

Carolyn Fish  
Executive Director  
Rockland Family Shelter

### **Rockland Family Shelter**

The Rockland Family Shelter is a private non-for-profit corporation located in Rockland County New York. We started in 1979 and initially we began our services to assist battered women and their children. We opened a 24-hour hotline and an emergency battered women shelter. We have a staff of 47 people who provide counseling, advocacy, legal services. We have two attorneys who provide legal representation in family court to victims of domestic violence. We have staff that work specifically on children services, a social worker who works with mothers and their children. We have sexual trauma counselors and advocates and we provide therapy to survivors of sexual trauma as well as their family members. We have residential and non-residential programs. We have 24-hour hotline, which can be accessed in obviously 24-hours a day. We have an emergency shelter. We have staff that speaks a variety of languages: Spanish, French, Creole, Yiddish, Hebrew, Hindi and we have access to 19 Asian language as well. We have developed a domestic violence court within the county where we have staff that are available within those courts. And we have outreach in education programs in schools, and with a variety of law enforcement and educational systems and the medical systems as well.

### **Mandatory Arrest**

Back when they were first holding community meetings on the issue of mandatory arrest, we had developed a policy in our county, in the mid eighties, with the Stop Fear Coalition, that was a pro-arrest policy. So it was long before anything else was on the books, and we were very happy with that. Pro-arrest wasn't mandated, but it was a pro-arrest policy, which our police departments had agreed to. Then it was about the early nineties when there was talk of developing a law, of creating a law that would require mandatory arrest. And a woman- I went to one of her hearings in Manhattan, and it was so clear to me at that point in time that mandatory arrest was not the way to go, because of the impact it would have on communities of color.

### **She's put in more danger**

So I'm laughing I mean as a feminist, and Phyllis Frank, also who you know is a strong feminist, both of us were opposed to it. So there were many feminists who understood the connection of racism, as I said earlier, if you understand the connection between racism and sexism, mandated arrest was not something we were in favor of. That said, the law was passed. Now that did present a tremendous dilemma, because it seems like it flies in the face of what we keep saying: listen to the battered women. You've got to say what they want. At the same time the struggle was, but she's put in more danger.

When her abusing partner feels that she somehow is moving the legal system, she isn't in control of the legal system. It is the District Attorney. It's the people, the state of New York that are bringing charges. It isn't her. She's simply a witness in this process. So how best could one protect this witness? And that's when part of the mandatory arrest developed to protect her from being the one who's moving the system. So I don't think it's as clear cut. There are many feminists that are opposed to mandatory arrest and many who aren't and I think it's a tremendous conundrum that we're dealing with.

### **Racism and Sexism**

The beauty that has come from it, if there has been some, and there has clearly been some, is that the issue has been made clear to police you've got to take this seriously, you must take this seriously, and there may not have been any other way to do that. At the same time it really does put women of color and their partners of color in more jeopardy and we have learned this from women of color, and we have to acknowledge it and we can't pretend it doesn't exist, and it's not a question of blaming that this one is so terrible and that person is so terrible. It's just putting the truth out there and how we deal with racism in our communities is just as important as how we deal with sexism.

### **Listen to what she's saying**

One thing we've clearly learned as a movement was not to assume we know more than the woman whom we're helping, because she really has the expertise. She knows what's going on. You know, as a community, as a society I think many of us have looked at battered women very negatively and blamed her for the abuse and then blamed her for staying, and blamed her for leaving. So no matter what she does, she's making somehow the wrong decision, and, in fact, what we have come to understand, and this has been sort of the basis, or the foundation, of the movement, is to listen to what she's saying. Listen to the voices of battered women, and hear what they want, what they need and your role really as an advocate and as a movement is just to help her figure it out, and give her some other options that she may or may not know about and then support her whether she's leaving, or not leaving. Whether she wants to get an order of protection, whatever in between, or her choices, help her know that she's not having to go through that alone.