

It's hard not to panic. I totally doubted my perceptions all the time. I think he manipulated me to do that a lot. I called the national DV hotline, but they were saying she was going to talk to them. I get in

# WHEN YOU JUST KNOW

**LGBTQ/T Partner Abuse Survivors' Experience of Risk of Physical Violence and Lethality**

I couldn't leave away if I did leave. I tried to physically remove myself from the room, but she would not let me. She would say things like "I'm not your abusive ex," but she sounded just like him. He left me alone when the restraining order was in place, but told me that someday he would find me and finish me. I could fucking kill you and no one would know or care. I kinda thought it might only end if one of us died. She would accuse me of wanting other people, sleeping with other people, and would humiliate me in public. I was worried even though I broke up with him, it was gonna go on unless he committed suicide bringing me with him. I felt I kept reaching out for help, and it was a shit storm. I'd try the Network la Red I lost

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# Introduction

In September of 2015, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health Institutional Review Board approved a project proposal submitted by The Network/La Red to conduct a capacity building project as part of the "Massachusetts High Risk for Domestic Violence Re-assault and Homicide Prevention Mini-Grant" program. The project was designed to focus on collecting data directly from survivors in order to identify risk factors specific to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBQ/T) intimate partner relationships associated with increased risk of lethality or severe re-assault. Currently, little research has been done to understand or establish evidence-based risk factors identified for the general population of partner abuse survivors and abusers that apply to LGBQ/T relationships, and little is known about what additional factors might contribute to risk for survivors in this population. This project, led by The Network/La Red (TNLR), a Massachusetts LGBQ/T-focused domestic violence organization, seeks to improve the knowledge of staff of their own and collaborating agencies on partner abuse lethality and severe re-assault risk generally while also engaging in a systematic interview process with the survivors they work with to identify risk factors specific to the LGBQ/T population.

The goals of this project were: 1) to understand the factors contributing to survivors' sense of risk (and escalation of risk) in relationships with an abusive partner; 2) to achieve a better-informed response to risk in this population among staff of the project member agencies; and 3) to provide a set of suggestions for future research partners and funders to consider for inclusion in future research in this area. Following transitions within the organization, the project began in earnest in early October, 2015, with a training for staff of TNLR to be prepared to conduct the interview with survivors. Following this training on October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the staff began conducting interviews. Surveys were conducted throughout the Fall, Winter, and early Spring, and were completed in late April, 2015. Two additional sites were initially included in the planning for this study, but due to time and staffing constraints, they were unable to participate in the data collection process.

The final count of survivor surveys in this study was 24, all of which were collected by staff at TNLR. The following report encapsulates a summary of the data from these 24 survivor accounts, and includes recommendations for practice at the conclusion of the report.

## Project Goals

- 1) to understand the factors contributing to survivors' sense of risk (and escalation of risk) in relationships with an abusive partner.
- 2) to achieve a better-informed response to risk in this population among staff of the project member agencies.
- 3) to provide a set of suggestions for future research partners and funders to consider for inclusion in future research in this area.

# I. Data Analysis

The data included in this preliminary report was generated from interviews with 24 survivors, conducted by TNLR staff between the dates of October 27th, 2015 and April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2016. The data have been analyzed using standard techniques of in vivo coding (Saldana, 2015), and using HyperResearch qualitative analysis software. The analysis was conducted by lead researcher, Susan Marine, a professor of education with significant experience in conducting qualitative research and analyzing data for research reports, with the partnership of Colleen Mee, TNLR research coordinator, the subject matter expert immersed in the daily work of responding to survivor needs and concerns within the framework of the organization’s mission. Coding was conducted line by line, assigning meaning to each individual response. Line by line coding enabled looking both within and across individual interview responses to highlight significant statements. Significant statements typically take the form of direct quotes that appear to reveal a coded pattern or theme, and are noted throughout the report (Moustakas, 1994). Significant statements were then grouped into clusters of meaning according to the sentiments, beliefs, or values they convey about the phenomenon in question—in this case, the experience of the escalation of violence at the hands of an intimate partner. These clusters of meaning are represented in the thematic findings noted below, and in each section, survivor voices are provided to illustrate the thematic findings in more depth. While the themes captured below indicate some emergent patterns, both of experience with harm/risk of lethality and responses to it, each individual survivor’s story has its own unique contours and complexities, which are often “flattened” in the data analysis process. As we honor each individual experience, we also acknowledge that what is presented in this report does not represent the totality of survivors’ experience.

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## Areas of Inquiry

After a lengthy period of deliberation with the research team at TNLR, the interview protocol was designed to obtain the following types of information from survivors participating in the study:

What is the nature of experiences of harm (including location, context, survivor and abusive partners’ response, resources drawn upon, and after effects) as they are lived by survivors?

How, if at all, do survivors’ experience of serious harm differ (or not) along these same axes of experience? (location, context, reactions, resources drawn upon for support)

When and if survivors have felt they are in danger of being killed by an abusive partner(s), what is the specific nature of that experience (again, centering on location, reaction, resources drawn from, reactions, and after-effects)

The goals of approaching the data collection in this manner were two fold. First, we wanted to better understand the nature of escalation—in what ways violent episodes or experiences build, over time, and the context and conditions for that building process (as well as whether survivor reactions, resources, or other "contours" of the experience are changing over time). Secondly, we wanted to provide a meaningful way for survivors to talk about the experience of lethality without jumping immediately to that place. By asking survivors about experiences with harm, then with serious harm, then with lethality, we honored the full range of survivor experience and ideally, reduced the risk of unintentional re-traumatization by providing survivors with control over the pacing of disclosure. By demonstrating compassion and sincere interest in the full range of the survivors' experiences, and not only the most life threatening situations, the staff can build trust for future interactions and provision of services, enabling survivors to decide how much to share and at what level of detail. In the final analysis, 16 of 24 (66%) of survivors in this study reported experiencing fear of being killed, threats that they would be killed, and/or actions taken by abusers that could ostensibly have led to lethality. While this suggests that not all who experience partner abuse are at risk of being killed by their partners, a significant majority are, signaling an urgent need to identify the contributory factors and "interrupters" associated with the most extreme form of partner violence.

While this suggests that not all who experience partner abuse are at risk of being killed by their partners, a significant majority are, signaling an urgent need to identify the contributory factors and "interrupters" associated with the most extreme form of partner violence.

The following summary describes the data collected, the major findings associated with the 24 participants' experiences, and the trends noted in these survivor accounts. The survivors in this study faced significant challenges navigating their abusive partners' often volatile, unpredictable, and frequently terrifying behavior. All have survived by utilizing family, friends, and other community resources, and most significantly, by drawing upon their most valuable resource—their own resilience.

