



## **From Theory to Practice: Forging a Collaborative Evaluation Strategy for a Culturally - Informed Domestic Violence Initiative**

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knowledge of rights and systems, facilitating access to services, and providing culturally appropriate support to Latinx survivors of DV. These core elements are meant to empower survivors and help them successfully transition from a state of crisis to more long-term planning. The ultimate goal is safety and stability, which is achieved through access to necessary crisis interventions and resources. Additionally, attitudinal change and independence/agency

are facilitated through interactions with and support from bilingual and bicultural advocates working within the LAF. These advocates empower participants to advocate for themselves and independently navigate systems relevant to their stated goals including safe housing, legal justice, immigration relief, mental health, increased income, stable employment, and opportunities to advance their future (see Figure 1 for a visual representation).

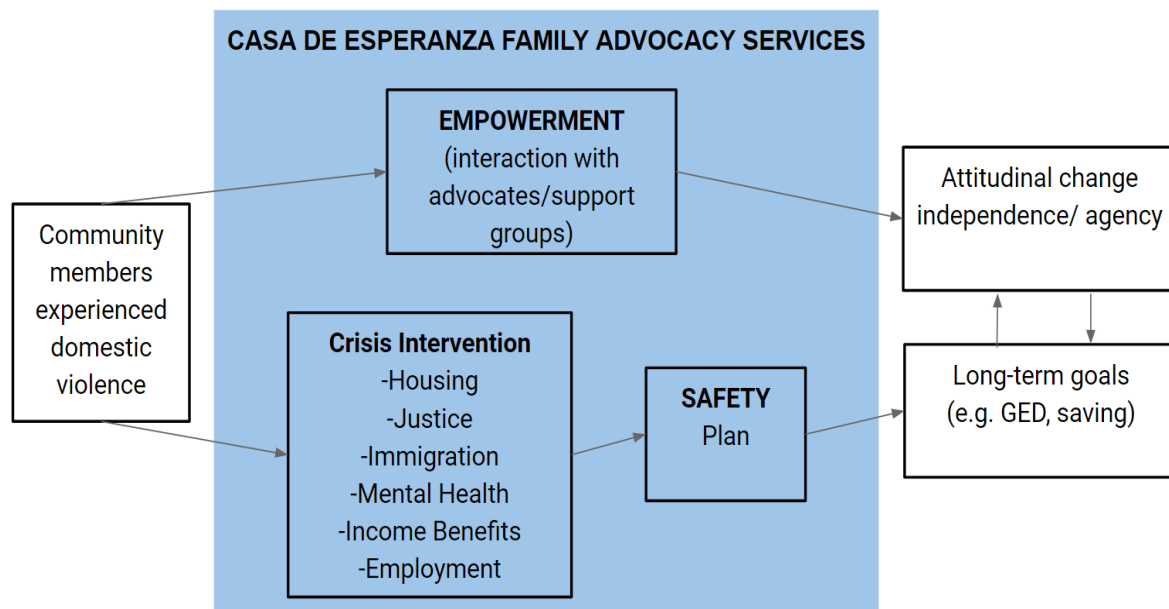


Figure 1. FAI Theory of Change

### Insights from the Advocate Focus Group

As part of the evaluation team's effort to understand the full scope of Casa de Esperanza's FAI, a focus group was conducted with nine of the 10 full-time advocates to assess their unique perspectives about the implementation and success of the program. A flexible questioning route (Kruger & Casey, 2015) was used to guide the group discussion around four general areas: (1) goals of the program (e.g., how do you know that the program is successful?), (2) participant needs (e.g., how do you assess the needs of each participant?), (3) advocate role (e.g., what is

your day-to-day like? In what ways could the program best support its advocates?), and (4) feasibility of follow-ups (e.g., is there a system in place to follow-up with participants?). The meeting lasted about an hour and was audio-recorded with permission from the advocates. Using a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2014), responses were later assessed to form categories of comments and ideas, which are referred to as themes (described below). Advocates were open and engaged throughout the meeting and expressed excitement at the idea of developing an evaluation plan for the FAI. Their commitment to the FAI and the

communities they serve was evident in their responses and their willingness to collaborate with the research team. This all may indicate that the acceptability and feasibility for conducting the proposed evaluation will be high.

