

Helpers of Helpmate – Healing the Community

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Abstract

The advocates -- both professional and volunteer -- of Helpmate, a domestic violence and intimate partner violence (DV/IPV) agency in Asheville, shared their lived experiences with DV/IPV advocacy through interviews and surveys. The advocates' revealed how DV/IPV affected their own lives and intimated a collective mission to do what they could to heal their clients, the community, and often themselves. The advocates' stories reflect Helpmate's method of using the feminist empowerment model to move beyond the liminal place of the shelter, towards healing and agency to "create a life that is free of violence." Helpmate's integrative community approach, based on "collaborations that cultivate...strengths, knowledge, talents, and services" reflect in the advocates' narratives. Additionally, the advocates' narratives reveal a synchronistic vision with Helpmate the institution, to create a lasting peace for DV/IPV survivors and the community through proactive intentionality to stop the cycle of violence preemptively through education and outreach. This resulting ethnographic paper illustrates a diverse set of advocates with various motivations and identities, giving of themselves with time and talent, to cultivate a safe space for healing at Helpmate and in the broader community.

Keywords: Domestic Violence and Intimate Partner Violence, Feminist Empowerment Model, Women's Shelter

1. Introduction

Asheville, located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Western North Carolina, "is a popular resort, convention, and tourist center... [with] numerous recreational and scenic attractions"¹. Asheville routinely receives superlatives like *Outside* magazine describing the city as one of the "Best Outside Towns," remarking that its "slacker-hip downtown, where art deco [*sic*] facades house indie cafés, an eclectic music scene, and a core of craftsfolk that rivals any in the nation"². Asheville is multifaceted: *Forbes* ranks it as one of the "Best Places for Business and Careers" and *USA Today* agrees, noting it is one of the "Top Cities for Business Trips"³. NPR foreign correspondent Eric Wiener named Asheville one of the happiest places on Earth in his travelogue, *The Geography of Bliss*⁴.

Asheville is also rife with domestic violence and intimate partner violence (DV/IPV). During the fiscal year of 2010-2011, Buncombe County (Asheville is the county seat) ranked 7th out of 100 counties in domestic violence cases (1,670) and 13th in sexual assault cases (345) in North Carolina⁵. The pretty picture painted on postcards does not exist for those who live in a world of violence, not in a tourist brochure. For these individuals there are the Helpers of Helpmate, the professional and volunteer DV/IPV advocates that work diligently for their clients, helping victims become survivors. Through informal interviews, surveys, and participant observation, Helpmate's advocates revealed their thoughts about DV/IPV, the agency as an institution, and themselves. Their stories reveal individuals that epitomize and echo the ethos of Helpmate.

Established in 1978, Helpmate began when a county task force completed a study that indicated, "over 7,500 women were being battered in Buncombe County each year"⁶. In 1981, Helpmate rented an urban apartment –

followed by a rural apartment in 1982 – to serve as an emergency shelter. Several shelters later, Helpmate moved into their current facility near downtown. For security purposes, the location of the shelter remains a closely guarded secret⁷. Helpmate serves as “Buncombe County’s primary provider of crisis-level services for victims of domestic violence and their children”⁸. Helpmate defines itself through its mission statement as “a domestic violence agency that works with our community to eliminate abuse and fear”⁹. The Helpers of Helpmate work with the community through legal assistance, outreach, long term counseling, and emergency services to heal the wounds – both physical and emotional – inflicted by DV/IPV.

2. The Helpers of Helpmate

Helpmate’s advocates embrace the mission statement and facilitate its goals using the feminist empowerment model^{10, 11}. This model entails taking womenⁱ out of the role of the “victim,” and helping them help themselves. Under this model, Helpmate’s clients receive recommendations and encouragement to make decisions for themselves, instead of proscriptions and ultimatums. The power dynamics involved with DV/IPV habitually make the abused feel helpless and instill a perception of worthlessness. The use of affirmative language as a healing modality is important at Helpmate and in the DV/IPV movement to give women back the power they lost¹². Women at the shelter are called “clients” or “residents” and referred to as “survivors,” not as “victims” by the advocates.