## Overview of Findings

The following summary includes analysis of the experiences of 24 survivors of domestic and sexual violence, all of whom sought services from The Network/La Red in the past ten years and who are currently involved in seeking services from, or volunteering or working at, The Network/La Red. As noted in Table 1, participants in this study have a variety of identities related to sexual orientation, gender identity, race/ethnicity, age, and the geographic location and urban/suburban environs where they experienced abuse. To summarize, approximately 25% of the sample identified as lesbian women; 50% as women of other sexual orientations (including queer, bisexual, and pansexual). 30% identified as transgender, as trans men and transmasculine or gender queer. While two participants identified as gender fluid, using female pronouns, there were no self-identified trans women in this study, though there is significant evidence in the research literature that this population is at significant risk of experiencing domestic abuse (Greenberg, 2012). Three participants identified as gay men. In terms of race/ethnicity, the majority of participants in this study (n=15; 58%) identified as being people of color, while 9 identified as white/European (including white/Jewish). Unsurprisingly, 80 claim Massachusetts as their home, while the remaining five live in other U.S. states (including Florida, Georgia, California, Alaska, and New York) as their primary residence. Participants mostly reside in urban locations (75%), while the remainder live in small towns, suburban, or rural locations. All survivors in this study are identified using a pseudonym of their choice.

**Table 1: Demographics of sample: n= 24**

Sexual Orientation diversity of sample <sup>1</sup>	Gender Identity	Race/ethnicity	Age	Location
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lesbian: 6</li> <li>Bisexual: 3</li> <li>Queer: 5</li> <li>All people: 1</li> <li>Pansexual: 3</li> <li>Gay male: 3</li> <li>Homosexual: 1</li> <li>Older I get, less attracted I am to the label that defines my sexual orientation: 1</li> <li>Sapio-lesbian: 1</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trans: 5 (includes trans man, trans masculine, and otherwise unspecified)</li> <li>Gender fluid: 2</li> <li>Cisgender: 17</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>White: 9</li> <li>Black/African American: 6</li> <li>White/Jewish: 2</li> <li>Black/Native American/ Chinese: 1</li> <li>Latina: 1</li> <li>Hispanic/Latina: 1</li> <li>Multiracial: 1</li> <li>Mixed race: 1</li> <li>Puerto Rican: 1</li> <li>European/East German: 1</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>22-27: 2</li> <li>28-33: 7</li> <li>34-39: 6</li> <li>40-45: 2</li> <li>46-50: 2</li> <li>51-56: 3</li> <li>57-62: 1</li> <li>No age given: 1</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Massachusetts: 19</li> <li>Florida: 1</li> <li>New York: 1</li> <li>California: 1</li> <li>Georgia: 1</li> <li>New Jersey: 1</li> <li>Alaska: 1</li> <li>Urban/city: 17</li> <li>Small town: 3</li> <li>Suburban: 2</li> <li>Rural: 1</li> </ul>
	<b>Pronoun Use</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>She/her: 11</li> <li>He/him: 6</li> <li>They: 5</li> <li>Ze/zur: 1</li> <li>Mostly female in public but wife uses male: 1</li> </ul>			

According to the Executive Director of TNLRL, the sample is generally representative of their typical client base, though they do not collect comprehensive data on all survivors as many are calling in crisis, and the focus of the call is on support and resources rather than data collection.

<sup>1</sup> Some participants chose more than one identifier for demographic categories, thus the totals for any given category do not total to 24.

## Experiences With Harm

Not surprisingly, each participant has experienced harm at the hands of one or more of their partners, now or in the past, hence their reason for accessing the services of TNLR. These experiences ranged from being in the car during an episode of their partner's road rage, to being pushed into a secluded area of their home, to being subjected to a partner's rage after the partner returned home from a night of drinking, to destruction of property such as punching walls. Participants discussed times when they were forced to witness self-harm of the abuser, or were threatened with abuser's suicide. Being fearful of being outed as trans was also mentioned by one participant. The location most frequently noted for these episodes was the car (theirs or the abuser's), their home or the abuser's, or a home primarily occupied by a relative of the abuser's. These appear to be the most common spaces for violence or threats of violence to emerge.

**Table 2: Types of harm experienced and location of harm**

Types of harm experienced (most common to least common responses)	Location of harm (most common to least common responses)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Road rage/abuser takes wheel of car/ run off road</li> <li>Pushed into basement</li> <li>Locked in dwelling</li> <li>Property damage</li> <li>Being pushed out of home, into street</li> <li>Breaking/throwing objects</li> <li>Attempt to strangle; sexual abuse</li> <li>Verbal abuse</li> <li>Fear of outing as trans</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Car (most common answer)</li> <li>Survivor or abuser's home (next most common)</li> <li>Homes of other relatives (parents, grandparents, etc)</li> <li>Dorm room</li> <li>Work</li> <li>Social Events</li> </ul>

In terms of the context, survivors reported three kinds of "lead up" experiences: what might be called a *communication context* (for example, being talked to disrespectfully by the abuser and challenging it, leading to escalation); a *behavioral context* (survivor was behaving in some way the abuser did not like or failing to behave in some particular way, which the abuser used as an excuse for a rageful reaction); a *relational context* (survivor was connecting with others, such as friends or family, in a way the abuser did not like). In keeping with well-researched understandings of abuser motivations (Elmqvist, et al., 2014; Renzetti, 1996), the abuser's need for control, and employment of numerous behaviors designed to wrest control away, echoed through the words of the survivors in this study. As exemplified by Aundrea, the tension and fear associated with the unpredictability of such events was intensely anxiety-producing:

*I knew she was angry, so I didn't know what was going to happen next. Her coming back drunk—my fear came from knowing we'd get into a fight or argument, or she'd want to be intimate, and I wouldn't want to, and I'd feel really uncomfortable about that.*

Skip described the range of behaviors her partner would adopt, which in some cases required Skip to be more physically forceful than she wished in order to escape:

*I was in a relationship for three years that ended when I was 18 that was really abusive. I had a boyfriend, we both identified as bisexual. He was abusive in every way TNLR described as abusive. As far as being afraid for my safety, one of the things he'd do is lock me in his apartment so I couldn't leave because I wanted to leave. He'd block the doorway or take my keys so I couldn't drive away if I did leave. If I wanted to get out, I would've had to push him, which would've escalated into something else.*

It is important to note that fear of harm did not always correspond to physical injury; on occasions when survivors witnessed property damage, the threat they sensed to their own well-being was real. As David noted:

*One time when we were having a fight, they punched a wall. It felt scary enough I left the house. In the car, they would often punch the dash or window, and that felt scary.*

In terms of patterns noted regarding general fear of harm by their abusers, survivors experienced 1) intense fear, coupled with 2) risk of harm or actual harm resulting from physical violence, property damage, and being excluded from their homes or confined to a specific area of their home. Experiences while driving were the most commonly reported form of harm by survivors in this study, as Billy described:

*I blocked a lot out, but I'm sure they'll come up the more I answer. There was always a pervasive feeling of unsafeness throughout my relationship because my ex-boyfriend was really unpredictable and controlling. I think some of the moments that I felt most unsafe were when he would get really upset, lose his temper. We lived in a place where we drove a lot, and there were multiple incidences when he would drive, I'd feel really scared, he'd get out of control. We got in a wreck once because he was mad at me. The driving was one of the most consistent ways. He was careful not to be physically violent. I think he kind of knew that was not okay by society's standards.*

Wayne, similarly, mentioned a time when he was driving, and the abuser reached for wheel during argument. Wayne's older son tried to intervene by blocking the abuser, and dislocated his shoulder

Jealousy of the survivor's other friends or past dating history was also mentioned as a factor in the abuse for several respondents, often triggered by nothing more than an abuser's perception of infidelity or even past interest in another person. Abusers often used this as excuse to lash out at the survivor, as noted by Rain:

*What led up to the break-up and the subsequent stalking, was her jealousy. She would accuse me of wanting other people, sleeping with other people, and would humiliate me in public. One incident occurred at a popular gay club ... I was dancing with her and she thought I was looking at someone and started to shove me on the dance floor. She grabbed my button up blouse and ripped it open, turned me around, and shoved me towards the girl she said I was looking at. I ran out of the club and she started chasing me, calling me names. She drove her truck around me, demanding I get in. I walked to her house in the winter, with no coat on, and had to go in to get my keys...*

Using a survivor's subordinated identity as a weapon was reported by several survivors in the study. DS described the fear and threat he experienced when his abusive partner threatened to "out" him as trans

to other people, including DS's family. Accusations of infidelity were also levied at DS when he was visiting the abuser at the abuser's family home, leading him to feel trapped and powerless.

Darnell's abuser centered on exploiting his vulnerability financially, and extracting financial support from him by force. Darnell reported "[being] afraid of coming home and being hit. One time I had to have money for [abuser], and I could not go home for five days because I did not have the money."

When asked how participants reacted to these experiences, most described behaviors that included avoidance or escape, and minimization and de-escalation (trying to reduce the reaction through placating the abuser, stopping the behavior, or using distraction). As Dee noted, these strategies were admittedly less than empowering; "I do everything in my power to keep things from escalating, but you can't stop crying when something hits a nerve." Tigan used a variety of strategies, depending on the context and the nature of the threat, stating:

"I... do everything in my power to keep things from escalating, but you can't stop crying when something hits a nerve....[the abuser] gets angry when he sees me cry."

*I tried to help her calm down by sympathizing; by saying she can't just lose control like that and threaten people; by shutting up and letting her go through her rant until she was done. [I] Tried to emotionally make myself disappear.*

Jake talked about specific strategies he would undertake to prevent escalation of abuse while his partner was driving, saying "In the car, I tried to de-escalate things as quickly as possible--suggest we forget it, or that she pull over so I could drive—didn't help. In self harm—I would try to physically stop her from doing what she was doing." Avoidance was the most common kind of response noted by survivors, as in the case of Hawa, who explained that she often had the feeling of walking on eggshells. She could tell from the look on her abuser's face that something was about to happen. When that happened she stated that she would be quiet, and "try to get prepared for what was coming and try to not make any noise or do anything to set it off because any little thing could set it off." While a few participants described fighting back, either verbally or physically, against the abuser, this was relatively uncommon. Snobunny expressed an example of how she resisted, saying "You can't speak to me like that. It's okay to be upset, and you can't talk to me that way. I will not let you talk to me like this."

Managing the situation often entailed numbing one's own reactions to the abuse, or at least attempting to do so. Dee spoke of her efforts to minimize her own reactions, and noted "I... do everything in my power to keep things from escalating, but you can't stop crying when something hits a nerve....[the abuser] gets angry when he sees me cry." Aundrea's strategy for managing the situation required her to react in the moment to a number of unpredictable factors, often having to do with her partner's alcohol abuse:

*With the drinking, I'd get under the covers and pretend to be sleeping so we wouldn't fight, or she wouldn't try anything. Sometimes when I was up, she would just start an argument with me when she came in. Even if I didn't say anything, she'd say she knew I was upset because she'd been drinking because she'd always get violent.*

Having experienced abuse in multiple relationships, Star spoke of the different ways they had to negotiate and respond to the abuse happening in the moment, again indicating the unpredictability factor and the stress this caused. They described:

*It's hard not to panic. With Partner A, there was nothing I could do or say. With Partner B, I tried to physically remove myself from the room, but she would not let me. Then, I tried leaving the house, but she didn't want me to leave because of who/where I may go to, so she left.*

Social isolation and the judgment of others compounded the abuse in many cases. Some, like Billy, spoke of the harm as a factor in ending the relationship, after trying a variety of other strategies. The breakup preceded a period of time in which Billy was then stalked by his abuser, and described the painful lack of support he received from their mutual friends during this episode:

*I ended up breaking up with him because it was too much. Usually, I would try to make things better, or reduce the harm. I'd try to passify his anger, and calm him down. I feel like I had a calming presence, so I could do that to an extent. Although, he had this irrational controlling behavior. When we broke up and he started to stalk me, I became much more assertive. He'd email me every single day, and I wouldn't usually respond at all. Once in a while I'd respond by saying please stop contacting me. I lost most of my friend group. He became close with any and everybody I was close with. The few friends I maintained saw through it, but many were swayed by him, and felt I was a terrible boyfriend to him. I would just have to leave when he was stalking me.*

**Table 3: Reactions to threat of harm**

Participant reactions to threat of harm
Avoidance/escape from abuser (most common strategy)
Sympathize with abuser to de-escalate
Stay quiet/do nothing
Respond/fight back verbally
Fight back physically

## Experiences with Serious Harm

Of the 24 participants in the survey, 18 (75%) agreed with the question that they have felt in danger of serious harm by their partners. Several of those who responded “no” to this question qualified their response; Aundrea, for example, stated “I wouldn't say serious. I knew she would never actually hit me, or I wouldn't think she would. I wasn't afraid of serious harm, but it was still scary.” Tigan also provided some complexity to a “no” response, describing:

*Most of her violence was not directed specifically at me--she only hit me once and came close a second time. But she punched holes in the wall in my apartment, beat and kicked the dashboard of the car (no matter whose car it was or who was driving), drove really recklessly (weaving at high speeds, tailgating with lights on and horn blaring when she was mad at someone). I thought she might kill me without intending to.*

Participants' descriptions of what constituted serious harm typically included a fear (or actuality) of serious physical harm, the abuser's threats to commit suicide, and/or fear of lethality (more on this in the next section). Experiences with serious harm often included detailed descriptions of violence or threats of violence that occurred over an extended period of time, or at the apex of a relationship, such as when the survivor was attempting to end the relationship. Skip relayed how this played out in her relationship as follows, and the steps she took to try to protect herself from the abuser's intentions:

