

The Center for Violence-Free Relationships: Transitioning to a Performance-Based Organization

Organizational Strengths Grant Case Study

This case study was developed with support from Blue Shield of California Foundation, through the Strong Field Project (SFP), to share the story of The Center's transition to a performance-based organization with the larger domestic violence field. It is informed by interviews with The Center's leaders and materials published by the organization.

Organizational Background: “Three Women and a Revolver”

Aiming to increase its technical and evaluation capacities, The Center for Violence-Free Relationships (The Center) applied for a two-year Organizational Strengths Grant (OSG) through Blue Shield of California Foundation's Strong Field Project (SFP). After receiving the grant in 2010, The Center used the funds to increase the technology skills of its staff members, create a more efficient client management system, measure program effectiveness, improve service delivery, and start developing new measurements of client success. The Center's primary strategies for realizing these goals were computer literacy training for staff members and implementing the Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) software, which provides the organization with a virtually paperless method of using data to monitor client progress and continuously improve service delivery.

The Center for Violence-Free Relationships was founded as the El Dorado Women's Center (Women's Center) in 1980 by members of the County Commission on the Status of Women to meet the needs of displaced homemakers in rural El Dorado County. As Executive Director Matt Huckabay more vividly described it, “The [Women's] Center was established by three women in an old house, one of whom kept a revolver in her top desk drawer because she needed it.” When it became apparent that many of the displaced homemakers being served were fleeing violent relationships, the Women's Center shifted its focus more explicitly to providing domestic violence and crisis-type services.

The mid 1980s marked an important period of growth for the organization. It added services for rape and molestation survivors, as well as rape prevention programs for high school students. The Women's Center also became part of the county's sexual assault response team, which is responsible for accompanying sexual assault victims on the way to the hospital. Finally, during this same timeframe, the Women's Center established an emergency shelter for battered women and children, which eventually transitioned to a larger facility in the early 1990s.

Along with its growth in services came a simultaneous broadening of the Women's Center's mission statement to include various aspects of feminism and social justice. In 2008, with new Executive Director Matt Huckabay at the helm, the Women's Center underwent a significant transformation by simultaneously sharpening its focus on providing crisis intervention services and adopting a more holistic model of service provision that included other family members who may have experienced violence in the home. Matt Huckabay explained the rationale for the latter effort:

“We were looking at expanding into family violence and understanding the intersection between the intergenerational transmission and exposure to family violence, and that if we are going to be serious about eliminating domestic violence, then we had to be serious about getting the children that grow up in these homes, because that is the next generation of perpetrators and victims, and we are shortsighted in thinking that we can eliminate anything if we aren't dealing with [them].”

As part of this transformation, the organization moved to a new office location, changed its name to The Center for Violence-Free Relationships, and revised its logo. As the executive director summarized, “We changed our mission, we changed our name, we rebranded ourselves.”

Today, operating with a budget of just under \$1 million and a staff of 19, The Center is the only local agency providing specialized services to domestic violence and sexual assault victims and their families. Current services include a 24-hour crisis line; victim counseling and support groups; emergency shelter, food, and clothing; transitional housing; legal assistance; group counseling for batterers; and community education and prevention. The Center serves between 900 and 1200 individuals per year. The demographics of The Center’s clientele have remained largely constant over the years, though the executive director notes that there has been an increase in Latino clients and a broadening of the socioeconomic swath served.

Readiness and Vision for Change

“What I realized was that there is an ability to bring business practices into a healing profession and that those things do not have to be diametrically opposed. You can do both, and both are okay.”

—Matt Huckabay



Coming off the major identity transformation process that occurred in 2008, The Center was already in a mindset for change when it applied for the OSG Cohort 1 grant in 2010. Its transformation up to this point had not been without its challenges. There were varying levels of nervousness and resistance among long-standing staff members in reaction to the executive director’s organizational rebranding efforts and his emphasis on accountability and program effectiveness. Mr. Huckabay’s style was informed by a philosophy and tools he brought from his business-world experience.

Mr. Huckabay brought a certain financial-analysis frame to his work as executive director. He began conversations with staff members about how to align The Center’s capacity with its finances, and posed straightforward questions about client progress and outcomes, such as how many divorce proceedings were started and completed. What he discovered was that there was no easy way to answer such questions. Staff members would have to go through paper files and case notes in order to access that type of data.

For Mr. Huckabay, the most significant questions had to do with providing evidence that The Center was effectively diminishing domestic violence. “I think there was this huge assumption that we do good work,” he explained. “We have to be [doing good work]. We’re exhausted, we’re working hard, we’re seeing a lot of people.” Mr. Huckabay also realized that better data collection had to be accompanied by more effective service provision:

“Our front door opened and I watched as a young mom walked in holding a baby, and behind her was her mom, who was followed by her mom. And right there in that moment I had three generations of women, from the same family, all of whom had a history of domestic violence, and they were holding that fourth generation in their arms. And it was at that moment I said, “This is not working.” And so that’s when the seed got planted that I have got to figure out a way to make this different. And that was really the catalyst.”

