

*The Duluth Model*  
*What it is and is not: Clarifying and Correcting Common Misconceptions*

By  
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**Introduction**

In recent years, there has been a growing movement towards the development of coordinated and integrated community responses to domestic violence. The ‘Duluth Model’ is perhaps the best known and most prominent of the successful coordinated programs, gaining international recognition. Many aspects of the ‘Duluth Model’ have been replicated both in Australia and elsewhere but do we really know what Duluth is?

There have been many discussions and debates about the ‘Duluth Model’. Some of these discussions have been based on fact, some on fiction and others on pure fantasy. It is often misrepresented as ‘a mandated men’s program’, a “ pro-arrest approach” or a “ no drop prosecution program”. Recently we were astonished to hear the claim made in a public forum that the Duluth model was the preferred model for male violence intervention used in Queensland and that it runs for 12 weeks. It has been these kinds of misconceptions that have prompted us to write this short apology for the Duluth Model. While the authors in no way offer themselves as ‘experts’ on the ‘Duluth Model’ we both have had considerable contact with the Duluth Program. One of the authors has visited Duluth, spending time with the program and speaking at length with the founder, Ellen Pence. The other has trained in the Duluth men’s curriculum and program facilitation and worked for two years in the USA co-facilitating up to four men’s groups (based on the Duluth Model) per week. We welcome this opportunity to provide some insight into what ‘Duluth’ is and isn’t and raise some questions for our own interpretation and application to program development.

**Background**

Duluth is a city in Minnesota USA situated on the shores of Lake Superior. It has a population of approx 90,000 people. In 1981, Duluth became the first community in the US to develop a coordinated community response to domestic violence. Law enforcement, criminal and civil courts, women’s services, and relevant human service agencies (including housing, health, churches, child protection, etc.) began to work together to make their community safer for victims and to hold perpetrators accountable for their violence. Fifteen city, county and private agencies in Duluth adopted policies and procedures, which coordinated their interventions in domestic violence, assault cases. Formal agreements with agencies that deal with domestic violence have been developed including victim advocates, law enforcement officers and administrators, prosecutors, probation officers, court administrators, mental health services, policy makers and judicial officers. The coordinating body became known as *DAIP* (Domestic Abuse Intervention Program). The aim of *DAIP* is make connection and consistency between agencies so as to knit together a system response to violence without any weak points or gaps in service that could further compromise victim safety.

Much of the pioneering work of *DAIP* is credited to Ellen Pence who has written extensively on reforming systems and safety & accountability audits and she continues to provide leadership in the development of collaborative responses.

### **Systems Reform**

The purpose of developing a coordinated community response in Duluth was to protect victims of domestic violence from further acts of abuse and to hold abusers accountable for their behavior. *Systems reform* is the pivotal point and foundation underpinning the Duluth Model. For nearly 30 years, DAIP has tracked and monitored domestic violence assault cases, at the same time working with various agencies to improve their system responses from the perspective of victim safety. In 1994, DAIP developed the Domestic Violence Safety & Accountability Audit to change deeply entrenched practices that often favored offenders over victims of domestic violence. Pence (1988) stated clearly that the state has an obligation to ‘protect’ its citizens, which includes victims of domestic violence. We know from the reality of our own work that there are many victims who do not want to prosecute their partners and are then seen as a ‘barrier’ to effective intervention against their abusers. Pence argued that the focus needs to shift to identifying the problems and barriers within the system rather than becoming mired in issues surrounding victim’s problematic responses to the abuse they experience. Agencies and organizations working with victims of domestic violence interacting with each other need to have victim safety and offender accountability as the cornerstone of all procedures and interventions.

### **Core Principals and Practices**

The foundation of the Duluth Model includes five core principals and eight activities for interventions to protect victims and end violence. These are clearly outlined in the document Domestic Abuse Intervention Project: An Overview (see <http://www.duluth-model.org/>). The five core principals are:

1. Whenever possible, the burden of confronting abusers and placing restrictions on their behaviours should rest with the community, not the victim.
2. To make fundamental changes in a community’s response to violence against women, individual practitioners must work cooperatively, guided by training, job descriptions, and standardize practices that are all oriented toward victim safety and violence cessation.
3. Interventions must be responsive to the totality of harm done by the violence rather than be incident or punishment focused.
4. Protection of the victim must take priority when two intervention goals clash.
5. Intervention practices must reflect a basic understanding of and commitment to accountability to the victim, whose life is most affected by our individual and collective actions.