*Yeah, towards the very end of being together. I broke up with him and had been trying to for a while. When I was younger, I identified as bi, then realized I was lesbian. So, I used that to get out of the relationship, which was convenient in some way, but he was really mad. He kept saying I was awful and abusive, and I kept checking if he was okay because he was suicidal. He kept saying, "You broke up because you like girls, so we can still hangout." There was times I watched the news in the morning to see if he killed himself that night because I thought he'd really do it. I thought he'd try to do it if I was there, so that was really scary. I kinda thought that if that was the case he'd say that to get me to come over, it wasn't just him he was trying to kill. Right after breaking up with him, I got talked into visiting him because I thought it as a hangout because I was moving away. But he was really depressed, threatening suicide, and I remember bringing a knife, which I didn't plan to use, but there was some point in the relationship I kinda thought it might only end if one of us died, and it wasn't going to be me. I was worried even though I broke up with him, it was gonna go on unless he committed suicide bringing me with him. He lived with his grandmother, and she was never home. We were always alone, and it was a remote place. It freaked me out.*

"He kept saying I was awful and abusive, and I kept checking if he was okay because he was suicidal...I was worried even though I broke up with him, it was gonna go on unless he committed suicide bringing me with him."

**Table 4: Types of serious harm and location**

Types of serious harm	Location
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Threat of harm to survivor/intimidation</li> <li>• Actual harm to survivor</li> <li>• Surveillance of survivor</li> <li>• "Everything"—all situations/occasions</li> <li>• Threat of harm to self (abuser)</li> <li>• Property damage</li> <li>• Erratic driving</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survivor's house/apartment</li> <li>• Car</li> <li>• Abuser's home</li> <li>• "Any place" (multiple locations)</li> <li>• Always when alone with abuser</li> </ul>

Fear and a sense of lacking control typified survivor's experiences with serious harm, resulting in a sense of hopelessness that sometimes manifested in a desire to die or be harmed in order to cope with the chaos. Regarding fear of serious harm, Dee reported that "she hoped she would go through the

windshield,” signaling the intense lack of feeling of worth and safety experienced by survivors in situations where they are repeatedly exposed to danger.

Others reported being threatened with being kicked down stairs, or feeling the need, in S.W.L.’s words, “of needing to hide or run.” Pebble described her experiences with a former female partner who was perceived to be “so nice” by others, but was prone to instant turnarounds in behavior and affect, often cornering Pebble and acting erratically. Overall, survivors’ narratives of serious harm included two themes: *unpredictability* and *chaos*. Survivors’ inability to predict when escalation would happen, and about when the partner would become dangerous, were common, and were

Pebble described her experiences with a former female partner who was perceived to be “so nice” by others, but was prone to instant turnarounds in behavior and affect, often cornering Pebble and acting erratically. Overall, survivors’ narratives of serious harm included two themes: unpredictability and chaos.

exacerbated by their own feelings of panic and need to react. D.S. characterized the experience as being unmoored and unsure of how to respond, describing it as being “freaked out....wasn’t sure what to do in those situations...always stressed by fighting.” One survivor who did not provide a pseudonym indicated an almost unceasing sense of personal danger in her relationship, and relayed that “it [the danger] was in everything... the actions of my partner, the partner’s attitude, and the atmosphere.” She stated that “you could feel it in the air.” Jay also described the eerie sense of being targeted by someone who was not really present, noting “There were times she seemed so angry that it was like she was on autopilot. When she was disconnected that way that it felt like she would do serious harm to me.”

While many incidents of serious harm took place in the survivor or abuser’s home, driving was once again indicated as a place of serious risk. As Billy noted:

*Driving recklessly can be really dangerous. He wouldn’t just do it with me, but would do it alone. One time we had a fight, and he called me in the middle of the night saying he got really drunk and was driving home. He was so emotionally upset, blaming it on me, and why he was driving drunk. I definitely felt in danger when he was behind the wheel. I think he knew the rules of the world well enough not to be physically violent towards me.*

Reactions to serious harm were complex. In terms of coping or response strategies, survivors spoke more openly about seeking help from others, both professionalized resources (such as TNL, police, and other agencies and organizations), family, and friends, with differing levels of perceived support and compassion. Escape and safety planning was also practiced by some, coupled with ambivalence about leaving and fighting back, as shared by Snowbunny, who described “run[ning] into another room with the keys, wallets, and phones. I want to feel safe and that I’ve gained control of things I’d need to leave. I also don’t want her to leave. I’ve walked out of the car and down a one way. Sometimes I fight back, but I feel bad if I hurt her.” Aundrea spoke of writing in her journal, seeking out the support of a friend at a local domestic violence shelter, and seeking counseling at a shelter as positive supports for healing/coping. Pebble described the ways her abuser manipulated her abuse history, both emotionally and by inciting physical dissociation:

*When I was with [abuser], because I had already been abused before, it made me really vulnerable. I would go into the fight or flight phase, and it felt she was playing with that. She knew how to trigger me. she would say things like “I’m not your abusive ex,” but she sounded just like him. I started disassociating, and she’d be holding me and taking care of me all of a sudden, but creepy. I really hate my body was doing that. I tried to talk to a lot of people. I*

*talked to my coworkers, and would tell them she wanted me to make a schedule of my free time. They would give feedback, but I felt they didn't understand because we were same sex partners.*

What are sometimes described as "maladaptive" coping strategies—drug use, coping with food, self-harm, disassociation—were practiced by four participants the study. Frequent attempts to connect with others, and to resist the controlling effects of the abuser, were evident in the survivors' narratives, as were commitments to becoming more self-empowered in their coping. As Dee both honored and lamented, "I'm learning to do it myself. I wish I could use you guys more often, but my husband would be upset to find out I'm still talking with TNLR. TNLR has given me some good breathing techniques as well. Malcolm spoke to the importance of "hav[ing] a circle of family and friends I can draw on for support," while Baby spoke of going to the police to obtain a restraining order. Unfortunately, however, a significant number of survivors also internalized the threat of serious harm, minimized it with others in their lives, or hid it altogether, such as Jay, who lamented, "I internalized everything until college, when I told my now-wife what happened."