Not all staff members were examining The Center’s underlying theory of change with a similar critical lens or focusing on identifying discrete areas for improvement. Instead, the majority of staff members were concerned with addressing scarcity—needing to secure more funding to provide more services.

Instead of framing the need for change as an organizational strengthening process, Mr. Huckabay posed it to staff members as a matter of more effectively meeting the needs of both staff members and clients. Based on conversations with staff members about how to do this, Mr. Huckabay drafted a vision for change to address identified needs. This vision became the basis for the OSG-funded project—creating an agency-wide software-based performance management system that established a virtually paperless method of using data to monitor client progress and continuously improve service delivery. Initial staff member reactions were mixed. While there was a sense of excitement, there was also some degree of nervousness about the new software system being used as a punitive tool, and some doubt that the project was anything more than a passing fad.

At the same time, Mr. Huckabay was viewing the performance management software system not only as a tool for meeting identified staff and client needs, but also as a vehicle for realizing larger cultural transformation at The Center. As Mr. Huckabay observed, “We were going to fundamentally do business differently.”

Organizational Strengthening Process

The Center for Violence-Free Relationships described its organizational strengthening process as one of hope mixed with trepidation. While The Center recognized that the OSG project represented a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, it also posed a risk. There were questions of whether the project was too ambitious, too broad in scope. There was also the more fundamental risk of attempting to mix business and outcome measurement practices with domestic violence services.

The Center’s change process was led by Mr. Huckabay, Operations Manager Emma Owens, and volunteer consultant Jana Pingle. It was implemented in several key phases:

Staff Computer Literacy Training. To increase its technical capacity, The Center first focused on increasing staff members’ ability to interface with computer systems and work with the Microsoft Office suite. Toward this end, The Center utilized Trainingcenter.com, which provides affordable online self-paced computer training courses. All staff members were required to meet at least basic program fluency requirements. During the first year of the grant period, staff members completed 38 computer skill courses ranging from basic PC skills to using SmartArt. To ensure a continued level of computer proficiency, The Center also created a basic computer fluency test to be administered during the hiring process.

Workflow Mapping and Researching System Options. In the earliest months of the project, The Center mapped out all of its existing workflow processes and documented how data were collected from them. The Center needed a software system that would do the following: measure a variety of data showing client growth; permit easy access to data; allow staff members to enter their own data in real time; and facilitate easy analysis of collected data. The Center researched different software options by speaking with other SFP grantees, domestic violence agencies, and local nonprofits about their own systems. Five months after the project’s inception, The Center identified four strong software options and began meeting with vendors for presentations and system demos.

Selection of ETO. The final selection of ETO as the software system occurred after creating an extensive vendor comparison spreadsheet, interviewing current ETO clients, and listening to a final vendor presentation involving representatives from each of The Center’s departments, as well as its fiscal manager. ETO was chosen for four key reasons: it was remotely housed for easy access through any Internet connection; it could be easily configured and updated by The Center staff; it had scaling-up capabilities; and it was geared toward performance management and social impact measurement. The Center signed the contract with Social Solutions, Inc., the vendor of ETO, approximately six months after the project began.

ETO Implementation. Once a project manager from Social Solutions was assigned, The Center submitted program charts and prospective workflow process mappings that helped inform development of the ETO system blueprint—which was submitted and approved approximately nine months after the project began. The blueprint for the new ETO system detailed all the outcomes, indicators, and assessments needed for The Center’s five programs. Also during this phase, The Center’s system administrators were trained and the ETO system was configured and tested. System refinements, staff training, and the creation of an online user manual followed. Data was converted to the new ETO system in summer 2011.



ETO Goes Live. The ETO system went live with a party on August 1, 2011. The last paper file was converted one month later. The formal launch was followed by a year of ensuring data quality, developing custom reports, and supporting the continued development of ETO.



The Center experienced a few key challenges during its change process. The first was being unable to find a technical advisor with knowledge of existing software options. Executive Director Huckabay described this challenge as something that almost derailed the project:

“We went in with an assumption that [technical advisors] had the capacity to do what we asked, what we needed.... That was one of our lowest points in the project, when we realized that there was not one TA consultant that could do what we wanted to do, given the finances we had to do it. And that set us back. We had to regroup ourselves around that, and we really questioned our scope; maybe this wasn’t possible.”

