

12-2021

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Responding to Domestic Violence with Transformative Justice and Community Accountability

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December 10, 2021

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Abstract

Walnut Avenue Family & Women's Center (WAFWC) wanted to create a survivor-driven transformative justice program for survivors of domestic violence and the people who caused them harm. The program needed to be customizable enough to suit the specific needs and individual safety considerations of the participants, but also needed enough structure that it could be reproducible from case to case. In order to design a program that was based on these ideas and able to be used in the context of a non-profit organization, WAFWC researched ways other communities had been using transformative justice and community accountability to address issues other than domestic violence. With this research and the agency's foundational understanding of domestic violence dynamics, they created, in collaboration with the Conflict Resolution Center (CRC) of Santa Cruz, *The Transformative Justice Project*. The project seeks to act as a way for couples with a history of domestic violence to meet their individual and joint goals safely and without the involvement of law enforcement. The program has not yet entered its pilot phase and is still being evaluated and adjusted with the utmost consideration for survivor well-being, harm reduction and trauma informed service.

Keywords: domestic violence, transformative justice, conflict resolution, harm reduction

Agency Profile & Communities Served

Walnut Avenue Family & Women's Center (WAFWC) is a non-profit organization in Santa Cruz, California. It was originally founded in 1933 as a Young Women's Christian Association to provide support to local women, young mothers, and their children. Since its founding, the agency has expanded to serve the changing needs of its community. WAFWC is most often recognized in Santa Cruz for their work with survivors of domestic violence (DV) and domestic violence advocacy, but is not solely a domestic violence agency. In addition to DV services and advocacy, the agency provides services for families, children and youth, food and employment support, and referrals to other local resources. The unifying goal for all offered services is to foster healthy relationships between participants and the people in their lives, regardless of the nature of the relationship (WAFWC, 2021). One of the core values of the agency is inclusion and acceptance for all identities and traits and they provide services to people of all identities, sexual expressions and preferences, gender identities and presentations, demographics, and ages. Services are offered free of charge and the organization does not discriminate based on income, socioeconomic status, or any other financial considerations.

Based on a review of participant demographics from the last 12 months, the majority of WAFWC's participants are white, English speaking women. These demographics match the community to some degree and, since domestic violence is so often gender based it makes sense that many of the participants would identify as female. There are, however, many other demographics that experience domestic violence and the agency recognizes that there is room to expand the reach of their services. WAFWC hopes to be able to provide support to a more diverse demographic, providing resources for non-binary, queer folks, ethnic and racial minorities and other communities.

Problem Description

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence reports that “on average, nearly 20 people per minute are physically abused by an intimate partner in the United States” (NCADV, 2020, p. 1). This translates to over 10 million people experiencing abuse from an intimate partner over the course of one year. The organization defines domestic violence as “the willful intimidation, physical assault, battery, sexual assault, and/or other abusive behavior as part of a systematic pattern of power and control perpetrated by one intimate partner against another” that can include a myriad of types of abuse, not just physical violence (NCADV, 2020, p. 1). It is an issue seen across all ages, genders, sexual orientations, races, religions, nationalities, and communities. The results of domestic violence can include physical injuries, lasting psychological trauma, and death (NCADV, 2020).

Despite the prevalence of the issue, there are few to no options in existence to support individuals who are committed to remaining in a relationship, despite the presence or history of domestic violence (DV), and who want to improve the safety of the relationship. Even fewer options still offer personalized support and accountability, do not rely on or involve law enforcement, and provide services for the person causing harm. Often, the assumption is that anyone in a DV relationship wants to leave and just needs the right support to be able to. This is very often though not the case and there are numerous reasons as to why someone might stay in a relationship despite the presence of domestic violence. Some of these reasons might include housing insecurity if they were to try to move out, fear that things will get worse if they leave, a desire to stay to try and make things better or to stay together for their kids, or just simply because they love that other person and want to be with them. While it can be difficult to know the barriers to leaving a relationship, or why a person may want to stay, it is important to

recognize that leaving is not always the number one goal. This fact is not something that is widely understood and resistance to this idea can lead to programs based on the assumption that anyone in a DV relationship wants to leave. This approach is extremely limited in its understanding of domestic violence relationships and may not account for an individual's personal bias regarding DV.

