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## Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault: Research Practices for Protection Orders

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**A domestic violence  
and sexual assault  
crisis center  
program evaluation**  
*SASA Crisis Center –  
Legal Advocacy  
Program*  
Hastings, Nebraska



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# Program Description and Context

## The Spouse Abuse Sexual Assault (SASA) Crisis Center Legal Advocacy Program

**Mission Statement:** *“To be a source of help, hope, safety, and inspiration to survivors of domestic and sexual violence. We embrace and focus on the story of each individual with deep concern and care in order to understand, facilitate, advocate, and support.”<sup>1</sup>*

SASA has been in existence for 40 years serving individuals and families in many important ways. Their current set of service provisions can be found detailed below in an organizational chart.

### Legal Advocacy Program

SASA views their legal advocacy program as a way for them to inform, guide, and assist their clients in obtaining one tool to achieve safety: a protection order. They also view this program as a way to advocate for system changes to be made regarding how and why protection orders are or are not awarded.

### Goals

The overarching goal of the program is to assist individuals who are facing domestic violence and/or sexual assault to achieve safety. SASA’s legal advocacy program strives to be an agent of cultural, community, and system change.



### Services Provided

Clients receiving services from SASA’s legal advocacy program receive assistance in writing an affidavit for protection or harassment orders. SASA advocates also attend court upon the client’s request and connect survivors to other legal resources they may need.<sup>1</sup>

# 1

Staff member fully dedicated to the legal advocacy program

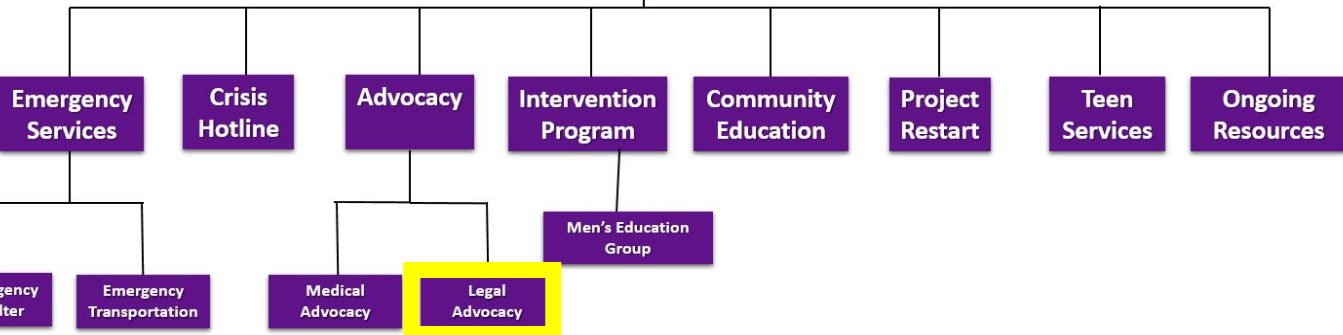
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# 4

Staff members partially dedicated to the legal advocacy program

SASA has 7 full-time and 5 part-time staff.

