



National Task Force
to End Sexual and
Domestic Violence Against Women

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Violence Against Women Act (2005)

Action Toolkit

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Press Release

The press release is generally the first notice a reporter will get regarding your news and surely will have the most information without giving the entire story. Answer the questions below to help identify the information that should be included in the press release:

- ◆ Why is this important and how does this make news?
- ◆ What are the main points?
- ◆ What is the Who, What, Where, When, Why and How?
- ◆ What quotes are available or needed to help personalize the press release?

Once you have identified the information, begin writing the release. Much the same way as reporters write their own stories, they appreciate receiving their information in “inverted pyramid” style – the most important information is first and details of lesser importance or background follow. Other things to consider are:

- ◆ Is a factsheet needed for additional information? What other information is available to help a reporter write their story?
- ◆ Is the release written so that a newspaper can reprint it word for word?

A common mistake to avoid is starting the release with the organization announcing something. For example:

“Today [ORGANIZATION] announced efforts to expand its program.”

Instead, write the action or result created by the announcement.

“More families will be able to receive emergency shelter services due to a new program launched today.”





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Media Relationship Building

Building relationships with the local press is an integral part of raising community awareness not only about domestic violence and the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), but also the valuable services offered by state and local domestic violence programs. Exposing domestic violence and educating the media can only bolster community support for and media coverage of this issue.

Develop a media list to include the names, titles, addresses, phone and fax numbers, and e-mail addresses of reporters and editors your organization wants to target. It is helpful to organize your list by reporters' assignments (or "beats"). This will prevent you from contacting reporters who generally will not cover the issue of your press release or event. For instance, you would not call a health reporter to discuss law enforcement trainings in your state.

It may be easier to keep separate lists for each beat. You may also want to make notes about reporters, such as other stories they have written relating to domestic violence.

Write a letter to the reporters introducing yourself and your organization. Please ensure each letter is tailored to the specific beat the reporter covers. Provide additional materials such as your annual report and brochures to give the reporter a better understanding of your organization and the services you provide. Indicate that you will be calling them in the near future to follow up on the materials sent and offer any assistance you can on future stories related to domestic violence.

Call the reporters on your media list to formally introduce yourself and your organization. It is best to call reporters before 2 p.m. to ensure they are not being disturbed during a deadline. This call should be quick and straight to the point (but friendly!). Ask if they have received your materials and offer your organization as a resource for future stories related to domestic violence. Ask to schedule a meeting with the reporter to have a more lengthy discussion on domestic violence and your role within the community to end violence. It will also give you an opportunity to find out more from reporters about the types of stories that really excite them so

that you can tailor future communication to their interests.

Never underestimate the impact of a thank you letter. Every time a reporter writes a story about your program or meets with you, take the time to write a quick letter thanking them for raising awareness. Personalize the letter with a comment about the article and be sure to politely provide further insight into details that may have been incorrect or vague.

Periodically check in with reporters to update them on your organization's activities, to offer praise for insightful or informative articles on the issue, and to offer guidance on improving the reporter's coverage of domestic violence.

"Hello, this is [NAME] from [ORGANIZATION]. I recently read your story [INSERT HEADLINE] and wanted to thank you for bringing this issue to the attention of the community. However, in the future it may be helpful to include the state's domestic violence hotline number so that women who relate to this story know there is somewhere they can go for help."

Add reporters to your mailing list to ensure that they not only receive your press releases, but also your newsletters and conference materials.

Continually update media lists. Newsrooms have a very high turnover rate, so be sure that your lists are updated periodically, and especially before a big event. Although you may not consider your organization's Open House a press event, it is still helpful to invite reporters as members of the community. Also, be sure to update the notes for each reporter by logging responses from outreach efforts.





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Pitching the Press

Calling members of the media can sometimes be an intimidating experience. Because of the hectic environment of the newsroom, reporters can sometimes but not always appear rude, especially if they are being contacted during a deadline. Understanding the newsroom environment is essential to effectively pitching the press.