There are also numerous reasons why a person may want to avoid the involvement of law enforcement. Some may feel that police involvement would not help their situation and may even make it much worse. Punitive justice is not always an effective method of reformation and many perpetrators of domestic violence do not see long term behavior changes. It is extremely common for individuals who have been incarcerated for domestic violence charges to be re-arrested and it is estimated that 60% of those with a domestic violence conviction are re-arrested for the same charge within two years of their release (Monroe & King, 2020). Additionally, incarceration is not equivalent to justice for the survivors of the violence and does not always offer the closure that it is so often assumed to. Stefanie Mundhenk, a public defender in Kentucky, states that she receives many calls regarding her clients who have been charged with domestic violence. Regularly though, the callers don't want the accused to go to jail, believing that that is not the best solution for their situation (Mundhenk, 2021).

Contributing Factors

In the United States, and most Western societies in general, the primary way of responding to crimes and unfavorable behaviours in general is punitive justice and incarceration for the perpetrators of these actions. These cultures have developed and been conditioned to believe that removing a person from society is the standard course of action and because of this, incarceration has become the dominant form of retribution. This idea starts from a very young

age with the use of a time out and continues into school and employment with the practices of suspension and expulsion or termination. Eventually, these practices escalate to the level of incarceration and potentially even solitary confinement as the ultimate means of exile. The commonness of these practices can mean that society often fails or does not even attempt to think about alternative means of justice.

One of the biggest problems with placing such emphasis on punitive justice is that it is very often unsuccessful - very few perpetrators are actually convicted particularly in the context of domestic or interpersonal violence. This low conviction rate comes from a myriad of sources, both social and legislative. Without the appropriate legal proceedings, it is impossible to convict a criminal, regardless of the crime. No legal process can begin, however, without an initial report to law enforcement. This is an issue that is especially relevant to crimes of sexual and domestic violence. Numerous social factors influence the choice of whether or not to report, and many of the factors that allow these types of crimes to continue, contribute to a person's hesitancy to report.

Yuki Noguchi, business desk correspondent for NPR, spoke on the Morning Edition about how often cases are rejected by courts. She spoke with Professor Sandra Sperino of University of Cincinnati who explains "You'll see case after case where a woman was groped at work and the court will dismiss the case as a matter of law, finding that's not sexual harassment" (Noguchi, 2017, pp 6). These dismissals are pertinent in large part because of the role they play in setting a precedent. Setting a precedent is so significant because "in a common law system, judges are obliged to make their rulings as consistent as reasonably possible with previous judicial decisions on the same subject" (Richards, 2009, pp 1), meaning when one judge rules on

this type of behavior and finds it is not to be considered sexual harassment that notion carries over into other cases of sexual violence setting subsequent judges to rule in the same way.

Consequences

Incarceration is certainly not the appropriate route for all crimes and often perpetrators of violent crimes benefit more from counseling, personal and community accountability and therapy. Hattendorf and Tollerund (2009), describe the characteristics of male batterers;

Male batterers from abusive families may recall detesting the violence they observed or experienced as children, yet as adults they perpetuate this pattern... Scharer (1979) found that as children, abusers are often told how to act and feel, discouraging creativity and autonomy in problem-solving. They then grow increasingly distrustful and hostile while forming a protective psychological shell. This produces a low tolerance for frustration, leading to emotional instability (p 19).

Though this definition is outdated, the term “male batterers” is typically avoided and seldom used now, the ideas of human psychology remain largely the same. This “previous exposure to violence” that Hattendorf & Tollerund talk about is a commonality amongst many perpetrators of sexually violent crimes and is something that can have devastating effects for both perpetrators as well as potential future targets when it is overlooked.

Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Our society focuses on punitive justice and incarcerating perpetrators of	There are few to no options available for individuals committing to remaining in	Violence in the relationship continues to escalate

violence	DV relationships that offer personalized support and accountability.	
Punitive justice is often unsuccessful - very few perpetrators are actually convicted		Those close to the person experiencing harm cannot understand why the person stays, further isolating them
People who cause harm are often written off as being “too far gone” or impossible/not worth rehabilitating		Negative impact on mental health of both parties

Capstone Project Description and Justification

Capstone Project

This capstone project is the research and development of a transformative justice program which would work with individuals committed to staying in relationships where there is a history of or active elements of domestic violence. Through a transformative justice and community accountability process, WAFWC will work with partners in relationships with a history of domestic violence to support them toward a healthier, safer relationship and living environment. This project operates with the understanding that there are many reasons why a person who has experienced DV may not want to or feel able to leave a relationship. Reasons for this may include financial dependence, love for the partner, a lack of social network outside that relationship, and many other possible factors. Also, the person or persons in the relationship may not feel comfortable involving law enforcement. Reasons for this may include fear for their own

safety or the safety of their partner as a result of police violence, desire for an outcome other than arrest or incarceration, or previous negative experiences with law enforcement. With the understanding of both of these conditions, the transformative justice project serves as an alternative to law enforcement to support survivors of DV to live safely and provides the partner who caused harm the opportunity to develop the skills and accountability to stop their unhealthy behaviors.

Project Purpose

In the past year and a half, there has been a dramatic push away from involving law enforcement in many situations, particularly for nonviolent offenses. This movement gained more public awareness following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and has been especially true within communities of color and among individuals who are most likely to be targeted by police brutality. Since domestic violence is a crime that occurs when there is an imbalance of power, the people targeted by domestic violence are often also targets of police violence. With the overlap between these two categories it seems a reasonable projection that this would be a group of people who would want to find solutions divorced from law enforcement. It is not unusual that law enforcement officers who respond to domestic violence calls, and law enforcement in general, are found to have a history of being abusive or perpetrating sexual assault themselves. “A database created by The Buffalo News showed that every 5 days an officer is caught in a sexual assault case or misconduct” (Dayone, 2020, pp 6). Additionally, it is common for law enforcement officials to be immediately doubtful of the victim's story, blame the victim, or side with the person causing harm. For example, a study from 2020 found that police officers “involved in domestic violence investigations were prone to treat victims with skepticism immediately” (Dayone, pp 5). WAFWC hopes to create a program

which would utilize concepts from transformative justice and serve as an alternative method. This would make it possible for individuals to navigate these situations more safely without having to engage law enforcement.

Project Justification

There are numerous benefits to the development and implementation of a transformative justice program in Santa Cruz. Programs similar to the one WAFWC hopes to develop exist elsewhere and have seen great success. For example, the Community Justice Center in Fresno, CA works with individuals recently released from prison and aids them in the process of reintegrating into society. In order to achieve this, the center uses COSA (Circles of Support and Accountability), an evidence-based restorative re-entry program. The program is used internationally and is “considered the most effective...restorative re-entry program in the world” (Community Justice Center, 2021, p. 1). Another benefit is providing an alternative to punitive justice as it is not an effective method of reformation. Many perpetrators of domestic violence do not experience long term behavior changes and for many survivors of domestic violence punishment is not equivalent to justice. This project focuses on harm reduction and recognizes that a person needs to be an active participant in their change in order for there to be any real progress made.

Through this program, WAFWC hopes to create an outlet for survivors who may be wary or even fearful of involving law enforcement but do feel that they need outside support from somewhere. Additionally, by providing this alternative, survivors will be empowered to develop a plan for their lives and future on their own terms, allowing them the freedom to embrace non conventional approaches without the many restrictions the courts or law enforcement may place on them. It also moves toward a more holistic approach to the domestic violence response and

creates viable options divorced from law enforcement. Lastly, this will be an interagency program, drawing on the expertise of both WAFWC and the Conflict Resolution Center, strengthening the merit of the program, and benefiting the populations served by both agencies.

Project Implementation

This project will be implemented through collaboration with Walnut Avenue Family & Women's Center (WAFWC) and the Conflict Resolution Center of Santa Cruz (CRC). It will be completely voluntary, meaning the individual working with WAFWC/CRC must express interest in participating in the program in order to be considered and eligible. The survivor will then receive an overview of what the program will entail including time commitment, duration, who will be involved and to what extent, and what the program can and cannot do. After this process has taken place, the person causing harm will be interviewed to assess their suitability for the program. This process will include learning about the history of their relationship with the survivor, the extent of violence that has been present, and pertinent information about the person causing harm including history of violence outside the relationship. During the early stages the presence of children in the relationship will also be a consideration, though not an absolute disqualifier, as the more moving pieces there are, the more complicated the process becomes.

