

The Rose Adom Center Changes the Legal Landscape for Domestic Violence Victims

by Abbey Wallach

Colorado's first Family Justice Center for domestic violence victims, the Rose Adom Center, opened in Denver on June 29, 2016.¹ Popularized across the nation during the 1980s and 1990s, Family Justice Centers co-locate criminal justice, civil justice, and community organizations in a single, centralized location.² By housing the offices and staff from these myriad organizations, known as partner agencies, Family Justice Centers seek to provide more services to domestic violence victims³ and to facilitate collaboration among the partner agencies to improve their services.⁴ Perhaps most important, by following a "victim-centered model," Family Justice Centers provide services that retain victim autonomy while addressing domestic violence.⁵

The Rose Adom Center follows the Family Justice Center model and currently houses 19 partner agencies⁶ that provide services in three categories: (1) law enforcement by systems-based actors, including the Denver District Attorney's Office, Denver Police Department, and Denver City Attorney's Office; (2) civil legal support, such as protection order and family court assistance; and (3) advocacy and resource-based support, such as counseling, access to shelters, and public benefits assistance. In its first eight months of operation, the Rose Adom Center received over 1,100 adult visits and 340 child visits.⁷ By co-locating these partner agencies and facilitating their collaborative approach to serving domestic violence victims, the Rose Adom Center is changing the legal landscape for Denver's women, men, and children facing domestic violence.

A Fractured Landscape

Before the Rose Adom Center opened its doors, a multitude of robust community and systems-based domestic violence agencies existed—quite literally—all over the greater Denver area. But their physical separation and resulting isolation from each other presented numerous challenges, both for domestic violence victims and the agencies that served them.

For victims, the separation of agencies meant there was no central figure to help them discern what services to seek. Information about the obvious and immediately necessary service providers, such as police and shelters, is available online, but that information can be difficult to find and understand. And some necessary services are not as obvious to victims at the outset, such as the need to procure food, transportation, and counseling once separated from the abuser.

One recent Rose Adom Center client's experience illustrates how markedly difficult seeking domestic violence services can be when services are not co-located. "Amanda" was being stalked and harassed by her ex-husband, so a friend recommended she file for a protection order. Amanda describes searching online for information about obtaining a protection order as "totally confusing and convoluted." Despite being a professional woman in her late 20s with two undergraduate degrees, she felt lost. She explains, "I was finding a lot of legal lingo and I didn't understand what it meant or where I was supposed to go and what I was supposed to bring."

Many people facing domestic violence have not achieved Amanda's education level,⁸ and some do not share her command of the English language.⁹ Moreover, Amanda was fortunate to have a friend's help. Domestic violence is often characterized by an abuser's control over the victim¹⁰ and forced isolation from family and friends,¹¹ and many victims do not have access to the Internet, sufficient finances, or even the family car. When taking into consideration that victims who seek to leave an abuser are in crisis,¹² these are significant barriers to identifying the type of services victims need and the organizations that provide those services.

Prior to the Rose Adom Center's opening, even when a victim managed to identify which agencies and services to seek, accessing them could be a logistical nightmare. Many organizations were located in different neighborhoods or suburbs, causing victims to zigzag the greater metro area multiple times in a dizzying series of



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appointments, walk-ins, and long waits. Victims would have to retell their story at each visit, enhancing their traumatic experiences. Most agencies were open only during business hours, so the endeavor might be impossible for anyone without a flexible work schedule or an understanding employer.¹³ And some agencies did not allow children, adding childcare to the lengthy repertoire of details to figure out.

When victims accessed a service, it was for just one piece of the puzzle. They could participate in a police interview, but would not receive shelter or counseling at that time. Or they could apply for food assistance, but not apply for a protection order or file for divorce at the same location. As a result, it could take days or weeks to obtain the resources and support necessary to escape domestic violence.

This taxing process of obtaining help overwhelmed many victims.¹⁴ Moreover, this disjointed system undoubtedly frustrated some victims' attempts to leave their abuser. On average, victims return to abusive relationships *seven times* before leaving permanently,¹⁵ in part due to a lack of information about available resources¹⁶ and the absence of an advocate supporting their decisions.¹⁷ One young woman who experienced domestic violence in 2009 and subsequently spent weeks trying to coordinate law enforcement, housing, and medical assistance, all while maintaining a full-time job, grew so frustrated that she simply gave up.

