

inSocialWork Podcast Series

Episode 294 – Domestic Violence Response Teams: Examining Motivations for Implementation of a Police-Advocate Partnership: Laura Johnson, PhD

Speaker 1 [00:00:10] Hi, everybody, welcome to inSocialWork. I'm Peter Sobota. Our podcast is getting a makeover. We'll be expanding our focus, our format and our website, among some other changes. And you'll see this all rolling out during the summer and in the fall. In the meantime, here is a new episode that was recorded before we started this evolution.

Speaker 2 [00:00:31] Hello from Buffalo and welcome to inSocialWork. This is Louanne Bakk and I'll be your host for this episode. In this podcast, Dr. Laura Johnson describes the Domestic Violence Response Team program findings from her research project examining factors that contribute to police officer support for partnership interventions are discussed and implications for social work, practice and policy are summarized. Dr. Laura Johnson is an assistant professor in the School of Social Work at Temple University. She was interviewed by Dr. Shaanta Murshid, associate professor here at the UBC School of Social Work.

Speaker 3 [00:01:12] Today, Laura Johnson will be talking to us about a research project she conducted to examine the current state of the Domestic Violence Response Team VRT program in the state of New Jersey. As part of the study, she explored the organizational structure of the DRC, the nature of collaborative relationship among domestic violence organizations and police departments involved in the implementation of the DVRT and how to measure the success of the program. Laura, we'll talk briefly about her study findings and then focus on the collaborative relationships between police and domestic violence organizations, findings she found to be particularly interesting and recently published in an article on the journal Violence Against Women. And this is a really timely topic given the current state of the world, the BLM movement in particular. And so we are very excited to have you, Laura. So first question. Can you tell me about the research project that the data for this study came from? Sure. So in 2018, the New Jersey Domestic Violence Fatality and Fatality Review Board received some grant from the National Domestic Violence Fatality Review Board to support some research that they were interested in. And so they partnered with the sponsor that I worked at at the time, which was the Center on Violence Against Women and Children at the Ruckersville Social Work for some research projects that were aimed toward answering some research questions that were of interest to them. And so we were able to do three different projects with them. And the first looked at a unique domestic violence police response model being implemented in New Jersey. The second looked at how public high schools across the city are implementing dating violence prevention programs and response. And the third project, which was the one that I will be talking about today, look at the domestic violence response teams. And so that intervention in particular was one that the board had identified over the years of having the potential to play a role in preventing lethality. And so there is sort of anecdotal evidence that this could play a key role in supporting survivors and connecting them for resources. But there was no formal research done in the sea about the state intervention. We were able to take this opportunity to learn more about the domestic violence response. Wonderful. And what sparked your interest in this topic? So an area of research that I am particularly interested in is interagency collaboration and coordinated community responses to domestic violence. And so this was an intervention that I observed was functioning in New Jersey and in the literature. There's a lot of evaluations of coordinated community responses that have been done over the years. The findings of them have been mixed and there's a lot of variation in what the models look

like. So knowing that in New Jersey, the domestic violence response is a mandated intervention. It came about in the 1990s as part of the Prevention Act. I was interested in learning more about the program and how it was working. And as it turned out in New Jersey, there hadn't been a time of formal research into this. So it was an area that everyone was equally interested in learning about. Could you tell us more about the domestic violence response team, the DVRT intervention that you looked at as part of your research project? Sure. Like I mentioned, it was implemented in New Jersey as a result of mandate that came down through policy. And so the policy says that each police department should either develop their own domestic violence response teams or participate in an established team. And there's also some training component as well. So the general structure of the program is that in each county there is a domestic violence organization and that organizations generally has a coordinator who oversees the response. And so the response teams themselves are typically made up of volunteers. And so then they collaborate with the police departments in their county for implementation. Generally, each police department also has a police liaison who is involved in that collaboration. And while there is variation in how it actually gets implemented, the general idea is that when the police go out to a scene, they have the sense that a survivor will be going back to the police department, that generally they would be activating a response team member to come out to the police department and meet them. And so while the survivor is there, the volunteer and the survivor could meet privately in a separate room and go over some things such as resources and the criminal justice system, with really the goal of decreasing some of the trauma associated with domestic violence, helping survivors to make more educated decisions about their options, and really helping them to understand what access to resources are available and really making those connections as a crisis response. Wonderful. And what were you interested in learning? From this project, what were your outcomes? The things that we were really interested in learning about broadly were to get an overall sense of the functioning of the response team. Like I said, that there hadn't been any real formal evaluation of it. So there is sort of anecdotal information about how it was working, but really having something to document, how it was working and what were the strengths and challenges that were being experienced. And we looked at the organizational structure, the volunteer recruitment and management and just kind of the overall nature of the collaboration. And so to get that information, we interviewed twenty four individuals, 15 of which were response team coordinators and nine were domestic violence police liaison officers. And the police were a lot more challenging to recruit. And were there any findings that you thought were surprising or unexpected? Yeah, I would say that what I actually published on in the article in Violence Against Women that just came out were some of the findings that were particularly interesting to me. That in particular was not something we explicitly asked about. But what we found when we were analyzing the data is that comments frequently came back to the factors that fostered police collaboration with the response. While there was technically mandates that make this participation required, it's actually a lot more nuanced than that as most things are. Some of the things that we found as motivating factors included these four areas, and one of which was the perceived benefits to police response and investigation. And some of those were really practical occupied while they're at the police department waiting for the officers to do lots of paperwork when they go back. So with the thought of that is they're there. And while they're just sitting there, it would be great if they were able to have something beneficial come from that time. That was one perceived benefit. And the fact that officers usually had the opportunity to participate in training the domestic violence organizations, especially the liaison officers, would be able to go to the and our training, which those who did, said that they learned a tremendous amount from such an extensive opportunity. It also helped the sentence statements, for example, because it helped to calm them and they understood more about