### Spouse Abuse Sexual Assault (SASA) Crisis Center

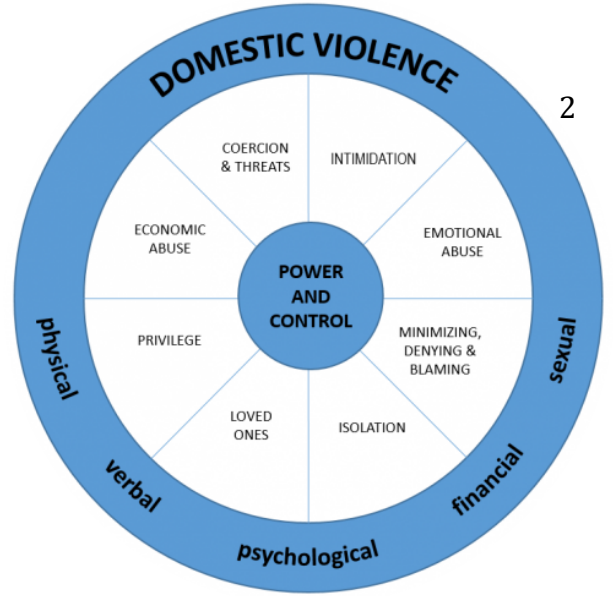




# Social Problem Being Addressed

## Social Problem

The social problem being addressed by SASA’s legal advocacy program is that individuals are experiencing domestic violence and sexual assault. As a result, they are obtaining protection orders as a form of safety, security, protection, and peace of mind. SASA states that domestic violence in particular is a system of power and control that is allowed and perpetuated in communities that value men over women. This cycle results in physical, emotional, and financial harm for the victim. Obtaining a protection order can break the cycle of power and control from the perpetrator which in turn empowers the victim to establish safety.



## What is Domestic Violence?

“Domestic violence can be defined as a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. Abuse is physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, or wound someone.”<sup>3</sup>

## What is Sexual Assault?

“Sexual Assault is an assault of a sexual nature on another person, or any sexual act committed without consent. Sexual assault is a crime motivated by the need to control, humiliate, and harm. Perpetrators use sexual assault as a weapon to hurt and dominate others.”<sup>3</sup>



## Who does it affect?

This problem affects primarily women, but men as well. Anyone can become a victim of domestic violence or sexual assault. Families, communities, and other systems such as healthcare, law enforcement, and social services are also greatly affected by this problem.



## How does it affect them?

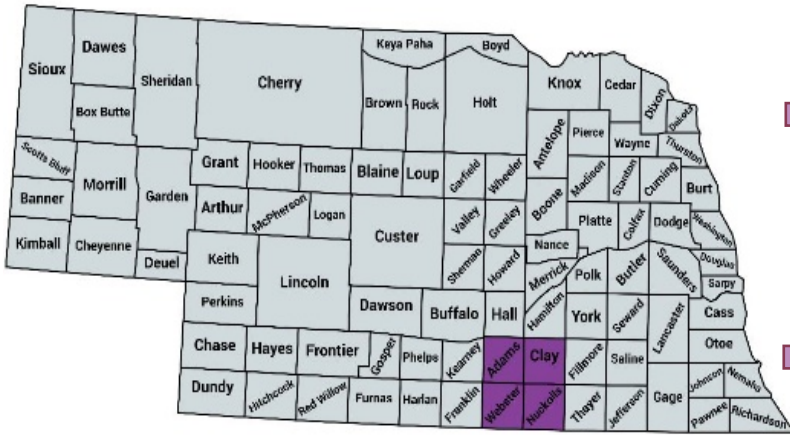
Victims of domestic violence and sexual assault respond in several ways. These can be emotional and psychological responses such as depression, flashbacks, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Other effects include self-harm, sexually transmitted infections, substance abuse, eating disorders, pregnancy, sleep disorders, suicide, bruising and other physical injuries, sexual dysfunction, and fertility issues in women, among others.<sup>4</sup> It may also be difficult for these individuals to function regularly as they may live in fear and isolation.



# Social Problem Being Addressed - Prevalence

## Prevalence

*National:* "1 in 4 women and 1 in 9 men were victims of sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner with a negative impact such as injury, fear, concern for safety, needing services" (p. 2).<sup>5</sup>



### *State:*

➔ "The most recent statewide estimates of sexual assault in Nebraska estimate that more than 1 in 8 women in Nebraska has been the victim of sexual assault..." (p. 20).<sup>6</sup>

➔ Data gathered from the Nebraska State Patrol reports from 2012-2013 "revealed there were 225 deaths related to domestic violence... All domestic violence-related deaths occurred within a heterosexual relationship, with a male abuser and a female victim... In all of the cases, the homicide occurred as the victim was ending (or had ended) the relationship" (p. 32).<sup>6</sup>

### *Local:*

➔ SASA's service area includes Adams, Clay, Nuckolls, and Webster counties in Nebraska. In 2016, the total population of this service area was 31,536.<sup>7</sup> This population includes 12,719 total households, of which 6,456 (51%) were married couple households.<sup>8</sup> 93% of individuals in the service area were white.<sup>7</sup>

➔ The Nebraska Crime Commission reports that in 2017 the counties in SASA's service area had rates of violent crimes of 0-2.5% per 1,000 individuals, with Adams county having the highest rate.<sup>9</sup>

➔ SASA serves approximately 750 individuals per year with many of those individuals coming back several times for service. They also served approximately 100 individuals per year, about 50 households, in their emergency shelter.

