

Rebranding the Domestic Violence Movement:

Changing Domestic Violence Agencies' Names is a Crucial Step in LGBTQ Inclusion Work



National LGBTQ Institute on Intimate Partner Violence

A PROJECT OF THE LOS ANGELES LGBT CENTER

In partnership with the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs and In Our Own Voices, Inc.



Who We Are

The National LGBTQ Institute on Intimate Partner Violence was created to significantly enhance the safety, well-being, support, and health of LGBTQ intimate partner violence (IPV) and domestic violence survivors throughout the United States. The Institute is a project of the Los Angeles LGBT Center, the nation's oldest and largest community-based LGBTQ service and support organization, working in close collaboration with the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) and In Our Own Voices. Utilizing ongoing input from providers, experts, and consumers, the Institute offers state-of-the-art training and technical assistance that significantly expands the capacity of public and private agencies to provide culturally relevant, survivor-centered LGBTQ IPV intervention and prevention services. The program also works to enhance the visibility of LGBTQ-specific IPV needs and intervention strategies, while conducting research to identify and disseminate evidence-informed interventions and overseeing policy initiatives that have a meaningful impact on the quality, scope, and accessibility of LGBTQ IPV services nationwide.



The History and Context

In the late 1960s the women's liberation movement started what was dubbed "the battered women's movement". This was a groundbreaking and essential step in naming the problem of domestic violence and beginning to create advocacy strategies, shelters, and domestic violence agencies. Domestic violence (DV) was an issue that was shrouded in social stigma and silence, and because the majority of DV survivors are women, many of these programs became called "women's organizations," "women's shelters," or "women's support groups." What we know now is that while it is critically important to name patriarchy and sexism as sources of oppression and abusive ideology, they are not the sole causes of domestic violence. Abuse is not limited to relationships between a man and a woman—anyone of any gender or sexual orientation can be a survivor or perpetrator of domestic violence. It is also important to talk about domestic violence as something that affects all people while addressing the forms of oppression—including sexism/patriarchy but also racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and more—that are used by abusers to justify and enact abuse.

Herstory of Domestic Violence: A Timeline of the Battered Women's Movement. September 1999. VAWnet.
<https://vawnet.org/material/herstory-domestic-violence-timeline-battered-womens-movement>



The History and Context (cont)

In 2013, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) codified this new understanding of domestic violence by adding sexual orientation and gender identity as protected classes of survivors. Explicit provisions were included to ensure that LGBTQ victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking are not denied access to the critical services that VAWA supports on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. However, while nondiscrimination protections are an essential tool in creating access, these provisions do not on their own make a space affirming for LGBTQ survivors.

To the extent that the domestic violence movement is growing and expanding its understanding of domestic violence, it is clear that as a field we need to examine how we frame what domestic violence means. Visibility is so essential when it comes to domestic violence. It was critical to put a name to the "battered women's" experience in the 1960s because it made what was previously a publicly invisible issue visible. Similarly, we now must ensure that the needs and experiences of LGBTQ survivors are included in this movement by expanding the terminology we use to describe essential DV services. This includes avoiding the use of gendered language that upholds a system which keeps LGBTQ survivors invisible.

In providing trainings and technical assistance (TTA) to over 4,500 domestic violence service providers across the country, the Institute's staff repeatedly hears a genuine desire to support LGBTQ survivors. We often hear the phrase "we will accept everyone regardless of their gender." Having a policy that welcomes survivors of all genders and sexual orientations at an agency is good in theory, but LGBTQ survivors need and deserve specialized, appropriate, and relevant services, not just access to DV spaces.

"Nondiscrimination Grant Condition in the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013". U.S. Department of Justice: Office of Civil Rights. April 9, 2014.
<https://www.justice.gov/archives/ovw/file/29386/download>





Organizations with “women” in their name repeatedly share that this presents an obstacle to survivors of other genders identifying the services as available to them.