The distance between service providers presented problems for the organizations addressing domestic violence as well. Beyond physical distance, organizations were often marked by ideological disparities. Typically, systems-based actors, mainly prosecutors and law enforcement, advocated for and enforced policies designed to remove and prosecute abusers, such as mandatory arrest and no-drop prosecution.¹⁸ These policies frequently do not align with the missions of certain community and advocacy groups, who focus on providing resources and advocacy for domestic violence victims and may be skeptical of or opposed to state intervention.¹⁹

As a result, existing physical barriers deepened into conceptual rifts. Typically, systems-based actors and community organizations had little meaningful contact and lacked opportunities to develop

knowledge about their counterparts and trust for their processes. According to Allison Rocker, Denver District Attorney in the Domestic Violence Division, although the agencies were aware of and sometimes referred clients to the other service providers, these relationships were not deeply networked. Nancy Olson, Project Safeguard's Executive Director, adds that organizations were reluctant to refer clients to other agencies because they could not predict what the outcome of that referral would be for a client or how it might affect the referring organization's work. This lack of trust reinforced separation among the agencies and between victims and the system at large.

The Rose Adom Center Changes the Landscape

The Rose Adom Center is one of over 80 Family Justice Centers nationwide.²⁰ It is the brainchild of Denver Mayor Michael Hancock, who lost his sister to domestic violence in 2002,²¹ and self-made McDonald's franchisor Rose Adom, a domestic violence survivor.²² Inspired by a visit to San Diego's flagship Family Justice Center, Mayor Hancock, Adom, and their team of key fundraisers set out to create a similar nonprofit organization and center in Denver. Adom donated \$1 million to kick off the capital campaign that converted an old Denver Public School building into the titular three-story edifice that now boasts several thousand feet of office and meeting space for the 19 partner agencies, a computer lab, and a full kitchen. The Rose Adom Center receives and relies on funding from a variety of sources, including grants and donations from individuals and foundations.

There is now one place in Denver where domestic violence victims and their families can address many of their varied needs. From the beginning of the process, seeking resources for domestic violence and related problems is easier. Instead of expending valuable time and resources discerning which services to pursue, anyone seeking services can simply walk through the Rose Adom Center's front door.

There, the intake staff—several cheerful young women who seem to always be smiling—collect information and make initial recommendations as to which partner agencies might be a good fit for the individual. After intake, clients are escorted upstairs and shown to the sprawling living room and kitchen, where staff and volunteers offer them tea, coffee, and snacks. They can wait on a plush couch next to a fireplace or play with their kids in the children's playroom, which is crammed with books and toys. Natural light pours through the large windows and reflects off of shiny kitchen appliances. Two opaque, key-card secured doors bookend the room and remind visitors that they are safe there.

Meetings with partner agency staff take place in interview rooms decorated like a home den with placid nature photographs adorning the walls. Through windows, clients can watch their children in the adjacent playroom while they talk to agency staff about their options for the resources provided by partner agencies.

Staying true to the goal of promoting victim autonomy, the ultimate decision about which agencies to meet with is always made by the individual seeking services. And it is the Rose Adom Center's policy that no client ever has to report abuse to law enforcement. Clients who choose to report can meet with detectives or district attorneys in interview rooms on the other side of the floor—a floorplan deliberately designed to avoid implicit pressure to report and to protect the confidentiality of those who do not wish to engage with law enforcement. These interview rooms are also cozy



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and welcoming. As Rocker explains, gone are the glass and steel interview rooms of old that doubled as suspect interview rooms—stark reminders to victims of the repercussions their partners would face. Instead, victims tell their stories sitting on couches and surrounded by sanguine yellow walls.

