

Jon Wainwright: Hello and welcome to another edition of CAP-impact Policy Change in Practice. I am Jon Wainwright and today we are sitting down with Erin Scott, who is the Board Chair of the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence. Thank you so much for joining us today, Erin.

Erin Scott: Thank you for having me.

JW: Let's start with the basics here, which is, how did CPEDV start and what do you do?

ES: So, The Partnership - which is actually the shortened version that we like to use - it's a little easier than remember all the letters.

The Partnership was created in 2005, but we were the merger of a few other regional coalitions that started back in the 70's. In 1976, activists began to organize regionally and that was the time when a lot of domestic violence agencies were opening, a lot of people were looking at proposing policy changes, looking at how our society was addressing domestic violence.

For a while there was a Southern California coalition and then there was the California Alliance, which was kind of its northern counterpoint. And in 2005 they joined to become the current iteration, the statewide iteration, of the Partnership.

The vision of The Partnership is a California free of domestic violence. A big vision.

JW: It's a good vision to have.

ES: Yes, it's a good goal. There are three basic strategies that The Partnership uses: public policy, communications, and capacity building. We're a membership organization, so The Partnership is really representing the voices of survivors throughout the state. Our member agencies, the main chunk of member agencies are advocates and organizations who serve survivors.

JW: Like groups like WEAVE?

ES: Groups like WEAVE, exactly, or the group that I'm the Executive Director of. Yes, there are many of us around the state. And then we have some other allies who are also members, some individuals, etc.

We need this huge network of people, unfortunately, because 5.7 million Californians are impacted by domestic violence every year, which seems like such a big number. To give you some scale, it's about 11 times the population of Sacramento.

JW: Good lord.

ES: Yes, a lot of people.

JW: So I'd like to focus in on the policy work that you do. Over the past couple of years, what have been some of the major policies that The Partnership has zeroed in on and tried to affect change on?

ES: I'm going to give you a few specific examples that have to do with economic security.

JW: Okay.

ES: Domestic violence is the type of issue that impacts everything in someone's life. So, there may be immediate emergency measures that you need to deal with in order to get out of an abusive relationship, but then there are all these other issues that you're left dealing with.

So it may have been that you had no access to, or you weren't able to get a job, you had no access to funds while you were in that relationship because one of the things that the abusive partner did was control your finances, for example. This is very common. So economic security is one of many issues, including housing, immigration, reproductive rights that we look at to help survivors deal with a whole range of issues that they face when they're dealing with domestic violence.

Obviously, you need economic security to continue to have stability, to help you family. And often for some survivors, if they don't achieve that stability, it may be that returning to the abusive partner is one of their only viable options in order to have some sort of stability for their family, economic stability. And that's not what most people want to do.

JW: No. That doesn't really sound like an option. It sounds like a horrible option.

ES: Right, if you're someone who's decided to leave the relationship you don't want to be forced to go back for economic reasons. You at least want to have those choices.

This last year we co-sponsored AB 557 from Assembly Member Rubio. It allowed CalWORKs temporary housing assistance to be extended to applicants fleeing domestic violence. So it provides survivors with a safe housing option as they're leaving an abusive situation.

As you may know, domestic violence affects all different income levels, all ethnicities, it can affect everybody. But, obviously, if you're on the lower end of the income scale you have more issues when you're trying to re-stabilize after a relationship.

So, CalWORKs, which is the state's source of financial support for people with children, is an important option. There is housing assistance that can be part of your CalWORKs grant. So making sure that's available to people fleeing domestic violence.

JW: And that, I can see, is just so critical to having just an address that's not tied to the abuser - whether that's being able to move your paychecks to a different location or if you need to try to get a new job because of the abuser - being able to have an address to put down on a job application.

ES: That's true, but also even just having an address. I mean, think about the cost of living...

JW: Yeah.

ES: in a lot of parts of California. It's so high that without some sort of assistance, quite a lot of people have trouble. But if you need assistance because you've experienced harm as a result of domestic violence, it's appropriate to have some ways that the state is going to help you bridge that gap until you can become more self-sufficient.

This bill also requires counties to provide CalWORKs application "good cause" waivers.

JW: So what are those exactly?

ES: So a good cause waiver is - for a lot of government benefits, there's a time limit.

JW: Okay.

ES: If you're experiencing domestic violence, you could file what's called a good cause waiver to say, "I need a little more time because I'm experiencing domestic violence and I'm experiencing a lot of trauma and I'm not sleeping..."

Things that might prevent you from ... Because the time limit is supposed to say, "Okay, by this time you're going to be able to get a job."

Now whether generally that's realistic is another discussion.

JW: Yeah. It's completely case-by-case.

ES: Yes, but there is something in law that says by this time, you're cut off. So this is a way to ask for extensions. For example, this bill extended good cause waivers to things like school attendance requirements in cases where domestic violence was present so they could continue to receive the CalWORKs support.

In 2005 we had two bills that related to economic security. One was to give survivors more access to CalFresh benefits, which is like food stamps.

JW: Yeah, and there's also the matching program for when you go to the Farmer's Market and CalFresh will match every dollar you spend at the Farmer's Market so you can have access to fresh food.

ES: Exactly. Right. So the whole thing is based on food access. And also in 2005 there was AB 418 that enhanced survivors' ability to terminate their leases early if they needed to relocate and find another place to live.