Helpmate attends to the whole person by facilitating long-term permanent solutions to DV/IPV, not just addressing an emergency situation. This frequently originates with a compassionate and accepting advocate working the Hotline, a 24-hour emergency service phone number (828-254-0516) that provides information and counseling to those in need. Many callers require immediate emergency shelter, followed by food and clothing for themselves and their children. Often legal aid is essential for restraining orders and custody issues. Through the Hotline, Helpmate helps numerous people who will never come to the shelter by providing information about community resources or advice, prompting change before a situation escalates. Helpmate affords similar care and attention to the public, by providing information through community outreach; sometimes it can heal the hurt before it happens¹³. Helpmate is an integral part of Asheville, and the community is an integral part of Helpmate.

That integration regularly originates with the battered Blue Bag of DV/IPV information with Helpmate written in sharpie across the top. Christy Price, the Outreach & Administrative Coordinator for over nine years at Helpmate fills the Blue Bag with informational packets about DV/IPV. Every event and every advocate attending in Helpmate’s stead gets this bag or another version of it. It has several informational fact sheets, such as “Signs of a Battering Personality” and statistics about DV/IPV. Infographics describing the cycle of violence and illustrating the power dynamics of an abusive relationship are paper clipped and collated. Bumper stickers proclaiming, “Real Men Don’t Hit Women” and “Peace on Earth Begins at Home” inspire the community to be visually vocal about changing DV/IPV one spotlight at a time. Informational brochures outlining the services that Helpmate offers come in two sizes: brochures designed for potential donors or volunteers and business card tri-folds for purses and wallets intended for potential clients. These brochures and tri-fold cards come in both English and Spanish versions. Included in the Blue Bag is a request for additional advocates; there is always further work to be done. There is a Wish List of supplies the shelter requires; there are never enough diapers, paper towels, or food – every – little bit helps.

The ubiquitous Hotline number dapples every piece of advocacy information. Perhaps the most essential paper in the Blue Bag is a tear-off sheet with the Hotline number. Regularly taped inside women’s bathrooms around Asheville and away from the eyes of male abusers, these sheets provide the abused with the knowledge that the journey away from violence has a starting point. The contents of the bag might seem too vast, and the information too vital. Never fear, instructions are always forthcoming from Christy encouragingly saying to the advocate, “you are going to do a terrific job” and leaving you with a heartfelt thank you for representing Helpmate in the community. That Blue Bag and the advocates that accompany it from place to place are angels of advocacy, never knowing if the person who takes a paper needs it for themselves, their mother, or their sister. Perhaps a man who wants to stop being an abuser will get the courage to call the Hotline and receive advice¹⁴. Perhaps a father wants a bumper sticker for his truck because his little girl should never have to live in fear. That Blue Bag is Helpmate, and the people who ceaselessly carry the bag are the Helpers of Helpmate. You never know where those papers might land; it might just be the sign an abused person has been waiting for and a call to the Hotline will soon follow. Why does a person pick up the Blue Bag from the shelter and take it out into the world? Why does a person become an advocate at Helpmate, facing the pain of DV/IPV when so many others ignore the problem?

