

support and advocacy
for survivors of violence and trauma



Witness Justice e-Newsletter

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Team Heal Trauma

Another Brick in the Wall: Abusive Relationships and Parental Alienation Syndrome

It's just another slap in the face of the domestic violence survivor. Or perhaps it's worse than a slap. According to many experts, it's just another brick in the wall built by abusive spouses bent on controlling custody of their children. It's called Parental Alienation Syndrome, or PAS, and it has enjoyed some airtime in the media after the publication of *A Promise to Ourselves: Journey Through Fatherhood and Divorce*, a book penned by actor Alec Baldwin. Since the book, in which the actor criticizes what he terms "the family law industry," hit bookstores in late September, PAS has hit the airwaves, and "it" has hit the fan among domestic abuse survivors.

Parental Alienation Syndrome supposedly occurs when one parent makes false allegations against the other parent in order to build a wall between that parent and the child. These false allegations-such as accusations of abuse-can be quite serious and damaging. Yet, according to many experts



The race is over, but it's not too late to **support Team Heal Trauma**, Witness Justice's charity running team, and it's commitment to raising awareness about the impact of psychological trauma.

All of our runners successfully completed either the marathon or the 10K race at the 33rd Annual Marine Corps Marathon.

CONGRATULATIONS TEAM on your hard work and dedication!!

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on domestic violence, PAS is a stratagem employed by some abusers to discredit parents from protecting their children from real abuse.

A PAS argument would go something like this: a battered wife attempts to protect her abused children by filing a protective order with the courts. The batterer counters by telling the court that his wife is fabricating the abuse to, as one expert characterized it, "demonize" him.

Many experts contend that PAS is nothing more than a ploy in the tug-of-war custody battles that, like an exclamation mark at the end of a sentence, often ends abusive relationships. The Presidential Task Force of the American Psychological Association and the National Council for Juvenile & Family Court Judges have both rejected PAS. According to Joan Meier, Executive Director of the Domestic Violence Legal Empowerment and Appeals Project (DV LEAP), "PAS was invented to defeat child abuse claims" Yet despite research suggesting that it has no validity, PAS has enjoyed some success in family law courts.

As a result, experts believe that PAS may, in some cases, act as an accomplice to child abuse; it may mislead judges into believing that no abuse occurred when in fact it did. It may mislead judges to believe that the abuse was only a figment of a vindictive mother's imagination designed to poison the husband in the minds of their kids. Sue Else, president of the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV), noted in a recent article posted on the organization's website that in custody cases involving domestic violence, judges must "ensure that the safety of family members is not dangerously impaired by misleading-and legally unjustifiable-'parental alienation syndrome' theories."

Many experts agree that the family court system does not completely understand domestic violence, which impacts its decisions with regard to the welfare of abused children. In its fallible judgments, courts have even granted custody and/or visitation rights to abusive parents.

PAS suggests that one spouse is attempting to engineer a wall between the kids and the other spouse. But the reality is much different. In court, especially during bitter custody battles, battered spouses must climb over a wall to protect themselves and their children from abusive spouses. PAS, according to many experts on domestic violence, is just another brick in that wall.

A Giant Leap for Change in the Criminal Justice System
- David A. Washington

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Changing Systems

Imagine eating spinach and ice cream together. Are you thinking - Yuck? That may be the response that comes to mind when you think about victims of violence and abuse being placed in a criminal justice setting rather than in a therapeutic environment.

Surprisingly, the fact is that there are a substantial amount of survivors that are displaced into a criminal justice setting. Supporting this fact is the TAPA Jail Diversion Site study which reported that 63.4% of survivors in criminal justice settings are lifetime witnesses of violence; 51.5% have reported lifetime sexual abuse; and 88.6% have reported lifetime physical abuse. [As reported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, (1999)]

Prior to 1995, there were no manualized models of trauma-informed services on a group level in the criminal justice setting. Without understanding and implementing trauma-informed approaches as a way to effectively address the underlying issues taunting a victim, as Roger Fallot, PhD., from Community Connections in Washington, DC, stated, "There is a vicious cycle between incarceration, homelessness, mental health problems, and substance abuse."

The State of Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene Administration, through the Division of Special Needs Populations, has made progress in this area and developed the TAMAR Program to serve men and women struggling with substance abuse, mental health issues, and a history of childhood victimization.

In 2000, 22 men and women sat, waiting apprehensively, to find out what traumatic experiences had to do with their current situation: incarceration and shattered dreams. This marked the beginning of the TAMAR Program (Trauma, Addictions, Mental Health And Recovery) within the Washington County Detention Center, and also significantly transformed the criminal justice system setting in Washington County to be one that is trauma-informed.

