



VIOLENCE FREE
MINNESOTA

Transforming Public Safety

July 24, 2020

Last year, Violence Free Minnesota chose to rebrand and refocus our name to more fully encapsulate our work, mission, and vision for the future. Our mission not only involves representing victim/survivors of relationship abuse, but also challenging systems and institutions and promoting social change. If our end goal is to create a violence free Minnesota, we must confront all systems of oppression and violence, including state-sanctioned violence.

Over eight weeks have passed since George Floyd was murdered by the Minneapolis Police Department. We have waited to make a public statement, in part because we needed to reflect on ourselves as an organization and on our work. We have been in this position too many times over the years. As a country, and as a state, we are facing a reckoning. As the statewide anti-domestic violence coalition, Violence Free Minnesota is not exempt from this call to look honestly upon our history and take accountability for where and when we have willingly participated in systems of oppression.

We can trace the origins of today's anti-domestic violence movement to women's activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Throughout this 50 year history, Minnesota has been at the forefront, shaping anti-domestic violence work in ways that have had national and international impacts. Our advocates and activists have made monumental strides in advancing awareness of domestic abuse and improving the safety of victim/survivors. We cannot overstate the significance of the cultural shift these early activists and leaders brought about, changing our understanding of domestic violence from a "private matter between two people" to seeing it as a central component of women's inequality. It was critically important at that time that domestic abuse be seen as the significant harm that it is - a harm that is worthy of a response, a harm that demands that we do not look the other way. This remains truer than ever today. However, our understanding of what kind of responses best serve victim/survivors and their families has shifted further and further away from our radical, grassroots beginnings.

Over the past few decades, Minnesota has played a significant role in perpetuating the anti-domestic violence field's dependence on the criminal legal system as the first and best response to relationship abuse. Decades ago, advocates and survivors of color raised concerns about relying on the criminal legal system as the primary response to domestic and sexual violence. White leaders in our movement, including white leadership in what was then the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women, ignored those concerns. Instead we invested heavily in this system that has deep historical ties to the oppression of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color, implementing statewide policies and local practices that relied heavily on the criminal legal system and law enforcement in matters of relationship abuse. These policies have received national and international accolades and yet, we know:

- The criminal system often has no impact on the safety of victim/survivors and can place them at greater risk of harm;
- The criminal legal system often re-traumatizes victim/survivors;
- Victim/survivors themselves are charged and convicted under this system for behaviors that were necessary for their survival and safety;
- Small, incremental changes and reforms have not produced the results we need to close racial gaps in housing, jobs, education, wealth, health and safety;
- Our focus on institutional and systems advocacy to mitigate harms has not worked;
- We cannot continue to use a violent and oppressive system to respond to violence that is rooted in oppression.



VIOLENCE FREE MINNESOTA

As leaders in the field of domestic violence, it is past time we name our own history of complicity, change internal structures of white supremacy in our movement, and end our dismissal of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) leaders' and advocates' experiences, knowledge, and ideas. It is on Minnesota's advocates and experts to lead in new ways. We commit to and call on our movement to:

Change how we do anti-domestic violence work -

- Join BIPOC leaders and advocates who have been forging paths away from reliance on the criminal legal system to address violence and harm in our communities.
- Understand, listen, and provide meaningful responses to victim/survivors' experiences.
- White leaders and white-led organizations will suspend what we think we know in order to deeply reflect on our structures and governance models while committing to actionable changes.
- Reimagine how we provide advocacy and services to victim/survivors, ensuring that all of our services start from the needs and experiences of the most marginalized victim/survivors in our communities.
- Complete anti-oppression assessments of our organizational policies and practices and act on those assessments.

Change policy and practices within systems -

- Reallocate funding from the criminal legal system to community-based solutions.
- Oppose the expansion of criminal legal options and explore alternatives.
- Alter the response to domestic & sexual violence: rather than the criminal legal system being our first and primary response, we will look at internal and community-based responses first.
- Engage communities to fashion appropriate responses and solutions to abuse and violence in their communities.
- Provide leadership in the process of transforming public safety.
- Support policies that improve the safety and quality of life for all Minnesotans, such as decriminalizing survival, addressing mandatory arrest policies, increasing affordable housing, etc.

Our movement was founded to stand up to systems of oppression. We must stand with BIPOC survivors, advocates, and community leaders and support their demands. It is time to shift our thinking and our work to build the equitable Minnesota we all deserve -- one free from violence and abuse, racism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and oppression in all forms.