

**What Family Courts Can Do to Increase Safety for Battered Women and Their Children:
Recommendations from Survivors of Domestic Violence**

1. Grant permanent Orders of Protection when requested. Have court personnel or police responsible for serving papers.
2. Hold abusers accountable:
 - Insure consequences for not attending mandated services (get feedback from their partner about the effects services are having & whether they are attending). Substance abuse programs need to be monitored and have measures in place to ensure the victim's safety;
 - Bring criminal charges against abusers found guilty of child sex abuse in family court;
 - Prosecute abusers who make false & malicious child abuse reports against their partner;
 - Provide penalties for not returning a child after visitation (within an hour of the specified time).
 - Have abusers attend a class on domestic violence after an Order of Protection is granted.
3. Do not grant unsupervised visitation to batterers (who are 7 times more likely to abuse their children). Supervised visitation programs need to be monitored and have safety measures in place. Their staff should be trained to understand the dynamics of domestic violence. Create a mechanism to report programs that compromise the safety of the victim or children.
4. Mandate training and monitor Law Guardians so that they truly represent the best interest of the child and understand the dynamics of domestic violence. Encourage them to work with any counselors or advocates the parties are currently using.
5. Provide trained, monitored language and sign language interpreters to battered women who need them and have a grievance procedure in place for complaints and a system for accountability. Recognize that an interpreter needs to speak the same dialect as the person s/he is translating for. Training of interpreters needs to include the importance of confidentiality, the dynamics of domestic violence, and the accurate interpretation of legal terms and descriptions of abuse. Provide a separate interpreter for each party if needed, so that victim and perpetrator don't need to stand in close proximity of each other, which is very intimidating for the victim.
6. Ensure battered women's safety on court grounds.
 - Provide locked and secure bathrooms;
 - Provide a separate entrance for battered women;
 - Create separate waiting rooms for petitioners and respondents;
 - Do not have both parties wait for the completed Orders of Protection in the lobby together;
 - Hold abusive partners in the courtroom for 15 minutes to allow victims to leave safely and not be followed home and/or take victim to another building or another exit so no one can follow her;
 - Do not allow violations of orders of protections on court grounds and/or in front of court personnel;
 - Allow survivor to testify without her abuser present (when legally possible) or ask her to approach the bench, so that she can tell her story without being intimidated.
7. Never reveal the address of a battered woman – in written papers or verbally.
8. Never order couple's counseling in cases where there is domestic violence. This is very dangerous for battered women and has been shown to be ineffective in these cases. When mandating parenting skills workshops, do not have both parties participate in the same program.
9. Limit adjournments:
 - in family court when children are in foster care, which greatly delays their return home and is traumatizing to the entire family;
 - in cases where it compromises the victim's safety;
 - when repeated trips to court pose a financial hardship to the victim.
10. Define domestic violence to include controlling behavior and intimidation, as well as physical abuse.

11. Advise mothers of the consequences of pleading guilty to neglect charges.
12. Don't let batterers use the courts to harass and bankrupt their victims. Limit the number of forensic evaluations ordered – they are often used as harassment by batterers and are very costly for battered women.
13. Ensure that battered women have adequate counsel in family court whenever significant issues are at stake. Permit domestic violence advocates into the courtroom to support battered women, whether they are represented by an attorney or not.
14. Ensure that victim's rights are protected regardless of sexual orientation.
15. Mandate training to all court personnel, including Judges, court officers, lawyers, parole, and probation on the dynamics of domestic violence. Include a domestic violence resource coordinator on staff who can provide information to court personnel and victims.
16. Decisions on child support should never be made without victim being present.
17. Provide all victims of domestic violence with a booklet on their rights that also explains how to navigate the system.
18. Establish an outside, independent review board that can review and monitor court decisions and where complaints can be brought.

The Voices of Women Organizing Project (VOW) is an organization of survivors of domestic violence working to improve the systems battered women and their children turn to for safety and justice.