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Escape was sometimes practiced as a coping strategy, though it was not possible for some in this study to even attempt. Coupling distance from the abuser with support from TNLR staff was described as a meaningful approach, as Rain expressed:

*I ultimately got a restraining order and spent a month in Puerto Rico with my family. He left me alone when the restraining order was in place, but told me that someday he would find me and finish me. I don't know what to say...I stopped being afraid of him a long time ago. I don't fear for my life anymore. With my female partner, I was fortunate to have been in the transition from working at the law firm to working at The Network/La Red. [staff member] helped me tremendously. She was my advocate and someone I felt safe confiding in. She helped me through the restraining order process and in safety planning after it was denied. She was and will continue to be someone who holds a special place in my heart.*

Some survivors shared that involving a family member or friend provided an important distraction for the abuser and could sometimes enable calm to return to the situation. Family members were viewed as important allies in the effort to self-protect. Sarah described this:

*When this happened, I would usually bring in his mom. She lived with us half the year each year. When she was there, I would usually talk to her before bringing it to him because she knew how explosive he could get. I'd go to her to help calm him down, and get a different perspective. When I tried to leave several times, I brought my friends or family with me because he wouldn't do anything in front of them.*

**Table 5, Reactions to threat of serious harm and resources accessed**

Reactions to Threat of Serious Harm	Resources Accessed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emotional reactions (sadness, fear, anxiety depression)</li> <li>Efforts to escape/avoid abuser</li> <li>Attempts to reason with abuser</li> <li>Involve abuser's family in efforts to de-escalate</li> <li>Dissociation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TNLR hotline and counseling</li> <li>Family and friends</li> <li>Therapist/counselor</li> <li>Restraining order</li> </ul>

## Threats of Lethality

Lethality in relationships where there is domestic violence is a serious issue, and while only a small percentage of abusers act on a desire to kill their partners, the wide variety of contributory factors makes it difficult to predict how, when, or why this will happen (Campbell, et al., 2003; Campbell, 2005). We learned through this study that fear of lethality is a serious concern for survivors in this study; 16 of the 24 (80%) participants said they believed their partner might kill them, while three others qualified their “no” answer in some way (Billy, for example, said “Not intentionally. Maybe we would die in a car crash. I didn’t think aside from a car crash, he’d come kill me.”). Jake also indicated that his partner did not intend to kill him, while qualifying this statement a bit: “Not intentionally—but I was warned she might just say fuck it and kill herself and me in the car (rather than get me specifically).” Two participants feared lethality at the hands of two different partners of differing genders.

The location of these episodes was again largely centered in survivors’ dwellings or cars, while one survivor also said she imagined that her abusive former partner would “probably take me off in the woods somewhere.” Returning to the original question about the nature of experiences with general harm, survivors’ experienced threats of lethality in the *behavioral* context (acting in a way the abuser did not want, or refraining from acting in a way the abuser desired), or by enduring lethal threats without a specific named cause (for example, a survivor was reminded of dangerous chemicals in their home, as a pre-cursor to being burned or bombed).

Lack of careful forethought about how an abuser might kill their partner was not typically expressed by participants in this study, but many again described the fear and stress inherent in being unsure of the abuser’s plans of intentions while being aware of the potential for being killed or the abuser omitting suicide. Skip captured this when he shared:

*I’d do whatever I could to not piss him off. I don’t know his plan, but I do know he didn’t have well thought out plans about things. He was suicidal, even though I think the majority of the time was to control me. But before he met me, he was diagnosed with bipolar, so I always thought he could do something stupid because he was really upset....he would say, “I could fucking kill you and no one would know or care.” When threatening suicide he’d say, “I don’t even wanna be here, I wanna die,” then turn it to, “You wouldn’t wanna live without me, right?” and “How would you live if I died?”... trying to convince me I wouldn’t wanna live without him.*

Some in this study experienced lethality if they questioned or challenged abusive behavior, as in the case of Hawa. Hawa described being at home once with the abuser and the abuser was bragging to survivor about other women sending her provocative pictures on facebook. The survivor got upset and closed the abuser's laptop. From there, "it was horrible." The survivor stated that the abuser started throwing knives at her and grabbed the back of her neck and told her "I'm going to kill you."

**Table 6, Lethality fears/threats**

Nature of lethality fear/threat	Location	Context
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reckless driving</li> <li>• Serious injuries (broken nose)</li> <li>• Verbal abuse</li> <li>• Pushing/shoving</li> <li>• Throwing/hitting with objects (i.e., knives)</li> <li>• Telling survivor that abuser would kill them</li> <li>• Being choked/strangled</li> <li>• Threaten with deadly chemicals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• House (survivor, abuser or both)</li> <li>• Car</li> <li>• "Off in the woods"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Argument preceding the threat</li> <li>• No particular pre-cursor mentioned</li> <li>• Trying to set boundaries with abuser</li> <li>• Abuser drinking</li> <li>• Attempting to modify abuser's behavior</li> </ul>

Reactions to fears of lethality were also diverse, and ranged from active resistance to passive avoidance to silence. Survivors frequently *did* take action on their own behalf in response to such threats. As was stated earlier, Snowbunny pushed back, stating "You can't talk to me that way. You can be upset, but can't speak to me this way. I'm not going to let you say these things about me. I matter!" The survivor who faced the possibility of being burned or bombed in her own home involved the police in order to dispose of the dangerous chemicals. In addition to these examples of active resistance, survivors often described efforts to de-escalate through a variety of techniques, including silence, offering apologies, buying the abuser things, offering to have sex with the abuser, and allowing the abuser to 'give off steam.' In dire moments of impending harm, survivors took significant measures on their own behalf, including one's recounting of sleeping in a closet to be able to see her abuser coming.

**Table 7, Reactions to threats of lethality and resources accessed**

Reactions to Threat of Lethality	Resources Accessed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resistance/fighting back</li> <li>• Seeking resources</li> <li>• De-escalation through placating abuser</li> <li>• De-escalation through silence. Passivity</li> <li>• Offering gifts, sex, or other incentives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friends</li> <li>• Family</li> <li>• Therapists</li> <li>• Counseling/hotlines (DV-specific)</li> <li>• Police support</li> </ul>

Self-doubt accompanied the threats in some cases, and surfaced the fact that no matter what was attempted, the survivor couldn't placate the abuser, as Tigan described,

*I was really scared although I tried to tell myself I was just exaggerating, that she's never really tried to kill me. If I even said something about her driving and how scared I was, she would launch into a tirade about how I was taking the other driver's side and how unsupportive I am. But if I said nothing I was unsupportive too—either way those things always ended up being my fault or my responsibility. She also would say there was nothing wrong with what she was doing and that was my issue with anger.*

Similar to cases of threat of serious harm, survivors reported feeling that it was difficult to predict the abuser's escalating desire to act lethally, or to connect it with any particular action or incident. As Rain relayed,

*On that particular day, he was angry. I made a comment about his anger, asking him to relax and it had the opposite effect. He backhanded me and when I struggled to get up off the floor and leave, he grabbed me by the hair and the beating started. I was punched, kicking, slapping, biting bag over the period of 12 hours.*

Physical restraint often accompanied threats of lethality, compounding the sense of helplessness experienced by survivors. Skip described,

*There would be times I was just trying to get him off me. He'd sit on me with his knees on my shoulders, and pin me, while attempting to have a conversation. I'd go along, so I could get up. If I fought him, it'd just be worse.*

Regardless of ability to name or predict a trigger, the survivors in this study were quite aware of the seriousness of intentions behind such threats, and in cases where they or their children were at immediate risk, they acted to avoid further escalation whenever possible. Nancy expressed it this way:

*There was no doubt in my mind that he meant it, and I wouldn't allow anyone to hurt my kids. My motherly instincts kicked in and I knew I had to get out of there.*

Efforts to manage or minimize the harm in cases where they felt at danger of lethality were similar to previous examples, with placating and de-escalation being the most common responses. Avoidance or escape was a less-frequently mentioned strategy in this case; perhaps owing to the fact that for survivors were in extreme danger—facing serious injury and/or attempts to kill them—escape might have been desirable, but not particularly feasible.