the process. So in addition to those benefits to the criminal justice system, process is also, of course, significant to the survivors themselves, and in particular, that it really clarifies the criminal justice process, especially around protective order, which can be really confusing. And it helps provide survivors with resources that sometimes they're not even aware are available to them. Interestingly, the need to comply with mandates did come up. But the thing that I found was sort of funny about it is that when people are talking about where the mandates came down from, people talking about a variety of places, and so some people knew that it was a public law. Other people have what I think is mandated by our prosecutors or the police chiefs a definitive need to comply with the mandate as part of it. Some of it was not even really where the mandate was coming from. Right from the fourth. And I think, of course, was last. But definitely perhaps one of the most important is the recognition that it really is a serious crime. And so it did come up that a lot of times, even when communities either didn't have a massive response team or they did, but it wasn't really being activated in the way that it could be. Having something occur in the community was really an impetus to looking at the response as an important and critical intervention and utilizing it more for recognizing that each time an officer response to a domestic violence incident, the continued possibility of escalation, and that can lead to significant injuries and fatalities. And there is an acknowledgment that it really needed to be addressed with the same resources as other crimes that officers were investigating. And the other piece that I didn't talk about in the manuscript that I also found to be interesting, it came down at the policy level, but really the ability for the counties to implement the intervention varied. And some of it was just really basic pieces like the demographic, for example, of the community. Some communities are a lot smaller. There are a lot more rural, and it's an intervention primarily that requires volunteers. And so for some communities, it was harder to keep the volunteers because of either. There were too many cases coming in where they were getting called out a lot or they weren't getting called out enough for then people would just kind of lose interest because they weren't really getting utilized. I thought that that was sort of interesting because I think that's a great idea. You know, volunteers are getting involved and it provides an opportunity for people to support the community. I mean, even the. Efforts that the coordinators have to go through in really maintaining a strong group of volunteers who are actively engaged, required a lot of time commitment, right? Well, I can see many ways in which this is a very social work issue. But could you still talk about why this is an issue that social workers should be concerned about? Sure. And I think as you touched upon right in the beginning, right now, this conversation about the criminal justice system and police and social work collaboration is really at the forefront of every area in the U.S. It's definitely come up a lot in social work as well. And so I really focus on how it works in the context of domestic violence. I think what we've seen in domestic violence kind of transcends other issues, as I was saying, is that there can be value in such collaborations or they are also certainly challenges. And some of what I found in this and other research projects that I've done around this area is that establishing trust and building relationships are really crucial to that effective functioning of interventions like the rest of response team or other collaborations, especially when you have professionals with different overall goals and values in those areas in particular. I think that leadership is really important in helping different groups to recognize collaboration can be beneficial. And in general, in a lot of areas, violence against women included. We're working in silos and I think social workers are really uniquely poised to make these connections across organizations and sectors, because I think as social workers, we come to a place where really we have the best interest of the people that we work with in mind. And that kind of help to break some of those barriers that come from different philosophical values in the firm. Your job is to do this with the police if your job is to maintain safety while our job is to protect victims. And so how can we meet in the middle and find a way to do that? And of course, it's not that easy, but I