In addition to fostering security and efficient access to resources for the clients, the space facilitates collaboration among the partner agencies. In shared workspaces or in the single breakroom, agency staff can discuss case scenarios, point out potential problems, and share the policies and best practices of their organizations. Though they previously knew *what* services other organizations provided, systems actors and community advocates are learning *how* their counterparts address the various implications of domestic violence. This burgeoning understanding facilitates referrals and collaboration. Partner agency staff report that they are better at identifying the services other organizations can provide to clients and then helping clients meet those agencies in real time. They are willing to make these referrals, Olson explains, because they have begun to build trust with each other. And, says Olson, this directly benefits individuals who use the Rose Aandom Center because “people trust the process more when the people in the process trust each other.” As a result, individuals facing domestic violence are able to make more informed choices about how they want to address domestic violence in their lives.²³ Because it is easier to access various domestic violence-related services and because those service providers are collaborating and improving their approach to victims’ needs, the legal landscape is becoming more seamless for domestic violence victims.

New Challenges Emerge

Of course, co-locating several distinct partner agencies in one location is not without its challenges. Partner agencies identified two particular challenges that emerged from coalescing agencies in the Family Justice Center model.

The first is a continuation of the old: systems-based actors and community or advocacy actors still have different, and sometimes conflicting, goals. For some, working in close proximity highlights this discrepancy. Overcoming it requires building trust, which in turn requires deliberate and time-intensive overtures. Turnover frustrates the process, and key players may find themselves starting practically from scratch each time a staff member leaves.

However, while working in the Rose Aandom Center may highlight certain differences, it also forces partner agencies to figure out how to work through them. In that process, a consistent theme emerges: each agency has the same end-goal to secure the safety of every man, woman, and child who walks through the door. Disagreements, then, ultimately serve to remind the partner agencies that the joint mission is paramount.

The second challenge is a consequence of collaboration: how to share information without running afoul of confidentiality and mandatory reporting laws. When a victim meets with a partner agency representative, the victim becomes the client of that agency, and confidentiality requirements rule. In addition, certain partner agency staff members are required by law to report known instances of domestic violence or child abuse to law enforcement. The prospect of sharing information across agencies becomes com-

plicated when, for example, a client is interested in speaking with police but first wants to know how his or her own legal issues may be implicated, or a client wonders how applying for certain social services could affect an existing child support order.

According to Project Safeguard's Legal Advocate Leanna Stoufer, this challenge can be overcome with increased awareness and creativity. Partner agency staff members employ the "hypothetical," a communication tool that allows staff to inquire about a client's situation with another partner agency without revealing sensitive information. For example, staff members will ask Rocker what testifying will be like for a victim under particular circumstances or speak with a counselor to determine whether certain childhood behaviors are typical of trauma. This creative flow of communication facilitates relationship-building among the partner agencies which, in turn, allows Rose Anodom Center clients to access a wider range of information.

Looking Ahead

By providing easier access to domestic violence services and fostering collaboration among those service providers, the Rose Anodom Center promotes greater efficiency and cooperation while addressing domestic violence. Victims are therefore able to make more autonomous and informed choices about their response to domestic violence in their lives. This signifies an evolving legal landscape for domestic violence victims. Thanks to the Rose Anodom Center, what was once a fractured and difficult process is shaping into a community-based response that is easier to navigate and better equipped to address the myriad needs of domestic violence victims.

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Notes

1. More information about the Rose Anodom Center, including how to make financial donations, is available at www.RoseAnodomCenter.org.
2. Gwinn et al., "The Family Justice Center Collaborative Model," 27 *St. Louis U. Pub. L. Rev.* 79, 82 (2007).
3. The word "victim" is sometimes ill-received. Its use in this article is solely for the sake of consistency with the majority of academic works that explain and celebrate the Family Justice Center model. Where appropriate, individuals facing domestic violence and seeking related services are referred to as clients.
4. Stoever, "Mirandizing Family Justice," 39 *Harv. J.L. & Gender* 189, 202 (2016).
5. Guiding Principles, Family Justice Center Alliance, www.familyjusticecenter.org/about-us/guiding-principles.
6. The following is a complete list of the Rose Anodom Center's on-site partner agencies as of March 5, 2017: Asian Pacific Development Center, The Blue Bench, Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, Colorado Legal Services, Denver Children's Advocacy Center, Denver City Attorney's Office, Denver County Court Probation Victim Assistance, Denver Department of Human Services: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Denver District Attorney's Office, Denver Domestic Violence Coordinating Counsel, Denver Police Department Domestic Violence Investigation Unit, Denver Police Department Victim Assistance Unit,

Dress for Success, Healing from the Heart, MHCD Right Start Infant Mental Health Program, Project Pave Project Safeguard, SafeHouse Denver, and Servicios de la Raza.

