

Why a Men's Center

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Twenty-three years ago a small group of men decided to create a local organization to promote community and anti-sexist activism among men. We were inspired by feminism, the early literature of the "men's movement" and our own personal experiences with challenging the dominating forms of masculinity. We wanted to create male identities and masculine culture that more authentically reflected the diverse realities of men's lives. We knew that the oppression of women and the dehumanization of men were two sides of the same coin. We knew that homophobia was directly linked to men's fear about expressing who we really are, and that racism, classism and ableism were demanding that we fight for one "right" way to be a man. And we knew that many truths about men, truths that we all needed to hear, were buried under the weight of the power and privilege we were offered if only we would keep silent.

23 years after the founding of the Men's Resource Center of Western Massachusetts, men in diverse communities around the United States, and throughout the world, are organizing. The MRC has served as a model of what is possible – a vibrant, grassroots, community-based men's center that is more than a passing fad catching the eye of the media. And now, Men's Resources International is supporting the development of men's programs in diverse communities, and building a global network of these initiatives working in alliance with women.

If men's centers are truly going to become an ongoing part of the fabric of our society we all need to understand and support the reasons for having a men's program in our communities. Because few of us have any of experience of a men's center, and because there are many voices of suspicion and fear, we need careful, and repeated explanations of why a men's center is so valuable. Here are some of our answers to the question, "*Why a men's center?*"

Because men are hurting. Many men are in pain. This pain can be physical, mental or emotional, usually all three. Some men recognize it, many men do not. Often men try not to pay attention to their pain. We have learned to "suck it up", "hold it in", "walk it off". We believe that admitting our pain to others is an admission of weakness, proof of not being a "real man", letting others down. And we know it is frequently an invitation to be shamed and abused. We often end up isolated and afraid in our pain. Addictive and abusive behaviors are one way we attempt to cope with this hidden pain.

At a men's center a safe place is created where men are encouraged to respect the full range of our feelings, where we do not have to deny our pain, our fear, our anger or our joy, where men come together to witness and support each other in expressing ourselves clearly and honestly. We break through our fears and learn that our greatest strength is in our vulnerability with ourselves and others.

Because men are hurting others. Violence in our relationships, in our families, on our streets, and in our schools continues to be one of the most significant social issues of our time. Much (although not all) of this violence seems to be done by men and teen-age boys. Although we have a growing number of legal and social services for victims of violence, our society has not yet developed an array of effective resources for addressing the perpetrators.

At a men's center men join together in learning how to recognize and take responsibility for our patterns of hurtful behavior. We examine how the social and psychological dimensions of masculinity have affected us personally and created the conditions for violence and abuse. We share and support each other's efforts to change these patterns, individually and culturally. We join as allies with

women in challenging cultural and institutional systems of domination and control. We offer each other and our society models of recovery, safety, empowerment and hope.

Because men are divided against each other. From an early age males learn to compete against each other. We are taught to think about ourselves literally as potential soldiers fighting other men to the death in combat. Other men are seen as enemies, dangerous, someone from whom I have to defend myself and my family, someone competing for limited resources. We have used differences of race, nationality, class, and sexual orientation as battlegrounds for our fear of other men.

At a men's center men come together with an agreement of honesty and respect for each other. We learn to put aside our fears and create a culture where we can practice understanding rather than winning, communication rather than fighting, sharing rather than defending. We become a place where men from different backgrounds, lifestyles and communities can learn to feel safe with, listen to and care for each other.

Because masculinity is in transition. Our understanding of what it takes to be a successful man is going through big changes. We are being called upon to develop new ways of relating to our emotions, our partners/wives, our children, and our work. This can easily leave us feeling confused, disoriented and overwhelmed.

At a men's center men find others who are facing these changes. Together we resist the pressures to adapt to a rigid, dominating masculinity, and support each other in developing diverse ways of being a man that express our highest values and visions. We are creating a new, more healthy culture of masculinity.

Because men want to help. Many men care about violence, oppression, inequality, liberation and healing. Although we may want to take a stand, speak out, make a difference, we often feel uncertain, scared, isolated, silenced and powerless.

At a men's center men join together with other men who want to make a contribution to the lives of the men, women and children in our communities. Together we find ways to take actions that give voice to our caring and our commitment. We learn how to work collaboratively with each other and with women, developing shared power and leadership. A men's center offers training and opportunities for men's leadership and community activism.

The best answer to why a men's center, of course, may be simply to look at the Men's Resource Centers that now exist - in New Mexico, Texas, New Hampshire, Vermont and Massachusetts, and the individuals and organizations in Canada, Russia, South Africa, Sweden, Zambia, Nigeria and Japan who have been inspired to begin to develop their own men's programs.

Why a men's center? Because it makes a unique and significant difference in the life of individual men, women and children, and the health of our communities and our society.

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For information about: www.mensresourcesinternational.org*