Create a targeted press list or use an existing one. Contacting every reporter does not increase your chances for the media to cover your story. Instead, stick to the reporters with a genuine interest in the topic. It not only saves you time and effort, but also lessens your chances of dealing with irate reporters. Do note that sometimes a topic can be covered by more than one beat.

Send the information via fax or e-mail. Especially if you have not built a relationship with the reporter, always send the information first. It is important to send the information at least three days in advance of the event.

Call the reporters to confirm they have received the information and have had time to review it. It is best to call reporters before 2 p.m. to ensure they are not being disturbed during a deadline.

If they did not receive the information, confirm their contact information, briefly give your pitch, answer any questions they may have, thank them for their time and be sure to resend the information.

"Hello. My name is [NAME] and I am calling from [ORGANIZATION] to confirm that you received our press release about technology safety project. Oh, you didn't? Can I confirm that you fax/e-mail is _____. Thank you. I will be sure to resend the information. As you well know, modern technology has presented unforeseen threats to women's safety; however, these technologies provide new tools for women attempting to escape violent relationships. We will be holding a training next week for domestic violence advocates and law enforcement officials, teaching them how women can use technology strategically to escape abuse and how law enforcement officials can identify and

hold perpetrators accountable for misusing technology to terrorize victims."

If they did receive the information, briefly give your pitch, ask them what their level of interest is in the story and answer any questions they may have.

"Hello. My name is [NAME] and I am calling from [ORGANIZATION] to confirm that you received our press release about our high-tech safety program. Great! We think this training provides a great opportunity for your newspaper to educate its readers on how to protect themselves in the information age. We will be holding a training next week for domestic violence advocates and law enforcement officials, teaching them how perpetrators misuse technology to terrorize victims and how women can strategically use technology to escape abuse. I would be happy to make arrangements for you to attend our training or speak with trainers."

Ask if there is a better contact for the topic if the reporter is uninterested.

Consistently follow up with reporters, especially those that did not receive the information the first time. This is an opportunity to update them on the story, answer additional questions, gauge their interest, and determine when the story will run.

Resend materials one day before and the day of press events as a reminder to the reporter.

Place reminder calls to reporters one day before and the day of a press event.

Continually update media lists based on the responses you receive from your pitch calls. Update incorrect information, new contacts and interest levels of those whom you have pitched.



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Media Advisories

Media advisories are one-page announcements written to alert journalists to an event they may want to cover.

Some tips about media advisories:

- ◆ Advisories can be in bullet form announcing an event or press availability.
- ◆ An advisory should say when an event is, where it is, and what and whom reporters will find there.
- ◆ Don't forget to include at the top of the document a name and phone number of someone the media can contact to follow up.
- ◆ Be sure to date the document.



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Capturing Your Success: Creating Case Studies On Domestic Violence

A case study is a several paragraph description of an individual's or family's experience.

Some tips about preparing and using case studies:

- ◆ Attention spans tend to be short, so prepare a case study that is no more than a page long.
- ◆ Look for stories that emphasize your point with the fewest possible distractions. A good example would be the experience of a victim of domestic violence who was aided by a program or shelter supported by funding provided through the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). Seek out stories that support positive spin and don't complicate your messages.
- ◆ It is acceptable to prepare a "composite" case study for the media, so long as it is clearly described as such, and is not commingled with real case studies.
- ◆ Case studies should describe what the life of a survivor was like before intervention, and how a VAWA-supported program improved the person's life.
- ◆ Distribute case studies with an accompanying cover letter or as an attachment to an editorial memorandum or background.
- ◆ Don't forget to include at the top of the document a name and phone number of someone the media can contact to follow up.
- ◆ Be sure to date the document.



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Op-Eds

Op-eds are opinion articles 500 to 750 words in length. Most newspapers print such articles on the pages opposite their editorial page (that's where they get their name: opposite editorial).

