

Program Highlight: Apna Ghar

Apna Ghar (Our Home) was founded by a group of Asian and allied women of color who were responding to requests for culturally appropriate services. They initially operated a crisis helpline for five years between 1985 and 1990 through which callers seeking domestic violence services were referred to other existing agencies in Chicago. However, these survivors found that their language and cultural needs and the immigration and other systemic barriers they faced were not well understood, and thus they didn't receive appropriate services.

Apna Ghar incorporated in December 1989 and in 1990 opened two apartment spaces for emergency shelter for survivors. Then in 1995 they purchased a house for shelter and opened an office for administration and walk-in counseling, case management and legal advocacy services and a child visitation center. Apna Ghar began offering supervised visitation and safe exchange services in response to frequent requests from survivors that wanted a safe place for children to visit with the parent that had caused harm. In 2000, Apna Ghar's child visitation center became a federal demonstration site for the Office of Violence Against Women's Safe Havens project.

Neha Gill, Executive Director of Apna Ghar said becoming a funded demonstration site allowed them to hire specific staff and to formalize processes for operations, but moved the services more toward what the courts were seeking and away from what survivors wanted.

For Apna Ghar, the connections between ending domestic violence and working toward social justice has always been and remains about providing victim-centered, trauma informed services. As an agency that serves a majority of survivors who are immigrants, they must listen to and understand the significant and multi-layered trauma that many of the survivors and their families have experienced. The Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) at Loyola University Chicago studied Apna Ghar's work and created a service model and ecological framework. The findings bore out that Apna Ghar was indeed working with survivors in a holistic way that took systemic inequities into account. Survivors who seek assistance from Apna Ghar have experienced multiple traumas, particularly those fleeing countries that have been at war. Forced marriages, rape as a tool of war, lots of sexual assault in the refugee camps, genital mutilation, as well as partner or family violence, are common experiences.

This all meant that Apna Ghar's work with survivors must be provided through a social justice/ human rights framework. They start with looking at the family to determine what their strengths are and what they need. Staff and volunteers then seek resources from the community and systems to help the family build a network of safety. Staff help the survivor determine the impact of general living conditions to develop a plan for moving forward out of the current dangerous situation.

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The current environment of negativity toward black and brown people in general has added layers of trauma to the survivors seeking their assistance. Immigrant survivors are facing hatred at their jobs and at places that are supposed to be helpful. Much of what they experience is racially motivated, but they understand the gender component as well. A common example is survivors being told things like “if you are willing to wear that hijab, then what kind of treatment do you expect?” Sound familiar? Victim blaming in yet another context.

The immigration options included in the Violence Against Women Act have helped but it takes a long time. Survivors who are applying for immigration status independent of their batterers are stuck in limbo for a long time leaving them with the inability to access any type of resources or benefits until they achieve status that allows them to get housing, jobs, education, etc.

Providing services to victims of domestic violence from an understanding of trauma experiences is precisely what justice reform is about. In order to end domestic violence, we must incorporate the lived experiences of all survivors and include these perspectives to improve and expand our efforts. Apna Ghar is helping lead the way towards ending domestic violence.

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