The Center overcame this challenge by relying on the volunteer consultant, Jana Pingle, and the expertise of ETO project managers. Another fundamental challenge occurred during the ETO implementation phase when The Center had to determine which outcomes, indicators, and assessments were going to be used in the ETO system. The Center contacted other domestic violence organizations for examples and found that very few domestic violence organizations were in fact measuring their impact and effectiveness. As a result, The Center had to create or adapt outcomes and assessments that were appropriate for the domestic violence field. In effect, The Center piloted the customization of ETO to measure outcomes of a domestic violence and sexual assault crisis center.

Finally, a third challenge was shifting the thinking of counselors at The Center—moving them away from a counseling or therapeutic role to a case manager role. The need for this shift surfaced during ETO implementation, once it became easy to see how much time each staff member was spending with each client and what was covered during each session. In response, The Center created a Plan of Action assessment in ETO, which details a case manager’s plan for a client with specific goals and time limits for accomplishing those goals.

Emerging Outcomes

The Center for Violence-Free Relationships’ OSG project has resulted in several concrete outcomes, as well as some less tangible but equally important ones. At the most basic level, the project has (1) led to the development and implementation of an agency-wide performance management software system, ETO, and (2) increased the computer skills of staff members. While The Center’s project was highly specific and technical in nature, it also had broad and profound implications for the organization’s culture, expectations, and practices. The following outcomes can be identified:

A cultural shift within The Center about the value and use of data. The implementation of ETO has transformed The Center’s culture to one focused on performance management. It has also fundamentally changed the way The Center views data and outcomes. Staff members now expect meaningful outcome information from ETO and, more importantly, now view data collection as a performance-enhancement tool instead of as a means of monitoring employees. Staff members also value the ease with which they can access each other’s data, so that a case manager can quickly pick up with a client where another case manager left off.

Measuring client progress instead of tracking services provided. The process of developing the ETO blueprint revealed an important limitation in the way The Center was thinking about data: it was focusing primarily on tracking service points instead of measuring client progress toward larger goals. To address this limitation, The Center adapted the Stages of Change model for domestic violence and sexual assault survivors. With this new model, the emphasis is primarily on tracking clients’ demonstrated progress along a continuum, and secondarily on tracking service provision. This new emphasis is part of The Center’s important shift from data collection to performance management—which involves holding staff members accountable for client outcomes. ETO also allows counseling staff members to easily see the resources involved with moving their clients

“With the old culture, data and feedback were punitive, big brother-ish. The culture is beginning to shift. Data and feedback are now just another tool that enhances our ability to do our job better.”

—Matt Huckabay

through the Stages of Change model. This has led to greater consensus among counseling staff members about when it is appropriate to establish prerequisites for accessing more intensive services. This helps ensure that clients are truly ready to benefit from services and that resources are used efficiently.

Stages of Change Model



Expectations for impact measurement and evaluation. Evaluation and impact measurement are now key parts of The Center's organizational culture. Organizational leadership now expects all program leaders to be able to answer critical questions about goals, outcomes, indicators, and evaluation processes.

Standardization of teamwork and organizational practices. The OSG project involved the utilization of certain tools and modes of practice, which have since become standard at The Center: Gantt charts, action items, and "the expectation that staff members will be working in teams now for every single project we undertake."

Heightened sense of inter-connection and cohesion among departments. Designing and implementing a new agency-wide software system brought The Center's different departments together as they worked on the best ways to create and configure the system and learned more about each other's work.

Data-driven decision making. ETO allows The Center to assess accomplishments across program areas and to make data-driven changes as needed. For example, ETO data showed that the Client Services program was not exiting clients once they were out of crisis. This was due to the fact that counselors were not setting clear goals with survivors. As a result, counselors now create a Plan of Action with each new client in order to set time-limited goals.

Streamlined workflow processes. Developing and implementing ETO required the creation of visual maps of current and prospective workflow processes. These visualizations helped the organization greatly streamline a number of processes, such as those involved with initial client contact and subsequent counseling/case management.

Transition to a paperless agency. As a result of ETO implementation, The Center has become a paperless agency. The only exceptions are the papers that clients fill out and legal documents that The Center is required to maintain hard copies of. The Center's requirement that staff members let go of *all* paper ensured greater dedication to high-quality data entry.

Stronger position for managing continuous change. ETO implementation led The Center's leadership to realize that there is no end point to evaluation and change, and that ETO itself is a living system that must adapt to ongoing program developments.

New conceptual and technical tools. The Center has created a number of concrete products related to ETO design and implementation that can be adapted by others in the field. These include a staff computer training program with associated tools (curriculum, completion grid, certificates, and a computer literacy test for new hires); a Stages of Change training, quick guide, and ETO assessment; a Google site protocol manual on organizational policies and procedures; a Plan of Action goal-setting and case management tool in ETO that tracks client progress; and a Needs Assessment tool for measuring survivor needs and exploring options for addressing them.