#### *Theme (1): Long-term Orientation as Success*

Many advocate comments related to perceptions of program goals and participant outcomes that represent these goals. In particular, advocates seemed to agree that the program's fundamental goal is to establish participants' safety and stability over time. Advocates repeatedly highlighted that this goal involves more than just addressing participants' immediate, short-term needs (e.g., shelter) but also helping them gain confidence in their ability to advocate for themselves and develop and pursue long-term goals (e.g., GED, savings). For example, one advocate noted that, "*When participants come in at first, they say, 'can you call the clinic for me?', or, 'can you find me an interpreter?', but after they've been through advocacy and they begin to understand that they can navigate these systems, they start to say, 'I'll call them, it's no big deal.' They start doing it for themselves and that's when we know it [advocacy] is working.*" Notably, for advocates, success of the Family Advocacy Initiative is "... more than just meeting [participants' stated] goals, like finding stable housing or getting an order for protection, although it's that, too. It's helping them realize they have the power to get out of this and to be safe and happy."

#### *Theme (2): Operational Details*

Throughout the discussion, advocates described the details of day-to-day operations and discussed their work in practical terms. Generally, advocates reported an average workload (in terms of number of participant cases they manage at a given time) of between 25-30 participants per advocate, which they described as challenging but

manageable. Advocates also described two key advocacy processes, (1) intake and needs assessment, and (2) case termination and follow-ups, which are described as sub-themes below.

#### Sub-theme: Intake and Needs Assessment Process.

Advocates generally described the intake process as long, with a number of demographic variables to record and many 'boxes to check.' In response to the question, *how do you assess participant needs?* advocates were quick to note that each participant is a unique human being and must be treated as such rather than as a case to manage. Advocates further noted that participants are often in a state of crisis at the time of their intake, and; therefore, advocates are faced with the difficult task of providing emotional support while also trying to appropriately and accurately assess participant needs – a task which advocates do not often feel fully prepared for (this will be discussed further in Theme (3)).

#### Sub-theme: Case Termination and Follow-Ups.

Advocates reported that there is no formal protocol for closing a case. Instead, advocates noted that it is up to the discretion of the advocate and supervisor to determine when an individual is no longer an active participant of the FAI. One advocate stated, "*Usually, a case is closed if the participant has met their goals, says they don't need services anymore, or if we just can't get into contact with them anymore.*" Additionally, in response to the question, *how feasible would it be to conduct follow-up calls with participants after their cases have been closed?* (in order to follow-up on long-term outcomes), advocates reported quite firmly that it would not be feasible given their already high workloads. The caveat was added, however, that it is a good idea and could be implemented if new hires were made for that purpose.



*Theme (3): Increased Structural Support*

Throughout the focus group advocates expressed their unanimous support for the work that the organization is doing in general, and within the Family Advocacy Initiative, in particular. Although advocates expressed pride in being part of the Casa de Esperanza community and to be able to help participants in such tangible ways, they also expressed dissatisfaction with some aspects of the program and identified ways in which these could be improved. These were further categorized into two subthemes: (1) record-keeping, and (2) increased training and support.