On a positive note, a majority of participants (15; 63%) in this study *did* seek support during or after an experience where a survivor feared lethality included telling friends (most common), therapists (next most common), family, and hotline counselors (at TNLR and other similar agencies). TNLR advocates who provided feedback on these data indicated that many survivors are talked out of the threat, minimize the threat, or downplay it because they don't feel they can be believed, or are fearful. Additionally, female abusers may seem less lethal because they are women, and are less physically imposing than a stereotypically-envisioned abuser. S.W.L. involved police, the fire department, the state public health agency, and other

TNLR advocates who provided feedback on these data indicated that many survivors are talked out of the threat, minimize the threat, or downplay it because they don't feel they can be believed, or are fearful.

advocates and lawyers in her situation with the dangerous chemicals. Experiences interfacing with mainstream domestic violence agencies were inconsistent at best, as relayed by Pebble:

*The one person I kept in contact with, who was in a same sex relationship and a DV trainer, couldn't see it. Later she said to me she didn't realize how dangerous she was. I felt I kept reaching out for help, and it was a shit storm. I didn't know there were specific resources for the queer community. I called the national dv hotline, but they'd constantly be switching genders, and saying she's a he, and it was really confusing to talk to them. I didn't feel they were really getting it.*

Only two survivors in the study mentioned seeking help from the police or other official enforcement resources. Most reported that seeking help was important to their survival, while in a couple of cases, the help they received (or rather, did not receive) set the survivor back in their efforts to move forward and escape. Mixed messages were also common among those seeking help; as Hawa relayed, the person who intervened was her mother, who told her abuse was normal. Hawa also told her best friend, who told her she should leave her partner. Reaching out was not without complexity; some felt that doing so was disloyal, and that it caused them to defend their abuser, whom they still loved and wanted to be with. Snowbunny described,

Most reported that seeking help was important to their survival, while in a couple of cases, the help they received (or rather, did not receive) set the survivor back in their efforts to move forward and escape.

*It made me defend her because everyone said how I should just leave, but I love her. It made me scared about how much worse... Just raised the bar until the next bad thing.*

These mixed messages were sometimes compounded by the survivor's family and friends, who would choose to remain in relationship with, or even take sides with, the abuser. This would leave the survivor in an impossible bind, trying to negotiate their own safety with their need for family and friends to support them. This double bind was described by Aundrea:

*They could have been supportive in general. The friends we had thought I was really difficult to deal with. Some of them even thought I was cheating because we had made the agreement to be in an open relationship because I really wanted to end the relationship...My family still communicates with her, and my sister made her my niece's godmother. They still hangout, and are friends with her new partner. Even now, that's really difficult for me.*

Informed by early conversations where staff of TNLR shared patterns they had anecdotally witnessed over the years, we hoped to better understand the extent to which seeking help led the survivor to feel more, or less, sure of their own perceptions regarding the abuse. When asked whether seeking support helped them to trust their own perceptions more or less, more than half said that self-doubt was a significant part of the experience of being threatened with lethality. Sarah's experience was described as follows:

*I totally doubted my perceptions all the time. I think he manipulated me to do that a lot. So much at the end when I kept going back and forth about leaving, there was so many times I felt "crazy" and was making up how bad the situation was. I finally had my friends and family involved telling me how bad it was and I needed to leave, and I still felt like it was me causing the issue.*

Similarly, "helpers" sometimes attributed the abuse to mental health challenges, which survivors then felt pressured to take on as a support for healing. As Jake described:

*My therapist considered them [violent episodes] all to be manic episodes since my partner was bipolar. She encouraged me to learn more about bipolar, make sure my partner was on meds and seeing a therapist. [This] made me doubt my perceptions because it wasn't supposed to be abuse, just something I had to live with.*

Billy's experience was primarily focused around erratic driving and experiences with risk in the car, thus rendering him unsure of whether his sense of risk was real. He commented,

*I doubted my perceptions because he was never physically violent towards me. So, I didn't associate the driving with a form of abuse. Also because he had mood swings all the time. Eventually, towards the end I didn't have many friends to talk about because he kind of won them all over, so there were only a few left.*

A sense of isolation and feeling consistently or frequently alone with the abuse and its effects was a common thread throughout many of the survivor's stories, whether they had experienced harm, serious harm, or threat of lethality. It is important to note that these situations often involved significant emotional distress, which is not always evident in the quotes included above, because the survivor has had some time to recover from (and get distance on) the abuse. Support was key: The need for support was partially about connection, and partially about identifying resources needed to imagine a different future. As Wayne so aptly said, "talking [with resources] is important for not feeling alone, and shelter is helpful for security." Nancy echoed the crucial nature of being able to locate resources, sharing that "An ad for (a DV shelter) came on the TV just after [I] hung up the phone. It was like a sign from God." Nancy stated that she called the number, and they had an opening in their shelter. She left that night with her children. On the way there, she got lost at the subway station, and a police officer asked her if she needed help. She told him she was trying to get to a shelter, and he made a call, and the police ended up driving her to the shelter.

## IV. Summary of Findings: Harm, Serious Harm, and Threats of Lethality

Each individual survivor in this study has experienced significant stress, emotional suffering, and in many cases, physical injuries as a result of the abuse they have endured. While no two stories are identical, and while it is impossible to thus generalize across the board about the nature of abuse faced by LGBTQ/T individuals in this study, some themes and patterns have emerged from these stories, which help to illuminate collective understanding of the conditions under which partner abuse happens in these communities, the effects that it has, and the resources and strategies survivors call upon to cope with it.

