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Safe Families NYC: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Programs for Domestic Violence Cases

Request for Information

Program Background

In November 2016, Mayor Bill de Blasio launched the New York City Domestic Violence Task Force (task force) to develop comprehensive strategies to address domestic violence. Despite overall declines in crime in New York City, reported domestic violence continues to remain stagnant and accounts for 40% of felony assaults and 20% of homicides citywide. The task force is comprised of leaders from city agencies, community based organizations, professionals who work with victims and offenders, law enforcement, and domestic violence survivors. To date, the task force has made recommendations that resulted in 32 new initiatives, including the implementation of Safe Families NYC, a free supervised visitation and safe exchange program to create a safe space for children to have court ordered visits and exchanges with their non-custodial parent in domestic violence related cases.

Leaving an abusive relationship is the most dangerous time for victims of domestic violence and their children with escalating violence, even homicide, occurring more frequently during and after separation. And, children are often targets of or witnesses to this violence. In cases involving domestic violence, court orders allowing visitation between a child and the non-custodial parent ensure continued contact between the abusive partner and the victim, creating an opportunity for the abuse to continue. However, it is difficult to predict which cases are most at risk for continued abuse. Courts often struggle to balance the competing considerations for safety from further domestic violence and parental access to their children, and usually order some level of parent-child contact to the non-custodial parent. Court orders for visitation often place the responsibility of coordinating the visits on the parents, and if free supervised visitation programming is unavailable, the visits may be unsupervised which can result in compromised safety for the adult victim and the children during the visit or exchange. Safe Families NYC, a supervised visitation program, seeks to provide no-cost services to families in ways that meet their individual safety needs.

Supervised Visitation programs provide a safe and therapeutic environment for non-custodial parents to spend time with their children. In instances of domestic violence, it is especially important to have a trained party supervising the visit to prevent any physical or emotional harm to the children or parent(s). Supervised visitation programs can help promote strong and safe relationships between children and their non-custodial parents and help healing. Judges in Family and Supreme Court can order supervised visitation connected to pending cases

related to custody/visitation, matrimonial and/or family offense petitions. However, judges in New York City (NYC) have reported that there are a limited number of organizations that can provide supervised visitation for families, especially at low or no cost. Many families going through the court system do not have the financial resources to afford fee-based supervised visitation services. This can result in judges ordering unsupervised visits, which can lead to potentially dangerous situations for families, or lack of visits, which can also have adverse consequences on the child and/or family.

Safe Exchanges can also be an important tool to support family relationships in instances when supervised visits are not necessary, but there is a conflict or history of violence that prevents safe and successful child exchange without a third party. Safe exchanges allow for a neutral third party to be present when the custodial parent exchanges the child with the non-custodial parent for a visit. This can reduce the risk of further abuse to the non-offending parent during an exchange and further trauma to the child.

Anticipated Proposed Services

Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ) in partnership with the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender Based Violence (ENDGBV) is looking to fund organizations to expand New York City's capacity to provide supervised visitation and safe exchanges, including the following services, through either direct provision by the applicant organization or through partnerships with the City or other organizations:

- Utilize a secure location that is child friendly for a supervised visitation program, and determine the ability to also conduct safe exchanges at the location. The location may be pre-identified by the interested organization or provided by the City, if available.
- Develop trauma-informed program policies and procedures for conducting supervised visitation and exchange services, and, if possible, differentiating types of visits based on family needs.
- Develop program policies and procedures for conducting safe exchanges.
- Provide supervised visits and safe exchanges based on developed policies and procedures.
- Implement procedures to maximize safety for both custodial and non-custodial parents and their children during the visiting and exchange processes.
- Ensure that all court personnel and other stakeholders understand the nature, dynamics, and impact of domestic violence by providing ongoing training and education sessions to court personnel and partner agencies. This could include partnerships with organizations with domestic violence expertise if organization does not have domestic violence expertise, as appropriate.
- Educate court personnel about the supervised visitation program and how to access it.
- Provide culturally competent supervised visitation services that will accommodate families who speak at minimum, English and Spanish.
- Provide culturally competent safe exchanges that will accommodate families who speak at minimum English and Spanish.
- Ensure program has a language access plan, such as a language line, to accommodate all non-English speaking clients.
- Conduct separate individual intake/orientation sessions with new families.
- Determine family need, including type of visit, number of visits, arrangements for exchanges, as appropriate and based on court order.
- Provide objective written reports to the court as requested.
- Provide referrals to the family for additional services as needed. These services can include, but are not limited to, public assistance, educational services, employment services, case management, treatment (such as mental health or substance abuse), housing, child care, civil legal services and immigration legal services.