The advocates at Helpmate have many motivations to work and volunteer at the shelter. Lily¹⁵, a former volunteer who majored in sociology and anthropology, spent her summers during college working at the shelter. Presently, Lily works at Pisgah Legal Services, a free legal aid agency in Asheville as part of their Mountain Violence Prevention Project (MVPP) that combats DV/IPV in Western North Carolina through legal advocacy. Lily began as a volunteer and now returns as a professional. She teaches classes about legal issues and community resources during Helpmate's volunteer training sessions, held several times a year. Lily "want[s] to give people a safe space to talk about the personal impacts of surviving DV/[IPV] or trying to support a friend or family member who is a victim." Others come to the shelter because of personal experiences and a driving desire to understand the complex nature of DV/IPV. Another volunteer, Ellie¹⁶, says she became interested in Helpmate because of an "episode of Law and Order: SVU ... in which a woman had been completely beaten up by her boyfriend, yet she still wanted to stay with him." Ellie stated that she "wanted to better understand how abusive relationships operated and the complexities in them." Lily and Ellie's motivations reflect a common theme amongst the staff: a desire to understand why abuse happens and to do what they can to stop it from happening again. The advocates at Helpmate have many reasons they became interested in DV/IPV, and for some, that includes experience with DV/IPV in their own lives.

3. Lived Experiences with DV/IPV.

Advocates shared stories about DV/IPV from their personal lives and their broader social networks, demonstrating a variety of experiences with DV/IPV. Erin Wilson, a Pisgah Legal Services attorney who helps many low-income clients of Helpmate says, "No, I have been fortunate not to have any direct or indirect experience with DV/[IPV]." Katherine Early, the Financial Administrator of Helpmate, says she had "no personal experience [with DV/IPV] except a coworker many years ago who was in an abusive relationship." Lily says, "I have been lucky enough to never be in an abusive relationship myself. As a young adult, I did learn about a lot of abuse that had gone on in my extended family." Christy also experienced abuse in her family: "I was very aware of the abuse both my cousins and my aunt had to deal with daily from my alcoholic uncle. He threw things at them, slapped them around, but it was his brutal words that had the most long-term effect on my cousins and my aunt. I still see the devastating effect on all of them to this day." Christy continues with a story from her past that she only heard as an adult, another common theme for many stories of DV/IPV from the advocates.

One day the oldest girl [next-door neighbor and childhood playmate] came over and started banging on our door, screaming for help...begging for someone to help her mom because her dad was beating her in the garage, punching her in the face over and over... calling her terrible names.

Christy's father was able to stop the attack, and the neighbor's father fled the scene, only to be arrested some time later. The next day he returned, "acting as though nothing had happened, despite the fact that his wife's face clearly told a different story. She had chosen not to press charges." Christy ended her story by explaining how her neighbor eventually left the abuser, only to marry another man that became abusive. After a second divorce, Christy never saw her with another man and commented that she "seemed like a different person...happier." The advocates found a place to focus negative emotions from trying moments in their past by continually creating and maintaining a safe, nurturing place for others and themselves: a house of healing.

4. The Hotline

Helpmate provides a 24-hour Hotline operated by a staff member or volunteer advocate who will answer the phone and assess the situation. The ring of the Hotline is the single most controlling sound at the shelter, second only to the intruder alarm. Hotline shifts determine the schedule of meetings, and every conversation and lunch break stops when the phone rings. During each Hotline shift, there is a primary advocate to answer the phone and two additional backups in reserve. During training, Hotline advocates learn "all domestic violence victims are different...treat each one individually...do not assume you know what she will say or what she is thinking"¹⁷. Training for the Hotline requires volunteers to attend multiple shadowing sessions at different times of the day, with different advocates.

The Hotline receives various types of calls: Crisis Calls are when the caller requires immediate intervention and is in imminent danger. The ability of an advocate to help during these calls is dependent on the peculiarities of the situation and the current resources available. Ventilation Calls occur when a person is not in crisis but just wants to talk about their problems. These calls can be frustrating for a counselor because little may seem to be "resolved." The advocates must remember that helping the caller to clarify her feelings may be just the first step in a long, long process of changing her life. She has a right to move at her own pace. Information Calls come from persons, not in crisis, who want to talk, but who also want some concrete information¹⁸.

