

**A Discussion of Accounting for Culture in Supervised Visitation Practices:**

**The City of Chicago, Illinois Demonstration Site Experience**

**Summary and Recommendations**

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## **The City of Chicago, Illinois Demonstration Site Experience**

*I'm not from this country; when you are going to assess me, you don't know me and where I come from and what I'm all about. How can you assess me and suggest things to me?*

*I brought sweets one day to thank [staff]. I told my [child], 'you can call him uncle.'*

*I thought I'd be going to a public aid office or an ER where you sit for 26 hours bleeding and no one cares ... but I felt that I was not another number to them.*

*If you don't respect the person, you're not going to do a good job, regardless of race.*

*What if I do not know how to read English, what if I do not know how to read? I want someone to explain the rules, all the form.*

*It is dangerous for some women if all resources and all of this help is revealed, left in the open air ... it has to be done culturally sensitive ... Remember that [women] have been treated like property; this is something we have been carrying since old times, and our grandmother suffered, our grandfathers did it. I do not know exactly what to do or how, but one has to be cautious about this. I have felt lost in all of this.*

*Respect . . . explain . . . listen*

- Mothers and fathers using supervised visitation and exchange -

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## *Summary and Recommendations*

As part of their participation as a demonstration site for the Safe Havens Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Program,<sup>1</sup> three Chicago visitation centers and their collaborative partner, the Mayor's Office on Domestic Violence, explored how the current design, processes, and procedures of visitation and exchange centers account for aspects of culture. The centers are programs of Apna Ghar, The Branch Family Institute (Branch), and Mujeres Latinas en Acción (Mujeres). Representatives from each center, the city office, and Praxis documented each center's efforts to account for their clients' cultural and economic backgrounds.

Using focus groups, interviews with parents and staff, observations, and group readings of redacted case files, we documented current center practices that account for the cultural differences of families coming to the centers and, in particular, that account for their experiences with race and class oppression.

We started the discussion with this question, selected by the Chicago demonstration site partners: How does culture play a role in serving families using supervised visitation? At one level, our question had a ready answer: of course "culture" plays a role in supervised visitation. Everything not of the natural world is cultural, constructed within a particular world view, language, values, and norms. There is no such thing as culturally neutral supervised visitation and exchange. Everything visitation centers do has cultural dimensions and impact. It is not a matter of saying that this intake is influenced by culture, but that exchange is not; or, this family has culture, while this family does not. It is a matter of understanding how to recognize the cultural dimensions and impacts of the ways in which centers are organized, and which culture influences the program.

Each of the Chicago centers is grounded in a larger organization that formed within a cultural-specific context and purpose. Each center serves families from multiple cultural backgrounds, although this is less true for Mujeres. The centers tweak, alter, and shape aspects of the prevailing model of supervised visitation in ways that recognize the different life experiences and cultural identities of the parents and children coming through their doors. At the same time, the procedures, policies, forms, and documentation look much like that of most supervised visitation and exchange centers throughout the country. We found that the prevailing model of organizing visitation services is so pervasive and familiar that it is difficult for someone in the day-to-day practice of a visitation center to imagine alternatives.<sup>2</sup> We were not able, for example, to get very far in articulating what it would look like if we had to come up with a way for one parent who was battering another to spend time with his children in a way that was safe for everyone, but without using a center, in the generic space and shape that we know. Different

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<sup>1</sup> The Safe Havens: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Grant Program, established by the Violence Against Women Act of 2000, provides an opportunity for communities to support supervised visitation and safe exchange of children, by and between parents, in situations involving domestic violence, child abuse, sexual assault, or stalking. The four Demonstration Sites – in Chicago, Michigan (Pontiac, Jackson, Traverse City, and Muskegon), California (San Mateo, Santa Clara, and Santa Cruz Counties), and Washington (City of Kent) – have paid close attention to visitation and exchange in the context of domestic violence, and to collaboration between visitation centers, domestic violence advocacy organizations, and the courts.

<sup>2</sup> "We" in this paper is the collective we: the Chicago centers, project directors, and the Praxis technical assistance partners.

cultures might have entirely different ways of being safe and ensuring safety. Articulating what those different ways and ideas might be is one of the next steps in the continuing discussion. We put that project aside for another day and decided to focus on what was occurring in the centers.