New ETO partnerships and local leadership. The Center is collaborating with other ETO users, such as the YMCA Sonoma County, and participating in ETO user conferences to share experiences and

Armed with new technical and strategic thinking skills as a result of the OSG project, The Center is now in a stronger position for managing continuous change.

performance management techniques. On the local level, the OSG project highlighted The Center's technical capacity and project management skills, which resulted in The Center serving as the lead agency for a county grant that involves three other agencies.

Looking Ahead

For other domestic violence organizations looking to undertake organizational change processes, The Center for Violence-Free Relationships offers the following overarching recommendations:

Dedicate sufficient time and space for human transition and cultural shift. Managing the human elements of a transition is as important as system conversion. Creating a dedicated space and time for the change process is critical to signify the importance of the change and to hold all staff members accountable. As Executive Director Huckabay observed, "It was challenging to find blocks of time for nineteen staff to come together, but when they saw it was being done, to accomplish technology training or do strategic planning, for example, they realized it was important."

Evaluate and modulate the pace of change. While it would have been easy to implement multiple changes simultaneously as part of the ETO implementation process, The Center realized that it was important to separate and space out the changes. This gave the leadership team an opportunity to see what the reaction and level of compliance was for an initial change, before moving on to the next one. The Center also recommends setting up a schedule of change with appropriate indicators of effective implementation, and assessing how well each change is implemented before attempting to implement the next one. "There were times that we felt that something had taken hold and we would get two or three months down the road, or we'd start implementing another change, and found that it really had not taken hold," observed Mr. Huckabay. "We needed to go back and do more work around the culture component of it before moving towards another thing. So being able to modulate the pace of things and getting indicators of when the time is ready for moving forward [is helpful]."

Build a leadership team with complementary strengths. One accelerator for the OSG project's success was having a leadership team in place with complementary strengths: visionary skills, information technology expertise and software conversion experience, a deep understanding of The Center's data collection processes, and project management skills. Having leadership team members with different strengths allowed the OSG project to progress efficiently through different phases that required various areas of expertise.

Invest sufficiently in pre-conversion preparation. The Center's successful conversion to ETO was partly due to intensive upfront preparation. This included staff technology training, documenting current workflow processes in order to inform the ETO blueprint, and using ETO paper forms before going live with the system conversion.

It is clear that The Center's OSG Cohort 1 project has already led to significant change in terms of organizational systems and culture. Looking ahead, two areas of further impact are expected. The first is the possible replication of The Center's experience at other domestic violence agencies transitioning from data collection to performance management. Indeed, The Center's entire software selection and implementation process was developed and documented with sharing in mind. The Center still plans to create and share a final blueprint for customizing ETO to a domestic violence and sexual assault agency—covering the key phases of process mapping, software implementation, and transition management—and including specific tools such as a project charter, process mapping tools, an implementation Gantt chart, and an online procedures manual.

The Center also expects to continue working with other agencies looking to implement ETO, thus facilitating an exchange of experiences and strategies. Beyond the adoption of ETO at individual agencies, The Center also hopes to facilitate a larger conversation about how the domestic violence field might coalesce around a common performance management system in order to measure its effectiveness and determine best practices.

The second area of expected impact is internal decision making. Based on ETO data, The Center will reassess where it can have the largest impact in terms of programs and services, and where to direct its limited funding. "We are accepting now of the notion that we are going to have to say no to some people," observed Mr. Huckabay. "That's okay [because] we would rather do deep quality work than quantity work. And that has been our new mindset. We're going to see that plan come to fruition in the next year or two."

The Center for Violence-Free Relationships sees its next step as relying more on ETO data to make both programmatic and client-level decisions.

At the client level, The Center will be increasingly using aggregate ETO data about what works to inform individual service plans and avoid setting clients up for failure. Based on a client's particular situation, The Center can provide data-driven recommendations for specific and sequenced services. Then, as Mr. Huckabay explained, "We can case-manage that process and get them to a state where they really receive the full benefit of what we offer." In addition, by relying on data-driven service recommendations, The Center can realize stronger outcomes overall. Mr. Huckabay summed up the advantages for both clients and staff members:

"Why wouldn't you want to have a 90 percent success rate with your clients following through on a divorce that you worked on? And if all that means is that they take a year to get some education, get some stability, remove some barriers, and try to get themselves set up better before they go down that road, why wouldn't you want to do that?"

Finally, The Center has been granted an OSG Cohort 2 grant to use ETO data to develop a theory of change for all of its programs and document effective practices through a partnership with the PerformWell portal. The theory-of-change process will allow The Center to better align its services with its mission, target populations, and desired outcomes.