One training recipient shared a story that illustrates the importance of being specific about whom an agency provides services to: A hotline responder at an organization with “women” in its name received a call from a man who said, “I know you don’t have services for me, but can you give me the number of a place that does?” The hotline responder mentioned feeling shocked that the caller assumed she could not help him, because the agency served survivors of all genders. This situation forced her to think more about the impact their agency’s name had on survivors looking for supportive services. She reflected, “How many people don’t even call us because of our name?”

The Institute has delivered many trainings to organizations with “women” in their name and has had the opportunity to have meaningful dialogue with staff members on the impact of this language. Organizations with “women” in their name repeatedly share that this presents an obstacle to survivors of other genders identifying the services as available to them. This pattern observed by our on-the-ground TTA professionals led us to conduct this case study. Here, we document the experiences, barriers, and successes of domestic violence service providers who have successfully transitioned away from a gendered name and into something more gender-inclusive.

Case Studies

Case Study: Radiant Futures

The Institute team first sat down with Dr. Nefta Pereda, Chief Programs Officer of Radiant Futures, to talk about the process of process changing their name from Women’s Transitional Living Center in 2022. Founded in 1976, Women’s Transitional Living Center (WTLC) was the first domestic violence shelter in Orange County, California, and the third such shelter in the country. WTLC’s name reflected the services offered at the time: shelter for women experiencing domestic violence. Over time, WTLC increased service provision to include legal services, case management, education, support groups, and therapeutic services for survivors of all genders. As WTLC expanded, they added additional office space for survivors to be seen outside of the shelter, allowing them to serve survivors regardless of whether they were receiving shelter services. Over time, WTLC’s shelter space has grown to house women, men, nonbinary, and genderqueer survivors.

Dr. Pereda shared that conversations around a name change at WTLC occurred over the course of many years for various reasons. Staff repeatedly highlighted the importance of having a name that better represented the services they offered and the survivors who receive them. The name “Women’s Transitional Living Center” posed multiple problems in this sense and no longer felt like an accurate representation of the agency as a whole. The agency was not simply a transitional living space, but a holistic agency that meets survivors with services to match many of their needs beyond and in addition to shelter space. The agency also served men and survivors of all genders—both in shelters and in other support services—so having “women” in the agency name felt limiting.



Case Study: Radiant Futures (cont)

The process of updating WTLC to Radiant Futures began in 2017, when the shelter was moved to an apartment complex and new office space was added. “We went from being a DV shelter to a DV center where we served people’s needs regardless of whether they needed shelter. Two parts of our name were no longer accurate,” said Dr. Pereda. Internal conversations with leadership and the board of directors around 2018 led to the hiring of a consulting firm in 2021. Agency leadership engaged their stakeholders—including board members, outside partners, community members, staff, and current and former clients—through a series of questionnaires around their preferences for the new agency name. The organization’s leadership acknowledged the deep importance of these stakeholders and wanted to ensure their thoughts and opinions were taken into consideration throughout this process. Recognizing that a name does not have to describe every service an agency offers, they instead looked at their goals for survivors who utilize their services. They conducted surveys to identify the values of the organization and compiled a comprehensive list of supportive services offered by the agency before moving toward a list of possible names. One goal that resonated with all stakeholders was building up hope and resiliency in the survivors who access their services. Suggestions for a new name were narrowed down to three options, and a vote was held with the staff members at the agency. Staff also voted on logos and color schemes suggested by the public relations consulting firm, as it was important to agency leadership that all staff members felt like they had a voice in this process. In 2022, their name was officially changed to Radiant Futures.





Case Study: Radiant Futures (cont)

We asked Dr. Pereda how he has seen their name change impact the demographics of clients. Dr. Pereda shared that Radiant Futures continues to serve women, men, and LGBTQ survivors of all genders. When survivors enter its all-gender shelter program, they are told they might be sharing space with survivors of all genders. Previously, survivors were surprised and even apprehensive. Since the name change, however, survivors entering the shelter or accessing services are less likely to expect a women-only space. This is such a critical shift for LGBTQ survivors, who may experience anti-LGBTQ discrimination from other residents they share shelter space with. “We didn’t want to stay in the past,” said Dr. Pereda. “We wanted our name to encompass everything that we do. We wanted people to be curious enough to call and see what we had to offer. It wasn’t just the ‘women’ part that brought about the change. We wanted the name not just to answer the questions; we wanted people to want to ask the questions. We wanted people to say, ‘What is this?’ and go to our website and engage with the myriad of services that we have. We wanted our name to represent the diverse services that we have.”