We found numerous examples of “cultural humility” in action, however, and used the concept to frame much of our discussion. The notion of cultural humility was not a product of our inquiry, but a framework that resonated with the Chicago centers in exploring center practices and cultural differences.<sup>3</sup> Cultural humility “incorporates a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique” and “advocacy partnerships with communities,” as “reflective practitioners” and with “self-reflection and self-critique at the institutional level.” Cultural humility “involves the curiosity and motivation to understand the web of meaning in which children and families live, and the reflective capacity to examine our own cultural values and assumptions. It requires a commitment to appreciating similarities and differences between our own culturally shaped goals and priorities and those of the children and families we care for. It requires as well an obligation to ‘rein in’ [our] power and authority ... so that the voices of children and family members can be fully valued and heard.”<sup>4</sup>

Each of the centers has a keen awareness of people’s everyday experiences with oppression. Center staff describe their role as facilitating the process of visitation in ways that maximize safety for battered parents and their children, while minimizing the center becoming just another obstacle for families.

*Often I ask myself, and so does the staff ask: What are my biases? What is it about this culture we live in that makes things difficult for a family? What do I think of this culture? We individually acknowledge that we do not know all answers, thus we have to ask, when we do not know, and this only helps us to help the families. We are willing to learn, willing to accept feedback. It is [crucial] to ask and never to assume.*

– Visitation center director

*We don’t want to become one more of the oppressors.* – Visitation center staff

Our experience exploring aspects of culture in supervised visitation led us to the following recommendations, offered as a guide to centers in thinking about how to build cultural humility into their organization and practice. We want to emphasize that this is only the beginning of a much larger, ongoing discussion of culturally responsive visitation practices.

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<sup>3</sup> Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-García, *Cultural Humility Versus Cultural Competence: A Critical Distinction in Defining Physician Training Outcomes in Multicultural Education*, Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved, 9:2, 117-125, 1998. For Tervalon and Murray-García the qualities of cultural “humility” include respect, dialogue, awareness, and reflection. While their article centers on health care, the Chicago centers found that the authors’ discussion of cultural humility resonated with how the centers’ approach their work.

<sup>4</sup> David Browning, *Visiting in a Foreign Land: Cultivating Cultural Humility in Pediatric Palliative Care*, The Baltimore Sun, December 20, 2004.

## Building Cultural Humility in Supervised Visitation and Exchange

1. Practice ongoing study, self-reflection, and self-critique, both institutionally and individually.
2. Ground your work in historical context and understand how people and their cultural beliefs as well as behaviors have been excluded, silenced, denied, marginalized, and oppressed.
3. Design deliberately, in the staff, building, access, and décor; from the pictures on the walls to the greeting at the door.
4. Examine every form, policy, procedure, brochure, and directive and question its cultural framework, assumptions, and language, and identify which culture it privileges.
5. Learn about the communities you are and will be serving; make connections, find teachers, and teach yourself.
6. Include the communities you are and will be serving; provide a place *at the table*, via inclusion as staff, board members, trainers, and consultants.
7. Form and maintain advocacy partnerships; involve communities in crafting and defining policies, not just commenting.
8. Never ask a single individual, a single voice, to represent all of any community.
9. Provide services in a person's *first voice*, in their home language.
10. Learn and practice respectful listening and genuine dialogue.
11. Support families' cultural traditions.
12. To be discovered . . . We are not presenting our experience in Chicago as the final or only word on building culturally responsive supervised visitation and exchange. Ongoing work in Chicago and other communities – the “lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique,” – will lead to ideas and approaches that we have yet to discover.

But *how* to do this? None of these facets of cultural humility stand alone. They are intertwined and interdependent. There is no single formula, recipe, or seminar to follow. There is no single set of specific, finite tasks and skills that can be mastered. The *how* is a way of thinking about things that leads to concrete changes in a center's mission, design, and daily practice.

We are all cultural beings, familiar with our own behavior, art, beliefs, language, institutions, and other aspects of culture. The concept of cultural humility requires that we step out of this familiarity; it requires a commitment to reflection and questioning, on an institutional level as well as individuals.

For example, it is critical that European Americans working in supervised visitation understand and recognize their own cultural practices. As the dominant social group, its culture is so familiar to its members that it is largely invisible. Thinking about the work of the visitation center with recognition of the dominant culture in view, however, will lead to identifying ways in which European American ways of thinking, being, and acting have been imposed on center relationships and practices, such as concepts of parenting, ways of communicating, the definition of family, and the very concept of supervised visitation.<sup>5</sup> This kind of reflection and critique cannot occur in isolation. It requires the genuine participation of and consultation with the communities in and near which the center is located, and careful listening.

We offer several ideas for cultural humility in action, drawing on the experience of the Chicago centers and our related discussions.

✓ **Define a clear identity that is separate from the court.**

For many families, civil and criminal court intervention has been characterized by disrespect, confusion, and a gross lack of information about the process and what is expected of them. Many immigrant families are far away from understanding the judicial system in their country of origin and even more so here, where the language and system itself are very different.

