In 2001, the City of Chicago Mayor’s Office on Domestic Violence (MODV) was selected to participate in the Safe Havens: Supervised Visitation and Safe Exchange Grant Program (Supervised Visitation Program), as a demonstration site. The Supervised Visitation Program allowed the City of Chicago to contract with three existing domestic violence supervised visitation centers: Apna Ghar, The Branch Family Institute, and Mujeres Latinas en Acción (collectively referred to as the Chicago visitation centers).

As a part of participating in the Supervised Visitation Program, the Chicago demonstration site, with the assistance of technical assistance provider Praxis International (Praxis), explored how the current design, processes, and procedures of the visitation and exchange centers accounted for aspects of culture. Specifically, the Chicago visitation centers chose to examine the question:

**How does culture play a role in serving families using supervised visitation?**

Using focus groups, interviews with parents and staff, observations, and group readings of redacted case files, the MODV, the Chicago visitation centers, and Praxis documented current center practices that account for the cultural differences of families coming to the centers and utilizing supervised visitation and exchange services, and, in particular, that account for their experiences with race and class. In examining this question, numerous examples of “cultural humility” were documented.
The concept of cultural humility was not a product of the inquiry, but rather a framework that resonated with the Chicago visitation centers in exploring center practices and cultural differences.¹ Cultural humility “incorporates a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique” and “advocacy partnerships with communities,” as “reflective practitioners” with “self-reflection and self-critique at the institutional level.”² Cultural humility “involves the curiosity and motivation to understand the web of meaning in which children and families live, and the reflective capacity to examine … [the practitioner’s] cultural values and assumptions. It requires a commitment to appreciating the similarities and differences between … [the practitioner’s] culturally shaped goals and priorities and those of the children and families … [the practitioner] care[s] for. It requires as well an obligation to ‘rein in’ [the practitioner’s] power and authority … so that the voices of children and family members can be fully valued and heard.”³

Practitioners are cultural beings, familiar with their individual behaviors, arts, beliefs, languages, institutions, and other aspects of culture. The concept of cultural humility requires that practitioners step out of this familiarity; it requires a commitment to reflection and questioning, on an institutional as well as an individual level.⁴ Drawing on the experience of the Chicago visitation centers and related discussions, the following are examples of ways to integrate cultural humility into visitation and exchange practices:

- Define a clear identity that is separate from the court. For many families, civil and criminal court intervention has been characterized by disrespect, confusion, and a lack of information about the process and what is expected of them. Many immigrant families have difficulty understanding the judicial system in their
country of origin and even more so in the United States, where the language and system itself are very different.

- **Structure adequate time and flexibility into interactions with children and parents.** Time and flexibility are essential in order to build trust and relationships, understand what has happened in someone’s life, and explain supervised visitation or exchange and the center’s procedures in a way that makes sense to parents, particularly when the concept is entirely beyond their experience. For example: set aside 90 minutes for an intake appointment; or expand the customary 15-minute parental arrival and departure windows to allow for bus transportation and getting children in and out of jackets and car seats.

- **Invite diverse community organizations to walk through the center’s space and procedures and provide a critique.** Ask them to arrive at the center, complete an intake, and walk through the space as if they were a parent who would be using the center. Welcome their insights and recommendations about how to make the center and visitation a more culturally respectful experience.

- **Prepare center staff to work with battering parents.** A visitation center should not demonize fathers or structure its work around fear of batterers. To connect with them from a basis of respect does not mean abandoning battered mothers and their children or ignoring the ways in which children might be used as a tactic of battering. The Chicago visitation centers recognize the danger that some battering parents pose; however, they attempt to avoid lumping every visitation or non-custodial parent into a single category.
• Use staff meetings, ad hoc work groups, community members, and parents to help examine every aspect of the center’s design and the implied and explicit messages about who is welcome and how they are valued. For the Chicago visitation centers, non-threatening locations (alongside health care offices, a bank building, and a community center) are important in conveying respect, along with careful consideration of the placement and use of security measures such as uniformed guards and metal detectors, both of which the Chicago visitation centers ultimately chose not to use. Formality in addressing people, such as using Mr., Mrs., Miss, Ms., Usted, Señor, or Señora, is also a way for centers to welcome people and show respect. Where there is a gap between the center staff’s background and that of the parents using the center, invite community members to help review the center’s location, space, furnishings, magazines, art work, intake appointments, and visitation and exchange procedures. In addition, invite parents to help inform an understanding of the center’s design and impact, via focus groups, questionnaires, and other avenues.

• Prepare staff to support parents and children to lead with the language of their choice. For example, siblings may prefer to use English when discussing their homework amongst each other, but this may require that center staff help the parent understand the conversation.

• Provide opportunities for extended family to be involved. As the Chicago visitation centers have experienced, this can occur within the context of safety for battered parents and their children and any restrictions in court orders or sexual abuse issues. In consultation with and approval from the custodial parents,
visiting parents have brought other family members to celebrate a birthday or join the visit. “Family” for some parents and children includes a wide circle of relatives, close friends, and godparents.

- **Hold an all-center gathering to help bridge cultures and contribute to an atmosphere of warmth and respect for families.** Again, this occurs within the context of safety, the specifics of court orders, and availability of adequate supervision. One center, for example, has an annual dinner the week of Thanksgiving, with visiting parents, children, and other family members in one area (with several staff members) and custodial parents in another.

- **Support families’ food, music, and religious traditions.** Provide space for sharing meals and moving about, including dancing and sports. Work with parents to accommodate families’ faith observances, such as time for prayer, accepted foods, holidays, and rituals. This can be challenging to do, particularly in accounting for how these aspects of culture can be used as tactics for battering, or where parents differ in traditions or in interpretation of tradition.

- **Build processes for expanding the center’s understanding of families’ experiences with the courts, police, social security, welfare, medical, psychology, and other intervening institutions, both individually and historically.** For example, several of the Chicago focus group participants emphasized that African-American parents walk through the door of the center bringing with them their whole lives, which includes their community’s history with institutional racism, as well as their day-to-day encounters. A center that has been built with that cultural experience at its core takes care in how it appears to and works with parents.
Because parents are so often under scrutiny in their everyday lives and routines, as staff members themselves have experienced, staff minimize taking notes during supervised visits. They intervene if appropriate or necessary, but complete their notes after the parents and children have left. Where centers do not have a shared culture with parents and children, they must take extra care to become aware of their individual community histories. For example, it is easy for a person to believe that institutional racism does not exist if they have not experienced it.

The exploration is just beginning. Culture always plays a role; there is no visitation center or service that is culturally neutral. How can we make supervised visitation and exchange an experience with minimal barriers? How can we make supervised visitation welcoming, respectful, and aware of the lives of everyone who comes through the door? How might the idea of safe visitation and exchange look without the physical space of a center? How can we facilitate families’ cultural identities, as well as accommodate them? The Chicago visitation centers will continue asking these questions of their work, recognizing that there is no single answer, no one-dimensional response.


2 Id.