After the onboarding process is complete for the survivor, person who caused harm, and support network, CRC facilitators and WAFWC advocates will meet to further discuss whether the program seems appropriate for the situation and determine whether the case is fitting for the scope of the program. Each party will then meet with facilitators and their respective advocates to begin to identify personal goals, wants, needs, and safety standards throughout the program. Once initial goals and boundaries have been established, the participants' advocates will work

with the participants to identify support people ie. individuals in the partners' lives that are not affiliated with WAFWC/CRC and will be able to provide support during the program.

This group of individuals will be referred to as the "support circles." This program defines the support circles as the established group of individuals who were present in the partners' lives prior to the start of the program. They may include friends, family and others who are not affiliated with WAFWC/CRC. The support circle members will be screened and given an overview of the program which will focus specifically on their role in the process. Depending on the party they are providing support or accountability for, they will receive guidance on how to provide support without re-traumatizing the survivor or provide accountability without excusing the behaviors of the person who caused harm or colluding with them. The support circles will be present during group meetings to provide emotional support as well as be accessible outside of the program meetings to support their respective parties.

When both parties agree, individually, that it is an appropriate time they will meet with each other. This initial meeting will include the CRC facilitators, WAFWC advocates, and the support circles. The facilitators will work with both parties to come to one or more mutually agreed upon goals for the process. After these goals have been established and documents for record, advocates will continue working with their respective party. In addition to these participant-advocate meetings the program will include periodic group meetings with participants, facilitators advocates, and support circles.

Since the transformative justice project is a brand new program and has not yet taken on its first case, this is simply the anticipated implementation strategy. As WAFWC/CRC continue to take new cases and actively engage in the program details will inevitably need to be adjusted

to best suit the needs of participants as well as make the process as successful as possible for both agencies involved.

Assessment Plan

The program will be considered complete when the participants reach their previously agreed upon goal and feel that WAFWC and CRC no longer need to take an active role in the relationship. The parties will sign an agreement, as is standard for meetings with the CRC, and the agencies' formal service and client participation in the program is ended. The transformative justice project is, by design, highly customizable and results and goals will vary with each case. Due to the individuality and highly personal nature of the program, effectiveness will be defined by the participants. The conversations they have with their advocates and what is said during meetings with facilitators will indicate their feelings on the effectiveness of the process. The overarching or standing goal of the program is increased safety in the relationship without the engagement of law enforcement. This is not necessarily something that will be directly tracked by WAFWC/CRC as after the participants agree they have reached their goal formal service ends. Continued participation with the agencies will be voluntary and may not happen with all cases.

Expected Outcomes

The program will have an impact on individuals as well as the community and agencies involved. Each entity will have a different level of engagement and experience different, but related, outcomes. For the survivor in each case, the process will empower them to access support both from their personal lives as well as from social services and other relevant resources. The program is client centered and while the agencies will not do the work for the survivor they will support them in bringing together a customized network they may not have

otherwise been able or motivated to assemble. Additionally, the survivor will be engaged with different levels and types of support ranging from professional to personal. This variety will encourage a more holistic approach to their healing.

For the person causing harm, the process will have similar but different outcomes. They will also be prompted to create a support network which follows the same idea as that of the survivor. The developed network will include many levels of support and may not have come to be without external motivation and accountability. The process will also provide a process divorced from the legal system and punitive justice. The person who caused harm will be held accountable for their actions without the use of judgement and shame to enforce this accountability.

For the greater community at large and the involved agencies there will be a separate set of outcomes. The community members will engage with WAFWC and CRC, something which they may have never done. By the same token WAFWC will be expanding their scope to work with the support circles as well as the person causing harm, something which, in their former processes they have never done. This will provide opportunities for staff training, direct service, and experience, as well as new career and volunteer options in community-oriented service. WAFWC and CRC will also strengthen their relationship through this collaborative process, a partnership which is especially beneficial given the overlap in both agencies' shared goals and target populations.

