

Cultural Competence in a Field Placement as a Victim Witness Advocate

Contributed by Adalgisa Estevez, BSW

With graduation approaching, I find myself reflecting on what I have accomplished during the past four years at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. I have been taught theories, skills, and principles in conjunction with opportunities to intern at a highly accredited agency in Atlantic County. Like many other social work students, I find the need to have direct experience with clients is very important. I believe that having the opportunity to work with clients is essential, because it allows a social worker to apply skills learned in the classroom.

During my senior internship at the Atlantic County Prosecutors Office, Victim Witness Unit, I was able to apply many skills that helped me develop a rapport with each victim. In addition, I was given the opportunity to learn and facilitate the many services provided by the Victim Witness Unit. Throughout my internship, I was able to advocate for victims involved in child abuse, sexual assault, and homicide cases. Another interesting detail about my internship was having the opportunity to work with Latino victims of crime. This opportunity allowed me to utilize my bilingual skills and bridge the language barrier that in some cases existed among the prosecutors, investigator, and advocate. I was able to put the victims at ease and help alleviate the stressors caused by their traumatic experiences. With the guidance of my superiors and co-advocate, I was able to learn the "do's" and "don't's." Most importantly, I learned how to display a genuine concern, and above all, demonstrate professionalism at all times.

By now you may be asking yourself: what is a victim witness advocate? The role of a Victim Witness Advocate is very important in the prosecution of a criminal case. I define an advocate as the middleman or the "go to" person. While interning with the Victim Witness Unit, I was able to witness the remarkable work that goes on behind the scenes of a criminal prosecution. The advocates take their work seriously and display genuineness and empathy when interacting with each victim. All the advocates were passionate, empathetic, nonjudgmental, and professional when working with each individual. This made me realize how much I wanted to develop the same professional skills. With this newfound motivation, I observed them diligently to develop my skills.

I started by learning how to review case files and make entries in the various computer systems used in our office. Then I began to handle telephone calls from victims of crime. Next, I attended court proceedings with my supervisor, so I could better understand the workings of the court system. As I learned more, I was given more responsibility within the office. These responsibilities included speaking directly with victims and preparing written communications for them. These written communications were in the form of letters addressing court proceedings, plea agreements, indictments, and sentencing.

Another valuable skill I developed was networking. I was able to work with various social service agencies, such as the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS). By networking with other stakeholders, I was able to refer victims to other agencies, so these individuals would receive the maximum amount of services at their disposal. For example, in a child sexual assault case, I would contact the family and seek information about the well-being of the child. I would then provide them with information about the criminal justice system and the Victims of Crime Compensation Board (VCCB). Depending on the degree of the crime and the applicable statutes, the family or guardian of the victim has the right to have the defendant tested for HIV/AIDS. This information is provided to the family when applicable. If the family didn't have medical coverage, I would provide them with an application for the VCCB. The VCCB would then assist the family financially with any medical cost and counseling services needed by the victim. Aside from completing outreach services to the victim, this particular case would be placed on the list for the Child Abuse Multiple Disciplinary Team meeting (MDT). This team meeting is composed of prosecutors, investigators, Division of Youth and Family Services case managers, and an advocate from the Victim Witness Unit. The purpose of these meetings is to review current child abuse cases received in our office and/or child abuse cases under investigation. These meetings keep all the team members informed about new information on each case, and allow the team to change direction in the case if warranted. The circumstances and information relating to each case shared by the stakeholders represented on the MDT helps to reduce the amount of stress on the family and victim. We shared information, so the families and victims would not have to go through painful interviews more than necessary. Beyond the social service that the MDT provides, studies have shown that cases involving an MDT are prosecuted more successfully. Speaking the Client's Language

During my internship at the prosecutor's office, I was also given the opportunity to advocate for victims of crime in sexual assault cases and homicides. My supervisor in the Victim Witness Unit called on my individual skills as a native speaker of Spanish to work with the victims of certain cases. The victims in these cases were Latinos and did not speak English. Because of my fluency in Spanish, I was able to co-advocate for these victims, along with the supervising advocate assigned to the case. I was able to contact the victims and inform them in Spanish about the criminal justice system and the various social services available to them. I made them aware of their rights as victims of crime and answered any questions regarding the prosecution of the case. It was rewarding to be able to ease the anxiety in an already difficult situation by removing the language barriers between the victims and staff at the prosecutor's

office.

Cultural competence is very important when you are working with victims of different nationalities. {quotes align=right}It is important for advocates to be aware of the customs and challenges each different culture presents.{/quotes} Being Latina, I have an advantage over my peers, because I am able to work with the Latin population with less difficulty. For example, I was involved in a sexual assault case in which the victim was Latina and felt very intimidated by law enforcement. By stepping in as an advocate, but more importantly as another Latina, I was able to ease her anxiety as well as translate her feelings to the prosecutor. My involvement in the case eased the feelings of the victim in two ways—first, because I was a woman who was caring and compassionate about what she went through, and second, because I was another Latina, which made it easier for her to relate to me.

In another example, I had the difficult task of informing a family member that a loved one had been killed. When this particular family picked up the phone and heard the bad news, it was in Spanish rather than English. Subsequently, when this family went to court, I was there beside them explaining in detail the court proceeding. The victim’s family members appreciated my ability to speak to them in Spanish and be sensitive to their language barrier.

Working with the Latino community often presents individual challenges to social workers. It’s important to understand that although Latino is a general term, there exists a variety of subcultures all with their specific challenges. Some examples of these differences are characteristics in skin color, language, nation of origin, religion, self-ascription, and citizenship status. {quotes}When interacting with Latinos, it’s important not to assume all Latinos are from the same country.{/quotes} By asking questions about their country of origin, religion, and language, you are showing empathy, and your clients will appreciate your efforts to know them better. As a Latina, this skill comes to me easily, but those who do not possess this skill could benefit from additional training. This training would provide a cultural awareness, which would ultimately benefit both social workers and the clients they serve.

Also during my internship, I have worked with homicide cases. During these complex and sensitive investigations, I have been able to use my fluency in Spanish to assist with working with the victims’ families. I worked with both the investigators and prosecutor to assist in communication with the victims’ survivors, as well as helping to obtain relevant information regarding the case. As with other cases, I offered various social services and outlets for the victims along with their families as they tried to work through a painful situation. New Skills

In closing, my position as an intern at the Atlantic County Prosecutor’s Office allows me to serve in the capacity of a Victim Witness Advocate. I often call on my fluency in Spanish, along with my sensitivity to the needs of the Latino community, in completing my job tasks. I have been able to apply practical knowledge I have gained during my time as a social work student at Richard Stockton College. Each time I work with a client, I take away new skills and knowledge, which helps me improve overall. This will help me to improve my individual skills, as well as using these skills to improve the services I provide on each case.

Through my experience as an intern, I have developed my professional skill set and improved my practical communication skills. All of these improvements move me toward my final goal to provide the maximum amount of service to each person with whom I work.

Adalgisa Estevez, BSW, received her degree from The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey in Spring 2006. This article appeared in the Winter 2007 issue of THE NEW SOCIAL WORKER. For permission to reprint or reproduce in any way, please contact Linda Grobman . Copyright 2007 White Hat Communications. All rights reserved.