A common question during training is what "types" of calls come in and when. While no means absolute, during the day shift, Information Calls are common, Crisis Calls begin as the sun goes down, and overnight calls are people who need emergency shelter. It is beneficial for people learning the Hotline to work with several people at different times to account for the variations of calls. The comfort and confidence of the Hotline advocate is paramount, and the backup system allows everyone from – a new volunteer to an experienced staff member – to have an advocate to assist them. Often the advocates must use the Helpline to avoid burnout^{19, 20}. After an extremely emotional call, an advocate will sometimes call their backup to talk it out and to get the reassurance that they gave the right advice or to learn what to do next time. The Hotline has two primary outcomes: informational calls about services available in the community and services offered by Helpmate specifically or facilitation of steps to provide emergency shelter. The Helpers of Helpmate take considerable effort making survivors feel like they are coming to a trusted friend's home to help heal the hurt, not a shelter to hide them from the world.

5. Emotional Geography of Helpmate

The sense of place resonates within the advocates of Helpmate. Lily says she pictures "A big hug from Joy (another case manager). Christy working diligently, calmly, focused, I aspire to be like her." Her words embody the love and respect one has for a family and a home. Helpmate as an institution is in many ways a home. It has a family room littered with books, board games, and a TV, usually with a child transfixed by Dora the Explorer or Big Bird. There are guest bedrooms, each decorated differently and a picnic area with a play set in the backyard for the children. Like many homes, the kitchen is the center of the universe and usually alive with activity. The sounds and rhythms of the day echo through the halls. With each new morning the children awake and get ready for school, the sizzle of bacon fills the air, the ping of cereal hitting the bottom of bowls ring through the halls. If you did not know you were in a shelter, this would look just like a loving home.

The walls are a little smudged from a thousand little hands, art fills the rooms with positive messages, and everyone has chores to do. There is a graph in the kitchen, and every client has daily tasks, from sweeping the floors to taking out the trash. The violent turbulence that brought the survivors of DV/IPV to the shelter slowly becomes replaced by simple and reflective tasks interspersed with counseling and planning sessions. The shelter is clean and well maintained but worn down from constant use. Some of the carpet needs to be replaced, the couch has seen better days, and the grass needs to be mowed: a similar story retold in homes across the United States. The difference being, this home is secured by several steel fire doors, in a secret location, and many of the people in the shelter are fearful for their lives. However, for many, this is also a paradise.

Many advocates mention security and speak of the physical structure of Helpmate as inextricably important for the physical and mental wellbeing of the clients, none more eloquently than Jodi Wygmans, a Case Manager at Helpmate, former Peace Corps volunteer, and graduate of nearby Warren Wilson College. She says that many survivors describe the shelter as "'landing in heaven' or 'becoming a new person.'" She continues,

Some clients coming in have not slept well in a very long time, have not been allowed to care for themselves the way they'd like out of fear that they'd be accused of cheating, have had to wade through mindgames just to survive a day, many have extensive PTSD symptoms and more... [when] given...days of rest and freedom, a person is able to think more clearly and sometimes able to start weeding out the negative, degrading words they've been hearing.

Helpmate is the home that many survivors of DV/IPV never had, a safe place that is free from the burdens of the outside world, a refuge from the storm.

Lily reiterates Jodi's sentiment: "I had a client who was repeatedly sexually assaulted by her husband. When she moved into the shelter...she told me was how wonderful it was...to take a shower and know that no one would walk in...and attack her." The safety offered by Helpmate cannot be overstated nor can the continuous shifting demands

of the shelter. The perpetual marshaling of limited resources wears down the advocates and even the animism of the shelter is effected; the palpable stress fills the air. There are moments of peace at the shelter, a rhythmic cadence changing with the seasons; while governmental decisions are determined and often appealed. When the decisions are rendered some clients leave as others take their place. While the clients and the challenges change, the advocates stay, adding their distinctive talents to the whole.

