

A Safe Haven on the Reservation

Protecting Women from Intimate Partner Violence

By Kerrita McCloughly

Closing the Gap, Violence Prevention - Who's Responsible? • January/February 2002

American Indian women are disproportionately affected by intimate partner violence (IPV) and one organization is trying to do something about it. American Indian organizations and tribal agencies are organizing shelter, legal, and preventive responses.

“Violence against women is the number one public health problem in Indian country,” said Cecilia Firethunder, public education specialist for Cangleska, Inc., a non-profit agency serving the women of the Oglala Sioux Tribe.

According to Firethunder, Cangleska was created to help counteract the effects of violence on Native families and society.

“A society with a tradition of respect for women and strong matriarchal lines had disintegrated into rampant violence against women, widespread alcohol abuse and high rates of unemployment,” she said. These socioeconomic and sociological issues fueled the cycle of violence, so Cangleska, Inc. was formed to address these underlying problems. It has raised funding to provide counseling services for women and men, spent years petitioning the justice system to take the issue seriously, and performed grass roots education and training in the community.

“IPV is very high in our communities—it’s higher than what people want to accept,” said Firethunder.

American Indian women were victimized by an intimate partner at rates higher than others—23 per 1,000 women as opposed to 11 per 1,000 Black women, 8 per 1,000 White women and 2 per 1,000 Asian women, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics’ report *Violent Victimization and Race, 1993-1998*.

“IPV impacts the entire social system—from healthcare and social services to education,” said Firethunder. “We’re here to do what we can to stop it.”

America has the impression that IPV only occurs between a man and a woman and does not affect society, according to Firethunder. “It impacts families of both men and women, as well as all our social systems,” she said.

Holding the Community Accountable

On the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, Cangleska has partnered with the Oglala Police Department, the Oglala Housing Department, the Oglala Tribal Court, the Oglala Tribal Prosecutor’s Office, and the Judiciary Committee to create a coordinated community response to violent crimes against women.

“Thirteen years ago we became the first reservation to create mandatory arrest laws for violence against women. We’ve expanded the laws to include other crimes, including stalking, because 17 percent of American Indian/Alaska

Native women are stalked, compared to 8 percent of all women in the general population,” Firethunder said.

“We’ve made sure that everyone is aware of the law and that training throughout the justice system is ongoing. We make sure that the entire system is responsive—training cops, courts, prosecutors, judges, and other people in the system,” she added.

Cangleska also provides civil legal assistance services to battered women through the Stronghold Civil Legal Office, which serves each of the nine districts on the Pine Ridge Reservation, and educates the community on its available services and the rights of battered women. Cangleska conducts sensitivity training to increase awareness of the interpersonal aspects related to battered women services, and on the intricacies of the tribal court system.

This program has made Pine Ridge a model for tribes across the country. In their Sacred Circle training center in Rapid City, Cangleska trains tribes

from across the country who have received grants from the government to conduct violence prevention programs.

“We’ve trained hundreds of Indian tribes. We train them on how to set up shelters and to improve police response and arrests. We also improve how prosecutions are conducted and we train tribes to address their own perceptions and responses,” said Firethunder.

According to Firethunder, the Pine Ridge Reservation has a population of approximately 2800 people, with half of the population 18 years or younger.

“We have 1800 men on probation for domestic violence. This is not because our men are more violent—it’s because we have made sure that the entire system holds men accountable,” she said. “When a call goes into a 911 operator, we make sure it’s followed through until the end. We made sure that the cops knew the law, and we trained them to make sure that evidence is gathered, and the person responsible is held accountable.”

Programs and Services Offered

Beyond providing legal services, Cangleska also provides shelters, programs for batterers and abused women, and public education programs.

“We have two shelters on the Reservation and one in the city nearby. Here in South Dakota we have a strong network of White and Indian women—it’s one of the things we’re so proud of. In the rural areas it’s White and Indian women working side by side to protect women. We can bring women to a network of shelters across the state to get them away from their environments,” said Firethunder.

“Our staff are all trained to be advocates no matter what their position. Our courthouse is right next to us so

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anyone on staff is able to obtain temporary protection and custody orders for women and their children as soon as they arrive," Firethunder said.

Cangleska also provides a very comprehensive men's rehabilitation project called the batterers program. The staff also proactively educates youth by going into schools and conducting workshops with them, about their perceptions about violence. They hope to prevent the cycle of violence before the children become adults.

A new area on which Cangleska hopes to have an impact is in the medical/health aspect of sexual violence. "We're looking at Indian Health Service—looking to influence emergency rooms to respond to sexual assault," said Firethunder.

"Women don't report rapes because they don't think anything will happen. Fifty percent of women coming into our emergency rooms will not allow themselves to be examined for sexual assault and have a rape kit test," Firethunder said. "Their perception is that they were drunk, so they deserve it and so they won't report it."

Cangleska has worked to separate the violence from the alcohol. The agency has worked to convince law enforcement that alcohol doesn't cause violence, and has succeeded in encouraging judges to

send men to violence management classes, along with alcohol abuse classes.

"Indian women are raped at a greater rate than women of all other races," Firethunder said. Cangleska has taken a lead in trying to address this staggering statistic. Their first issue is the legal system—"We try to get numbers on the prosecution of rape cases. We work with the U.S. Attorney's office and the FBI because if a rape crime happens on the reservation, the local cops turn it over to the FBI," she said. The second issue is that there's a lack of resources and services like rape crisis centers and counseling services and the crime of rape is going to require these services.

"When we work in the schools, we try to teach girls to pull together and to protect themselves and if they've been raped to heal from rape," said Firethunder.

"For me as an Indian woman, I felt it was important for me to help to provide the services our women need to heal from the pain they've suffered from violence in their lives."

For more information on Cangleska, Inc., contact Cecilia Firethunder at 605-455-2244. ❖

What is Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)?

IPV is actual or threatened physical or sexual violence, or psychological/emotional abuse. Some of the common terms used to describe intimate partner violence are domestic abuse, spouse abuse, domestic violence, courtship violence, battering, marital rape, and date rape. Intimate partners include current or former spouses, boyfriends, or girlfriends (including heterosexual or same-sex partners).

- In 1999, there were 671,110 violent acts committed against females by intimate partners, down from 1.1 million in 1993.
- Between 1993-1998, 75 percent of American Indian women reported their offender to be a non-stranger.
- Approximately 8 in 1,000 women and 1 in 1,000 men age 12 or older experienced a violent victimization perpetrated by a current or former spouse, boyfriend or girlfriend.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics—*Violent Victimization and Race, 1993-1998* and *Intimate Partner Violence and Age of Victim, 1993-1999*.

