

# Raising the Bar for BIP

Policy Brief Concerning the Need for Certification and Standards for  
Batterer Intervention Programs (BIP) in Arkansas



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## Executive Summary

Batterer Intervention Programs (BIP) are intervention programs for individuals who commit acts of domestic violence or abuse aimed at education, rehabilitation, and prevention of future violence. Though there are many models for these programs, they all generally address the causes and effects of domestic violence and the changes that must take place to prevent future violence. Although success in these programs can be difficult to quantify and depends on a batterer's willingness to change, research from the Journal of Clinics in Family Practice has suggested that BIPs can reduce the likelihood of recidivism by 44-46%. Many states, including Texas, Missouri, Kansas, Alabama, Michigan, and West Virginia, have implemented and codified certified BIPs which allow the state to develop the standards for these programs and to monitor their effectiveness. However, Arkansas has zero certifications or standards for BIP - leaving providers of these programs to create their own, with little to no accountability and no independently verifiable measure of their effectiveness. In addition to recommending the state adopt a certification process for BIP in Arkansas, the Arkansas Coalition Against Domestic Violence proposes to be an active member in the development and implementation of a standards and/or certification process.

## Context

At a glance, the benefits of certified BIPs are clear and far reaching. From a financial standpoint, they present a low burden to the state as many certified programs in other states require participants to pay their own way. Additionally, they are generally a more affordable form of intervention for batterers than other types of counseling, and they do not require a large staff to function, making them cost-effective for the agencies who run them. Another advantage of BIPs is the vast number of models and approaches available. The two most popular approaches are therapy-based and gender-based, and there are many evidence based models that fall within these categories. This wide variety of tried-and-true models means that the state can choose any approach, or hybrid of approaches, that it determines would best fit the needs of Arkansans. From a clinical standpoint, it is clear that regardless of what approach is used, BIPs provide a safe environment for batterers to work through issues that are often deeply rooted and emotional in nature. BIPs are generally group-based programs which allows for a sharing of ideas that is unique and beneficial. Batterers can challenge and hold one another accountable in a way that does not exist in individualized therapy or counseling, and the supervised setting ensures batterers are monitored through the duration of their program (average minimum program length is 26 weeks).

As stated above, BIPs have been shown to reduce the likelihood of recidivism. Specifically, a report from the Judicial Engagement Network stated that data from individual outcome studies showed that most men who complete BIPs go on to cease or interrupt the cycle of violence. One of the greatest advantages to establishing a certification for BIPs is the level of control that the state would have over certified programs. In addition to ensuring that certified programs met minimum mental and behavioral health guidelines, the judicial system would have reliable database of programs they could trust to refer those who are found guilty of domestic violence or whom a judge determines would likely benefit from a targeted intervention, such as BIP. It is not uncommon for judges to refer offenders to anger management courses as an attempt to offer an intervention over incarceration, however, anger management programs are highly inappropriate settings for a batterer - as domestic violence is about power and control, not anger. Additionally, anger management programs tend to be shorter in length and the abuse the batterer inflicted is excused, ignored, or blamed on the victim.

Despite the extensive advantages that BIPs have to offer, there are still a few issues with BIPs that should be addressed. First and foremost, it is clearly established that measuring the effectiveness of BIPs in any real, quantifiable way can be difficult. As one report from the University of Pittsburgh on the Effectiveness of BIPs put it, “How do we measure ‘He hasn’t changed’ or ‘He’s doing better’?” Obtaining accurate data on recidivism rates requires long term study of a subject, which can be costly and difficult. However, that is not to say that accurate and useful data is impossible to gather. According to the same University of Pittsburgh report, the use of multiple outcome measures is likely to provide clearer insight and a better understanding of the effectiveness of BIPs than any single measure could provide. Another criticism of BIPs is the issue of how to effectively balance the interests of the batterer against the interests of the victim.