The eight practices are clearly listed and elaborated upon on the DAIP website. They are merely outlined below:

1. The intervention project changes how the community thinks about violence by building an underlying philosophical framework, which guides the intervention process.
2. The intervention project assists in the development and implementation of policies and operating procedures of the intervening agencies involved in the coordinated community response.
3. The intervention project tracks/monitors cases from initial contact through case closure to ensure practitioner and offender accountability.
4. The intervention project coordinates the exchange of information and interagency communication on a need-to-know basis and coordinated interagency decision making.

5. The intervention project ensure that resources and services, which offer safety and protection from further abuse are available to victims and other at-risk family members (children).
6. The intervention project utilizes a combination of sanctions, restrictions, and rehabilitation services to hold offenders accountable and to protect victims form further abuse.
7. The intervention project works to undo harm done to children.
8. The intervention project evaluates the coordinated community response from the standpoint of victim safety and the overall objectives of intervention project goals (see <http://www.duluth-model.org/>).

These are the core principals and practices on which the Duluth Model is based. To isolate and criticize a single practice and to call it the Duluth Model is to mistake the part for the whole. In philosophical thinking, this is known as a categorical error. The Model is far more comprehensive, sophisticated, and multi-layered than some critics appreciate.

### **Creating a Coherent Philosophical Approach which Centralises Victim Safety**

Participating agencies have negotiated a shared philosophical framework around which they can organize. A commitment to victim safety and to holding abuser accountable means an end to the often pervasive victim blaming that exists in many systems and responses. In Duluth, a philosophy grounded in victim safety underpins the practice of referring all actions back to the priorities of victim protection, accountability and deterrence.

It is often the lack of a shared practical philosophical understanding which impedes the progress of working in a coordinated and collaborative way.

In Duluth, victims of domestic violence interact with the Justice system through the following:

1. A civil process offering immediate relief
2. Criminal intervention
3. No Intervention (restricted to those cases where there is no physical injury to the victim, use of weapon or violation of a civil protection order.)

Pence (1988) suggests one of the biggest challenge of Duluth was to make a single incident focused adversarial criminal justice system responsive to the kind of crime which needs to be understood in context. Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behavior committed over time rather than a single criminal act dislocated from prior acts of violence. When victims of domestic violence call police seeking intervention, they are ringing into a complex adversarial system that is usually single incident focused and rarely takes into account the previous history of violence and abuse. Many women may stop short of initiating criminal proceedings against their abuser, afraid of retaliatory violence. This fear is well founded: studies estimate that a victim's risk of being killed by her abuser rises dramatically after she separates from him. Abusive partners often threaten and intimidate their victims following police intervention. As a result, victims may refuse to testify, ask police to drop charges, or even recant prior truthful statements regarding the abuse.

Duluth, San Diego, and many other jurisdictions in the US have been able to adopt a specific criminal justice reform perspective to domestic violence utilizing the following approaches.

- Aggressively prosecute misdemeanor domestic violence cases in order to stop the violence
- Provide early intervention at the misdemeanor level in order to prevent the escalation of offenders' behavior to felony level conduct
- Shift the focus from victim responsibility for prosecution to a focus on offender accountability
- Enhance victim safety by safety planning, strong victim advocacy and use of state-of-the-art technology to assess lethality
- The development of a strong multi-disciplinary, inter-agency response to family violence
- Promote community awareness about domestic violence, elder abuse, child abuse, statutory rape and stalking cases
- Hold batterers accountable by not dropping or reducing charges at the request of victims

### **The Perpetrator Program – Holding Men Accountable**

Pence (1997) suggests that a coordinated community response to domestic violence must decide what responsibilities and state and community agencies are regarding an abuser. The Duluth community engages in three direct interventions with domestic violence with violent men through three courses of action:

1. Creating safety plans with women which may include refuge referral or assistance to obtain civil restraining orders
2. Imposing sanctions and deterrents such as arrest, incarceration or mandatory community service
3. Opportunities for rehabilitation through referrals to ‘batterer’s programs’.

