Update on the Domestic Violence & Mental Health Collaboration Project
By Alison Iser, Project Coordinator

“If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”
– African Proverb

The organizations working together as part of the DV/MH Collaboration Project have opted to go far together rather than to go it alone. It has been a little over 2 years now and we have made significant progress through our joint efforts. I will fill you in on our successes, but first I will provide you with a little background on the project.

What is the DV/MH Collaboration Project?
It is a 3-year, grant funded project to improve services for domestic violence survivors with mental health concerns and to strengthen collaboration between domestic violence advocates and mental health service providers. The partner organizations are the focus of the project.

Who is involved?
The project is a partnership between:

- The City of Seattle Human Services Department, Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault Prevention Division (sponsors the project)
- Consejo Counseling and Referral Service
- King County Coalition Against Domestic Violence (coordinates the project)
- New Beginnings
- Seattle Counseling Service
- Sound Mental Health

The project is supported by a grant from the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW), U.S. Department of Justice.

What planning have you done?
The partner organizations participated in an in depth planning process that OVW designed for grantees. During the planning process, we created a Collaboration Charter that described how we would work together; the values that inform our work; the roles and responsibilities of each organization; how we would communicate; and more. Our next step was to identify the needs and strengths of our partner organizations. We conducted an in depth assessment that included input from service recipients, service providers, management, and board members at the partner organizations. We analyzed
the results and used that information to create a strategic plan. We started implementing our plan in June of 2009.

**What is the plan?**

We are working on four initiatives to create sustainable systems change at the partner organizations that provide direct service (Consejo, New Beginnings, Seattle Counseling Service, and Sound Mental Health.) The initiatives are:

1. Creating More Welcoming Environments
2. Enhancing Knowledge
3. Strengthening Issue Identification and Response
4. Improving Collaboration and Communication

**What are you doing to create more welcoming environments?**

We learned from service recipients that the environment in which services are provided really does make a difference. As a result, we worked with a national expert on accessibility and universal design to evaluate a couple of the partner organizations. The expert taught us how to assess the ways in which an organization creates spaces that are welcoming and areas where there needs to be improvement. We applied that information to evaluating the other partner organizations. Now each of the direct service organizations has a report of the strengths and areas for improvement for one of their facilities. The organizations are supporting each other in implementing the recommendations for making their spaces more welcoming to survivors with mental health concerns.

**What are you doing to enhance knowledge?**

We learned that service providers do not all have a basic level of understanding about the intersection of domestic violence and mental health. As a result, we are in the process of creating two online courses. One will be on domestic violence basics for mental health providers. The other will be on mental health basics for domestic violence advocates. We have also arranged for staff from the partner organizations to attend conferences to enhance their knowledge. Our group has attended the WSCADV, Triple Play, and Consejo Latino Behavioral Healthcare conferences.

**How are you strengthening issue identification and response?**

We learned that identification of domestic violence and mental health concerns is inconsistent and that not all service providers are knowledgeable about how to respond if the issue is identified. As a result, we are in the process of creating a tool to assist mental health providers in identifying domestic violence concerns and a tool to assist
domestic violence advocates in creating a safe space to discuss mental health concerns. We are also creating flow charts to assist providers in responding appropriately to disclosures. Finally, we will be creating training materials to support the entire process.

How are you improving collaboration and communication?
There are five components to our Collaboration Initiative. The first involves working with the directors of the partner organizations to foster a change orientation. The second is a commitment to sharing information between the partner organizations. A file sharing site has been created for the project and each of the partners has posted information about their programs, who is eligible for their services, and how to make a referral. This information will be periodically updated so it remains helpful. The third component is a liaison system. Each organization will be designating a liaison who will be available to the other partner organizations to address any issues related to communication, service provision, referrals or collaboration. The liaisons will meet regularly together to identify trends in requests, to troubleshoot problems, to share information with each other, and to coordinate the cross-disciplinary case reviews, the fourth component in this initiative. The case reviews will give partner organizations the opportunity to consult with each other about complex situations involving both domestic violence and mental health challenges. The liaisons and the case reviews will both start in the spring of 2010. The fifth and final component is relationship building. We recognize that providers are more likely to refer, consult, and collaborate with each other if they actually know each other. To accomplish this we are holding a series of relationship building events. The ones we have had so far have been very successful and we look forward to holding two more in 2010.

What is different as a result of this project?
At our last Collaborative Team meeting for 2009 we reflected on all that we have accomplished this year and shared the changes that have taken place at our organizations because of this project:

- After years of trying to engage staff in addressing domestic violence, they are now very interested because of this project. People want to build their skills, there is excitement, energy and focus about this, and people are seeking out consultation.
- Communication between domestic violence & mental health providers has greatly improved.
- People have enjoyed the relationship-building opportunities and are really connecting across organizations. Our organization is less isolated as a result of learning about and getting to know the other agencies.
Internal leadership coming together on this project has been very beneficial to the organization as a whole.

This has been the fulfillment of a long-term dream to see this come together. It is the best of all our projects.

We now have a deeper understanding of the issues and the challenges organizations face when trying to address them.

Because of this project, there are now multiple voices in our agency speaking up about the needs of survivors with mental health concerns.

We anticipate that we will see even greater changes as we continue our work in 2010 and finish implementing all the pieces of our strategic plan.

If you have any questions about this project, you are welcome to contact me at Alison@kcadv.org or at 206.568.5454.