

Letting Foundation

# CONNECTIONS

Winter 2006



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# Coming Together

## to Address Wicked Social Problems

By Sue E. Williams and  
Renée A. Daugherty

Each year several million adult women and men experience violence at the hands of their intimate partner. The violence may be physical, emotional, or both and may involve husband and wife, ex-spouses, boyfriend and girlfriend, or co-habiting adults. Economic costs of intimate partner violence are estimated to be nearly six billion dollars each year. The emotional costs are uncounted.

The Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation (OPPD) was formed in 2000 in response to a documented interest and need for addressing challenging social problems in a way that included citizen perspectives and judgment. One of the mainstays of OPPD is workshops in which adults and older youth learn skills and strategies for public deliberation. OPPD also convenes deliberative forums throughout the state.

In late summer 2004, OPPD expanded their efforts to foster public deliberation both conceptually and geographically by framing the issue of intimate partner domestic violence to be used in communities throughout the nation. Domestic violence, particularly intimate partner violence, is a problem in Oklahoma that has frustrated law enforcement, the judiciary, social-service agencies, and most important, the individuals and families touched by this problem. Our state is not alone in this frustration—it is a national problem.

For almost two decades, the works of Ronald Heifetz, as well as Rittel and Webber, have been cited when describing social problems that are suited for, if not demanded for, public deliberation. Heifetz indicates that our most serious political problems are those in which the very definition of the problem is unclear and the nature of the treatment undefined. These are problems that governments and experts cannot fix by themselves. For these problems, without an engaged public, there is little hope for finding a workable solution. Rittel and Webber call these problems “wicked problems.” The issue of intimate partner violence certainly fits the description of a wicked social problem—one that has permeated our social fabric for centuries—one that experts and social activists have tried to address with little

success—an issue plaguing communities across our country.

Currently communities and states are dealing with domestic violence, and specifically intimate partner violence, in many ways. In several instances, communities choose to ignore the problem, contending that it is a private issue. Other communities and states are aggressively addressing the problem from single perspectives like criminal justice, law enforcement, or social-service action. All of these approaches are proving to be unsatisfactory, thus allowing a serious common problem to go unsolved; a reflection of the dysfunctional nature of today's communities.

Given this situation, OPPD concluded that public deliberation is essential in order to impact social change related to intimate partner violence in communities across our nation. Thus the partnership accepted the challenge of framing this wicked problem. A work group, including OPPD members and individuals interested in issues related to domestic violence—including community activists, social-service providers, educators, researchers, and the abused—convened to design a project for framing for public deliberation the issue of intimate partner domestic violence.

One of the most challenging aspects of the framing effort was to name the problem in public terms. During a second work group session, participants struggled



OPPD group participants work through a framing strategy session to name the problem at hand in public terms.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Administrative Office of the Courts—  
photographer: Cheryl Camp

## Challenge Two

with questions such as: How do citizens understand the problem? How do people talk about the problem? What other problems do people seem to link with this problem? What about this problem is really important to people? What are the different points of view with respect to this problem? This intense work session included some frustration on the part of individuals, but ultimately, a clearer understanding of individual and collective perspectives on a wicked issue emerged.

The problem was named Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and described as violence between adult couples in American society. IPV may be physical, emotional, or both. The costs of Intimate Partner Violence are huge. The work group experience of struggling to name and describe the issue in public terms

the issue of IPV for community consideration. The challenge before the group was to frame the issue in a manner that minimized polarization, which can prevent positive social change. Individuals represented concerned citizens, victims of abuse, members of the judicial system, members of law enforcement, educators (public and higher), social-service providers, leaders of the religious community, representatives of advocacy groups, and convenors and moderators of National Issues Forums. The framing team drew on the resources from the work group, the survey, and the experiences and perspectives of those participating in the framing session.

Large group and sub-team work during a two-day period created a preliminary framework. Framing group members participated in an exercise in which they were asked to describe various Intimate Partner Violence scenarios to determine how people perceived the severity of each scenario. This was an experiential way of helping the group realize how people perceive and define the problem differently. Further, this experience helped participants grasp the wide range of situations that exist within the

Intimate Partner Violence problem.

Three sub-teams, lead by experienced NIF moderators with extensive issue-framing experience, worked independently, using different framing approaches to identify three or four themes that emerged from the voices on the issue of Intimate Partner Violence. The whole group then convened to discuss common themes that emerged from sub-team work and draft approaches. From these themes, three approaches were drafted. After approaches were identified, each sub-team worked to identify possible actions associated with each approach, the voices of those who would speak for the approach, the voices of those with contrary views, and likely tradeoffs for each approach. Ultimately a preliminary NIF issue map was created—*Intimate Partner Violence: What can we do?*

Pilot forums were conducted across Oklahoma and the United States to test the preliminary framework. Three-hour pilot forums tested the framework to determine whether it fostered public deliberation in a variety of settings and queried participants about its “user friendliness.” Framework revisions were based on these pilot forums.

After the issue-framing session, it was clear that important voices on this issue were missing—the voices of perpetrators and abusers. To address this situation, pilot forums included abusers in both mixed settings and homogenous settings. Input provided by perpetrators and abusers provided valuable perspectives for additional framework revisions.

Framing a wicked public problem is a time-consuming, challenging, and often frustrating experience. Individuals who are very passionate about a given issue must be willing to hear the voices that may not be heard on that issue. Individuals with experience and commitment to public deliberation and issue framing must listen carefully to the voices of those who care very much about an issue.

Only time will tell if the work of the many dedicated individuals associated with the Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation and the National Issue Forums will help to change communities that are struggling with IPV. Issue framing is about community-building in a unique sense. It attacks the dysfunctional aspect of today’s communities in which common problems go unsolved with a counteraction that attempts to solve these problems by balancing self-interest with a sense of community and the common good. It is the bringing together of a community of people who care very much about the well-being of others and believe in the importance of building viable, sustainable communities capable of making decisions about challenging, everyday problems.

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helped this diverse group realize that their perspectives and experiences were rich but limited. So the work group decided to gather additional perspectives on the issue.

Web-based, e-mail, and paper surveys were distributed throughout the National Issues Forum database and to any group identified by the work group. From across the nation, over 530 responses were received in a two-week period. Respondents came from all walks of life, a wide range of socioeconomic and ethnic groups, and virtually every age and educational level. People responded with concern and passion about the need to address the heinous problem of Intimate Partner Violence.

A group of twenty-nine individuals from Oklahoma and seven other states were invited to participate in framing

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The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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