Case Study: WEAVE

The Institute team also met with Julie Bornhoeft, Chief Strategy and Sustainability Officer, and Beth Hassett, Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director, of When Everyone Acts Violence Ends (WEAVE) in Sacramento. WEAVE was initially named Women Escaping a Violent Environment when it formed in 1978 as a domestic violence service. As WEAVE grew, it expanded to support survivors of sexual assault and human trafficking and broadened their scope to all survivors—not just women survivors. It became clear, as the organization expanded, that the name no longer reflected the full range of services the agency provided. The name-change process was “gradual,” according to Bornhoeft, because WEAVE had strong brand and name recognition in the Sacramento community and in the national domestic violence movement overall, which they sought to maintain. In 2003, they changed their name to WEAVE, and dropped the original meaning. This ensured that they retained name recognition within the community without being beholden to a name that “wasn’t reflective of where we had come to,” as Hassett put it. However, despite the name change, anytime they got news coverage or were introduced at an event, people continued to identify them as “Women Escaping a Violent Environment.” The organization struggled with this outside perception of their name over the next 16 years despite their branding, logo, outreach, documentation, and more only containing the name WEAVE. They were also registered by the IRS as WEAVE.



Case Study: WEAVE (cont)

They were also registered by the IRS as WEAVE. But they could not escape the public's desire to have WEAVE be an acronym. In 2019, the organizational leadership of WEAVE identified that they were really seeing this public perception as a barrier. Men, nonbinary people, and youth were not accessing services because of the perceptions around the name. "If they want an acronym, we had to give them an acronym," said Hassett. The organization held a naming contest when they were going through the first name-change process in 2003, and a youth member of the community came up with the idea for "When Everyone Acts, Violence Ends." Internally, that acronym had been tossed around throughout the organization for years and had resonated with the staff. "We feel like it reflects our opinion, which is that it takes a community to stop domestic violence," said Hassett. Once they came up with the new acronym, they stopped getting misnamed and soon saw a shift in public perception. While the organization is still called WEAVE, they now use "When Everyone Acts, Violence Ends" as a tagline and call to action.

After changing their name, WEAVE quickly saw a big difference among men and nonbinary survivors, who began to access services at much higher rates. Because there had been a longer period of transition and more data to pull from, WEAVE shared that they were confident that there has been an increase in LGBTQ survivors and men accessing their services. The data reflected this shift and, anecdotally, the staff felt and saw the change in how people in the community perceived their services. This shift also came in tandem with WEAVE's intentional outreach at LGBTQ events in the community, so these increases can't solely be attributed to the name change, but there was an organizational consensus that the name change made a significant difference.



Lessons Learned

Lesson #1:

Rebranding Takes Time and Requires Consensus Building

Both organizations shared that rebranding took more time and effort than was expected. The impact of community buy-in and input from stakeholders was something that both organizations shared as a key to success. WEAVE and Radiant Futures both held conversations in the community, within the agency, with the board of directors, and with stakeholders over the course of many years before their respective name changes were made. Both WEAVE and Radiant Futures solicited input from staff and the larger community toward what a name change could look like. The sentiment that their name was deeply rooted in the organization's ethos resonated with stakeholders of both organizations.

WEAVE's leadership shared that while there was not significant pushback when the official name change took place, there had been years of leadership-level conversations and advocacy around LGBTQ survivors, including the fact that their previous name was not representative of the community's needs. Radiant Futures shared that their transition was not without challenges. Change, especially to the name of an organization with a long history that holds deep significance to many people, is often challenging. While staff, clients, and new leadership were excited about the name change, some stakeholders who had a long history with the organization pushed back on the process. Radiant Futures' leadership and staff spent time with those who struggled with the name change to explain the importance of better representing the work being done at the agency. Over many conversations and meetings, they were able to change the hearts and minds of many stakeholders who were initially resistant to the change. According to Dr. Nefta Pereda, the messaging that resonated most with stakeholders noted that "our name was implying women are the only people who are survivors, and men were the only ones who are abusers." The previous name suggested that the organization only served women survivors, said Dr. Pereda. "Changing our name meant we could serve more survivors. Coffee and conversations were what helped change minds."