An important component of Duluth and one that is perhaps most familiar to us is court mandated nonviolence programs for male offenders. However these programs are not offered in lieu of other legal interventions or at the expense of victim safety. The ‘Duluth Model’ is a many faceted approach that incorporates responses to victims, perpetrators and children through various interventions – it is so much more than the ‘men’s groups’ of which we have become familiar.

Yet so often we hear professional practitioners reducing the ‘Duluth Model’ to only the men’s intervention curriculum and program. Even a recent study (2003) by the eminent National Institute of Justice (cf. [www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/195079.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/195079.pdf)) mistakenly referred to the Duluth Model as if it was only the men’s violence intervention program. This is a common misconception and misunderstanding of the Duluth Model, which is in reality more about clear and consistent safe principals, policies, protocols, procedures and practices across the community, as a systemic response to domestic violence. As Dr Ed Gondolf reminded us during his Australian visit in November 2006: “*it is the system that matters*”.

The Duluth Model is first and foremost about reforming system responses to domestic violence. The men’s violence intervention program is embedded in the system response and consequently is accountable to the system. It is not a stand-alone response (Gondolf, 2002). Without system support, the effect of the men’s violence intervention program is questionable to say the least. The success of any men’s violence intervention program relies heavily on the cohesion and

consistency of the civil and criminal justice systems in monitoring: attendance, participation and progress; violation of court orders; failure to comply to conditions; and further acts or threats of violence (cf. <http://www.duluth-model.org/>).

Certainly, an important component of the Duluth Model is the court mandated nonviolence program for male offenders. In Duluth, Ellen Pence and Michael Paymar developed a specific curriculum *Power and Control: Tactics of Men Who Batter*, which is a 2-hour weekly educational program. A critical aspect of this program is the fact that it was based on research with over 200 victims from whose stories of abuse were identified men's common strategies of control and abuse in intimate partner relationships (<http://www.duluth-model.org/>). From this research the well known and widely used Power and Control Wheel and the Equality Wheels were designed. This is a gender-based cognitive behavioural program that focuses on abusive power and control strategies use by men in intimate relationships. It challenges men's beliefs around male privilege and entitlement and presents the alternative case for respectful, safe, non-abusive relationships (Pence & Paymar, 1993). The original curriculum was developed as a 26 week program although many programs now are held over a much longer period of time( 9-12 months)

### **DAIP Evaluation**

Program evaluation activities have been a critical part of the development of DAIP. Program success is determined by research with a strong emphasis on evaluating interventions from the standpoint of victim's safety. These studies have employed a range of research methods to examine the project's effectiveness in enhancing victim safety and holding offenders accountable for their behavior. These include monitoring, safety audits and interviews.

An evaluation by Shepard (1992) examined many different aspects of the project. The evaluation found that recidivism rates were significantly lower after increased project development. Statistical analysis indicated that greater reductions in abuse occurred when the offender was court mandated and had completed the men's program.

### **Some Evaluation Findings**

- 60% of battered women felt safer when their partner was attending a group
  - 80% of battered women thought the combined responses of police, courts, DAIP and shelter were helpful in ending the abuse.
  - 69% of battered women had not experienced recent physical abuse and 41% had not experienced recent psychological abuse at a one-year follow-up.
  - Recidivism rate was 40% for a five year follow-up using criminal justice records
  - Men who completed the program had better outcomes than those who did not
- (Shepherd, 1988 & 2000)

### **Conclusion**

Over nearly 30 years of action research, evaluation, auditing, and listening to victims, Duluth has been successful in developing an internationally acclaimed program of system reform, which

continues to challenge conventional thinking on responding to domestic violence. It is important to note that the Duluth Model is not a static, monolithic approach to responding to domestic violence, but an ever evolving and developing work of continual progress, refinement, and attention to enhancing community responses to safety and accountability. It would be naive, unwise, and downright dangerous to dismiss 30 years of practice wisdom and program evaluation. In fact, the Duluth Model may not so much be in need of challenging and questioning, as do some practitioners' understanding and implementation of it.

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