➔ SASA stated they feel the domestic violence and sexual assault numbers for their service area are in line with the national averages.

➔ The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services reported that 17,300 individuals in Nebraska received services for sexual and domestic violence in 2016-2017.<sup>10</sup> Compared to the 2010 census of 1,826,341 people in Nebraska, that is approximately 0.01% of Nebraska's population seeking services for Domestic Violence/Sexual Assault.<sup>11</sup>





**Correlates of medical and legal help seeking among women reporting intimate partner violence (Duterte, Bonomi, Kernic, Schiff, Thompson, & Rivara, 2008) <sup>12</sup>**

This article involved examining the relationship between intimate partner violence and help-seeking behaviors among female victims. The type, severity, and duration of violence were key factors in the examination.

**Methods:** This study included 1,509 randomly selected women who were interviewed by phone. Areas of analysis included items such as demographics and census information, whether the victim’s children witnessed the violence, self-reported help seeking, and the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System to assess physical, sexual, and psychological abuse/violence.

**Key findings:** Women who sought legal services were less likely to be married, more highly educated, and employed full-time. Those who experienced physical abuse were 3.1 times more likely to seek legal help. Severity of the abuse was associated with victims seeking legal help. This study stated often that credence should be given to a woman’s internally based abuse evaluation process and threshold because services were sought when the victim felt they had reached their threshold. An important line taken from this article is: “Women seeking legal protection are more likely to have been exposed to serious abuse and their situation should be taken seriously” (p. 94).

**A comparison of civil and criminal orders of protection as remedies for domestic violence victims in a Midwestern county (Kethineni & Beichner, 2009) <sup>13</sup>**

This article focused on the differences between criminal and civil protection orders for victims of domestic violence and the factors that play into the issuance of each. This article detailed the stipulations of criminal vs. civil protection orders and what each process entails.

**Methods:** This study included selection of an initial 100 civil and 100 criminal protection orders to be examined, of which 33 were removed from the study due to study requirements. Areas for analysis included the primary presenting issue of the victim, nature of abuse, and an ordinal-level violence scale created by the researchers. Other factors included demographic information, type of protection order (emergency, plenary, or interim), dates of abuse/protection order issuance, relationship factors, types of remedies sought by the victim, and prior criminal history of the offender.

**Key findings:** Many, if not all, protection orders were granted for personal remedies (abuse, harassment, stalking, etc.). Also, many offenders had a prior criminal offense which made the protection order more likely to be granted. Re-abuse was lower with the issuance of protection orders. Factors that influenced protection order issuance were abuse history before filing, history of physical abuse for criminal protection orders, and history of emotional abuse for civil protection orders. The article also emphasized that the civil process is shaped by the victim’s wishes which provides them with an active role in the process and a sense of empowerment.





## **Criminal protection orders for women victims of domestic violence: Explicating predictors of level of restrictions among orders issued (Sullivan, Weiss, Price, & Pugh, 2017)<sup>14</sup>**

This article spoke to the idea that protection orders are utilized by law enforcement and the justice system to stifle rates of domestic violence. It was also highlighted that little research has been performed to recognize the factors associated with the issuance of protection orders. This study aimed to determine how several factors of an individual's circumstances affect the level of restriction a protection order places on the offender.

**Methods:** 298 participants were randomly selected, signed an informed consent to participate, and partook in a structured interview. Areas of data analysis included the level of protection order associated with each case, self-reported demographic factors, relationship factors (i.e. length of relationship), types of victimization (physical victimization - Revised Conflict Tactics Scale, sexual victimization - Sexual Experiences Survey, psychological victimization - Psychological Maltreatment of Women - Short Version, Fear of Partner Scale), whether the offender is the father of any of the victim's children, and court-process-related factors.

**Key findings:** Demographics and having a mutual child were not defining characteristics in the level of protection order granted. Most individuals were granted the level of protection they requested. Key factors that influenced the level of protection orders issued were severity of psychological abuse and level of fear the individual had of their offender.