5. Community Resources

Moving forward and beyond their past is often extremely challenging for survivors of DV/IPV²¹. They are routinely extracted from the normal societal bonds of family and community by their abuser in order to control them²². Additionally, survivors of abuse are often kept from developing life skills required for financial independence and are, in many ways, utterly reliant upon their abusers^{23, 24}. This is one of several reasons survivors of DV/IPV stay with their abusers. The question “why did she stay?” is a complicated question, but frequently has a straightforward answer: where would she go, how would she survive, and how would she get there^{25, 26}? If the abused have children, often they absorb the pain and humiliation so their kids do not go hungry. Helpmate provides an opportunity to change the cycle of violence by giving them a place to go, to begin the process to regain control. Helpmate excels at providing the tools for survivors to rebuild their lives. The greatest of these tools is integration within the community and expertise at navigating all the resources available to their clients²⁷.

Helpmate works closely with the other nonprofits and government agencies in Asheville. Our VOICE is a crisis intervention and prevention agency focused on sexual violence. Helpmate and Our VOICE often work in concert and participate in community events together throughout Asheville. These events raise awareness and much needed resources for both agencies. Often, they are joined by MAHEC, the Mountain Area Health Education Center, which provides healthcare and education in Western North Carolina. These organizations have combined their resources to create a powerful force to prevent DV/IPV at the crisis and proactive level.

Helpmate excels in facilitating the often precarious steps to obtain emergency government assistance. Abusers often control their victims by limiting access to friends, money, and resources^{27, 28}. Many of Helpmate’s clients leave their abusers with just their bruises and emotional scars: no money, no car, and nowhere to go. Most governmental programs are understandably based on the total income of a family and have a long lead-time to receive benefits to protect against fraud. This is a double-edged sword for victims of DV/IPV, who on paper may be rich. In reality, hunger is as close as the next sunrise, and the address that once identified them to the world is now a reminder of a painful past.

Helpmate works closely with MANNA FoodBank, a service organization that partner with the food industry to provide for immediate needs. Helpmate’s case managers are also veterans at navigating the Department of Social Services (DSS) to ensure the health and wellness of their littlest clients. Countless issues arise, and Helpmate and DSS work together for the best interest of the children that are often a pawn in a “he said she said battle.” Churches and schools in the area are often partners with Helpmate, particularly in proactive action to curb violence.

6. DV/IPV and the Law

Helpmate excels at legal advocacy and has two paid Court Advocates on their staff, Melissa Kight and Kristine Vliet, including several volunteers. Helpmate speaks to every person, male or female, that appears in “domestic violence” court in Buncombe County seeking protection. Clients are assisted in navigating the complicated justice system that is all too often weighted against people who cannot afford representation²⁹. Many times, clients are facing the legal system, a world unknown to him or her, for the first time^{30, 31}. Full time legal advocates provided by a domestic violence shelter are unique in the world of DV/IPV advocacy³² and competent legal representation in a court of law is often the difference between life and death³³.

The fourth floor of the Buncombe County courthouse holds Civil Court every Thursday at 9:30, and the Helpers of Helpmate are always there. To get into court, one must first go through a set of security stations and then navigate an antiquated building undergoing renovation to arrive at the courtroom. The hallway outside is dark and evokes an animistic malaise that wafts from the walls. Before court starts, people meander around the corridor giving sideward glances and expressing different levels of discontent. The Court Advocates of Helpmate are hard at work tracking down their clients and informing them of what comes next. However, the Court Advocates use the feminist

empowerment model as well. All final decisions are up to the client; the Court Advocates give them advice to the best of their abilities. When the court doors open, there is a rush to get a seat; sadly, there are never enough seats in Civil Court. The roll is called, and the session begins.