think it's an important step that communities try to make. Right. And what are some practical implications of the research for policy and for practice? Sure. So I think for research, one of the things that I have found to be interesting and important is that these systems, such as the criminal justice system, are so complex that having one approach isn't going to solve everything. Each intervention, I would say, has the potential to connect survivors with resources and provide some clarification around the process, which is really important. One of the things that I found is that there have been a lot of different research projects that have looked at the effectiveness of these interventions. But the reason really kind of varies because the interventions, Barry, and rightly so, because they really need to fit with the community. But I think really trying to disentangle what about these interventions work really kind of in the sense of looking at the implementation and what are the key components needed to be effective as something that is of interest to me. I think another important piece, which is also probably one of the more challenging pieces in research, is the survivors choice is really important in domestic violence. And when navigating the criminal justice system, the coordinated community responses and a lot of the research does include more administrators, it's a little bit sometimes easier to access and less intrusive than having a full array of data points, including survivors, voices of support and engaging how the interventions are working. So that's something that I'm also interested in, right. What can social workers offer in this area? I think if a profession we're talking a lot more about the role of social workers play and whether they should play a role or not in the criminal justice system. And I think part of a broad debate that's been going on in the field right now, I think it's really complicated by at a minimum, I think that there's no right way or wrong way to collaborate. And community is really going to vary depending on where a community is and the spectrum of building relationships and trust, bridging the gap and really starting those conversations can be an important first step in some communities. Unfortunately, the police department or the prosecutor's office might not be the best group to partner with initially, but maybe there's other people in the community that have that shared interest in supporting the case of the survivors of domestic violence or whoever that population is. And that's where the collaborations can really start from there. And then sometimes as administrators just happen to be there, somebody who wasn't so supportive initially and then the next person who was in that position to get on board and join that initiative solve. I think that in general, being able to provide survivors with more opportunities and options is always beneficial. And I got in that Tamoxifen because not everyone has the same level of purpose or they start out from the same place. But I think it has the potential to provide necessary information and resources and connections that can be crucial in a survivor decision making process. Going back to collaboration's a little bit, in your experience, have you seen social workers and police officers collaborating in a way that you think produces the justice or or even meeting survivors needs? Yes, it's complicated and I think it's really community based. So I have seen some police departments that are doing really, really great work for. They're really trying to be survivors under at least the challenge for these types of corporations. And one of the reasons why I don't feel that even is those policies like mandatory arrest, for example, where on the one hand it takes a survivor's choice away, which some argue is a bad thing. Some say it takes the survivors choice away, which can be helpful for the survivor because it takes them out of it. And none of these are easy choices. And I think to some degree at the going to come back to what lens you're looking at it in, that I think that there are definitely collaborations out there where everyone comes to the table with a shared respect. And from there they are able to work together to discuss cases and to have a shared responsiveness to if something goes wrong as part of a collaboration, there's enough trust that that can be communicated in a way that creates a stronger system without suffering any potential relationship. I mean, it's not easy to get to that point, which I think is one of the challenges that I think, especially when you have the right group

of people together, it's definitely has been done in different communities, right? Well, I ask because justice means different things to different people, including survivors. And I wonder whether their definitions of justice are taken into account. What's next for you in terms of your research in this area? For my particular area of research, I'm interested in coordinated community responses kind of broadly and some of the systemic functioning. And so some of the things that I'm really interested in are looking at kind of what those key components are. So looking at ways that different groups of people can collaborate and work to build relationships and what level of coordination is necessary to really achieve a common goal if it kind of runs on a spectrum and then also doing some more evaluation work? I think the point that you brought out is what we do not have, especially in the evaluation of these particular interventions, is a lot of survivor feedback. And so, well, research really runs the gamut in terms of what outcomes have been looked at that far and how the data has been collected on coordinated community responses. And so if you have the administrative data from police departments, you have an administrator from victim serving organizations. You have a handful of studies that have collected data with survivors. Outcomes really have varied. But because of that, I think that there's still a lot we don't know about the overall effectiveness and what the best practices are. And so that was an area that I am interested in. One of the things that I think is interesting also, like I had mentioned, is that this is a state policy. But just because something comes down as a policy, that doesn't necessarily mean that it's going to be implemented the same across departments or that all communities have the same access to resources. And so I think with interventions like this for domestic violence or for other violence against women areas, it is particularly important to have that administrative support from opinion leaders like prosecutors or police who can really diffuse that information. In any work that I've done, where I've looked at how to foster more survivor centered perspectives in police departments, a consistent theme was that the police chief and the prosecutors really played a key role in fostering that mentality within the community. And I would say that that's one that's really crucial. And also, in general, the field of violence against women has struggled with funding availability. And so I think really for these interventions to be implemented at the highest level of functioning, this is where they need the resources to be able to do that. And so I think that those are particularly important to interventions like the domestic violence response team and other community collaboration. Well, good luck with that research. I look forward to hearing more about that and I guess reading more about it once you publish. Thank you so much for your time today.

Thank you so much. I really appreciate the opportunity.

Speaker 2 [00:21:14] You've been listening to Dr. Laura Johnson discuss her research on the Domestic Violence Response Team program for more information on this episode. Please visit our website at inSocialWork.org and please join us again at inSocialWork.org.