### **Application**

The literature highlighted is closely related to the evaluation at hand because they all pertain to domestic violence protection orders and reasons why they may or may not be granted to domestic violence victims. Many of the same aspects of domestic violence were focused on throughout the literature, including severity of abuse and type of abuse (physical, sexual, and psychological). Another key theme identified in the literature was how protection orders are more likely to be issued when the violence experienced by the victim is more severe. The literature also expressed concern with precipitating and influencing factors that victims bring with them when they are ready to seek a protection order against their offender. This theme is particularly relevant to the evaluation at hand because it will examine protection orders to determine what precipitating factors influence a judge's decision to grant protection orders. The evaluation at hand will be similar but also unique from the studies depicted. This study will be focusing on the factors that determine whether a judge decides to grant a protection order for a domestic violence victim and how SASA can use that information to help their clients when they fill out their affidavit.







# Logic Model

## Spouse Abuse Sexual Assault Crisis Center – Legal Advocacy

**Social problem being addressed:** Individuals are experiencing domestic violence and sexual assault and are seeking legal assistance for protection with undesirable outcomes and may become victims of re-abuse.

### Inputs

- Guidelines for the Nebraska Coalition to End Sexual and Domestic Violence
- SASA staff
- SASA client civil protection affidavits/granted orders
- Funding
- On-site office space/facilities
- Staff training and supervision
- Equipment – copy machines & office supplies
- Mileage reimbursement for employees attending court
- Community referrals

### Activities

- Inform, guide, and assist clients in writing affidavits for protection or harassment orders
- Assist clients in preparing for the court process
- Attend court upon the client’s request
- Connect clients to other legal resources available, as needed
- Collaborate with law enforcement to obtain accurate reporting information
- Advocate for system change regarding how and why protection orders are or are not granted
- Receive community referrals and complete formal intake process
- Track protection orders throughout process and update clients

### Outputs

- # of clients served in Legal Advocacy program
- # of times staff attended court with clients
- # of meetings attended with area judges
- # of Legal Advocacy sessions held

### Short-Term Outcomes

- Clients will have increased knowledge of protection order process
- Clients will have increased knowledge of common factors in accepted protection orders
- Clients will have increased skills in filling out affidavits for protection orders
- Clients will have increased ability to propose a successful (accepted) affidavit
- Clients will have increased support in seeking legal assistance
- Clients who meet SASA criteria will be awarded protection orders
- Judges and members of judicial system will have a better understanding of domestic violence to inform their decisions

### Long-Term Outcomes

- Clients will be protected and safe
- Clients will have a sense of empowerment and relief
- Judicial system will work for the safety and well-being of domestic violence and sexual assault victims

### Impact

*Individuals are legally protected in a community free of domestic violence and sexual assault.*

**Collaborating partners:** area judges, area courts, area law enforcement

**External factors:** racial disparities, prejudice, dependency on offender (unemployment rate), complex environment including systems with differing ideas and values, availability of housing



## Quantitative Proposal

### **Current Quantitative Methodology**

Currently, SASA collects data within the Legal Advocacy program through SASA staff keeping track of the number of client protection order affidavits SASA staff have assisted clients with. This includes protection orders that have been awarded and denied by area judges. SASA does not currently use any research design or measurement tool to collect or analyze this data as per Jo Springer, SASA's Executive Director. Therefore, there is no reporting being done with the data that is collected, other than those numbers being included in their annual Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) grant application.



### **Why is collecting data so important?**

It is important to begin collecting and analyzing data concerning SASA's protection order process for several reasons. SASA staff feel that advocating for their clients and communicating with area courts, judges, and law enforcement regarding their clients' needs is dire to the work they do. It becomes much easier to talk and reason with these entities and individuals when there is solid research and data backing the passion for their clients' safety and protection. Collecting this data also helps SASA staff to clearly recognize what they are doing well in their Legal Advocacy program in assisting individuals in finding safety and protection.