A victim of DV/IPV can file for a temporary restraining order at the Clerk of Courts office. To make the order permanent (for one year) the alleged DV/IPV survivor must go in front of a judge and stand beside their alleged abuser. For most clients of Helpmate, this is the first time they have seen their abuser since they left for him or her. The alleged abuser is angry, accusatory, and has often hired a lawyer. A client from Helpmate frequently cannot afford a lawyer and will sometimes be represented by Pisgah Legal Services and aided by the Court Advocates. Pisgah Legal Services can only aid in civil matters, not criminal proceedings. Often clients have both cases concurrently, with their abuser taking out criminal charges in order gain leverage on the abused. The legal system is a conundrum for many in the best of times, and the emotional tumult of seeing their abuser again is more than many victims of DV/IPV can handle. There is a phenomenon discussed by advocates called the “look” which is a method an abuser uses to control the abused. If abusers catch the eye of the abused, often all of their resolve melts away, and they revert from a survivor to a victim³⁴. Often an abused person will lose their confidence in court consequently requesting that the case be dropped and will leave with their abuser, apologizing to the court for the inconvenience.

When their name is called, Pisgah Legal Services and the Court Advocates manage the clients’ cases for them, but the outcomes are too innumerable to discuss at length. The first day of court is rarely the last. The judge typically informs the alleged abuser he or she must wait fifteen minutes to allow the abused time to exit the building safely. The clients of Helpmate return to the shelter and try to make sense of the day in court. The Court Advocates are still hard at work processing paperwork, making phone calls, and coordinating with Pisgah Legal Services while the Case Managers at Helpmate help their clients deal with the repercussions of the day. Helpmate reacts to crises at the shelter and in the court of law but strives to prevent DV/IPV through proactive intentionality as well.

7. Healing the Community

Helpmate’s integration with the community is assuredly not limited to facilitating access to resources but rather acting as a resource for the community. Helpmate functions as a professional development organization providing necessary training to members of the emergency services as well as the medical and mental health fields. Helpmate also provides counseling sessions that are required by local agencies and the judicial system for many people to receive aid. Often Helpmate facilitates learning workshops in local schools for teenagers and other at risk population groups. Helpmate regularly presents to various faith communities and civic groups as well, with the Blue Bag in tow.

Community outreach and education are the essence of DV/IPV advocacy. Responding to an emergency and stopping one from happening are two entirely different tasks. Reactions and outcomes to emergencies are quantifiable; they easily fit into statistical categories. The ineffable proto-advocacy flows from the efforts of Helpmate, through the community and resounds into history by effecting intergenerational violence. The public craves information about DV/IPV and once a conversation begins, everyone has a story about DV/IPV in his or her own life, whether directly or indirectly.

8. Conclusion

The lifeblood of Helpmate is the professional and volunteer advocates that incorporate their abilities and motivations into an organization driven to prevent and limit the effects of DV/IPV. The Hotline, a constant sentinel, provides a constant source for advocacy and change in the larger community. By combining outreach with integration, alongside governmental and nonprofit resources, Helpmate truly heals the community. Helpmate the institution and the people that make it robust share a bond and commitment that is stronger than the pain and degradation caused by DV/IPV. The healing Helpmate provides has an exponential effect into the future as women and children are removed from DV/IPV by curbing the intergenerational effects of DV/IPV, therefore stopping another cycle of violence before it begins³⁵.

Perhaps the pretty picture painted on postcards does exist for those that experience DV/IPV. Helpmate is nestled on a mountainside with the expanse of Asheville spreading out before it, framed by the Blue Ridge Mountains. The panorama includes an emerging downtown seeking to redefine itself from a tourist center to a modern city, the

newly minted suburbs of urban sprawl all shiny and new, and across the French Broad River the mill towns fade like the memories of factories that once supported them. Many survivors of DV/IPV stare longingly at the view when they leave Helpmate for the last time: this reassuring pause acknowledges their journey from victim to survivor. The Helpers of Helpmate helped them face their troubled past, the uncertain present, and empowered them to redefine themselves as they move beyond the liminality of the shelter to recapture their agency. The Helpers of Helpmate will always be there until the day DV/IPV vanishes and the Hotline does not ring.

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11. Endnotes

i Men suffer from DV/IPV abuse as well, and this ethnography in no way attempts to exclude men, but women are the primary clients of Helpmate.