

Supervised Visitation and Exchange: Keeping Survivors of Domestic Violence and Their Children Safe A Step-by-Step Guide

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Fact Sheet

Introduction

Supervised visitation and exchange centers can play a critical role in reducing the risk that many victims of domestic violence and their children face when leaving an abusive relationship and attempting to safely navigate custody. Creating services that truly mitigate those risks involves a great deal of planning. Programs seeking to supervise visitation in domestic violence cases must address a broad range of potential dangers, including the possibility that the very services they provide could become vehicles through which battering parents can continue their abuse. This guide, from the Vera Institute of Justice's (Vera's) Center of Victimization and Safety (CVS), outlines steps to help along this path.

The goal of the guide is to support communities that are seeking to create visitation and exchange services for

families who have experienced domestic violence, as well as collaborations that work with existing centers that primarily provide services in child abuse and neglect cases and are interested in adopting a new approach to serve domestic violence victims. The authors draw on the experience of CVS, which has provided training and technical assistance to more than 70 communities to provide visitation and exchange services, as well as the guidance of other national technical assistance providers.

A Step-By-Step Guide to Developing Visitation and Exchange Services

The guide provides a step-by-step approach to developing visitation and exchange services that are responsive to the safety and other needs of adult and child victims of domestic violence.

A community collaboration can follow these steps to create a visitation and exchange program that can become an effective part of the community's response to reducing the risk domestic violence victims and children face after separation.

› **Step 1. Build a solid collaboration.**

Because of these families' complex needs, communities creating visitation and exchange services should organize two joint efforts: a collaboration consisting of, at a minimum, a domestic violence advocacy program, judges who will refer families to the center, and a new or existing visitation provider; and a larger coordinating committee of service providers, of which these core partners will also be a part.

- › **Step 2. Understand the issues.** In order to design and deliver safe visitation and exchange services, it is critical that those collaborating to deliver these services understand post-separation violence, how parents who batter may use visitation and exchange services and court processes to continue their abuse, and best practices for reducing their ability and inclination to continue battering within the context of supervised visitation and exchange.

- › **Step 3. Assess the community's needs.** For communities setting up a supervised visitation service, a needs assessment can help collaborations better understand the safety and other needs of victims and children in the community as they relate to supervised visitation and exchange, and organizational and community strengths and gaps in meeting those needs.
- › **Step 4. Develop policies and procedures.** In the context of a supervised visitation center serving families that have experienced domestic violence, policies and procedures help to focus center staff on their central role of reducing risk to victims and children, so staff can make timely decisions that are responsive to the unique needs of the families being served.
- › **Step 5. Select a site.** Choosing a site for visitation and exchange services is one of the most important decisions a collaboration will make. The location, layout, and features of a potential site can have a significant impact on the safety of families and staff.
- › **Step 6. Ensure safety and security.** The primary goal of a visitation center is to provide a space for visitation and exchange to occur that reduces the heightened risks faced by many adult

and child victims after separation from an abusive relationship. The collaboration is tasked with determining how to provide safety, through policy, staffing decisions, and the use of security mechanisms.

- › **Step 7. Create programmatic resources.** In addition to the staff policy and procedure manual, visitation centers should create a series of programmatic resources to guide the work of staff, gather necessary information about the families with which they are working, document services, and share information with parents.
- › **Step 8. Hire and train staff.** Centers should hire staff who have a deep understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence. Center staff need

to be willing and able to intervene in visits and exchanges where necessary, have difficult conversations with parents, defuse escalating situations, balance accountability and respect when working with battering parents, engage children, and make decisions in the moment.

- › **Step 9. Open the visitation center doors.** After spending so much time planning and preparing for the visitation center to open, it is understandable to want to make it available to as many families as possible as soon as the doors open. Nevertheless, it is best to take a graduated approach by piloting services with a few families for one to two months before moving to full capacity.

For more information

To read the full report, visit www.vera.org/supervised-visitation-safe-exchange-guide. For more information about this report and the Center on Victimization and Safety (CVS), please visit www.vera.org and www.endabusepwd.org or contact CVS at cvs@vera.org. The Vera Institute of Justice is a justice reform change agent. Vera produces ideas, analysis, and research that inspire change in the systems people

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