

San Diego Family Justice Center Focus Groups
Summary Prepared by Child and Adolescent Services Research Center
July 21, 2004

This report summarizes the findings from five focus groups conducted by the San Diego Family Justice Center (FJC) between April and July 2004. Three English-speaking groups were conducted with a total of 17 women participating, one group was made up of 7 Spanish-speaking women and one group consisted of 3 men for an overall total of 27 participants. Participants commented on a range of services received by the Family Justice Center. Primary themes summarized below are as follows: (a) helpful aspects of services; (b) benefits of services and perceived changes resulting from services; and (c) recommendations made by participants.

Helpful Aspects of Services

- Caring personnel
 - Staff members were described as friendly, helpful, patient, comforting, and reassuring.
 - Staff was available when needed and took the time to listen.
 - Contact with staff left clients feeling respected and safe.
- Safe environment
 - Clients reported feeling safe at the Family Justice Center.
 - They described the center as a warm, comfortable place in a good location where they could go for respite and to access services.

"For the first time in months, for the first few months of my experiences, I felt safe here. I was here from open to closing because I felt so safe here and this was really important to me."
- Professional organization
 - The services were provided in a quick and efficient manner.
 - The services were also seen as being very responsive to addressing problems and meeting needs (such as legal assistance to obtain restraining orders).
- Helpful services provided
 - In addition to the main services offered, clients appreciated getting information on next steps, referrals for other services and help in communicating with others in the "system".
 - Clients also commented on the convenience of having needed services under one roof.

"Having all the services together in one place was so nice, I can't even tell you!"

Benefits of Services/Perceived Changes Resulting from Services

". . . they helped me here . . . My life is much better now that it was before. I feel more able to take care of myself and stronger. Before I came here I was scared of everything. It has changed me a lot. I can stand up for myself more. I'm not as afraid."

- Participants reported feeling stronger and more independent, better able to care for themselves, and not as afraid.
- They reported having improved relationships with others.
- They described themselves as being able to make better/stronger decisions and to pursue goals again (e.g., return to school).

- They felt that they were able to make changes that resulted in obtaining visitation with their children or having them back in their custody.
- Clients indicated that they were comforted by the recognition that they are not alone and could see that others were going through the same thing.

"It made me feel like I was not alone; other people have experienced what I went through. The people here who I talked with understood my situation and validated my experience. That made me stronger."

Concerns

- General
 - Concerns were expressed about police or legal system response:
 - police handling of cases
 - delays in legal proceedings
 - lack of knowledge about what is occurring with the offender with regard to the criminal justice system

"I would like to be in the loop of what happens with my offender. . . I continue to file police reports. But not knowing what happens when I file, and where he is, is a big concern for me."
 - follow-through to ensure guns are taken from offenders
 - Concerns were expressed about the impact of exposure to violence on their children; most of the participants who had children stated that the children were in counseling or needed counseling.

"I feel really guilty because for years my children lived in a home full of domestic violence. Because they suffered, they need to go to therapy for a long time. I hope they will continue to go to therapy and will continue to heal. I want them to understand that they do not need to live that way."
 - Some concerns were also expressed about the quality of shelter/housing currently available for victims of domestic violence.
- Specific to FJC:
 - Being turned away from services because not eligible or service wasn't available.
 - Negative encounters with some staff members.

Recommendations Suggested by Participants

- Fine-tuning existing services
 - Importance of having staff and volunteers who are well trained and compassionate; knowledgeable about services and resources available within and outside the FJC.
 - Importance of being able to speak to a person when calling, rather than a message or recording.
 - Improved communication regarding services available on site when people first come in.

"Find ways to make sure people are more aware of all the services that are available. Not just that the center exists, but what it has to offer."
 - Conduct intakes in a private area, not the waiting room.
 - Offer male "friendly" services (e.g., provide written materials that are gender neutral, include more men on staff)

"If there had been more males working here, that would have helped me open up. If a male would help me or I saw more males here I might feel more comfortable."

- Additional services
 - Support groups that meet monthly
 - Monthly lunches with presentations on topics such as housing
 - Additional legal clinic lawyers to decrease waiting time
 - Employment assistance
 - Financial support, temporary financial assistance
 - Counseling for children affected by the violence
 - Childcare
 - Onsite phone banks to make and receive calls
 - Help with moving; storage assistance (for personal possessions such as furniture)