## Quantitative Proposal

### Proposed Quantitative Methodology: Research & Sampling Designs

It would be beneficial if SASA utilized the implementation of a survey to assess for clients' knowledge of the protection order process and common factors in accepted protection orders. There will be no need for any pre- or post-tests because there will be no treatment being implemented with these clients and doing so would cause more strain in terms of time and money on SASA and its staff. Strengths of survey design research are that it takes less time, resources, money, and expertise to carry out than other research designs because there is no treatment being carried out, any staff member can implement the survey, and there is no scoring involved. However, there are weaknesses to this single-point survey design such as limited data on client change.<sup>15</sup>



The entire population served by SASA's Legal Advocacy program should be surveyed, if possible. The sample being pulled will be a nonprobability convenience sample because SASA will only be able to reach those individuals who they are serving through their program and no systematic randomization will be possible. A limitation to this sampling design is that it may not be representative of the entire affected population, meaning the sample will only represent the population that SASA sees and only those who respond to the survey and not the entire population being affected by domestic violence and sexual assault.<sup>15</sup>

SASA will be able to implement this research and sampling design by briefly training staff on how to administer the survey with their clients and how to collect and store that data electronically (Excel, database, etc.) SASA staff will administer the survey to clients in a quiet, safe, and pleasant environment prior to filling out their protection order affidavit. Clients are not bound to completing the survey and will be notified that they can opt out at any time via informed consent. Individual client scores will be shared with the client and then collected to be analyzed by staff and to inform practice and conversations with the area judicial system.



# Quantitative Proposal

## Proposed Quantitative Methodology: Measurement Tool

- ✓ The quantitative standardized measurement tool I recommend SASA begin utilizing is the Measure of Victim Empowerment Related to Safety (MOVERS) scale. This scale was collaboratively created by Goodman, Bennett Cattaneo, Thomas, Woulfe, Chong, and Smyth in 2014. It is available for distribution with the permission of the first author, Lisa Goodman. This measure is also available in English and Spanish. The MOVERS scale is a 13-item tool that requires answers to Likert scale questions ranging from “never true” to “always true.” This scale measures empowerment of the survivor in terms of their personal safety.<sup>16</sup>
- ✓ Items to consider concerning threats to internal validity in using this measurement tool are the instrumentation, i.e. the time and place of administration, and potential dropout/nonparticipation as this is a sensitive topic and many individuals may not want to participate.
- ✓ Based on three subscales created for the MOVERS’ scale reliability and validity, each subscale demonstrated good internal reliability and construct validity. While these scores were good, they were not great and could be improved through more testing.<sup>16</sup>

## Why this tool for SASA?

- ✓ This tool will be beneficial for SASA to use because it assesses for the client’s own perception of their safety. “Safety,” as defined by the scale, is safety from “physical or emotional abuse by another person.”<sup>15</sup> Gathering quantitative data using this scale will also help in writing affidavits to show that the clients’ scores on this scale prove to the area judges and court systems they do not feel safe in their current situation.
- ✓ Outcomes on the logic model this tool will help measure are long-term outcomes of clients being protected and safe, clients having a sense of empowerment and relief, and a judicial system that will work for the safety and well-being of domestic violence and sexual assault victims.
- ✓ The data collected from this tool will help to inform SASA, its clients, and the area judicial system to better understand what safety and protection looks and feels like for domestic violence and sexual assault survivors. This tool is also free with permission of the author, is simple enough for most anyone to score, is offered in two languages, and is short and simple enough to fill out.



## Ethical Research Practice

The proposed quantitative research and sampling design and measurement tool all reflect sound ethical research practice for social work. SASA will not be practicing outside of their competence and will be developing and enhancing their professional expertise by utilizing new data collection techniques to improve their program. SASA will also continue to be helping those in need, addressing social problems, and respecting the inherent dignity and worth of the person by assessing their clients’ knowledge and skills and safety before assisting them as well as using this information to help inform and have conversations with area judicial systems, judges, and law enforcement. By doing so, SASA will also be challenging social injustice by advocating for their clients coming from a research lens and data-driven approach.<sup>17</sup>



# Qualitative Proposal

## Proposed Qualitative Question:

*How does the approval/denial of an individual's protection order impact their perceived safety and protection?*

### Related Outcomes

This proposal seeks to address the long-term outcomes outlined in the logic model of clients being protected and safe, clients having a sense of empowerment and relief, and the judicial system working for the safety and well-being of domestic violence and sexual assault victims. The first two outcomes will be addressed through the participants' thoughts and feelings. The last outcome will be addressed by eventually utilizing this data to present to key members of the area judicial system and law enforcement.

### Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is the basic way this qualitative portion will be carried out. It is both a process and a product, meaning it guides how we will go about the data collection and methodology as well as how we will explain the data. The main goal of grounded theory for this project and evaluation is to help SASA develop a new understanding grounded in data gathered from their own field. Essentially, we will start with a guiding question, however the data will guide us to a new understanding of a certain subject, in this case it being how the approval/denial of a protection order affidavit impacts an individual's perceived safety and protection.<sup>18</sup>

It will be imperative to work to build strong rapport with the individuals considering the sensitivity of this topic and vulnerability of the participants.

### Interview Questions

- ➔ What makes you feel safe and protected?
- ➔ How did you feel when you received the outcome of your protection order affidavit? What was your reaction?
- ➔ What aspects of your safety and protection were affected by the outcome of your protection order affidavit?
- ➔ How do you feel that your life would be different if your protection order affidavit outcome had been different?
- ➔ What steps are you taking to continue to feel safe and protected in your life?

These questions will inquire from individuals about their feelings and actions relating to their awarded or denied protection order affidavits.

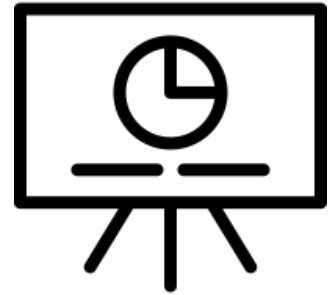




## Qualitative Proposal

### Data Collection

Data for this qualitative portion will start with the protection order affidavits that SASA has provided. Two or three specific protection order affidavits that were either awarded or denied will be identified through their particular story and/or demographics. The individuals who submitted these protection orders will then be identified by SASA staff who will provide their contact information. This information will only be utilized to contact the individuals to determine whether they would like to participate in this study.



After several participants are agreeable, one-on-one interviews will occur at SASA with Jo Springer present, as participants are most comfortable. Upon conjunction with the participants' schedules along with Jo's and mine, the interviews will take place either onsite at SASA or via Skype/Zoom in January and/or February of 2019. Interviews will be done as opposed to a focus group due to time limitations and the sensitivity and vulnerability of the targeted population. These individuals will simply be asked to speak about their experiences using the questions previously noted as an outline for conversation structure.

Participants will fill out an informed consent form so that they fully understand the purpose and risks of this study. These interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. The voice recording will be immediately saved in a password-protected drive. After being transcribed, the voice recordings will be destroyed. Data will be transcribed by March 1, 2019 and the analysis and reporting will be completed in March and April of 2019.







## Qualitative Proposal

### Strengths of Interview Methodology

A strength of the interview method is the timeliness, as there are only three individuals to coordinate with as opposed to several more. Another strength is that individual thought and specific individuals are being reported on, so their voices and thoughts are not getting lost.<sup>15</sup>

### Weaknesses of Interview Methodology

One weakness includes the scheduling as well because myself and Jo may have busy schedules that offer little flexibility and we do not know what participants' lives look like. Another weakness is that some individuals may feel uncomfortable in a one-on-one interview situation and may not want to talk much, as they have no peers to encourage them and may be reluctant to share.<sup>15</sup>



### Ethical Research Practice

Ethical issues regarding this study include confidentiality, consent, and doing no harm. The participants' confidentiality will be preserved through the anonymity of participants on SASA's end of things. I will not necessarily know the names of these individuals and their data will not be associated with their demographic information. The participants will all receive informed consent prior to the interview beginning. At this point, they will receive all information regarding the study and will be given full rights to opt out at any point if they feel triggered or generally uncomfortable. This study also is for educational purposes and to inform SASA's program only. All efforts will be made so that no harm will be done to participants. Here, we will be respecting the dignity and worth of the person and overall acting in a trustworthy manner.<sup>17</sup>



