MEMO

TO: Domestic and Sexual Violence Advocates Working in OVW-Funded Services Agencies

FROM: Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence

As domestic and sexual violence advocates, you know what it is to identify and respond to the diverse needs of clients of many different ages, cultures, racial backgrounds, socioeconomic classes, levels of education, physical abilities, sexual orientations, and gender identities. In addition, some of the survivors who turn to you for help may be faith-affiliated. Faith in the U.S. is itself highly diverse. Of course, you will also support many survivors for whom faith is not an issue at all.

When a faith-affiliated survivor turns to you for help, there may be several questions on your mind.

1. You may be concerned that your agency’s federal funding precludes you from hearing about the faith or faith concerns of your client because of rules about “separation of church and state.”
2. You may be concerned about your expertise in responding to faith-based questions and challenges.
3. You may be wondering what resources or referrals you can offer to faith-based clients that will provide them with the spiritual support they need.

In this memo, we will try to respond to some of these concerns in order to support your empowering work with victims who are faith affiliated.

Federal Funding Requirements
As a recipient of federal funding, you and your agency must not use federal funding to promote, endorse, or disparage religion. Federally funded programs are required to be neutral with regard to religion.

This means that you cannot:

- use the funding to support explicitly religious activities such as worship, religious instruction, proselytizing (trying to convert someone), devotional exercises, development and distribution of devotional guides and other religious materials, or counseling that encourages or discourages religious beliefs.
Pieces of a Bigger Picture

❖ judge, disparage, or discourage anyone’s religious beliefs.
❖ try to influence the beliefs, or lack of beliefs, of your clients.
❖ endorse the religion of your clients or promote religion to your clients.
❖ invite or endorse specifically religious speech.
❖ discriminate on the basis of religion in the delivery of your services (in other words, you can’t withhold services based on someone’s religious beliefs or refusal to hold a religious belief).

However, if you are serving a faith-affiliated client, you can:

❖ take part in a neutral manner in a client-initiated and client-directed conversation about the client’s religion.
❖ allow your client to discuss their experiences of sexual and/or domestic violence in religious terms.
❖ allow your client to describe the challenges of coping with the aftermath of sexual and domestic violence in religious terms.
❖ listen to your client’s faith-based concerns, just as you would to a client’s concerns about finances or safety. Faith may be a very important factor in the worldview, decision-making, and safety planning of your client.
❖ allow your client to explore their values, which may spring from their religious beliefs.
❖ explore your client’s social support network, which may include their faith community.
❖ ask clarifying questions to allow the client to tell you more.
❖ stay neutral and non-judgmental about the faith or lack of faith of your clients.

The Resource Challenge

No one expects you to become/be a religious expert, just as we are not expecting faith leaders to become domestic and sexual violence experts. Even if you are an expert in one faith, no one could competently respond to the concerns of the diverse breadth of faith-community adherents who turn to you for help. However, there may be some resources that would be really helpful to your clients.

❖ You can provide clients with a bibliography of print or video resources that address the issues of domestic and sexual violence from the viewpoints of diverse faith communities. A sample bibliography for victims and survivors is attached to this document.
❖ When you hand the bibliography to the client, you can highlight the available resources that may be of particular interest to an individual client.
The Expertise and Authority Challenge
Sometimes, faith-affiliated clients need to talk to a leader in the faith community. Faith community leaders have expertise to answer faith-based questions and can speak with an authority that no one else has. It is possible that you may be able to turn to faith leaders in your community for the expertise and authority that your clients need.

✜ You can provide clients with a diverse list of available faith-based leaders in the community so long as that list is based on religiously neutral criteria. For example, you could provide a list of local faith leaders who have successfully completed your agency’s domestic and sexual violence volunteer training program, who have a relationship with your agency, and who have agreed to serve as a resource for your clients.

✜ When you hand a client the diverse list of available faith leaders, you can highlight those that may be of particular interest to an individual client.

✜ In addition to offering training and technical assistance to local faith leaders, you can also support their expertise by providing information about available resources.

✜ You can provide local faith leaders with a bibliography of print or video resources that address the issues of domestic and sexual violence from the viewpoints of diverse faith communities. A sample bibliography for faith leaders is attached to this document.

✜ When you hand a faith leader the list of available print and video resources, you can highlight those that may be of particular interest to an individual faith leader.

✜ Safe Havens has many additional resources for faith leaders in your community, as well as help for you as you reach out to, partner with, and train local faith leaders. Check out our website at www.interfaithpartners.org, or call us at 617-951-3980/3981.

In addition, if you would like to know more about the intersection of faith and domestic and sexual violence, we have attached a bibliography for advocates to this document.