Lesson #2:

It Is Critical to Identify Funding Sources for Supplies When Rebranding

Radiant Futures identified that one of the most surprising factors was how resource-intensive it was to fully purge and transition the name out of every aspect of the agency. Redoing marketing materials involves time, logistical configuration, finding funding, and budgeting. From staff onboarding paperwork and intake forms to signs throughout their buildings, there were a large number of branded items that needed updating. Dr. Pereda shared, “I didn’t realize how many times we use WTLC in every document. ... We are still constantly finding things that [say] WTLC, because we were so focused on our external-facing pieces and did not realize that all of our forms and signage around the office [still said] WTLC.”

WEAVE shared that one benefit of this process was that it served as an excuse to freshen up materials. Printing new materials cost money, but the agency was able to take advantage of strategic funding opportunities from COVID-specific funding for this effort, meaning it aligned at a convenient time for them. Additionally, because the change was gradual and didn’t include a complete change of their name, many materials which simply read WEAVE did not require an immediate overhaul, helping to cut costs. WEAVE shared advice to other organizations going through a name change, saying, “If it’s going to be really different as a name, you need to put money aside to really enforce that change. Especially in larger areas.”

Radiant Futures benefitted from hiring a public relations firm that was instrumental in their name-change process. However, significant fiscal maneuvering and budget modification had to take place to make room for contracting an outside firm. WEAVE also felt that having a strong communications and public relations team was a huge asset to them in their transition. Identifying funding sources that can be used for materials and supplies can be an excellent opportunity for an organization to rebrand and change its name.



Lesson #3:

Outreach to LGBTQ Community is Necessary in Tandem to Rebranding

We heard from both organizations that active outreach to the local LGBTQ community in tandem with the name change was essential in ensuring that the organizations were accessible to LGBTQ survivors. Radiant Futures shared that they are working actively to network at local LGBTQ events—particularly at Pride events—to show the community that their organization is there for them. Radiant Futures also ensures that new staff members go through specialized LGBTQ inclusion training before starting work as domestic violence advocates. WEAVE stressed the importance of forging a strong relationship with their local LGBTQ center. WEAVE staff members regularly visit and engage with the LGBTQ center in a variety of ways, from participating in youth activities, doing sponsorships and tabling at the center’s events, and more. They also have a specific outreach program for LGBTQ bars called Safe Night Out, which trains bartenders to watch for signs of sexual harassment and assault and encourages them to hang signage in restrooms to inform patrons about resources for survivors. Additionally, they have a youth-serving program at schools where they focus on LGBTQ youth in their prevention work around sexual assault, sex trafficking, and dating violence.



Recommendations

1. Evaluate your organization's name.

Evaluate if your organization's name accurately describes the full scope of services that the organization provides and captures all intended clients. If the organization supports survivors of all genders, LGBTQ survivors, and single-adult survivors as well as families, consider how names that include "Women" or "Family" might prevent potential clients from accessing services.

2. Gauge interest amongst staff and board.

Create avenues for conversations about the organization's name in staff meetings, board meetings, and staff surveys. Collect meaningful feedback from staff on questions and concerns around the name change, and transparently address them with staff. Incorporate feedback and ideas for possible names from staff and board members.

3. Reach out for training and technical assistance.

Ultimately, name changes are a critical first step, but we cannot stop there as a movement. We are up against a long history of the domestic violence movement not being accessible to LGBTQ survivors. Targeted outreach is critical, as is increasing organizational capacity to provide culturally responsive support that addresses the unique and specific experiences of LGBTQ survivors. Organizations can reach out to the National LGBTQ Institute on Intimate Partner Violence to receive specialized training and technical assistance.

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