7. The Rose Anodom Center and many of its partner agencies provided the statistical and anecdotal information referenced in this article. In particular, the author gratefully acknowledges Margaret Abrams, Nancy Olson, Allison Rocker, and Leanna Stoufer for their contributions.

8. Domestic violence is most common among women ages 18 to 24. "Domestic Violence National Statistics," National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (2015), ncadv.org/files/National%20Statistics%20Domestic%20Violence%20NCADV.pdf.

9. See "Information on the Legal Rights Available to Immigrant Victims of Domestic Violence in the United States and Facts about Immigrating on a Marriage-Based Visa Fact Sheet," U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, www.uscis.gov/news/fact-sheets/information-legal-rights-available-immigrant-victims-domestic-violence-united-states-and-facts-about-immigrating-marriage-based-visa-fact-sheet.

10. "Domestic Violence National Statistics," *supra* note 8.

11. Jeltsen, "The Insidious Form of Domestic Violence That No One Talks About," *The Huffington Post* (Oct. 21, 2014), www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/21/domestic-violence_n_6022320.html.

12. Baker, "Necessary Third Parties: Multidisciplinary Collaboration and Inadequate Professional Privileges in Domestic Violence Practice," 21 *Colum. J. Gender & L.* 283, 291 (2011).

13. The Colorado Antidiscrimination Act entitles domestic violence victims to take up to three days off work to use domestic violence resources, but it only applies to employers with 50 or more employees and after the victim has been employed for one year. See CRS § 24-34-402.7.

14. Gwinn et al., *supra* note 2 at 81.

15. "50 Obstacles to Leaving: 1-10," National Domestic Violence Hotline (June 10, 2013), www.thehotline.org/2013/06/50-obstacles-to-leaving-1-10.

16. "Why do Abuse Victims Stay?" Sudbary-Wayland-Lincoln Domestic Violence Roundtable, www.domesticviolenceroundtable.org/abuse-victims-stay.html.

17. "50 Obstacles to Leaving: 1-10," *supra* note 15.

18. Kohn, "The Justice System and Domestic Violence: Engaging the Case but Divorcing the Victim," 32 *N.Y.U. Rev. L. & Soc. Change* 191, 193, 212-19 (2008). Colorado's mandatory arrest law, CRS § 18-6-803.6, provides in pertinent part: "When a peace officer determines that there is probable cause to believe that a crime or offense involving domestic violence . . . has been committed, the officer shall, without undue delay, arrest the person suspected of its commission . . ."

19. Sack, "Battered Women and the State: The Struggle for the Future of Domestic Violence Policy," *Wis. L. Rev.* 1657, 1666 (2004).

20. Stoever, "Mirandizing Family Justice," 39 *Harv. J.L. & Gender* 189, 201 (2016).

21. Prendergast, "Michael Hancock Speaks on the 'Unspeakable Pain' of his Sister's Murder," *Westword* (Oct. 20, 2011), www.westword.com/news/michael-hancock-speaks-on-the-unspeakable-pain-of-his-sisters-murder-video-5828198.

22. Interview of Rose Anodom (Nov. 16, 2013), www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2-WCnxmj_0.

23. These improvements are frequently the result of co-locating services in a Family Justice Center model. According to Casey Gwinn and others who created the flagship model in San Diego, "Preliminary outcomes and evaluation results have included reduced domestic violence homicides, increased victim safety, increased autonomy, increased empowerment for victims and professionals, reduced fear and anxiety for victims and their children with the court system, increased peer support, reduced witness recanting, and increased numbers of victims receiving services." Gwinn et al., *supra* note 2 at 90-91. ■