## Important statistics

- 225 deaths in Nebraska associated with domestic violence (2012-2013).<sup>8</sup>
- 17,300 individuals in Nebraska received services for sexual and domestic violence in 2016-2017.<sup>10</sup>
- 93% of individuals in SASA’s service area were white.<sup>7</sup>
- “1 in 4 women and 1 in 9 men were victims of sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner with a negative impact such as injury, fear, concern for safety, needing services” (p. 2).<sup>5</sup>

## Takeaways from the Literature

- No literature specifically mirroring the efforts of the programs at SASA.
- Important to focus on severity and type of abuse (physical, sexual, psychological).
- Protection orders are more likely to be awarded when the severity of abuse is higher.
- Important to look at the precipitating and influencing factors in a victim’s decision to obtain a protection order.

## Quantitative Takeaways

- Data collection, analysis, and reporting are important to inform practice.
- Survey design and implementation – assess clients’ knowledge of the protection order process before their interaction with legal advocacy staff members to determine what these clients need from them. SASA staff collecting and analyzing this data will be the most efficient means.
- Ethics are imperative in all social work practice, especially in research!

## Qualitative Takeaways

- The qualitative methodology proposed in this report will help SASA to get a better understanding of how the services in the legal advocacy program truly help and impact their clients.
- It will be up to the SASA program to continue the qualitative efforts put forth in this project beyond it.

## Important Logic Model Components

### Long-Term Outcomes

- Clients will be protected and safe
- Clients will have a sense of empowerment and relief
- Judicial system will work for the safety and well-being of domestic violence and sexual assault victims

### Impact

*Individuals are legally protected in a community free of domestic violence and sexual assault.*





## Limitations



### Possible Limitations of the Methodology

**Sample** – The smaller sample size of the available quantitative data (n=64) could create limitations in terms of generalizability. Another issue with the sample is that this data is the only data available to the researcher. It is unclear of specifically when, where, and how this data was collected.

**Measurement Tool** – As discussed in the quantitative proposal, the reliability and validity of the measurement tool proposed is not ideal. Due to the limited time and resources currently available to the researcher, this was the best measurement tool that could be found and may not be the best available.

**Lack of Prior Research** – The literature presented in this report is closely related to the general topic and concern of SASA's legal advocacy program, however it is not directly applicable. The fact that there is no prior research to be found in the realm of domestic violence/sexual assault legal advocacy programs makes it difficult to fully understand and implement research, evaluation, and practice within a program such as SASA's.

### Possible Limitations of the Researcher

**Access** – The distance between the researcher (Omaha, NE) and SASA (Hastings, NE) is a significant barrier to the evaluation process. The researcher came into this project completely unfamiliar with SASA, its mission, its target populations, and its programs. While this was a major barrier, there have been strides taken to alleviate any struggles. There has been great and numerous efforts made to communicate information and progress of this project in terms of emails, calls, and video calls.

**Bias** – The researcher has experience with harassment protection orders but has no experience either personally or professionally with domestic violence or sexual assault. This could create a gap between the researcher's understanding the real work being done.

**Time** – Due to the limited time allotted for this project and evaluation, the time to completely do it justice is not feasible.





## Recommendations/Next Steps

### Quantitative Proposal

One step that SASA could take for the future is to utilize the quantitative proposal set forth in this report. Beginning data collection in this manner would allow SASA to start the data collection process in general which will help to better inform their practice in their legal advocacy program. Assessing for their clients' knowledge and perceived safety will create a much clearer depiction of the client population they are working with.



### Consistent Data Collection

Another step is for SASA to keep complete records of who they serve, including demographics and full protection orders and affidavits if at all possible. This helps to inform service as well as provide context to whether affidavits are awarded or denied.



### Logic Model & Literature

Lastly, one other step for SASA to take for the immediate future is to adjust, utilize, and make a priority the logic model set out in this report. The logic model is a great starting point and guide post for SASA to develop policies and standards for the legal advocacy program, truly understand what impact their efforts are having, and what they need to do to reach their desired outcomes for their clients. Immersing themselves in the literature will be beneficial as well, as Jo stated previously that they have no literature available to them. Understanding and applying aspects of the literature to SASA's data processes and service delivery will be beneficial and will hopefully produce valuable outcomes.



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