Project Results

The Transformative Justice Project has not yet been implemented. Currently, the estimated launch date is summer 2022 but that could change depending on numerous different variables. The results that have come from this project so far are more specific to the agency than

the greater community which is the eventual goal of the project. The research done on transformative justice, domestic violence, and other relevant subjects, has enabled Walnut Avenue Family & Women's Center (WAFWC) to work in collaboration with Conflict Resolution Center (CRC) and develop a template for this program. The template has been sent to the agency's board to be approved so that WAFWC can begin the process of finding funding to implement the program.

So far, the previously identified expected outcomes remain to be intended outcomes as the program has not yet had the chance to launch. Given that the subjects of this program are humans with vastly different lived experiences, it will be difficult to quantify the results of the program. Since people's lived experiences are so subjective there isn't a purely numerical way to interpret the outcomes or successes of the proposed program. It is difficult to say what the project's eventual results will be since the program has not yet been implemented. That being said, the mock scenarios that have been run through the current template do support the expected outcomes with respect to the program's impact on the broader community.

The changes that have occurred as a result of the project have been internal. One change that has occurred within the agency is that the community engagement coordinator has received approval from their supervisor to make the Transformative Justice Project one of their primary focuses within the agency. This means that the program will continue to evolve and progress toward the expected outcomes. Additionally, at the inception of this idea it was unclear whether or not the program would even be possible. Through this process it has been established that it is feasible, however, it is more complicated than initially anticipated. Some complicating factors include the many nuances of domestic violence dynamics, the constraints of working within a non-profit organization, and the challenge that a lot of funding for domestic violence agencies

comes from law enforcement. Since the goal of the program is to not engage law enforcement it becomes a challenge of how to fund it without that involvement and in general, the challenge of not knowing how much funding is needed.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There are still a lot of steps that need to take place for the program to be fully implemented. Pending approval from administrators there will be a lot of logistical questions. How many staff members will each case require and how many hours will each staff member need to dedicate to the program? How does the agency afford to fund staffing for the program and if CRC mediators are volunteers what incentives will be necessary to get them to participate? It has been established that the program is possible, but because it doesn't exist yet it is hard to predict and it is hard to know what other questions will come up with implementing the program.

Additionally, this program and the ideas it is built on are going to be a big jump for a lot of people, both staff and community members. Adjusting to the idea that not everyone in a DV relationship wants to leave, or that not all survivors of DV want the person who caused them harm arrested will take time. Providing service to the person who caused harm will also be a tremendous shift for the advocates, particularly since so many people in this field are here because of some personal experience. Easing into that will be essential and incorporating the ideas of transformative justice into other agency practices and policies will help develop an understanding of what the program is founded on.

Personal Reflection

Personal & Professional Growth

While the program hopes to eventually address the issue of limited options for individuals who have caused or experienced harm to create a safer relationship without the

involvement or law enforcement, at the current moment it has not yet done that. The need that it has begun to address however, within the agency is the gap in services provided to both parties. WAFWC provided fantastic services for survivors of DV but none of the services worked with couples. After recognizing the need for services which incorporated both parties and identifying a way to do that, the program began to take shape.

There were other logistical issues with implementing the program specific to working within a non profit organization. Grants come with restrictions and assuring funding can be challenging, particularly for a program that doesn't have a mold or any set precedent. There are also laws surrounding domestic violence organizations that complicates the use of physical space. For example agencies need to have two separate entrances and be able to minimize contact between parties while they are in the building together. Oftentimes, by law the identified abuser is not allowed in the same building at all.

Strengths & Successes

The first several months of developing this program were dedicated to researching the political frameworks of transformative justice and community accountability. Hours were dedicated to learning how those ideas have been used in communities outside of nonprofits as well as what other non profit organizations have been incorporating these ideas into their program. Since so much time was spent on the background research and building a knowledge base that would serve as the foundation of the program, the theory is extremely well established. The ideas of transformative justice and community accountability have been incorporated into every element of the process, making the structure of the program very strong.

Limitations & Challenges

The biggest challenge of this project was the sheer scope of the program. This project changed the types of service that Walnut offered. The agency hadn't ever provided service to the person who had caused harm so that was a big shift for the advocacy and prevention department. There were logistical limitations as well as ideological challenges to the creation of The Transformative Justice Project. The primary logistical limitation of this project was time. At the start of this project it was unclear whether or not it was even something that could be accomplished and to get from that point to implementing the program takes more time than this capstone project and internship would accommodate. There were also obstacles regarding resources such as limitations in terms of the number of people working on the project, the hours that could be allocated, and what funding could be secured.