**Sub-theme: Record-Keeping.** Advocates generally seemed to think that the intake and needs assessment process is currently too unwieldy. Advocates described the intake forms as *“inorganic and cumbersome,”* and their database as not user-friendly, noting that the information they are required to record is mostly demographic in nature, likely for funding reporting purposes, and not particularly relevant to participant needs or goals. One advocate noted, *“it’s just too much red tape.”* Advocates also mentioned that the previously reported lack of formal protocol for tracking participant goals and needs often leaves them relying on ‘their head’ or their own informal/unofficial records to remember all the information. Advocates stated that all of this makes it difficult for them to listen to participants and be fully present with them at the time of their intake. The following quote summarizes this concern, *“It’s like, I want to listen to the participant, but because I have of all these reporting requirements, I end up having to continuously write down little details that actually have nothing to do with assessing or addressing what the participant needs.”*

**Sub-theme: Increased Training and Support.** Advocates suggested that there are a few areas in which they could use more support at the organizational level, and that these improvements would make them more effective and productive in their work. For

example, advocates reported that, for many of them, their advocacy position is their *“first job in the field.”* As such, they described thinking that specialized training for how to respond to DV at the start of the position would be very helpful. Advocates also suggested training for specific issues that are commonly found among participants’ situations (e.g., training in legal issues, common psychological responses to trauma typical for DV, immigration procedures). Finally, advocates expressed interest in receiving further support and training to mitigate job burnout and compassion fatigue, which are frequently reported problems in helping professions, particularly for those who respond to survivors of trauma (e.g., Killian, 2008). One statement especially embodied this sentiment, *“There’s a lot of compassion fatigue and just a lot of hard emotions that go on as advocates... we need to hold advocates up. We have high turnover because of the burnout, and we need to address that.”*

**Evaluation Plan and Design**

In order to effectively capture success within the FAI, the university team designed an evaluation plan that includes a broad spectrum of methods, such as participant and advocate narratives, as well as quantitative measurements. Importantly, this plan was informed by and responsive to the concerns as well as suggestions made by advocates during the focus group discussion. In particular, when developing this plan, we remained mindful of advocates’ expressed interest in receiving additional support and resources, including additional staff, to help with data collection and management. Thus, in developing recommendations, we sought to limit wherever possible the addition of new evaluation components that would add to advocates’ record keeping burden. For example, we emphasized the use of existing administrative records and forms, such as the FAI’s intake and exit interview forms. In some cases, we recommended ways of enhancing the data that were already being gathered (e.g., converting yes/no questions to Likert-

type scales). In other cases, we suggested incorporating scientifically valid psychosocial measures, recognizing that additional resources directed toward evaluation would be needed to supplement the existing data collection. Thus, the recommended evaluation plan takes advantage of the wealth of qualitative observations from interviews and reports that FAI advocates and other staff members do as part of their practice. The plan offers options tailored to specific logic model outcomes for use with current data and measurement infrastructure. It also offers options for expanding data measurement, collection, and management procedures to support ongoing advocacy and to create a more holistic and accurate assessment of program components and their success. By establishing means to capture both quantitative *and* qualitative data, this evaluation plan provides a platform for accurate evaluation of program outcomes and impacts through a depth and variety of information. In the next section, we describe the process that the university team engaged in when reviewing the FAI's logic model and offer recommendations for refining it and for strengthening outcome measurement.

#### *Review and Refinement of FAI's Logic Model*

In addition to conducting the focus group, the university team reviewed a draft logic model that was developed by Casa de Esperanza leadership in collaboration with FAI staff members (see Figure 2). This initial draft clearly considered evidence-based recommendations for effective program logic modeling (e.g., see W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004), and was critical in helping the university team gain a greater understanding of how core program components were linked to expected outcomes. In the next section, we offer an 'outsider's perspective' to recommend modifications to the logic model. Broadly, our recommendations were intended to help the initiative more clearly align each impact/outcome with a specific activity/output, and link elements of the logic model to specific evaluation strategies. We also offer suggestions about where additional data collection is needed, both before and after program participation, to evaluate the effectiveness of outputs. Finally, we make recommendations to ensure that clear and consistent language is used throughout in order to enhance the usefulness of this tool for future evaluation efforts.