Some tips about op-eds:

- ◆ Op-eds should emphasize the writer's opinion or experience and be of interest to the general public.
- ◆ Opinion page editors look for op-eds that advance the public discussion of an issue, that are interesting and compelling, and that come from interesting authors.
- ◆ Find out what the newspaper's word limit is for op-eds by calling the opinion page office and inquiring, or by checking on the newspaper's website. Most newspapers have limits in the 700-word range. But whatever the limit is, do not exceed it. Op-ed editors have so many articles submitted for their consideration that if you can't make your point in the allotted space, they can afford to wait for someone who can! Don't indulge the temptation to break this rule no matter how golden your prose.
- ◆ The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) offers myriad opportunities for op-ed pieces, which can address how the law has improved various aspects of our nation's response to domestic and sexual violence – and the unmet need for funding and support that still exists. The backlash or challenges to VAWA also require strong responses, and op-ed pieces can be among the most effective ways to address them.
- ◆ After you know what you want to write, you can call the op-ed editor to “pitch” the piece to him or her. The discussion might reshape your op-ed idea somewhat, but will make it more likely to be printed. Don't be discouraged if the op-ed editor tells you they can't promise to print it. They can't, and it's their job to tell you so.
- ◆ Attach a cover letter to the op-ed editor on top of the op-ed that summarizes the key point in one paragraph. Be sure your name and phone number are in the letter; if the newspaper decides to print the piece, someone from the opinion page will almost certainly be in touch with you in advance to confirm that it was in fact you who submitted the piece!



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Letters-to-the-Editor

Letters-to-the-editor are letters from newspaper readers that respond to stories, editorials or op-eds that the newspaper has recently printed.

Some tips about letters-to-the-editor:

- ◆ Letters should be no more than three short paragraphs. Different newspapers have different word limits. You can call and ask the newspaper, or check its website. That failing, you can count the words in a few days' worth of printed letters as a guide.
- ◆ Remember to use letters to advance your own messages, not just to criticize somebody else for getting it wrong. Do not spend your letter contradicting or denying what somebody else has said; you're just giving their arguments more play if you do. Make *your* case, not theirs.
- ◆ Refer in the first sentence to the article to which you are responding, and then move on to your point. The classic first sentence for a letter-to-the-editor is some variation of, "Your article on family violence overlooked a critical point." From there, move on to your messages.



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How to Handle a Print Interview

If you think of media outreach as a buy-and-sell transaction, the interview is the moment you either close the deal or don't. All the preparation, planning, media materials and everything else will pale in usefulness if you can't make your point in an interview. So getting it right in an interview is critical.

The good news is that it's not as difficult as it might seem. Your fundamental challenge in an interview is to make a handful of points to a reporter or to a broadcast audience in an intelligent and friendly way. That's something we all practice every day in our interactions with family, friends, colleagues, patients, and sometimes with perfect strangers.

That said, being a good spokesperson is something you learn; first by watching and listening, and then, when the time comes, by getting out there and doing it, even if you make a mistake or two along the way. Following are tips for how to handle print interviews, followed by advice on broadcast interviews.

Before the first interview request comes, your program or coalition should decide who its spokesperson or spokespeople are.

If you have more than one, they must coordinate what they say on behalf of the project to make sure they don't disagree with each other in public. Nobody other than designated spokespeople should speak for the organization.

When a reporter calls to ask for an interview, it's perfectly appropriate for the spokesperson to ask what the subject is and say they'll call right back. Always ask about the reporter's deadline in the initial conversation. You are entitled to collect your thoughts. But don't leave a reporter hanging; causing a reporter to miss a deadline can put the reporter's ability to do her or his job in jeopardy.

Think carefully about what you want to say before you speak.

Know how you want to answer the basic questions before you get on the phone. Your goal is to phrase your answers in short, punchy and quotable sentences that communicate your message.

Listen to how reporters react to what you're saying.

