

**Highlighting New  
Poverty Research****by Taryn Lindhorst,  
Erin Casey, and  
Marcia K. Meyers**

“Frontline Worker  
Responses to Domestic  
Violence Disclosure in  
Public Welfare Offices,”  
forthcoming in *Social Work*.

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The West Coast Poverty Center's **POVERTY RESEARCH FLASH** highlights new research by Center faculty affiliates and others on causes, consequences, and effective policy responses to poverty, with an emphasis on changing labor markets, demographic shifts, family structure, and social and economic inequality. More information about the West Coast Poverty Center is available from our website: [www.wcpc.washington.edu](http://www.wcpc.washington.edu)

January 2010

**Frontline Worker Responses to Domestic Violence  
Disclosure in Public Welfare Offices**

**Background.** Previous research has shown that over half of welfare recipients experience domestic violence in their lifetime, and one quarter of these women have been abused in the previous year. In addition to posing a threat to recipients' safety, domestic violence can impede victims' ability to comply with various requirements for receiving cash assistance. Federal policy allows states to exempt domestic violence victims from time limits, work requirements, and other rules, and the majority of states have chosen to allow these exemptions. However, few welfare recipients receive “family violence” exemptions, which might reflect a low incidence of disclosure of domestic violence by welfare clients, a low incidence of screening or applying “family violence” exemptions on the part of caseworkers, or some combination of these reasons.

In an earlier study, WCPC Affiliate Taryn Lindhorst, WCPC Director Marcia K. Meyers, and their colleague Erin Casey found that few frontline workers in states that use “family violence” exemptions actively screen clients for domestic violence, even in states where this screening is mandatory. Out of nearly 800 initial and recertification interviews the authors analyzed, workers screened clients for domestic violence in only 9 percent. In the current study, Lindhorst and her colleagues investigate how frontline workers react when clients disclose experiences of domestic violence.

**Methods.** The authors rely on data from 782 interviews between welfare caseworkers and female clients recorded at eleven sites in four states (Georgia, Michigan, New York, and Texas) in 1999 and 2000. The authors found only 22 cases in which clients disclosed domestic violence to their caseworkers as part of the screening process or sought services for domestic violence. The authors created a typology of caseworkers' responses based on best practices for addressing domestic violence among welfare recipients.

**Findings.** In the 22 instances of disclosure, only half of the women received specific information about community services or potential waivers of welfare program rules. In five instances, the caseworkers continued the interview as if domestic violence had not been mentioned. In two cases, the worker acknowledged the abuse and noted the existence of waivers of welfare requirements, but attempted to dissuade the client from availing herself of those waivers. In an additional three cases, caseworkers acknowledged the abuse but failed to provide additional services, instead referring the client to another worker. In nine cases, workers used some aspects of best practices, but in only three interviews did caseworkers follow a best practice model and provide clients with specific information about welfare rules, referrals to domestic violence services, ask them for additional information, and provide emotional support. The authors suggest that the low incidence of domestic violence waivers even in cases where clients share information about family violence results from a systemic reluctance to deal with clients' experiences of domestic violence. Remedies might include policy revisions to monitor compliance with domestic violence services similar to the kind of accountability currently enacted for helping clients become employed; more caseworker training in screening for and addressing domestic violence; and coordination with domestic violence service providers to assist in economic advocacy for abuse victims.

# Poverty Research Flash

**The West Coast Poverty Center** serves as a hub for research, education, and policy analysis leading to greater understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and effective approaches to reducing it in the west coast states. The Center, located at the University of Washington, is one of three regional poverty centers funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE). More information about the West Coast Poverty Center is available from our website: [www.wcpc.washington.edu](http://www.wcpc.washington.edu)

## Poverty Research Flash 2010-01

### Frontline Worker Responses to Domestic Violence Disclosure in Public Welfare Offices

**New research from Taryn Lindhorst, Erin Casey, and Marcia K. Meyers**

#### Key Findings

- Although prior research suggests that up to one-quarter of TANF recipients have suffered domestic violence in the previous year, only three percent (22 cases) of a sample of 782 interviews between welfare case workers and clients included a disclosure of domestic violence by a client.
- In general, caseworkers did not provide mandated services for domestic violence victims. Of the clients who disclosed domestic violence to their caseworkers, only half received concrete information about services or available waivers of welfare program rules.
- In five of the 22 cases, caseworkers effectively ignored clients' disclosures of domestic violence. Caseworkers employed "best practices" after domestic violence disclosure –i.e., providing emotional support, asking follow-up questions, giving information about potential waivers, and providing clients with referrals to outside sources of support such as shelters – in only three cases.
- The authors conclude that problems with implementation of the domestic violence policies reflect a systemic reluctance to address issues of violence with women rather than problems of individual workers.