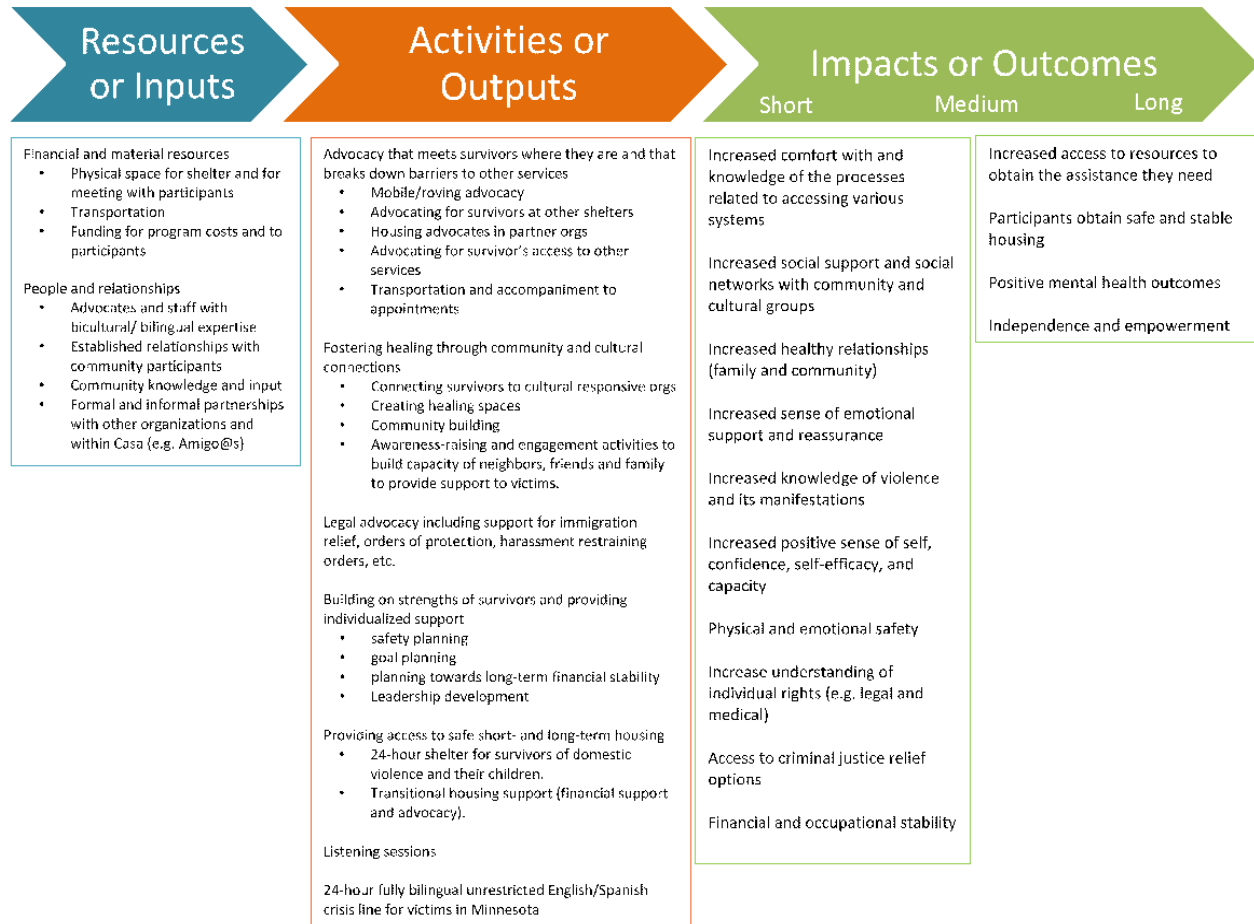


Figure 2. FAI Logic Model

A key outcome in the FAI's logic model is that participants will gain comfort with and knowledge of the processes related to accessing various systems. Given the importance placed on this outcome, we suggested that it would be valuable for an evaluation to obtain rich information about the nature and extent of knowledge gained by participants. We recommended building on the existing measure, which is limited to a single yes/no question from an exit interview protocol. The question asks participants to report whether, as a result of the program's support, they have developed further knowledge of available community resources. A simple enhancement would be to incorporate a five-point, Likert-type scale ranging from *Not at All* to *Very Much* to capture the extent to which participants perceive their knowledge and understanding

of a given system has increased as a result of the program's support. The question could also be added to a baseline and periodic assessment throughout the client's participation as a means of monitoring change over time.