California is really on the cutting edge, and a lot of it has to do with The Partnership's work in terms of housing laws that impact domestic violence survivors. There are provisions that help survivors get a lock changed. This early lease termination is huge.

JW: Yeah.

ES: Because you don't want another mark against you if you break a lease and then your credit history is messed up, your leasing history is messed up.

JW: Yeah. Or just staring down having to buy your way out of the rest of that lease would just be a nightmare on top of nightmares.

ES: Yeah. This allows a legitimate way to do that. We've also been actively fighting - and it's not as much of a problem here in California in part because of the work of The Partnership - but the misuse of nuisance laws.

There are some parts of the country where this is pretty prevalent, where a landlord will try to evict tenants because they've called 911 too much, which can create a nuisance for the other tenants.

Which I mean, okay, yeah, it's not pleasant if the police are coming, but obviously if there's a good reason someone's calling 911, you shouldn't be able to put them out on the street.

JW: You shouldn't be able to hold that against someone.

ES: You shouldn't be able to take away their housing for that reason. So again, there are a lot of good housing options, and this one in 2015 we worked hard on with some of our partners to get the lease termination bill in place.

JW: Okay. So on these policies that you've worked on, what are some of the tools in your tool kit that you use to try to get those from idea to signed into law?

ES: Right. Let me tell you first just a little bit about how The Partnership works on policy priorities, because that step, and then I'll move outwards.

JW: That sounds good.

ES: We have a real grassroots approach. We really involve our members. So, we have seven membership regions. That's part of how The Partnership is set up as a membership organization. And each region has a public policy committee that has access to Partnership staff - who's out there working here at the Capitol - and is super

impressive, knows the bills, knows the legislators, knows what's happening. And so each region, that committee which any member can join, has regular interaction with the staff here. And in each legislative session they're looking at bills together, basically, at each regional level, to say, "What do you guys think? How is this going to impact your clients?"

One of the great things about that amount of input is that, something that - my agency is in Oakland, and something that might be very beneficial to my agency in Oakland might have a negative impact in a rural area that I might not think of if it was just me on the phone giving input to The Partnership.

JW: Right. Oakland is not Amador County.

ES: Right, exactly. So we have structures in place to make sure that we're getting the range of input that we need because, again, unfortunately domestic violence affects a wide range of people, which means that one solution doesn't fit all.

And we know that, but often what we're looking at then is: are there unintended negative consequences? So if it's going to benefit Oakland, that's fine, as long as it doesn't have a negative impact on Amador County. And then during our annual membership meeting we have discussions about upcoming policy priorities, and then The Partnership hosts a policy advocacy day every year in May, and invites members to come and The Partnership staff sets up meetings with legislators and we can go talk to them, both about what's happening in our communities but also about the Partnership priorities.

So that's a whole lot of internal process. So the three main things structurally, that we're doing, is membership - lots of membership impact, continual education in the Legislature. As I mentioned, the staff have good relationships with as many legislative offices as they can, and...

JW: Not easy with 120 offices...

ES: Not easy...

JW: and regular turnover within those offices.

ES: Exactly, but making sure that we're continually educating, and that policy advocacy is a piece of that, continually educating the legislators.

And then our partners, so, in California, we're lucky that there's a robust activist community. There's the California Coalition Against Sexual Assault, also based here in Sacramento; the California Immigrant Policy Center; Legal Aid at Work, based in San Francisco which works on employment law issues; Western Center on Law & Poverty; and many more.

But these groups, it's great that they all exist because we can be watching these twenty bills, and they're really closely watching a different twenty bills, you know? We may have some overlap but there are enough of us looking at things that we can communicate with each other and see where our interests overlap and also really support each other. For us, so many things impact our clients that we can be really great partners to a lot of other organizations.

And, it's also just kind of the collective brain trust, having all of those organizations working together - especially with things like immigration law which are intense and specialized. It's helpful to have access to all those brains on all those things.

JW: Of all these different tools that you use, what seems to be one of, or maybe one or two of, the most effective tools that The Partnership has in their toolbox? It seems like these partners are one, where you have this great brain trust you can rely on. Am I accurate in thinking that's one of them?

ES: Yeah.

JW: And then, what are the others?

ES: You know, I think the expertise of our member agencies is really the other one because there's such a wide range of skill sets and types of expertise amongst our members. For example, the other day, actually, I was talking to Jessica about something that had come up. And I'm an attorney, but I've really only done civil law and work on the family law things of things. I've been doing domestic violence law my whole career, but I'm not a criminal law attorney. And so, I was like, "You know what, you should contact so and so down in Southern California, she's really an expert in that area."

Or, like, well, how is this going to interact with supervised visitation issues. I can think of an expert who I know amongst our members who really deals with supervised visitation. So, there's so much knowledge amongst our members that I think it's a great asset that The Partnership has. And so many of our members are working with thousands and thousands of survivors every day. So it's not just I've developed an intellectual expertise in X, it's a lot of experiential expertise and the voices of our clients that we're able to bring into the picture as much as possible.

JW: It sounds like you do a lot of really great work at The Partnership.

ES: Yes. And the staff is amazing. It's a small staff, but they're powerful.

JW: Small but mighty.

ES: Yes, exactly.

JW: Thanks so much for taking the time to talk with us, Erin.

ES: Thank you.