### These Include the Following:

- *The nature of partner abuse ranged from significant verbal and emotional abuse, to physical threats, and actual physical harm, including sexual violence, punching/hitting the survivors, choking/strangling the survivor, threatening to blow up the survivor using toxic chemicals, throwing knives at the survivor or threatening to cut the survivors' throat, and other acts of violence or threats.*
- *75% of survivors in the study experienced threat of serious harm; two-thirds (66%) experienced fear or threat that their partner would kill them.*
- *The location of abuse is most often in the survivor or abuser's home/dorm/apartment, followed closely by experiences in cars or while driving. Other locations include the abuser's family's home, at work, and in public, as well as any time alone with the abuser.*
- *The context leading up to incidents of harm was a communication context (for example, being talked to disrespectfully by the abuser and challenging it, leading to escalation); a behavioral context (survivor was behaving in some way the abuser did not like or failing to behave in some particular way, which the abuser used as an excuse for a rageful reaction); or, a relational context (survivor was connecting with others, such as friends or family, in a way the abuser did not like).*
- *Serious harm was characterized by survivors as being typified by a sense of unpredictability and chaos.*
- *Threats of lethality sometimes followed the pattern noted above (regarding a specific behavioral context) while at other times, the threat of lethality did not appear to correspond to a specific incident or action. The unspecific, unpredictable nature of many survivors' experiences with threats of lethality resulted in confusion, panic, and a persistent sense of helplessness.*
- *Survivors used a variety of strategies in their efforts to manage the abuse, including efforts to avoid or escape the abuser, to de-escalate the abuse by placating the abuser, being silent or passive, and in some cases, fighting back or resisting the abusive behavior.*

- *When survivors sought help or support, they called upon family and friends, partner abuse support agencies such as TNLR, therapists, and in a few cases, police or other law enforcement resources to support them.*
- *While survivors found LGBTQ/T partner abuse resources and in many cases, family and friends to be consistently helpful, other experiences with resources were mixed, and left survivors feeling misunderstood, judged, or isolated with the abuse. These experiences are discussed in more detail in the next section.*

## Findings Regarding Resources and Support

A primary purpose of this study, in addition to better understanding survivors' experiences with threats of lethality or other forms of serious harm, is to identify the resources, support systems, networks and opportunities for resistance and survival that participants are currently drawing on and that may be considered promising practices for intervention in these situations. Knowing how survivors cope with threats of serious harm or lethality is integral to developing meaningful systems to support them as they make crucial decisions about escape, termination of the relationship, and other strategies for reaching safety. The following themes were derived by examining data in response to the following questions:

- 1. Are there resources or strategies you have drawn upon to manage fear of serious harm or lethality?**
- 2. Is there anything specific that we (or other community organizations) could do to support you when you feel you are at risk of being killed by your partner?**
- 3. Is there anything specific that your friends, family, or your community could do to support you more effectively when/if you feel you are at risk of being killed by your partner?**

## V. Resource/Supports/Strategies: Findings and Recommendations

- 1) Service organizations such as TNLR and other partner abuse organizations, hotlines, and shelters play a vital role in providing survivors with support.**

**Recommendation: All partner abuse service organizations should be well-prepared to provide support to LGBTQ/T survivors of domestic violence.**

Survivors in this study spoke openly about the work of TNLR and other partner abuse service organizations in empowering them to take action on their own behalf, to challenge limiting beliefs that were preventing them from moving forward in their lives and in their relationships, and in providing

material resources and advocacy for the complex life situations they were navigating. Given that this is the work of every such agency and community organization, it stands to reason that all such organizations should be equally prepared to provide culturally competent and gender- and sexual orientation-inclusive support to all survivors. Survivors in this study experienced inconsistent service provision at community agencies not specific to LGBTQ/T abuse, and were often referred for treatment to centers not related to their presenting concern (for example, eating disorder or substance abuse treatment centers). Additional resources and training for referral providers appear to be needed to remedy this delay in accessing appropriate support. No two survivors' stories are the same, and neither are the resources needed the same in every situation. Some need safe homing and assistance with restraining orders, while others benefit most from individual counseling and support group participation. Rather than dictate formulaic solutions, service providers must be able to effectively provide all available options to LGBTQ/T survivors in an inclusive way, in order to empower their choice-making process.

## **2) Family and friends are also vital resources for survivors facing threats of serious harm, and must be provided with resources and support similar to those now available to survivors.**

### **Recommendation: Partner abuse organizations should provide accessible and culturally responsive education, awareness, and training to those supporting survivors.**

It is clear from the preliminary data in this study that while some survivors feel isolated and alone in their experiences with an abusive partner, many are reaching out for help to family, friends, and co-workers to alleviate the stress and anxiety of the abuse experience. However, family and friends do not always respond in ways that empower the survivor to move forward and take action in their own self-interests. In keeping with other research (Renzetti & Miley, 2014; Rose & Campbell, Tan, Basta, Sullivan and Davidson, 1995), resource development and additional outreach to family and friends of those facing abuse is imperative in order to expand the web of survivor support and empowerment. Family and friends' denial or minimization of domestic abuse, or normalization of it, results in a sense of confusion and self-doubt for the survivor, as they begin to question whether the abuse is really as bad as they currently perceive. Several in this study also reported that the abuser was skilled at bringing friends and family to their side, against the survivor. Thus, it is imperative that efforts to provide family and friends with skills and tools to effectively support survivors, and perhaps even to assess risk of harm or lethality by abusers, is essential. Friends and family must also be coached in understanding appropriate forms of intervention, and the potential risks inherent in deciding to "take over" a situation with a loved one who is in a relationship with a volatile, abusive partner. As Snowbunny counseled regarding family and friends' interventions, "Be cryptic. Please don't text/email, etc. anything my partner could read that can get back and hurt me. Although you may not want her there, if you want me there, the safest way for me to be there is if she can go, too." Additionally, a state or federally-funded public awareness campaign to encourage friends and family to better understand their role in supporting survivors of abuse could be crucial in changing

Family and friends' denial or minimization of domestic abuse, or normalization of it, results in a sense of confusion and self-doubt for the survivor, as they begin to question whether the abuse is really as bad as they currently perceive.

attitudes and awareness about these issues, and should include the input of staff at TNL and other agencies in its development and deployment.

**3) In addition to supportive counseling, material resources for those seeking to escape are essential, particularly shelter, and financial resources for achieving independence and stability.**

**Recommendation: State and federal agencies should allocate additional discretionary resources to LGBTQ/T-specific partner abuse organizations, to support survivors in escaping abuse.**

Many survivors in this study described being afraid to leave an abusive partner due to financial constraints, including the need for safe housing, financial support to move out of the abuser's immediate environs, and financial support to replace lost items such as automobiles, cell phones, and other means of sustenance. It is clear that family and friends are not, and cannot be, a survivor's sole source of financial support when attempting to escape partner abuse. The stress of facing serious harm, threats of lethality, or actual lethality compromises survivors' abilities to maintain economic independence, including securing and keeping employment. For that reason, financial support that can be used for any number of reasons to secure a survivor's independence and stability are needed, and survivors need to be aware that they can access these resources through partner abuse organizations safely and rapidly.