Two related key outcomes include (a) increased social support and social networks with community and cultural groups, and (b) increased sense of emotional support and reassurance. These outcomes highlight the critical role that social groups such as family, friends, and community members play in the well-being of survivors of DV. Although there is currently no formal protocol in place for assessing perceived social support, the FAI team could rely on observational data (from the advocates) to determine whether these goals are being met.

With the additional use of validated measures of social support (e.g. the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zinat et al., 1988), advocates could ascertain, document, and quantify (e.g., determine quality of support from family members, count number of close friends) participants' social support networks after each contact session or after a predetermined period of time.

Another key outcome involves increased healthy relationships (family and community). This outcome emphasizes the importance of social networks – with particular focus on family and community relationships – for fostering resilience among Latinx survivors of DV. Currently, the FAI team relies primarily on qualitative observations from the advocates to assess this outcome, which as described by the advocates during the focus group meeting, are not systematically recorded. Instead, each advocate relies on their own informal/unofficial records to track this data. Although valuable, qualitative observations that are not documented may make it difficult to accurately assess and track progress over time. Therefore, our team recommended Casa de Esperanza/FAI leadership develop a formal protocol for documenting qualitative observations and other advocate notes (see next section on broad recommendations), and complement such observations with validated measures of quality of romantic relationships (e.g., Investment Model Scale; Rusbult, 1998) and of sense of community (e.g., Psychological Sense of Community Scale; Jason, Stevens, & Ram, 2015) in order to better understand and assess participant progress and program success.

Further, the program's expected goals of increasing (a) knowledge of violence and its manifestations, (b) understanding of individual rights, and (c) positive sense of self, confidence, self-efficacy, and capacity all promote survivor empowerment and self-advocacy. At present, these outcomes are not being formally assessed. It was our recommendation that the program add

questions to the Intake and Exit Interview forms to assess these outcomes pre- and post-participation in the program, and to again complement such data with validated measures whenever possible. The evaluation team also recommended that the program take an active role in providing psychoeducation to participants by offering psychoeducational materials, workshops, or coordinating guest presentations on the topic.

The program's overarching goal is to address the needs and concerns of participants by empowering them to cultivate and sustain a life of agency and safety. To better assess efficacy for this goal, we also recommended that FAI staff conduct follow-ups to evaluate if concerns and needs participants presented at the time of intake have been remedied, and whether gains in safety have been maintained post-participation in the program.

#### *Broad Recommendations for the Evaluation Design*

To best support the continued success of this comprehensive program, the implementation of the following recommendations will be helpful in establishing a sustainable evaluation plan that allows easy and complete assessment of the achieved goals and processes involved. It is important to note that whereas the research team prioritized and considered sustainability and feasibility throughout the process (e.g., by relying on and maximizing existing resources), the implementation of some of these recommendations may require additional resources, including additional staff, and all of them will require organizational appreciation of the utility of a program evaluation as a means of program improvement.

1. Advocates should carefully record and archive progress notes for each of their participants. Given that so much important information is absorbed by advocates from personal interactions with participants, this information is invaluable for progress evaluation.

Also, having a structured form for progress notes could result in better, more systematic information, and prove to be more efficient in terms of time management. Cameron and Turtle-Song (2002) offer a description of commonly used formats for writing progress notes that may be useful in this regard. As the authors note, the purpose and benefits of utilizing structured formats for progress notes, such as the **Subjective Objective Assessment and Plan (SOAP)** format, are many and include improving the “quality and continuity” of services, as well as communication among providers. Further, structured progress notes help providers with “recalling the details of each client’s case” and “ongoing assessment of both the client’s progress and treatment successes” (pg. 287). Notably, keeping progress notes concise is important across settings and perhaps especially when working with survivors of DV. Above all, survivor privacy and safety should be prioritized.