If you can hear the reporter clicking away on a keyboard, you're on the right track. If it goes silent for a long time, that's usually a clue that you're straying from the straight and narrow.

Remember that the purpose of the interview is to say what you want to say.

Do not let yourself get drawn into talking about things beyond your area of expertise or knowledge. Use every question as a chance to make your points and emphasize your themes.

If you don't know the answer to a question, just say so.

If you've presented yourself to the reporter as a knowledgeable source on the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), it's perfectly acceptable to tell the reporter who asks about some other topic that you just don't know the answer. Try to help the reporter find a source who might be able to answer. Reporters are looking to get a job done, and will always remember sources who help them find something they need.



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How to Handle a Print Interview *continued*

Think about what sorts of background materials you can give the reporter to support your points.

Reporters want to know that you can support what you say.

Don't say something you're not ready to see appear in print.

This pertains no matter how chummy you've become with the reporter.

Nothing is truly off the record.

If you say it, the reporter can report it, or at least quote you saying it to someone else so that the second party will respond to you. If your instinct is not to say something, don't say it; if the reporter asks you to go off the record, refuse. If you decide to break this rule, at least remember that something

isn't off the record because you say so. The reporter must agree. So, if you say, "Well, off the record, I can tell you that..." you're still on the record. If you say, "Can we go off the record so I can answer that question?" and then wait for the reporter to agree, it will put you as close to being off the record as you can get.

Reporters aren't your friends, even if they're friendly.

Be courteous, be polite, and laugh if something's funny. But don't ever forget that anything you say can turn up in the newspaper.

If you can avoid it, don't set up an adversarial relationship with the reporter by being defensive, hostile or dismissive.

Guide reporters who don't know a lot about the issue to what's important without passing judgment on what they do and don't know.



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How to Handle a Broadcast Interview

Perhaps no media relations work is as pressure-charged as a broadcast interview. On the other hand, no other opportunity affords the chance to reach so many people with a message that is unfiltered by the media. Short of running your own broadcast advertising campaign, broadcast interviews are the most direct route to getting your point across to large numbers of people.

The most important thing to do in preparation for an interview is to choose your key messages, and then ask yourself what you are *most likely* to be asked, what you are *most afraid* to be asked, and what you *hope you get* asked. Work through how you would answer those questions, and you'll find that the rest of the interview will just flow naturally from there.

Here are a few tips on how to make a broadcast interview successful.

I think what really helps is to find out from the reporter what that person needs. Usually when I make phone calls – when I talk to a potential source for a story – I explain to them who I am: Here's the story I'm doing. Here's a brief outline of what I perceive my story is going to be. This is what I'm looking for and this is how they are going to contribute to this story. This is where they fit in.

-Ruby de Luna, KUOW Radio

Prior to the Interview

Find out in advance what the format of the show is.

Will what you say be taped and then edited for use on a news show? Will you be on the air live or "live-on-tape" (which means that, although the interview is taped, it will be aired in its entirety without interruptions or editing)?

If the reporter is taping your comments so that he or she can use some small portion in a newscast, you must speak in short sound bites. Sound bites are short, 5 to 20 second answers that make a point in a punchy, even memorable way. It may seem shallow to try to distill the complexities of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) into such a short product, but that's how it works. One sound bite to

consider: "The Violence Against Women Act was a tremendous leap forward in terms of America's response to domestic and sexual violence – but we have a lot more work to do."

If you're being interviewed for a talk show, you've got the luxury of a bit more time to make your point, but you'll still need to get your points across quickly and in interesting language.

Find out in advance what the audience of the station and the particular show is.

The answer won't change your message, but it might change how you communicate it, what kinds of metaphors you use, etc. Find out if a talk show takes phone calls from listeners. If so, ask friends or colleagues to call in.



How to Handle a Broadcast Interview

continued

Find out if the interview is on a public radio station.

Public radio doesn't have commercial interruptions, and you'll want to know that in advance.