Purpose of the Request for Information

MOCJ would like to understand what the interest and capacity is for organizations in NYC to provide supervised visitation services and safe exchanges for families with histories of domestic violence, based on the outline of services above. MOCJ would also like to learn from organizations what resources they would need to successfully carry out these services and serve families in NYC if they currently do not have the capacity or would like to expand capacity. MOCJ has compiled a list of questions for interested organizations to respond to in writing. Organizations can also provide any additional feedback or suggestions for how they think this type of program can be provided most effectively in NYC.

Before submitting responses in writing, interested organizations will have the opportunity to attend a meeting with a representative from a technical assistance provider with expertise in supervised visitation programs on **February 1, 2019 from 10am-12pm at the Manhattan Family Justice Center Training Room, 80 Centre Street, New York, NY 10013**. Interested organizations will have the opportunity to learn more about how to start a supervised visitation and safe exchange program, best practices, and to ask questions before submitting a written response to the City. **If you are interested in attending this meeting, please RSVP to Alexis McLauchlan at amclauchlan@ocdv.nyc.gov by January 23, 2019.**

Please respond in writing to the following questions:

- 1) Are you currently providing supervised visitation and/or exchange programming? In what ways? Are families with a history of domestic violence served by your program?
 - a. Have you previously provided supervised visitation and/or safe exchange? In what ways?
- 2) If you are not currently providing supervised visitation and/or safe exchange programming, does your organization have an interest in providing these services?
- 3) If your organization is interested, do you have the capacity? Please explain capacity in terms of staffing (including security), facility and space availability, and resources.
- 4) If your organization is interested but does not currently have the capacity, please describe the level of staffing (including security), facility and space availability, and resources your organization would need to provide these services.
- 5) If your organization is providing supervised visitation and/or safe exchange programming, how could these services be enhanced and what resources would it take to enhance them?
- 6) Does your organization have domestic violence expertise? If so, how long has your organization been providing domestic violence services and what services are you providing?
- 7) Does your organization have experience providing services to children? If so, for how long and how are trauma-informed principles integrated into those services?
- 8) What is the level of education of your staff who would be involved in this program?
- 9) If your organization does not have domestic violence expertise, would your organization be open to working with an organization with domestic violence expertise to receive training and technical assistance on providing supervised visitation and exchange programming to families experiencing domestic violence?
- 10) Does your organization currently have partnerships or close ties with domestic violence organizations or other experts in the field that could provide training and technical assistance to your staff? If so, which organizations do you currently work with?

- 11) Does your organization have capacity to serve individuals in multiple languages? If so, which languages? How does that language capacity meet the needs of the community that you serve?
- 12) What does your agency see as the greatest language needs? How could city funding increase your capacity to serve individuals in these languages?
- 13) Does your organization have appropriate space to provide supervised visitation or safe exchange programming? If not, are there modifications to your current space that would enable you to provide these services? If so, what are those modifications?
- 14) Does your organization have the appropriate security measures to provide supervised visitation? Please include if you have security personnel on staff and their qualifications.
- 15) Is your organization able to accommodate staggered arrivals of the different parties, ensure that the custodial parent and non-custodial parent do not interact, and ensure neither party is entering the facility with any weapons or illegal materials? How would you comply with these security measures? If you have the space availability for supervised visitation, does it allow for two separate entrances for custodial and non-custodial parents?
- 16) Do you have any other feedback or suggestions for how supervised visitation and safe exchange programs can be most effectively implemented in NYC?

Anticipated Term of the Contract(s)

Based on the information MOCJ receives, MOCJ anticipates releasing a Request for Proposals (RFP) with an anticipated contract start date of July 1, 2020.

Anticipated Funding amount and source(s)

The anticipated funding amount is between \$90,400 and \$140,400 annually based on the security, personnel, and equipment needs of each organization through city funding.

Contact Information

All comments and feedback regarding this Request for Information must be received no later than **February 22, 2019 by 3:00 pm**. Comments should be sent via email to: MOCJProcurements@cityhall.nyc.gov.