2. In order to evaluate outcomes at short- and medium-term time intervals after participants have left the program, it was recommended that FAI staff members and/or leadership conduct follow-up interviews with participants. These follow-ups could be conducted via a short phone call asking brief questions on key data points of interest. To this end, during the exit interview, advocates should ensure that accurate phone numbers for contact are collected and that participants expect follow-up phone calls. When conducting these phone calls, advocates should consider confirming physical location and security of the survivors to ensure confidentiality. Should the participants report ongoing safety

concerns, they will be referred to get back in touch with their advocate to be connected with relevant resources. Responses from these follow-ups should also be included in the database for each participant. This follow-up information is critical in order to assess progress during and after participation in the program and for assessing if skills and knowledge gained during participation have a lasting effect on participants. Given the previously noted concerns regarding the workload of advocates and their limited capacity to take on additional tasks, the evaluation team recommended Casa de Esperanza/FAI leadership consider creating a new position within the program to fill this need.

3. An individual-level database should be constructed and maintained which captures all information about participants in a secure manner. This database should be comprehensive and include complete information on demographics, the needs assessment from the intake interview, the case plan (with participant goals and current progress notes), the exit interview, follow-up call responses, and responses on other recommended measures for every participant. Collecting and storing these data centrally is critical to support ongoing advocacy, reporting requirements, and future evaluation analyses. Investment in a comprehensive system of data storage will facilitate sustainable ongoing evaluation endeavors moving forward.
  - a. User-friendly data entry form templates could be employed to allow advocates to enter new data directly into a central database (specific recommendations were

provided to the organization in an oral presentation of evaluation findings. A list of these is available upon request).

- b. Additionally, several recommendations were provided for analytical approaches and computations necessary to evaluate the types of questions using the various forms of information. These suggested resources were provided to the organization and are available upon request.

Implementing these recommendations would gather valuable information to improve the efficacy of the FAI but would also come with some risks to participant confidentiality. Systematically collecting and recording additional information about participants, particularly after participants have left the program, may present additional pressures on the FAI staff to keep that information, and thereby participants, safe. Although most DV agencies do include confidential paperwork, many of the evaluation-specific measures recommended above can be deidentified or aggregated after collection to preserve participant privacy. In addition, instituting clear data management protocols and training for all advocates would help the FAI maintain confidentiality for participant data.

### **Conclusions and Lessons Learned**

In this concluding section, we offer brief reflections, conclusions, and lessons learned from the student research team, the instructor, and the lead evaluator from Casa de Esperanza.

#### *Students*

For students in the community and clinical-community psychology programs at GSU, first formal exposure to the practice of community

psychology often happens in the context of a class project such as the present evaluation. This was the case for most members of our student team. As second and third year graduate students in the program, we were excited for the opportunity to translate the theoretical knowledge we had gained from foundational community psychology courses and research into practice through the development of an evaluation plan for a well-established national organization that exemplifies many of the tenets of the field. Indeed, Casa de Esperanza is a long-standing organization serving a need for culturally sensitive services for Latinx survivors of DV. Core community psychology practice competencies and value propositions such as empowerment, socio-cultural, and cross-cultural competence, among others (e.g., Dalton and Wolfe 2012; Ratcliffe and Neigher, 2010) are evident in all their initiatives, including (and perhaps especially) the FAI. In the process of reviewing formative program materials, engaging in ongoing communication with organization leadership, and conducting a focus group of family advocates, we gained valuable insights into the practice of community psychology. We believe this experience facilitated effective learning and professional development, as well as helped solidify our interests in developing, implementing, and/or evaluating community-based initiatives.