Find out if the host has a position on your issue – is he or she someone who minimizes the prevalence of family violence?

Find out what the host is like on the air.

The best way is to listen to the show. Often you can hear an excerpt on the Internet if the program is not local to your community.

Find out how long the interview will last.

Confirm this with the host or the producer just before going on the air. Producers sometimes lengthen a segment without warning the guest. If it matters to you, nail it down in advance. And if the host tries to stretch the interview despite the agreement, don't feel obligated to stay, just politely remind the host you need to leave at the agreed-upon time. On the other hand, if the interview's going well and you're getting your message out, don't stand on principle if you can afford the time.

Find out if other guests will appear and what they are likely to say.

The producer or booker can tell you that, but you may want to do some research on your own about how an "opponent" will make his or her points. If the other guest is sympathetic to your views, you might want to talk with that person by phone in advance to compare notes.

Offer background material to the host or the producer in advance.

If the interview is in studio, find out what time you need to be there, and then get there a little early.

If the interview is by phone, confirm in advance whether you're calling the station or they're calling you.

Be sure that your phone line is clear for 15 minutes before the show is to start. Producers sometimes call to confirm, or to give you last minute information about the interview, and they hate to hear busy signals!

Don't use a cell phone or a wireless phone for the interview.

Find a phone with a cord that goes all the way to the phone! If you're at home and only have one corded phone in the house, move it to someplace quiet.

If the show is in your market, listen to it while you're waiting to go on.

It's helpful to know what else has been said. But be sure to turn the radio off before you start, or you'll cause feedback on the air.

If you are doing a television interview in your office, give the camera crew ample time to set up.

A camera crew may require up to 20 minutes to set up an office or room so that it is appropriate for an interview. Be aware that the crew will likely rearrange furniture and bring in special lighting. All this work is done to make the interview look good, so it's best to go along with them.



During the Interview

Use the interview as a chance to convey your main message points.

Answer the interviewer's questions, but also make your points, even if they're not naturally part of the answer. Don't be afraid to move the discussion back to what you want to talk about by using a transition phrase like, "It's important to remember that..." or "The really important point here is that..." If you're asked a stupid question, don't embarrass the host. Instead, turn it around by saying, "Well, I think what you're really getting at here is..." or something similar.

Use the host's name.

It conveys to the audience that you're on a first name basis, which, in turn, suggests a measure of approval from the host.

Repeat your message.

Don't be afraid to repeat your point using different words. Repeat your message. (Studies tell us that repetition makes a message stick.)

Make your answers brief, but not terse. Don't drone on.

Listen to the show in advance to get a sense of the flow of the conversation. That failing, start by giving answers that are between 20 seconds and a minute in length, and then see how the host reacts.

If the host interrupts you, stop talking.

If another guest interrupts you, finish your point and let the host sort it out. They get paid for that.

Be clear and succinct.

Speak in short and relatively simple sentences. Don't use abbreviations or acronyms, legal or other jargon, shorthand phrases, or other language that wouldn't be understandable to a person in the street. Few people on the street know what VAWA is – spell it out. People will tune out in droves if you make

them feel like they've wandered into a conversation in which they don't belong.

Use topic sentences.

Your 7th-grade English teacher was right.

Use words that cue the listener that something important is about to be said.

For example, "Look, here's the point," "The important thing here is," or "The thing you really need to understand about this issue is that..."

Speak in outlines if possible.

For example, "I'd make three points about the important of the Violence Against Women Act. First... Second... Third..."

Use anecdotes or personal stories to illustrate your points.

Listeners relate to stories about personal experiences and remember them.

Don't be afraid to gesture on television!

Just keep your hands away from your face.

Assume no prior knowledge on the part of the viewer or the interviewer.

Speak as if you are talking with someone who is brand new to the issue. Often, you are.

Know exactly how you would answer the baseline question about your subject.

Questions like, "So, why does America need to put more money into stopping domestic and sexual violence?" Don't let yourself be caught flat-footed by a softball question!