✓ **Structure adequate time and flexibility into all interactions with children and parents.**

Time and flexibility are essential in order to build trust and relationships, understand what has happened in someone's life, and explain supervised visitation or exchange and the center's procedures in a way that makes any sense to parents, particularly when the concept is entirely beyond their experience. For example: set aside ninety minutes for an intake appointment; expand the customary fifteen-minute parent arrival and departure windows to allow for bus transportation and getting several children in and out of jackets and car seats.

✓ **Invite diverse community organizations to walk through the center's space and procedures and provide a critique.**

Ask them to arrive at the center, complete an intake, and walk through the space as if they were a parent who would be using the center. Welcome their insights and recommendations about how to make the center and visitation a more culturally respectful experience. Does the center feel welcoming, a place where they can interact with their children freely, joyfully, and safely?

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<sup>5</sup> Duluth Family Visitation Center, *Designing and Operating a Center that Accounts for Domestic Violence*, Duluth, MN, 2004.

✓ **Prepare center staff to work with battering parents.**

A visitation center cannot demonize fathers or structure its work around fear of batterers. To connect with them from a basis of respect does not mean abandoning battered mothers and their children, or ignoring the ways in which children might be used as a tactic of battering. The Chicago centers are not naïve about the very real danger that some battering parents can pose. They attempt to avoid lumping every visiting or non-custodial parent into a single category, however.

✓ **Use staff meetings, ad hoc work groups, community members, and parents to help examine every aspect of the center’s design and the implied and explicit messages about who is welcome and how they are valued.**

For the Chicago centers, non-threatening locations (alongside health care offices, a bank building, and community center) are important in conveying respect, along with careful consideration of the placement and use of such security measures as uniformed guards and metal detectors. Formality in how people are addressed is also part of how the centers welcome people and show respect, such as using Mr., Mrs., Miss, or Ms, or Usted, Señor or Señora.

When there is a gap between the center staff’s background and that of the parents using the center, invite community members to help review the center’s location, space, furnishings, magazines, art work, intake appointments, and visitation and exchange procedures. Invite parents to help inform understanding of the center’s design and impact, via focus groups, questionnaires, or other avenues.

✓ **Prepare staff to support parents and children to lead with the language of their choice.**

Siblings discussing their homework together may want to use English, for example, but this requires that center staff help their parent understand the conversation.

✓ **Provide opportunities for extended family to be involved.**

As the Chicago centers have experienced, this can occur within the context of safety for a battered parent and her children, and any restrictions in court orders or sexual abuse issues. In consultation with and approval from the custodial parents, visiting parents have brought other family members to celebrate a birthday or join them for the visit. “Family” for some parents and children includes a wide circle of relatives, close friends, and godparents.

✓ **Hold an all-center gathering to help bridge cultures and contribute to an atmosphere of warmth and respect for families.**

Again, this occurs within the context of safety, the specifics of court orders, and availability of adequate supervision. One center, for example, has an annual dinner the



week of Thanksgiving, with visiting parents, children, and other family members in one area (with several staff members) and custodial parents in another.

✓ **Support families' food, music, and religious traditions.**

Provide space for sharing meals and moving about, including dancing and sports. Work with parents to accommodate families' faith observances, such as time for prayer, accepted foods, holidays, and rituals. It can be challenging, particularly in accounting for how these aspects of culture can be used as tactics of battering, or where there parents differ in traditions or in interpretation of tradition.

✓ **Build processes for expanding the center's understanding of families' experiences with the courts, police, Social Security, welfare, medical, psychology, and other intervening institutions, both individually and historically.**

African-American parents, for example, as several of the Chicago discussion participants emphasized, walk through the door with their whole lives, which includes their community's history with institutional racism, and well as their individual day-to-day encounters. A center that has been built with that cultural experience at its core takes care in how it appears to and works with parents. Because parents are so often under scrutiny in their everyday lives and routines, as staff members themselves have experienced, staff minimize taking notes during a supervised visit. They intervene if appropriate or necessary, but complete their notes after the parents and children have left. Where centers do not have a shared culture with parents and children, they must take extra care to become aware of their individual and community histories. For example, it is easy for a person to believe that institutional racism does not exist if they have not experienced it.

The exploration is just beginning. Culture always plays a role; there is no visitation center or service that is culturally neutral. How can we make supervised visitation and exchange an experience with minimal barriers? How can we make supervised visitation welcoming, respectful, and aware of the lives of everyone who comes through the door? How might the idea of safe visitation and exchange look without the physical space of a center? How can we facilitate families' cultural identities, as well as accommodate them? The Chicago Safe Havens centers will continue asking these questions of their work, recognizing that there is no single answer, no one-dimensional response. The next question might be: How would protective or monitored contact between a child and a parent look for different cultures, if they could figure it out from the ground up?