#### *Instructor*

This consultation with *Casa de Esperanza* is an example of a successful project to introduce students to community psychology practices that align with their career goals (Kuperminc, Chan, Seitz, & Wilson, 2016). In ACE, we work to create a 'win-win,' in which students gain valuable experience while community partners gain a valued and tangible product that they might not have had the resources to accomplish on their own. A less obvious outcome is that these projects serve to deepen long standing relationships with community organizations that program faculty and students have worked with over

the years, and to establish new partnerships. In this case, three of our faculty members have worked closely with Casa de Esperanza starting more than 10 years ago in work that has involved multiple graduate and undergraduate students. Two alumni have gone on to full-time employment with Casa de Esperanza. In fact, one of those alumni (the 5<sup>th</sup> author of this article), served as the main point of contact for the current consultation project (see Community Partner reflections below).

As an instructor for ACE, I have learned that successful projects like this one are built on laying the groundwork up front, including transparency about strengths and limitations with regard to student time and previous experience, as well as establishing as much as possible a clear and feasible set of goals and expectations, and emphasizing shared ownership of and responsibility for the work. Toward that end, I ask that community partners provide a brief (typically one paragraph) description of the project they have in mind and meet with the class (either in person or by video conference) for an hour to kick off the project. Student teams then take the lead, building a collaborative working relationship, learning about the organization, defining specific deliverables, and reporting results. Individually, students also maintain a journal of their experiences, structured in a way that bridges their experience in the field with topics covered in class readings throughout the semester (e.g., planning an evaluation, selecting criteria, research design, ethical considerations). As the instructor, I try to provide enough 'scaffolding' to help students work through the process while allowing for an authentic experience that includes all the inevitable bumps in the road. In the end, my hope is that students emerge from this experience ready to take the next step to more independent projects.

*Community Partner*

We have a great deal to learn from culturally specific, community grounded programs such as the FAI, which are often engaging in creative and innovative approaches to meet the needs of survivors. Casa de Esperanza is home to the National Latin@ Network (NLN) for Healthy Families and Communities, the federally designated cultural resource center on DV and Latino communities (Domestic Violence Resource Network, 2017). Through the NLN we provide training, technical assistance, research, and public policy advocacy to better serve Latinas and their families. Part of this work includes providing evaluation support and evaluation capacity building with Latino-serving and culturally specific DV organizations. The partnership described in this paper is an example of how evaluation can be used as a tool to document and lift up culturally specific practices into the broader DV field, which has not always been supportive of approaches to DV work that fall outside mainstream White feminist models (Starr, 2018). There are many organizations – especially those run by and for communities of color – that lack the resources or internal capacity to evaluate their innovative practices and many have had negative experiences with external researchers and evaluators. Thus, it has been important to ensure that the evaluators we partner with are grounded in community psychology principles and are as open to learning as the students involved in this project were.

Casa de Esperanza's many programs have previously benefited from the assistance of student evaluators, but this partnership was the first to engage the FAI specifically. Prior to the current partnership with GSU ACE students, the FAI staff (the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> authors of this article) and I, the director of the researcher and evaluation center for the NLN and alumni of the GSU community psychology PhD program, had begun a participatory approach to evaluation. We worked together to outline the initiative, develop the logic model, and inventory their current evaluation practices. In addition to serving as a gentle

introduction to evaluation, this pre-work modeled participatory evaluation and set the stage for working with external evaluators. In our first meetings with the students, it was important to set clear expectations for the scope of the project. We emphasized the importance of ensuring that any evaluation plan and tools developed would need to fit within the program context. For example, some of the grants that support the FAI require their own data collection forms to be used for evaluation. The students heard our concerns and conducted a web-based focus group with FAI staff to learn more about the current limitations and structures that might impede a successful implementation of the evaluation. In addition, the staff who participated in the focus group shared their appreciation for the opportunity to offer direct input and be part of evaluating the impact of their work on survivors. The findings from the focus group document the real need for more advocates to fulfill the high demand of advocacy support and services for survivors of DV. Overall, the rich partnership between Casa de Esperanza and GSU, setting clear expectations for both the scope of work and the evaluation approach used facilitated a positive experience for our FAI staff. We look forward to the chance to improve and enrich our work and to be able to share Casa de Esperanza's unique approach to working with Latina survivors of DV.

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