**4) Accountability for perpetrators is elusive and fraught with complexity for many survivors. Current systems of accountability are not always an effective, or desirable, resource for survivors.**

**Recommendation: Options for perpetrator accountability are currently insufficient for meeting survivor needs. Because the benefits of alternative modalities are uncertain, additional research on these alternatives (such as restorative justice and community accountability circles) is warranted before they are adopted.**

While most in this study had experienced serious harm and threats of lethality, they very rarely described seeking support or assistance from law enforcement officials or criminal justice systems. Some expressed cynicism that such mechanisms would be responsive or helpful; others were genuinely conflicted about whether and to what extent they wished to hold their perpetrators accountable, due to fears of reprisal/retaliation, or continuing to feel love and connection to the abuser. Research shows that LGBTQ/T individuals have experienced significant oppression by law enforcement (Wolff and Cokely, 2007) and that law enforcement officials may hold stereotypical beliefs about queer individuals (Bernstein and Kostelac, 2002), leading survivors in this study to feel mistrustful about contacting them. These concerns are likely magnified among survivors of color and immigrant survivors, as recent data suggest that perceptions of police in these communities are at an all-time low (Davis and Hendricks, 2014; Newport, 2014). Clearly, for these and other reasons, the criminal justice system is not adequate in all or even most cases of LGBTQ/T partner abuse. To develop more effective measures for

accountability, more should be done to ask survivors for insight about their own individual situations and to create spaces where survivors can talk about the merits and minuses of these kinds of responses. Coming together as survivors and talking about remedies, safely and with skilled facilitation, and then using this information to inform policies and recommendations, is a crucial and underused approach.

It is apparent that multiple, complementary approaches for perpetrator accountability should center on survivor empowerment and restriction of perpetrator's ability to further offend. Alternative models, including community-based, holistic modalities for approaching accountability, include Circles of Support and Accountability, an offender re-entry program piloted in the state of Vermont with promising evidence of reduced recidivism for high-risk sex offenders (Fox, 2013). An alternative but related modality, restorative justice, has been heralded by some as a meaningful approach to addressing partner abuse (Gaarder & Presser, 2006; Pennell, 2006), while others have cautioned against its adoption without a great deal more research and consideration of the benefits balanced by potential perils (BC Association of....., 2002, Coker, 2002). It is clear from this study that survivors do not generally perceive law enforcement or the criminal justice system to be a viable or meaningful option for protection or accountability, thus additional, carefully conducted research of these and other alternatives before adopting any of them is recommended.

## **5) Survivors in this study experiences experienced significant varieties of abuse, with varying reactions and decisions regarding safety/escape, and use of resources.**

**Recommendation: Additional research is needed to identify the conditions of partner abuse, especially threats of lethality among LGBTQ/T survivors, the best support and resource options for survivors of abuse, and the role of gender identity and sexual orientation in the abuse experience.**

While the survivors in this study share some experiences – fear, anxiety and a sense of powerlessness, coupled often with confusion/chaos and a sense of having relatively few options for escape and support – much more needs to be understood about the life experiences of those who experience abuse as LGBTQ/T-identified people. Specifically, the following research questions emerged from this study that beg further consideration:

- *Acknowledging that escape is not always a desirable or meaningful goal for survivors, what are the factors that enable those who wish to escape and have done so successfully?*
- *What resources are most helpful to survivors in managing/coping with the abuse?*
- *How can we best support and empower those who have experienced abuse in multiple relationships?*
- *How can we take the emphasis off of scrutinizing survivor choices (including factors that lead to their own self-doubt), and return the focus to understanding the factors that lead abusers to abuse?*

- *How do racism, classism, genderism, and homo/bi/transphobia operate in relationships where there is abuse? How do these forms of oppression create conditions that make it difficult to manage or escape from abuse?*
- *How can we better assist survivors in seeking more effective and appropriate resources? (Therapy/mental health support, support groups, and shelter, specifically). How can we better equip service providers to respond sensitively, inclusively, and competently to survivors of all genders and sexualities?*
- *How can we better understand survivors' experiences and support survivors in trusting their gut reactions about abuse they experience?*
- *How can we interrupt messages in the larger culture (in the media, institutions, and families) that support abusers in committing abuse without accountability?*

Finally, more exploration of the context and conditions surrounding LGBTQ/T abuse and threats of lethality is warranted, to better understand how and when interruption/intervention may be possible and desirable.

## VI. Conclusion

The survivors in this study offer compelling and harrowing stories of times when they have survived the threat of harm, serious harm, and lethality in their relationships with abusive partners. They have survived largely due to their own resourcefulness, and their ability to manage extremely dangerous and chaotic situations effectively. However, that the individuals in this study have all survived does not mean that the urgency of what they experienced is any less profound. In fact, intervention and support is all the more poignant given that their suffering has been so concentrated, so perilous, and so isolating.

As TNLR continues its work listening to, supporting, and responding to the needs of survivors, it is imperative that continued attention is given to the location and context of partner abuse, survivors' reactions to the abuse, and the most effective and meaningful resources drawn upon to manage these harms and threats of lethality. Additional commitment from mainstream partner abuse organizations to provide inclusive, culturally responsive services, allocation of additional state and federal resources for survivors to cope with and escape abuse, additional education and awareness for friends and family members of survivors, alternatives to criminal justice prosecution, and additional research about the issues raised in this report are all outcomes of this study that require and deserve additional attention from policymakers, state and federal funders, and the community of all those opposed to partner abuse in LGBTQ/T communities. The work ahead is ours, collectively, to assume; the time is now, and the need is critical.

**Lives literally depend on our ability to rise to this challenge.**

The Network/La Red

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## About the Author, Susan Marine

Susan Marine, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Higher Education at Merrimack College. With extensive experience leading initiatives related to gender and violence prevention, her advocacy is centered in empowerment of the LGBTQ community. Working in the movement to end gender based violence since 1994, she has led sexual assault prevention and response offices at four different universities. Her research includes methods for making sexual violence prevention education more gender inclusive, and model practices for interventions to end LGBTQ sexual and relationship violence among college students. She serves as a consultant to a wide variety of colleges and violence prevention organizations, and is the author of *Stonewall's Legacy: Bisexual gay, lesbian and transgender students in higher education*.

## About The Network/La Red

The Network/La Red is a survivor-led, social justice organization that works to end partner abuse in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, BDSM, polyamorous, and queer communities. Rooted in anti-oppression principles, our work aims to create a world where all people are free from oppression. We strengthen our communities through organizing, education, and the provision of support services.

If you or someone you know could use support, call our free and confidential hotline: 617-742-4911. You do not have to leave or want to leave your relationship to get help.

If you are interested in more information about our services, the work we do, or interested in a training or technical assistance for your organization, check out our website: [www.tnlr.org](http://www.tnlr.org)

One time when we were having a fight, they punched a wall. It felt scary enough I left the house. I lost most of my friend group. He became close with any and everybody I was close with. The few friends I maintained saw through it, but many were swayed by him, and felt I was a terrible boyfriend to him. Most of her violence was not directed specifically at me she only hit me once and came close a second time. I knew she was angry, so I didn't know what was going to happen next. He left me alone when the restraining order was in place, but told me that someday he would find me and finish me. I'd do whatever I could to not piss him off. I was really scared although I tried to tell myself I was just exaggerating. She also would say there was nothing wrong with what's **TNLR hotline** and that it was my issue with any **Voice: 617-742-4911** her because everyone said now **Toll-Free: 800-832-1901** leave, but I love her. She grabbed the **www.tnlr.org** and ripped it open, turned me around, and shoved me towards the