Changing Lives

By taking this audacious leap to better serve victims, the state and the criminal justice system have offered men and women the opportunity to work through the stages of recovery from overwhelming life experiences. Collaborating with judges, attorneys, the Public Defenders' Office, Parole and Probation, and the local Detention Center, Washington County has seen a decrease in recidivism in those individuals that have completed the program, as well as a presence of hope in those that have suffered from the consequences of violence over the years.

This program facilitates humanitarian transformation. As a clinician who has been in the field of chemical dependency since 1989 I have seen

hundreds of individuals with histories of trauma being deprived of basic trauma-informed services. It is imperative that these services be made available to every survivor and it is my hope that the future brings with it an expansion of trauma-informed care within the criminal justice system.

As the system shifts from trauma-informed care to trauma-informed services, it is difficult to not wonder if we can eventually approach a transformation to trauma-informed communities.

Editor's note: each month, the column "Changing Systems - Changing Lives," will explore a topic raised by readers, discuss issues relevant to that topic, and provide suggestions for effecting change in trauma-informed care systems. Witness Justice invites suggestions for future topics; please email suggestions to editor@witnessjustice.org.

Board Member Profile of the Month

David Washington

Prisoners may have turned their backs on society by breaking its rules, but thanks to people like Witness Justice Board member David Washington, society will never completely turn its back on them. David, whose experience in the field of substance abuse spans more than a decade, is the program coordinator for both the Jail Substance Abuse and TAMAR (Trauma, Addictions, Mental health, And Recovery) programs for the Washington County Health Department's Division of Addictions and Mental Health, in Hagerstown, Maryland. In this vital role, David oversees trauma services at local detention centers. While his expertise covers the spectrum of substance abuse issues, he specializes in working with male prisoners who have a history of childhood trauma.



His post at the Washington County Health Department is the most recent in a celebrated career in the field of substance abuse, which began in 1989 with a position at the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. David earned a bachelor's degree in social work in 1999. A master's degree in social work followed a year later.

David is a much sought-after presenter who shares his expertise with audiences throughout the United States.

New Web Resource on Intimate Partner Violence

A new web-based course on intimate partner violence is now available: [Intimate Partner Sexual Abuse: Adjudicating This Hidden Dimension of Domestic Violence Cases](#), constructed by the National Judicial Educational Program (NJEP) in conjunction with the New Mexico Judicial Education Center.

The course, which costs nothing more than the time needed to register, provides several learning modules designed to be, according to the Website, a "comprehensive educational resource about the nature, prevalence, and impact of intimate partner violence intended to inform courts' response to this issue." While designed for a judicial audience, anyone and everyone interested in or impacted by intimate partner violence can benefit from this online resource. The twelve modules, beginning with a 42-page definition of the problem, include vital information such as "Why Victims Don't Report" and "Custody and Visitation Implications." The course also includes "Criminal" and "Civil Case Scenarios."

Useful Resources

National poll results on [Issues of Importance and Concern to Veterans of the Current Conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and Their Families](#), conducted by Witness Justice and the Veterans Initiative Center and Research Institute.

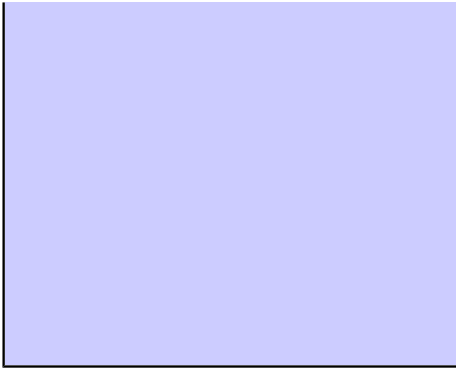
[VictimLaw](#), a free database launched last year by The National Center for Victims of Crime with funding from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office for Victims of Crime, is a valuable resource that victims can utilize to obtain information at the federal, state, tribal, and territorial levels about crime victim's rights and protections.

Where We've Been...

October 24 - Federal issue briefing on Capitol Hill on [Family Safety: A Significant Concern for Returning Veterans and Their Families](#), hosted by Witness Justice and the Veterans Initiative Center and Research Institute.

October 25 - WJ Board member Mildred Muhammad was presented with the [2008 Shirley Chisholm Woman of Courage Award](#), an award celebrating survivors of domestic violence, in Brooklyn, NY.

October 26 - WJ's Team Heal Trauma participated in the 33rd Annual Marine Corps Marathon in Washington, D.C.



October 30 - WJ Board member Andree Mattix was highlighted the recent documentary titled [Reshaping New Orleans Criminal Justice](#).

Witness Justice is a national nonprofit organization created by survivors for survivors. Our mission is to advocate for and support victims of violence and trauma. For more information, visit www.WitnessJustice.org.

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