This issue involves both the level of confidentiality that batterers are afforded and the level of involvement that victims have in the process. Some are concerned that offering batterers too much confidentiality decreases the level of accountability and further endangers victims, although there is no real research to back up this claim. However, this issue would be relatively easy to address through a coordinated effort in the establishing of certified BIP standards, and the intentional involvement of victim advocacy groups, such as the ACADV, to ensure that victim safety is ensured at every possible avenue.

Importantly, Arkansas remains in the top six states for our rate of domestic violence homicides, with 2.22 women murdered per 100,000 people (When Men Murder Women 2020). In 2019, over 22,000 victims of domestic violence were served in the 30 domestic violence shelters represented by the ACADV. Additionally, the ACADV tracked 51 domestic violence homicides committed in 2020, which included 14 men, 28 women, and 9 children who lost their lives to this issue. With such high rates of violence - impacting both men and women - it is past time Arkansas take a different approach to how we have been responding to domestic violence and consider a new approach on how to hold batterers accountable for their actions. As such, creating these state standards would ensure BIPs that are certified are cost-effective, tailored to the needs of the state and the batterer, and can more easily be integrated into the community's response to domestic violence.

## Current Policy/Alternatives

Arkansas does not currently have any sort of state standard or certification for BIPs, and although uncertified programs still exist, they are not accountable to the state and the state has no power to regulate them. These programs are also less integrated with other community efforts to combat domestic violence, so they are not always utilized to their full potential. In fact, the ACADV has found a concerning level of misunderstanding on the difference between anger management programs and BIP by various state officials, including Judges, DHS case workers, and mental health providers. This confusion on intervention programs for domestic abusers allows batterers to do the bare minimum in order to avoid incarceration or enacting true changes to their behavior, and as such, threatens the safety of victims who decide to come forward and work with the criminal justice system to stop the violence. The establishment of a statewide certified BIP system in Arkansas has the potential to greatly impact efforts to reduce domestic violence by working on an individual level to educate and deter batterers from committing further acts of violence, and ensuring batterers are closely monitored once they have started their program.

## Recommendations

Establishing a certified BIP in Arkansas would, no doubt, be a process which would require time and attention, and the Arkansas Coalition Against Domestic Violence would like to be an active member in the process. This is not unheard of for Domestic Violence Coalitions to be a part of their statewide efforts to oversee BIP, for example the Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence, along with other Alabama advocacy groups were granted statutory authority (Ala. Code 1975 §30-7-6) to oversee the establishment of their statewide BIPs. Additionally, Oregon law (O.R.S. §180.700) established a BIP advisory committee partially made up of representatives from domestic violence victims' advocacy groups. Ohio, Virginia, and West Virginia also have similar oversight standards. Part of what makes these state's BIP so successful, is an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence.

Based off the success of the BIPs in the state's mentioned, the ACADV would like to see the following elements made standard for BIP in Arkansas:

- Minimum program length of 26 weeks/sessions
- Strict accountability to probation/parole conditions and reporting of violations to probation/parole officers by the BIP service provider
- Emphasis of all BIP to be on ensuring safety of victims of domestic violence and their children
- Implementation of a gender-based intervention model (such as the Duluth Model) for BIP
- Consistent evaluation of all approved, BIP to measure effectiveness and ensure accountability

Additionally, as BIP deals primarily with domestic violence - the ACADV proposes the following concepts be made universal for all services providers of BIP:

- 1) battering is a pattern of behavior, not a stand alone event;
- 2) battering is not an addiction or disease, and not caused by alcohol or substance abuse;
- 3) batterers are solely responsible for their actions, and must be held accountable for their violence and abuse;
- 4) BIP service providers will provide mental health and rehabilitative services, but shall not participate as advocates for batterers in court settings to prevent collusion or manipulation by abusers; and finally,
- 5) BIP is not an appropriate setting for "family" or "couples" therapy, as the goal is to address the batterers violence and abuse, not reunite a family or couple.

## References

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