Some of the ideological challenges of this program were staying true to the values of the agency and mission while also taking special care to fully incorporate the practices of transformative justice and community accountability. There was also the issue of appropriately educating everyone who would be involved in the program and finding someone who could provide that education. The program needed to have enough framework to be coherent but also enough flexibility to be malleable for each individual case.

Broader Social Significance

There is much more than can and should be done that this program can only begin to accomplish. Domestic violence can't be divorced from other societal lessons, and in order to reduce the prevalence of domestic violence it is necessary to address the larger social issues that allow for this behavior to exist. Interpersonal violence, and particularly gendered violence and domestic violence, is about power and control and imbalances in power among people. Since it is about an imbalance of power, it is the concept of kyriarchy which must be recognized and

addressed in order to begin solving the more specific issue of DV. The kyriarchy “is the social system that keeps all intersecting oppressions in place” (Fiorenza, 2001). It is a system of oppression, domination, and privileges allotted to people based on many different characteristics. By challenging the idea that women are less than, this agency challenges and rejects the framework and ideology that allows or excuses interpersonal violence and domestic violence in particular. The shortcoming of couples counseling in the context of DV is that it assumes equal power within a relationship which is simply not the case. Counseling cannot work when the foundational idea that it operates within, equal power between partners, is not accurate for a particular situation.

With respect to transformative justice in particular, these ideas are not yet mainstream which is a barrier to framing and implementing. There are a lot of preconceived notions around the word accountability and what it really means to hold someone accountable in a way that isn't punishing them. There are going to be misunderstandings and ideological barriers so it is not unlikely that the program will run into misconceptions. It is also possible that due to the emphasis placed on separating the process from law enforcement that the program will receive pushback from law enforcement and legal systems. This may not necessarily come from the local police department but law enforcement programs in general may object to the growth and popularization of these ideas. Education will need to be provided to district attorneys, courts, and other fixtures in the legal system and it will be difficult to predict how they'll respond.

The advice I would give to any future Walnut Avenue Family & Women's Center intern is to get involved with the agency and talk to people outside of your field mentor. Since I was remote the entire time I did feel somewhat disconnected from the agency but I recognize that that was largely my own doing. I could have, and probably should have, put more effort into really

including myself in other aspects of WAFWC. If a student really wants to feel like a part of the agency it will be important for them to make a conscious effort to put themselves in those situations. Also, my capstone project wasn't one that involved most of the agency. It was more of a pilot, or a pre-pilot, so there were very few people other than myself and my mentor who were directly involved. The nature of the project didn't require me to work or communicate with other staff very often so that also contributed to feeling like I was only engaged with the agency in a very specific way rather than fully immersed.

If I could start over at my internship, I would have set a more regular schedule and developed a more structured plan for longer durations away from work, such as fall or winter break. There were periods of time where I didn't meet with my mentor regularly and it did feel like I lost touch with the internship and capstone project during those times. It wasn't difficult to jump back in but looking back I wish I would've made more of an effort to stay connected with the program for the full duration. I think doing so would have also increased my feeling of involvement within the agency.

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Appendix A

Scope of Work

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline/Deadlines	Supporting Staff
Field Learning Plan	CalState S4 submission	September 13, 2020	Marjorie
CRC Meeting #1		October 22, 2020 9:30 am	Marjoria, Alaya, Lejla
CRC Meeting #2		January 19, 2021 10:00 am	Marjoria, Alaya, Lejla
Field Learning Plan	CalState S4 submission	February 5, 2021	Marjorie
CRC Meeting #3	Rough Draft/Template of TJ program	February 16, 2021 11:15 am	Marjoria, Alaya, Lejla
CRC Meeting #4		March 25, 2021 11:00 am	Marjoria, Alaya, Lejla
Final Meeting before Capstone Presentation		December 6th, 2021 11:00 am	Marjorie
Capstone Presentation	Panel discussion	December 10th, 2021 8:45 am	Moderator: Maria Baranco (from Monarch)