local grocery store’s “So Fresh You Could Slap It” billboard advertising the freshness of their produce, to name a few.

The approach of the Media Action Team is built on the premise of respectfully pointing out our concerns about the messages contained in the ads, appealing to the company/advertiser to recognize that these potentially violent messages are in fact inconsistent with their public image, and seeking to establish long-term relationships to work together on promoting a respectful, peaceful community.

The most prominent and complex effort undertaken by the Media Action Team was to convince the Twin Cities’ two major newspapers, the Minneapolis Star Tribune and the Saint Paul Pioneer Press, to remove sexually explicit ads for strip clubs and x-rated movies from their sports sections. In the case of the Star Tribune, agreement was reached in June, 1999 after two years of correspondence and conversation with the publisher; the Pioneer Press removed the ads in March, 2002 after over 5 years of correspondence (with three different publishers.) In each case, the newspapers saw it in their interest to no longer run these ads in their sports sections, and also recognized their power to help assure a more respectful, violence-free community.

## **Conclusion**

In 1990 elected officials and community leaders in Ramsey County formed The Initiative, based on the open question of whether or not a Primary Prevention model could be used to address an issue as complex and multi-faceted as family violence. Through the creativity and dedication of hundreds of people across the Ramsey County community over fourteen years, we have learned that the answer to this critical question is a resounding YES. By understanding and addressing root causes of violence and disrespect through a sustained, community-wide partnership, we are now seeing results that demonstrate that we have the power, and therefore the obligation, to prevent acts of family violence today and into the future.

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