If you're doing a radio interview by telephone, stand up.

As you talk, walk around the room, and gesture if you're in the habit of doing that. It'll help energize your voice if you're moving around. Get a phone with a long cord.



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Looking and Sounding Your Best on Camera

The more trustworthy you look, the better you'll get your message across. You don't need to turn heads, but you do need to look like you're serious about putting your best foot forward.

The truth is that how you look and how you sound are hurdles you need to clear *before* viewers can absorb what you're trying to say. If they are distracted by some aspect of your appearance – jewelry that flashes on screen, for example – they may never get beyond the distraction. But if nothing about your appearance distracts them, and nothing about how you sound interferes, they will focus on what you are saying and whether it makes sense. Only then can a message travel across the airwaves, into a living room and into the viewer's mind.

Here are a few tips of the trade:

- ◆ Sit up straight or lean slightly toward the camera if you're sitting head-on toward the camera. Don't ever let your back touch the back of the chair. Pay attention to posture.
- ◆ Do not sit in any chair that swivels or rocks. If you must use a chair that moves, lock the chair into position.
- ◆ Use hand gestures, but keep your hands away from your face, and contain them so that your hands don't run off the screen.
- ◆ If you usually wear glasses, keep them on while on camera. Otherwise you may squint.
- ◆ Wear simply cut clothes – a simple pants suit, a dress, a shirt and skirt or trousers with a jacket or blazer.
- ◆ If possible wear solid colors, but avoid any color that blends in with your skin tone. Any shade of blue is almost always a good choice. Avoid red.
- ◆ Avoid loud plaids, stripes or patterns; very small patterns (like black and white houndstooth); and fabrics that sparkle (like lurex) or have a high sheen (like sharkskin, silk or satin charmeuse).
- ◆ If you are interviewed in your (or someone else's) office or in a studio, you may be asked to wear a lavalier microphone (a small clip-on microphone). The sound person for the camera crew will likely attempt to clip the microphone to

your collar and hide the wire. If you are uncomfortable having someone else attach the microphone, ask to do it yourself.

- ◆ If a reporter using a hand-held microphone interviews you, let the reporter hold the microphone in front of you when you speak. Do not grab the microphone.

Women Only:

- ◆ If you usually do not wear make-up, at least wear a lipstick color that is slightly darker than your natural lip color, so that your face doesn't look monochrome. Some stations in larger markets will offer you make-up. Ask in advance, and take them up on the offer.
- ◆ Do not wear large bows or ties at the neck. Unless you're a pro at tying scarves, don't wear a scarf.
- ◆ Avoid large earrings, necklaces that may be a distraction, and bracelets that will jangle when you move your hands.

Men Only:

- ◆ Avoid loud ties and ties with small, complicated patterns.
- ◆ If someone offers to powder your face, accept it. Powder is generally used to keep guests from looking shiny or sweaty on television.



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Creating an Effective Rapid Response System

- ◆ **Assign** individual members of your organization to monitor specific media outlets (local and national newspapers, magazines, radio and television).
- ◆ **Track** relevant statements and issues presented in the media.
- ◆ **Respond immediately** (ideally within the same newscycle or within 24 hours) to statements that are inaccurate or misleading. Call into radio stations during on-air interviews, call reporters who print inaccurate statements, send out a press release pointing out the statement and providing correct information. Acknowledge reporters who present accurate information.
- ◆ **Appear** at social/issue forums to address questions on the issue of violence against women and communicate concrete actions to eliminate violence against women.
- ◆ **Offer** resources to organizations that might affect change in the effort to end violence against women.
- ◆ **Write** letters to the editor regarding the issue of violence against women.
- ◆ **Focus** efforts on communicating the positive impact ending violence against women can make in all communities and providing concrete actions communities can take to end violence against women.
- ◆ **Drive** the news! Get stories on your issue placed in the media so communities are forced to address violence against women.

